Historical Context of Religious Conflict and Religious Education Curriculum

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Abstract

The main intention of this paper is to examine the multi-religious nature of Ugandan society, the un-healthy relationship between members of the different religions, the limitations of the current religious education curriculum to promote unity and harmony, Uganda's cherished educational and political goal and finally the requisite need for curriculum review. The paper begins by tracing the failure to have a multi-religious 'conscious' Religious Education curriculum to the historical-political and religious conflicts that gave birth to a denominational and 'divisive' educational system. The paper probes the religious landscape of Uganda and identifies and discusses key theoretical concepts that underpin the religious education debate in Uganda. Through this exploration, it will be established that Uganda is a multi-religious country that is dogged by religious discrimination and intolerance. Against this background, a critique of promoting a confessional CRE and IRE curriculum in religiously founded public schools will be given by illustrating the limitation of CRE and IRE text-books in promoting unity and harmony. Finally the paper will recommend that curriculum review is the way to go and the main objective of such curriculum should be to promote respect and tolerance and/ or understanding of other people's religious traditions.

Keywords: religious conflict, religious discrimination, religious intolerance, confessional CRE and IRE, national unity, harmony, multi-faith RE.

The onset of foreign political interest groups and religious denominations marked a period of intense competition for converts that resulted in the religious and political wars between 1888 and 1892. While African traditional religion(s) was the main religious tradition subscribed to by Africans before the advent of foreign religions, Islam was introduced in Uganda in 1844 by the Muslim Arabs, Anglican Christianity in 1877 by the British Church Missionary Society (CMS) members, and, Roman Catholicism in 1879 by the French White Fathers (Oded 1995; Kanyeihamba 1998; Welbourne 1968).

The establishment of formal education in Uganda was linked to denominational identity, a factor that continues to significantly affect the administration of educational institutions and the development of the RE curriculum[1]. The primary aim of missionary education was not the promotion of a secular curriculum but the conversion of, as many people, as possible, and, provision for spiritual growth through the triune mode of instruction, conversion and formation of character (Hansen 1984: 249; Sekamwa 1997) Muslim parents on their part, sent their children to Quranic schools where they were exclusively exposed to Islamic religious faith and practice.

The major breakthrough in designing a joint syllabus was early 1970's when Roman Catholics and Anglicans put together secondary and primary school ecumenical Christian Religious Education syllabuses. In 2001 the Ugandan government, for the first time, attempted to replace the confessional IRE and CRE with Moral Education in religiously founded public schools. The recommendations of the Educational Policy Review Commission as expressed in the 1992 Uganda Government White Paper on Education introduced Moral Education as a new subject on the curriculum to be taught alongside Religious Education. As for secondary schools, RE was recommended as an optional subject instead of a key alternative subject. The government's uneasiness with CRE and IRE is its failure to address the multi-religious nature of the religiously founded public schools.

[1] The majority of primary and secondary schools are religiously founded but grant aided by government and therefore also public education institutions. The influence of religious foundation bodies is significant since they influence who becomes the Head-teacher and whether religion is taught or not in the schools.

The overwhelming protest by religious leaders and other religious interest groups against introducing Moral Education from 1999 to 2001 culminated in government's rescinding of the decision thus an impasse. It is against this background that I probe the salient features of the religious education landscape in Uganda that will make a case for articulating the most appropriate religious education curriculum for primary and secondary schools.

Evidence for Religious Diversity in Uganda

Uganda is a multi-religious country and the multiplicity of religious traditions is reflected in the table showing religious composition (see table at end of text). Although Christianity and Islam are the 'recognised' religious traditions in terms of RE curriculum arrangements, there are other religious traditions in Uganda. The 2002 population statistics census results are inadequate in pointing out the religious composition of the country since they do not include Budhists, Sikhs and other 'minority' religious groups and African traditional religion continues to be a dominant force in the lives of Ugandans although this cannot be captured by statistics. Mpagi (2001:4) stresses the binding note of the African traditional religion as belief in a supreme being, the creator and the concept of the living dead. The different tribes in Uganda have variations in their articulation of the concept of the Supreme Being and the place of the living dead (Byaruhanga n.d.: 10). Mpagi (2001:4) and Magumba (2002:28) argue that although ATR only remains with a small number of followers, its influence remains deeply rooted in people's hearts. Similarly Waliggo (2001:3); while arguing for the inclusion of ATR on the curriculum for CRE in African schools refers to African traditional religion's 'ubiquitous presence in the world view of parents and children'. The continued influence of this religious tradition on the lives of many Christian and Muslim followers as attested to by Mpagi and Waliggo, alongside its being subscribed to by some Ugandans makes it one of the major religious traditions.

