
An Interview with Tai Solarin

Tai Solarin is one of Nigeria's leading educators and social critics. He is the chairman of the People's Bank of Nigeria and a writer for such leading Nigerian newspapers as The Guardian. He has spent much of his life as a human rights activist, and is held in high esteem by many. He is affectionately known as "Uncle Tai" by large numbers of his admirers.

When I visited Tai's Mayflower school a couple of years ago, I was immediately impressed by the seriousness and dedication of the students. Secular messages stressing the importance of education and self-reliance were posted all over the walls of the school. Everyone seemed inquisitive and eager to learn.

Following is an interview with Dr. Tai Solarin in which he discusses humanism and education in Nigeria.

—Norm Allen, Director
African Americans for Humanism

FREE INQUIRY: What is the Mayflower School, and how did you come up with that name?

Tai Solarin: I returned from the United Kingdom in 1952 with bachelors' degrees in history and geography. It was easy for me to be hired as the headmaster of a community school run by local people. But as all schools were run the same way I was soon queried as to why I was not starting the school day with hymn singing and prayers, and why I was not marching the students—all boys—to the nearby church every Sunday. I questioned the legitimacy of running a community school in a sectarian fashion, and I never asked my students to do what I didn't myself do. Since I was not going to accept the administration's directive I quit the school. It suddenly occurred to me that my only alternative was to build my own school. The name, Mayflower, evokes the 1620 voyage of the ship whose story I read about when I was a schoolboy. It was to be a school for all children, discriminating against none. The name, Mayflower, was our easy choice.

FI: Some would argue that the name is too Eurocentric. How would you respond?

SOLARIN: It is, indeed, Eurocentric. Nigerian society—I am inclined to say all African societies—is so steeped in religious effervescence that most people cannot do anything without dropping a nice word for the gods. In other words, it would seem secularity is a rarity in Nigeria.

FI: When was the Mayflower School founded?

SOLARIN: January 27, 1956.

FI: How many students attend the school?

SOLARIN: In 1956, seventy. In the 1991/92 school year there were 1,800 boys and girls. In 1992/93 there should be just over 1,900 boys and girls; about 1,100 boys against just over 800 girls.

FI: What makes the Mayflower School so special? And what advantages do your students have over Nigerian students who are taught in religious schools?

SOLARIN: It is special because of its secularity. We go all out

to tackle the problems of life instead of spending several hours of the week explaining the significance of the deity. We have been able to debunk the conservative idea that morality is only realized from the menu of religion. We have been visited by no end of employers who openly declare they would opt for our finished products any time as compared with the products of religious schools. They are convinced our graduates work harder. And we know that, too. Our products are more sure of themselves: they are more ready to take risks. Education in self-reliance has positive results.

FI: What are some of the accomplishments of former students?

SOLARIN: We gave Nigeria its first woman engineer. When Mrs. Kasim—*nee* Owotomo—got to her United States university to do chemical engineering, and was asked the reason for a young country like Nigeria producing women engineers, she said she could give no more candid reason than that her high school headmaster encouraged as many girls as possible to go for engineering. Many of our students in Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States eke out their lean incomes by working on building sites in the summer as plumbers, electricians, and tractor drivers.

FI: Where does the school rank as compared to other schools? And is it a junior high school, middle school, or senior high school?

SOLARIN: It is a full high school, incorporating the junior and senior, right from its inception in 1956. There are, according to official information, 6,000 state schools in Nigeria. Here in Ogun State, where the school is located,



Tai Solarin

Mayflower has been officially proclaimed the best school for the past fifteen years. There are around 500 schools in the state. Some consider Mayflower School to be one of the ten best high schools in the nation. I think I can improve on that by saying Mayflower School is one of the four best schools in the country. If the federal government would give Mayflower School a subsidy of ₦1 million a year instead of the ₦2.5 million that goes to each of what is called “unity schools” (which I have persistently called “disunity schools”) Mayflower would stand a shoulder higher than any other high school in the land.

FI: How is the school run?

