

## The Ethic of Religious Pluralism and Human Rights in Schools: Re-Evaluating the Multifaith Approach in Zimbabwe

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### Abstract

The power and role of religion in society, just like that of education, is as old as humanity itself. This truism continues to be manifestly intrinsic even in our day. In general, the contemporary religious landscape in post-colonial Africa is complex. In the Zimbabwean scenario, in particular, the religious reality is constitutive of mainstream Christianity, ATRs, Hinduism, Judaism and an esoteric resurgence of New Religious Movements (NRMs). The study posits that, in view of the undercurrents of Human Rights discourses today, education possesses the potentialities of advancing the universal acclamations on the sanctity of human rights and the inviolability of religious freedom and its expressions. It is contended that religious pluralism is one of the essential marks of an existing or emerging multicultural society. In addition, the study asserts that a multicultural society is characterised by multiple identities, a fact which evokes human rights issues. Principally, it is observed that the dominance of the Christocentric approach in the current pedagogy of Religious Education in the Zimbabwean schools makes the efficacy of human rights to be at stake. Accordingly, the aim of the paper is to show how the teaching and learning processes in schools can be utilised to communicate values that promote the ethos of human rights and morality that develop the total person.

**Key Words:** Human Rights, Multifaith Approach, Religious Pluralism, Pedagogy, Total Person

### 1. Introduction

It is universally acknowledged that the power of religion in influencing humanity, just like that of education, is as old as humanity itself. Hurst and Peters (1970:14), the two British philosophers of education, critically observed that education is a social system and functions as a process of initiation and renewal of the meanings of human experiences through transmission from one generation to the next. The point being that children are initiated into the new cultural and social traits as they interact at school, consciously or unconsciously. In these days of emerging multicultural or cross-cultural societies because of globalization, pedagogy or the teaching and learning processes in schools must be aligned to address issues of socio-cultural identities in some more proactive ways that recognize the currents of human rights issues in education.

This study provides an interaction of the power of religion and that of education in the context of human rights in schools in the Zimbabwean context. Worldwide, it must be noted that religion and education constitute two significant value systems, which influence people in terms of beliefs, interests and aspirations in their existential lives. One principal trait of values is that they are intrinsic in nature. Accordingly, a value system constitutes a form of a belief system that provides dichotomous categories of good versus bad, right versus wrong or desirable versus offensive notions that individuals or societies uphold. Yet, it must be mentioned that in general, there are certain values that esteemed as dominant (superior) and other values that are dominated (inferior) in society (Atkinson, 1999). This dichotomy of values as highlighted above is helpful in so far as it sheds some light concerning the nature of human rights issues, or more closely concerning the ways human rights are stifled in the teaching and learning situations in the schools. It should not be forgotten

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that schools today have become the ‘melting pots’ of cultures and of religious expressions largely on account of the unstoppable forces of globalisation that has become the new name for contemporary imperialism (Maposa, 2011: 34).

The above insights provide the point of departure of undertaking the present research. The study posits that religion has always been an influential value system in every society. Religion determines human life in a number of ways. For instance, it determines the way ‘people relate with people’ in politics, commerce, sporting and in education (schools). The study claims that, from the time of the colonial rule in Zimbabwe, Christianity has been the dominant force in shaping peoples’ lives. Specifically, that dominance has been very pervasive in the education system, principally on account of the fact that Christianity was closely associated with western civilization and British colonialism. Weber (1864-1920), the German sociologist and political economist, saw it fairly well that the western values were (and still are) based on the ethic of capitalist individualism. According to the South African philosopher Ramose (1999: 52), this latter individualistic value system is motivated by human egoism, that is, self-centredness. In the pedagogical processes, particularly in the teaching of Religious Education as a moralizing academic discipline, Christianity takes the epicentre of the educational instruction at the expense of the other alternative faith systems of some learners in the schools. The thesis of the study is premised on the fact that the current teaching of Religious Education principally perceives Christianity to be the repository or resource of dominant values that downplays those of other religious traditions, notably African Traditional Religion, Buddhism and Hinduism in the Zimbabwean context.

The study further contends that the methodology which is usually employed in the teaching and learning of Religious Education is the Christocentric approach. This approach is heavily based on the Christian Bible Scriptures. As this study observed, despite the Zimbabwean Government policy (ZANU PF Election Manifesto, 1980) and the Nziramasanga Presidential Commission Report on the Inquiry of Education and Training (1999) declared that the entire Religious Education curriculum adopt the Life and Multifaith approaches as methodologies in the teaching and learning processes, to date the curriculum remains basically Christocentric in content and ethos. As Ter Harr, Moyo and Nondo (1992:5) noted, too, much of the learning and teaching styles that take place in the classrooms favour Christianity at the expense of other religious traditions. It is instructive to ask a pertinent question that informs the study: Is there a hierarchy of values that learners and teachers uphold when they interact in schools or in society? In our observation, the prevailing scenario in Zimbabwean schools shows that Christianity is sidelining other living religions that some people profess to be authentic. The study examines the teaching of Religious Education at Ordinary level (‘O’ level) in Secondary schools in Zimbabwe. There is a growing realisation that the teaching and learning experiences are predominantly focuses on Christianity and less on other living religions. This scenario creates experiential conflict and eventually affects educational attainment as well. This is how the issue of human rights comes to the fore of the study as well. In such circumstances, human rights are sacrificed at the altar of the pedagogical processes.