The Islamic religion was introduced in Uganda In 1844 by Arab traders in Buganda, the central kingdom from which it was to spread to the rest of Uganda and it was therefore the first religion to be introduced from

outside Uganda. According to the 2002 population and Housing Census results (see Table 1 at end of report), 12.1% of Uganda's population is Muslim and this makes the Islamic religion the second biggest religious tradition in Uganda.

Christianity is dominant religious tradition in Uganda as per the 2002 population and housing census results since it comprises 85.2% of Uganda's population. The census results indicate that the Roman Catholic Church membership comprised 41.9% of Uganda's population and the Church of Uganda (referred to as Anglicans in Table 1) 35.9% of the population. Whilst the Roman Catholic Church and Church of Uganda are the two main Christian religious traditions, the Christian religious tradition is a diverse community of believers as evidenced by the statistics (see table at end of text).

Evidence of Curriculum Limitations and Conflict

Confessional Religious Education is the type of education found in Uganda's religiously founded public primary and secondary schools. Confessional RE is an approach of teaching about religion that promotes one particular religious tradition (Chidester *et al.* 1994; Jackson 1997). The confessional approach has as its main intention the affirming of students within their respective religious traditions as evidenced by main aim of CRE and IRE syllabuses which is, the promotion of spiritual growth within the Christian religious tradition and the Islamic religious tradition, respectively (Pastoral Institute of Eastern Africa 1974; Quraishy 1987).

The confessional approach to religious education was promoted in British maintained schools in 1970's and was described by the Schools Council Working Party members thus:

> This begins with the assumption that the aim of religious education is intellectual and cultic indoctrination (Schools Council Publications 1971:21).

Exclusiveness and indoctrination is therefore central to a confessional approach to RE. The students are meant to appreciate their own religious tradition and not to be exposed to other religious traditions. This type of

religious education promotes a superiority attitude among students of a particular religious tradition against others and this normally breeds classification and relationship to people in light of their religious identity. It is for this reason that in Britain like in some other countries, including South Africa, a multi-faith approach to teaching religion in schools has been adopted since it takes into account exploration of other religions and the attendant benefits.

Multi-faith RE describes the type of RE that is overtly concerned with the exploration of different religious traditions. It is a term that is synonymous with the debate concerning the teaching of RE in community schools of England and Wales. One major characteristic of these schools, as is the case in Uganda, is that many of them are funded by government but comprise students from different religious, racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Reference to a multi-faith RE or a phenomenological RE is to be appreciated from the standpoint of 'phenomenology of religions' concern in trying to understand another person's religious life 'through laying aside one's own presuppositions, and through empathizing with the 'insider' experience' (Jackson 1997: 14). While multi-faith RE refers to study of other people's religions, phenomenology may be said to be concerned with how other religions can effectively be studied. The two are therefore closely related as expressed by Watson (1993: 43) that 'phenomenological RE is referred to loosely as the multi-faith or world religions approach'. One of the key objectives of a multi-faith RE is to enable students to engage with religion as a reality of human experience instead of being viewed from the perspective of a particular religious tradition and this is what is referred to as promoting the understanding of religion.

Understanding of religion is normally presented by RE scholars as providing for student's thinking about religious issues as opposed to being inducted into a particular religious standpoint. The SCWP members explain it thus:

> Although the term understanding of religion is not directly defined by scholars, its objective is reflected as enabling students to think about religion instead of being passive recipients of religious information (SCP 1971: 37).

The active participation of students in reflecting on religious issues is discussed by Holley (1978: 19) and Watson (1993: 42) who consider it a source of promoting an independence of mind among students who can in turn draw conclusions from what they study. This means that students are able to explore religion, understand it (without undue influence from the teacher or any other authority) and draw their conclusions about religious issues. In other words there is room for respect and/ or tolerance of the 'significant other'.