SOLARIN: Like any other state school—Mayflower is state owned—the state government pays for staff and equipment, but charges slightly for tuition. The Mayflower parents’ organization is probably the strongest in the country. When last year the state government posted twenty-five fewer teachers into the school, the parents’ organization hired the complement, built four new classrooms, and supplied desks and chairs for the students. My wife and I help to maintain the school well and the stand-by generator when the main power supply folds up, which is often.

FI: Do the teachers receive any special training?

SOLARIN: No. Because of the acute shortage of professional teachers, most of our teachers are without professional training. As long as they are good in their disciplines, they are hired as teachers to go on transmitting the knowledge the best way they can.

FI: What would it take for humanists in other African countries to build schools on the Mayflower model? What qualifications, skills, and resources would be required?

SOLARIN: I think Mayflower School has been lucky not to have been stillborn. Formidable Christian churches, the Roman Catholic in particular, could have smothered it. It is alive today because its founders were convinced of what we were doing, and they were unrelenting and unsparing in their efforts. When I was in detention in Jos in 1984, a fellow detainee, a highly placed man in Jos, said that he would make sure the government paid the bill if I was ready after our release to build a Mayflower School for them. With the success of Mayflower School, I believe, today, it would take root in any other part of Nigeria, excepting strongly Muslim areas like Kano, Sokoto, and Borno states. In those places it would be tantamount to heresy to proclaim that man is the master of his fate, the captain of his soul.

What I have written above would hold for most black African countries. Tanzania and Kenya, for example, should be able to establish Mayflowers.

FI: Would you assist in such projects?

SOLARIN: I certainly would.

FI: Would it be useful to have more Mayflowers in other Nigerian cities? If so, what would be required to make this possible?

SOLARIN: The only answer to resolving most African problems is in multiplying the Mayflower School type. To get the young Africans weaned from their almost congenital reliance on fate, they must be educated to stand on their

feet. The worst bane of African nondevelopment is chronic dependence on the deity to solve all earthly problems. Give everybody education for self-reliance and we will vie with the best nations everywhere. For thirty-nine years I have had all the young people that passed through my hands—four years in our pre-Mayflower School days, and thirty-five years at Mayflower School—to learn this poem by William Ernest Henley:

1. Out of the night that covers me
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.
2. In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud,
Under the bludgeoning of chance,
My head is bloody, but unbowed.
3. Beyond this place of wrath and tears,
Looms but the horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years,
Finds and shall find me, unafraid.
4. It matters not how strait the gate
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.

Material assistance in the nature of equipping laboratories and stocking libraries would be needed, but the first and most essential need is the leader with a sense of mission. I am not thinking of a bell-ringing pastor to loudly shout what we stand for as one who means to do plenty but says very little. I envision a Quaker sort of leader who does not shout Quakerism, but does Quakerism.

As I write this I remember that we once worked very hard harvesting a field of corn and plowing the field, spreading compost and replanting the field with corn the same day in a desperate effort not to miss the rain that seemed imminent. Had we “rested” that day, our corn would not have grown to the height it is now. Because of that effort Mayflower School is going to harvest—as we did last year—three seasons of corn as compared with the traditional two-season harvests that are typical in this part of Nigeria.

FI: How is the Mayflower School governed? Is there a board, a leadership committee, or a designated successor who could run the school in the event of your retirement?

SOLARIN: I’ll answer the end of the question first. I retired sixteen years ago from the leadership of the school, surrendering it to the state. But the government realized it was a special school, so it lets me continue to assist in its further development. Individuals die but governments only succeed one another. I want us to run, as you do in America, state schools. I have quoted for the past twenty years, at least, an Irish Catholic priest who wrote: “Those who own the school, own its country, own its people, own its future.” And I do not want Roman Catholicism to own the future of Nigeria, just as I do not want it to be owned by Islam or Anglicanism. Nor would the religious want the school to be owned by secularism. But time will tell, for Nigeria is a secular republic, and so the future is in our favor.