The study perceives that far from offering pedagogy for liberation, the teaching of Religious Education in the Zimbabwean schools promotes indoctrination. But, we know fully well that every kind of indoctrination leads to mis-education (Atkinson, 1999). And, every mis-education process becomes a recipe for the chaos and discord in society. In this study, I share some conviction with the great Ugandan anthropologist, Okot p’Bitek (1966:8) that if one value system associated with a certain religion is different; it does not mean that it is inferior to the other. Every value system, or put it more clearly and directly, every scheme of religious faith is intrinsic to its own adherents. Therefore, the proper role of education must cater for the aspirations, interests and concerns of all the learners so that there is equality of the existential experiences. In the light or the foregoing insights, the education system must address and communicate the ethos of proper religious co-existence given the fact that Zimbabwe continue to be multicultural society on account of globalization. To address the rot of the Christocentric domination in education, there is need to re-align the teaching and learning of Religious Education in schools, methodologically speaking. The vision and goal being that the Christocentric approach should be replaced by the Multifaith paradigm that constitutes the potentialities of taking into board the interests and aspirations of pupils as learners in the schools. The

temerity of the envisioned approach is to enable education to foster moral values that can develop the ‘total person’ in contemporary Zimbabwe. This is the gist of the study and it proposes a methodological paradigm, that is, the Multifaith approach informed by the indigenous African philosophy of *ubuntu* (authentic humanness) in order to properly teach Religious Education as a moral discipline in the contemporary Zimbabwean curriculum.

## 2. Method of Study

In this research, I used some case-studies drawn from the two provinces of Masvingo and Manicaland in Zimbabwe. Some ten schools were sampled in each province and thereby making twenty schools that were visited. The case study method was enhanced through the use of two techniques. Firstly, questionnaires were administered in schools. The target groups were Form Three and Form Four students and their Religious Education teachers. Secondly, some supplementary in-depth interviews were held to the same target groups in order to obtain primary data. However, identity of the informants was withheld on account of maintaining professional ethics to respect the integrity of people who readily provided relevant data for the study.

## 3. The Undercurrents of Human Rights

Today, violations of human rights constitute the most worrying challenges of our times for the entire world civilisation. Sharma (2002: v) defines Human Rights as ‘rights’ or things a person is allowed to be or to do or to have. In fact, every person is entitled to inalienable rights by the sole reason of being a person. Human rights exist for every one’s protection against people who might want to harm, or dehumanise other people. Accordingly, human rights exist to help people get along with each other peacefully. One notable person who saw that human rights are universally endowed for everyone was Eleanor Roosevelt, the wife of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who was President of the United States of America from 1933 to 1945. Mrs Roosevelt queried ‘where, after all, do universal rights begin?’ She went on to posit that human rights must begin ‘In small places, close to home, so close that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person...Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerned citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.’ (Hubbard, 2001:2). As linked to the education system, particularly on the teaching and learning of Religious Education in schools, it is noted that Human Rights issues are generating some emotionally charged discourses, given the fact that there is no balanced utility of the religions that exist in Zimbabwe today.

## 4. The Religious Situation in Zimbabwe

The Zimbabwean religious landscape is complex. It is a fertile ground for many religions, notably, African Traditional Religion, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Baha’i Faith, Hinduism and Rastafarianism (Sibanda, 2010). Each religious tradition is involved in a kind of a fierce ‘struggle for mastery’, save African Traditional Religion, to control as many adherents into its fold as possible. It is a quest that represents the phenomenal *massification* process in which we see religions being involved in a game of converting numbers in recruiting and controlling as many souls as possible. Judged in the backdrop of the massification drive, the study revealed that Christianity has a dominant place in the religious landscape of Zimbabwe. As drawn from the Website, [www.religiouspopulation.com/africa](http://www.religiouspopulation.com/africa), the dominance of Christianity could be conceptualized better in light of the following statistics on the nature of religions in Zimbabwe, thus:

Christianity and African Traditional Religion-----	50%
Christianity alone-----	25%
African Traditional Religion alone-----	24%
Islam and others-----	1%
<b>Total -----</b>	<b>100%</b>