'Respect and tolerance', as a phrase, refers to a situation where a person has a positive attitude towards other people's religions. It is a secondary aim of a multi-faith RE. The underlying principle is that people need to hold the religious beliefs of others in high esteem instead of having a low opinion about them. As a consequence the assumption is that this situation can lead to good interpersonal relations between people of different religions. Respect and tolerance of other people's religions is therefore an antidote to religious discrimination and intolerance.

Respect and tolerance are expressed as an aim for secondary school IRE (UNEB: 1996: 49). Although no accompanying explanation is given about their meaning, they are written from a context where a Muslim student is expected to develop a positive attitude towards other people's religions. Scholars of RE articulate the phrase respect and tolerance differently. While Arthur (1990: 43) uses the phrase to portray the positive attitude that can be developed towards other people's religions through a multi-faith RE, Watson (1993: 43 and 1993: 44) uses respect and tolerance in different contexts to express them as key objectives of a multi-faith RE which enables one to develop a positive attitude towards the religious beliefs of other people.

Although the Ugandan Christian Religious Education (CRE) primary and secondary school aims attempt to address exploring of other religions (and this seems to be a 'cosmetic' reference to religious dialogue to convince the government about 'a multi-faith element'), the text-books do not address this aspect as observed by Mwesigwa (2003) in respect to primary school CRE[2]:

[2] Christian religious denominations in Uganda are so diverse and there is un-healthy relationship expressed in different forms among different religious

> The Joint CRE pupil's books for primary schools, in line with the intentions of the Joint CRE syllabus are overtly concerned with the promotion of the Christian religious tradition through emphasis on common Christian religious beliefs, practices and values. Since the concept of unity in diversity is downplayed and exploration of other religions is not provided for, the pupil's books may raise challenges for Christian and Islamic religious unity especially in the multi-religious schools (Mwesigwa 2003: 142)

The Ugandan CRE text-books for primary and secondary schools therefore cannot be a good medium of addressing religious discrimination and intolerance between Christians and Muslims or even among the different Christian religious denominations. Similarly and perhaps even more worrisome is that although the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) aims have provision for exploration of other religions, the text-books not only aim at enabling students to grow spiritually in Islamic religion, but also use offensive language to Christians when discussing Christianity.

The content of Islam Book one illustrates the spread of Islam in Arabia by citing incidences where prominent Christians approved of Islam and/ or accepted Islam as the only true religious tradition (Quraishy 1987: 21). The text-book goes further to explain how Prophet Isa (Jesus) was the forerunner of Prophet Muhammed and Islam is described as the perfection of the religion of God left incomplete by the Prophets before Muhammed (Quraishy 1987: 1). The content of secondary IRE text-books paints a picture whereby a Muslim student will look down upon a Christian student and consider his or her religion superior to Christianity. Such an approach to RE curriculum cannot promote respect and tolerance except negative attitude like religious discrimination and intolerance.

Religious discrimination is one of the possible products of an exclusivist curriculum. Religious discrimination refers to the preferential treatment of a member (or members) of a particular religion of another member (or members) of the same religion to the exclusion of another (or others). The issue of religious discrimination in Uganda is mirrored in the

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groups such as Roman Catholics and Anglicans towards Pentecostals and vice-versa; the different Pentecostal churches etc.

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historical and current religious political conflicts. It is for this reason that it is an issue of major concern addressed by the Ugandan constitution.

Chapter four of the 1995 Ugandan Constitution entitled *Human Rights and other freedoms* expresses the equal respect and dignity to be accorded to people. Article 21 of chapter four expresses the need for safeguard against religious discrimination, alongside other forms of discrimination and in part it reads:

> A person shall not be discriminated against on ground of sex, race, colour, ethnic origin, tribe, birth, creed or religion, or social or economic standing, political opinion or disability (LRC 2006: 39).

Religious discrimination is presented as one of the social evils that the laws of Uganda do not allow. Religion in Uganda has continued to be a source of polarization in social, economic and political life of the nation. Despite several joint ecumenical efforts among the different Christian religious traditions, the relationship between the Roman Catholics and the Anglicans has always been an edgy one[3].