My wife and I are still putting in all we can for the succor

of the school, and our efforts are being appreciated. But we do own, as a private, fee-paying school, the arm that goes under the name Mayflower Junior School. Today's junior high school is younger than our Mayflower school and so the state could not ask us to jettison the name. The Mayflower Junior School has 1,300 in residence and about 300 day students. All the children's parents fight to get their children in. The state minister of education honored us with a courtesy visit five weeks ago and told us that of every five parents that visit his ministry on behalf of their children, four plead for the Mayflower School.

Goodness for its Own Sake

. . . Dr. Tai Solarin in very many words and on many different occasions has denied the existence of God and heaven. He should be our own example of the good Samaritan. Not believing in our concept of God and heaven and thus the need for salvation, he has spent his life doing good for the selfless reason that it is good to do so. Solarin has fed the poor with food and the ignorant with knowledge. He has clothed the naked. He has suffered personal deprivations for the freedom of others. . . .

—*Adebayo Akerle in The Guardian, September 5, 1992.*

The school headmaster is the immediate school leader. Behind him is the Parent/Teacher's Association—a militant hard-working group. The Board of Governors, a grandiose body famous as an impotent body, lingers on. As in the case of the Parent/Teacher's Association, its members are volunteers, but because the children are not necessarily in the school they govern it is a lifeless institution. The government knows I am never in sympathy with decorative establishments and does not ask questions dealing with posting of teachers, grading them, and fixing their salaries.

FI: In America, many people say, "When God was taken out of the schools, the schools went to hell." These fundamentalists charge secularism and a removal of organized prayer from the schools with the destruction of the U.S. public school system. Have similar charges ever been leveled against your school?

SOLARIN: Nigerians say, "Education without religion is like a cup of tea without sugar." I hit back by saying it is a wrong analogy. The Chinese who gave tea to the world do not drink it with sugar. I tell them that morality has nothing to do with religion. All knowledgeable Nigerians know I am not religious, but they believe I am honest. *Morals Without Religion* by Margaret Knight is one of my favorite books. All employers who have ex-Mayflower students as employees are generally surprised at the degree of honesty they see in these young Nigerians who are nurtured by the truth of humanism.

FI: Some believe that only religion can bring about wholesome family values. But your family seems to be happy and stable. What accounts for your success in this regard?

SOLARIN: I do not know of any family that is more wholesome, or happier in Nigeria, and I publicly so declare. I got married without the invitation of God's intervention: My wife was not to obey me: we are a team. Most of the marriage contracts effected around me during the past thirty years either disintegrated or are on the verge of so doing. Mine has lasted forty-one years and is still going strong. I think I owe my happy marriage to openness and dedication, no fake belief, masquerading, or cheating. Our children—the girl got married to a Roman Catholic—are both secularists. But I never have asked them questions on faith. Let them make their choices, I say.

FI: When did you become a humanist?

SOLARIN: When? At least forty years ago. Why? Because it was only during my groping for a foothold that I was happiest. I maintain great comfort and infinite happiness living as a humanist. Charles Bradlaugh, H. G. Wells, Robert Ingersoll, Jawaharlal Nehru, G. B. Shaw, and H. A. L. Fisher fused to become the rock bottom of my life today. "I shall die, as I have lived," said H. G. Wells, "the responsible centre of my world."

FI: What can humanism offer people that religion cannot? And what kinds of weaknesses can be found in religion that cannot be found in humanism?

SOLARIN: Complete faith in one's self. You are never a leaner. You are forever self-reliant. The religious man is Janus-headed. He is two in one. He professes what he doesn't believe. Nigeria is dying today of religion—outrageous religious beliefs.

FI: How many famous humanists in Nigerian history do you know of, and do you know of any who are alive today?

SOLARIN: I know of none. Even some Nigerians of my age-group whom I have known for sixty years say in my presence that I am not a humanist/atheist: that I am only being branded, being given a bad name to accelerate my hanging! Every Nigerian is born saddled with a god to worship. It took me almost thirty years to get the sledgehammer to break the shackle around my mind. It took Bertrand Russell only sixteen years and two weeks to liberate himself.