In 1999, a test case of President Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Movement government's preference of Anglicans to Roman Catholics came up when the press reported that the Roman Catholic leader Cardinal Emmanuel Wamala led a delegation to appeal to the president following the closure of fourteen Roman Catholic founded Primary Teacher's Colleges (PTC's), leaving only seven open. On the side of Church of Uganda, twenty two Primary Teacher's colleges (PTC's) were left open following the re-structuring exercise. Although the government denied political religious influence in the decision to close the Roman Catholic colleges, later following religious-political pressure, an updated Uganda Parliamentary report on restructuring of Primary Teacher's colleges and National Teacher's colleges dated 18th April 2000, specified that six Roman Catholic PTC's previously closed by government, had been re-opened.

[3] It is common practice in Uganda for many people to recognize and subsequently relate names to religion. The majority of parents normally give their children Christian names that are in line with either Roman Catholicism or Anglicanism or for Muslims, Islamic names.

Although the Muslims constitute 10.5% of Uganda's population, they are a significant religious force in Uganda's social, economic and political life. From colonial times, Muslims have always complained of being discriminated against by the Christians by denial of key political positions, educational opportunities and economic benefits. The New Vision 18th December 2008 carried an article whereby a former Allied Democratic Front (ADF) rebel chief was quoted saying, 'When I was recruited, I was told that we were going to fight to get a Muslim president since Muslims in Uganda have all along been marginalized'[4].

The un-healthy relationship between Muslims and Christians, real and perceived needs to be addressed through curriculum efforts whereby young primary school pupils and secondary school students can grow up engaging in dialogue and having respect for each other irrespective of religious tradition. During my field work research in 2003 I interviewed primary and secondary school students in Mbarara district of western Uganda and discovered that there was no good relationship between them, with many intolerant of each other, a case in point was the use of derogatory language when referring to their colleagues who belonged to other religions (Mwesigwa 2003)[5] The students negative attitude to members of other religions suggests the breeding of an intolerant society.

Religious intolerance refers to behaviour of a religious person (or particular religious group) towards a member of (or members of) another religious group that reflects or expresses the incompatibility of members of different religious traditions. The *Collins Paperback Dictionary* (1995) defines the adjective intolerant thus 'refusing to accept practices and beliefs that differ from one's own.' The refusal to accept each other's religious beliefs and practices may be covert (as reflected in certain actions of individuals towards people of other religions) or overt (clearly expressed as

[4] Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) is a military wing of a Muslim led and dominated rebel group that is fighting the current NRM government of President Y.K.Museveni which they argue is Christian led and dominated.

[5] According to the New Vision 4th July 2007 a riot in Moyo that resulted in four fatal casualties, took place between the Christian and Muslim students of Ituala S.S.S, following disagreement on slaughter of animals for school meat by non-Muslims.

shown by some statements made about other people's religions or through religiously motivated violence).

While there seems to be a thin dividing line between religious discrimination and intolerance, religious discrimination can be argued to breed religious intolerance as illustrated by the Muslims in Uganda whose out-cry of being discriminated against has resulted in disliking their Christian counterparts and thereby resorting to armed conflict. It is against such a background that the Uganda government has been systematically trying to remove religion from the curriculum to an extent of now making it optional since it has ramification for conflict.

Conclusion

Mindful of the religious diversity of Uganda, the multi-religious nature of schools, the foundation body conceptualization of the purpose of religious education and the resultant uneasiness by government over a single-faith RE promoted by the religious leadership, it is imperative that all key stake-holders jointly work on revisiting the current curriculum concerning teaching religion in schools and designing new curriculum to address the multi-religious nature of society and school context without fully ignoring the interests of the foundation bodies. A compromise can be reached in designing new curriculum since the ultimate goal of addressing religious discrimination and intolerance, two of Uganda's greatest social ills, is desired by all stakeholders and any attempt to ignore it, is likely to be costly in future in terms of strained human relations and thereby development efforts. The promotion of national unity and harmony, Uganda's most cherished political ideal and the first national goal of education will only be possible if there is a curriculum review to resolve the contradictions.

Religion/ Denomination	Number	Percentage
CATHOLICS	10,242,590	41.9
ANGLICANS	8,782,821	35.9
MUSLIMS	1,758,101	12.1
PENTECOSTALS	1,129,647	4.6
SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS	367,972	1.5
OTHER CHRISTIANS	286,581	1.2
BAHAI	18,614	0.1
OTHER NON-CHRISTIANS	159,259	0.7
TRADITIONAL	241,388	1.0
NONE	212,388	0.9
ORTHODOX	4,738	0.1
TOTAL	24,433,132	100

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