FI: How many Nigerian atheists do not wish to make their atheism known to the public?

SOLARIN: Almost 100 percent. Even where humanists feebly say so, but are not vociferous about it, families and friends would like to see them buried as religionists, just in case!

My friend professor Ayodele Awojobi was a humanist, but he was not, like myself, a loud proclaimer of his humanism. He was buried at forty-seven, as a Christian. I am going to be the first Nigerian to be buried without prayers, church intervention, or pious priests around. I would prefer cremation but even a Mayflower graduate would not give me one! The part of my will on my disposition will be published by all Nigerian papers to leave no doubts anywhere.

FI: How is humanism treated in Nigerian media, if it is covered at all?

SOLARIN: Humanism does not have a place in our media.

No one mentions atheism or humanism unless he or she is talking or writing about Tai Solarin.

FI: Throughout your life you have been heavily and courageously involved in activism. Which causes have you taken up, and what kind of resistance did you receive from government authorities?

SOLARIN: I have stood, almost exclusively, for free, universal, and compulsory education for all children, to the end of high school. More able ones would ascend with or without the springboard of parents, philanthropists, and governments. I have also stood for social justice.

Military governments everywhere in Africa react badly to criticism. The longest detention I ever had was for seventeen months (1984–1985) when I suggested that the military government then in power should not last more than three to six months.

FI: Have your atheistic views ever landed you in trouble with the government authorities?

SOLARIN: No, although I'm sure they have not gone unnoticed. Mayflower School is the only school in Nigeria where the student is not taught religion, Christian or Muslim, and does not sing or pray to the deities at the beginning or end of any day.

FI: What are some of your thoughts on the nineteenth-century freethinker Robert G. Ingersoll, and what influence did he have on your thinking?

SOLARIN: He gave me the courage to stand on my feet and declare my stand on issues where for years I was too afraid to air my doubts. He tore off the dingy curtains across my mind's eye, and let me stand, unafraid, to wend my way through life.

FI: How can humanism improve the quality of life on the African continent?

SOLARIN: It will do for every individual what it has done for me. The first great thing humanism does, I think, to humanity is to make individuals appreciate being master and captain of their fate.

FI: Do you think there should be a concerted effort to attract blacks to humanism, as is being done with African Americans for Humanism, or do you believe that humanism attracts all people for the same reasons?

SOLARIN: The former is the only way out. The Africa-based African is born in fear and shackled in fear. He has to be wakened from his apparent state of stupor or somnambulism by tossing him into the night he fears, holding aloft the light of humanism for him to see with.

FI: Why do you believe that so few Africans are humanists, and what needs to be done to make humanism better known in Nigeria? What aspects of humanism would appeal to Africans in particular?

SOLARIN: So few Africans are humanists because nonhumanists are laden with a burden that humanists have shed: fear. Most Africans are taught from birth to fear—to fear daylight, life, death. Witches, angels, the Devil or Satan, thunder, lightning, nocturnal birds are all objects that generate fear. The African child is brought up not to ask questions. Precocious children are silenced. Any human being so shackled

is shorn of the equipment that is strongest in the armor of the humanist—courage. Strip the African of all objects of his fears and he will be as courageous as any other man across the world. Inject education into his or her life and you have led him or her halfway up the ladder of humanism. The most significant aspect of humanism that would, I think, appeal to the African most is the knowledge that his or her prosperity or wealth is none of the business of anybody outside himself or herself; that we can become whatever we choose to be.

My friends tell me it is God who makes me successful in my work. When I tell them I share in the responsibility of feeding, in his old age, a clergyman who preached sermons all his life, would they tell me why it was not he feeding me? They have no answer, but hold on, all the same, to their time-honored beliefs.

FI: Is it likely that humanism will ever become a popular stance in Nigeria?

SOLARIN: Yes. Humanism is not a digestible menu for the illiterate; only the educated could be humanists. Literacy in Nigeria touches only 25 percent of the people. If there is 5 percent illiteracy in America, not a single one in that percentage is a humanist. Let Nigeria climb to 60 percent literacy, and humanism will be seen marching jauntily on in colossal numbers.

But forces against broadening of the base of literacy in Nigeria are formidable. Governments in the Third World do not like the masses of the people being educated.

FI: Many blacks maintain that religion is absolutely necessary for the survival of the black community. They note that in America, for example, religious leaders like Nat Turner and Martin Luther King, Jr., used religion to unify and inspire black people to positive action. They also note that black religion has produced many black colleges and other important institutions, and that a firm belief in God actually helped many blacks through difficult times. What are your responses to these contentions?

SOLARIN: The blacks hold onto their God just as the drunken man holds on to the street lamp post—for physical support only. Habit is difficult, but not impossible to break. “The Jews hold to the hard core of national separatism, in spite of the steady evaporation of every traditional, religious justification,” is the way H. G. Wells looked at the Jews. Remove the Israel/Palestine wars in the Middle East and there will be no religious rallying force among the Jews. Religion is man's childish prop.

When I was five or so, I made a journey of forty miles with my mother. To make the journey, mother gave me a “bicycle.” The “bicycle” for any child of my childhood is the wheel of a bicycle which the child ran along the road. For the first fifteen miles of the journey I was way ahead of my mother. In the last stage of that journey, mother carried my “bicycle” along with our luggage, on her head. Without that “bicycle,” I could never have made the journey. Today, I am able to look back to discover that I had actually carried myself and the “bicycle” as well.

FI: Many Afrocentric thinkers believe that humanism and atheism are “un-African” or possibly detrimental to the African

psyche and to African unity and progress. What are your views on this?

SOLARIN: Humanism and atheism develop in the mind of man, not for a special breed of *homo sapiens*, but for humanity, just as the wheel has been invented, not for whatever race invented it, but for humans everywhere. Whatever are branded “un-African,” “for the Aryan races” are epithets for cheating.

FI: What do you believe accounts for the deep spirituality of many Africans?

SOLARIN: It is their long exposure to spirituality. Take a black African child at birth to live with the Eskimos. He would grow up completely donning the attitude of his cultural background. Nurture is mightier than nature.

FI: Many writers maintain that escalating violence between Muslims and Christians could possibly lead to another civil war in Nigeria. Is this possible?

SOLARIN: Yes. Every succeeding day aggravates the situation. And relations abroad between these two religions, or between Catholic and other denominations succinctly points, at least for Nigeria, to the inevitability of confrontation.

FI: How influential is traditional religion—especially *juju*—in Nigeria?

SOLARIN: Very influential. The more religious a person is, the more, generally, is his predisposition toward belief in *juju*.

FI: In the United States recently there have been legal cases involving videotaped actions (for example, the beating of motorist Rodney King by four Los Angeles cops). Could

this kind of videotaping ever happen in Nigeria, and if not, why not?

SOLARIN: It cannot happen in Nigeria—unless it were distantly done by an operator with a powerful camera. If they noticed, the police would descend on the cameraman, destroy his camera, and, perhaps, kill him.

FI: You expressed interest in starting a humanist library. What kinds of publications would you like to include?

SOLARIN: Robert Ingersoll is so easy to read. I would want light reading materials by humanist and atheist writers. Also Bertrand Russell’s *Why I Am Not a Christian*; Margaret Knight’s *Worlds Without Religion*; Thomas Paine’s *Age of Reason*; George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, and biographical books.

FI: Please feel free to express any final thoughts you might have on humanism, religion, and the Mayflower School.

SOLARIN: Even though I never during my twenty years as headmaster of Mayflower School sat the students down to soak them in humanism, they all knew my stand. If an expected rain fell on a Saturday, the students knew that the following Sunday morning would find us planting maize on the field instead of attending the community gathering, secular though this assembly is. I have heard chuckles from students when, occasionally, a visitor gave a word of prayer for the good work we were doing. “Lloyd George Loved my Father,” later became “Awo Loved my Father” lustily sung to the tune of “Onward Christian Soldiers” by our students, to the shock of, generally, new students or visitors. ●

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