The figures above are clearly significant for two principal reasons. Firstly, they show that Christianity dominates the religious landscape of Zimbabwe. The key reason is that Christianity greatly benefited from an associated with the past colonial system which facilitated its deeper foothold in the local 'nutritive soil' ahead of other religious traditions in Zimbabwe. It was due to this conspicuous dominance that almost tempted some Christians during the national Referendum for a new Constitution in the year 2000 to campaign to have Zimbabwe declared a Christian country legally (Chitando, 2001:178). Secondly, the foregoing statistics reveal that whereas African Traditional Religion was always suppressed by other foreign and missionary religions, but it still endures on like a 'meandering river which never dries up'. Even a religion like Islam, which constitutes almost less than 1% of the total population, has also tried to sideline African Traditional Religion in Zimbabwe. Despite the fact that African Traditional Religion continues to be distorted as primeval and nascent, it is nevertheless, a vital faith system for several people in Zimbabwe. This is confirmed by the reasonable 24% figure (see above) of people who claim subscribing to the indigenous faith system. In addition, this figure is intelligible given the fact that about 80% of the population lives in rural communities where African Traditional Religion is strongly adhered to in Zimbabwe (Muzarabani, 2012). Overall, the Zimbabwean religious landscape is pluralistic and perhaps the key questions relevant for the study are, thus: To what extent is the religious pluralism mirrored in the school curriculum? How vital is the Multifaith approach in light of the undercurrents of the Human Rights issues in Zimbabwe? The next section provides some attempts to answer these pertinent questions.

## 5. A Brief Overview of the Multifaith Approach

The Multifaith approach has come a long way in the education system in the West. This approach was mooted in the UK in the 1960s and the ensuing decade. Two fundamental circumstances were at play behind the formulations of the Multifaith approach for the British school system. Firstly, British society increasingly became multi-racial in its sociological profile following an endless stream of immigrants in years after the Second World War (1939-45). Secondly, the impact of immigrants resulted in religious pluralism (Ndlovu, 2004:149). These twin factors came to affect the nature of pedagogical processes in education. Thus, there was the need to change the curriculum and initiate some methodological changes.

The main advocates of the Multifaith approach in the UK included Loukes (1961; 1965) and Goldman (1965). The approach was conceived to cater for the needs of both teachers and pupils in the discipline of Religious Education that was hitherto dominated by teaching of the Christian Bible scriptures. However, in the 1970s, it was Ninian Smart, as cited in Ter Haar, et al (1992) who identified the thrust of the Multifaith approach more succinctly when he posited, thus:

First, religious studies must transcend the information. Second, it should do so not in the direction of evangelising, but in the direction of initiation into understanding the meaning of, and into questions about the truth and worth of religion. Third, religious studies should not exclude a committed approach, provided that it is open, and so does not artificially restrict understanding and choice. Fourth, religious studies should provide a service in helping people to understand history and culture other than our own...Fifth, religious studies should emphasise the descriptive, historical side of religion and thereby enter dialogue...The best interests of both Christians and non-Christians are served by these aims (*of the multifaith approach*).

The citation above is important in as far as it discourages the educational vice of indoctrination to take place in the teaching and learning processes in schools. In fact, Atkinson (1999:115) rightly asserted that indoctrination is a form of mis-education because it stifles critical thinking and freedom of learners. It is against this backdrop that the Multifaith approach becomes current and its re-situation and applicability in the education system in contemporary Zimbabwe is imperative in view of the need to develop the 'total person' who is balanced emotionally, psychologically and spiritually.

## **6. Fortification of the Multifaith Approach in Zimbabwe**

The rationale for the inclusion and fortification of the Multifaith approach in the Zimbabwean education system is not without its justification. First and foremost, it must be noted that, when compared to Christianity, the position and status of religions like African Traditional Religion, Islam, Rastafarianism, Buddhism and Hinduism are ambiguous. The findings of the study reveal that these religions are earnestly mistreated and abused in the teaching and learning of Religious Education as a discipline of the school curriculum. Yet, as evaluated from the broad African context, very little is being done to remedy the situation (Hexham, 1991:361).

Starting from the colonial era, curriculum change and innovation took various phases in Zimbabwe's education system. For instance, as Nhundu (1988:35) has pointed out, under the white reigns of Huggins (1934-53), Todd (1954-58), Whitehead (1958-62) and Smith (1964-80), the education system was characteristically founded on rigid racial discrimination. In respect to the teaching and learning of Religious Education as a school subject, the methodology was founded on monolithic Christocentric approach that espoused the Biblical Scriptures. The main ethos was meant to sustain features of classical British philosophies of education, morality, values, culture and civilisation. This state of affairs was dictated by the fact that much of the colonial education was exclusively in the hands of white missionaries (Zvobgo, 1996:16). This western form of education disadvantaged Africans given the fact that indigenous culture, values and spirituality, among other existential categories, regarded as primitive, fetishistic and nascent. Even when Zimbabwe got independence in 1980, it was difficult to shade off the vestiges of the past colonial education system. Whether it was by design or otherwise, but the hard reality is that many unworthwhile nuances of the old colonial education system were inherited into the supposedly new system of education in the post-independent Zimbabwe.

The study established that the current Religious Education curriculum at Ordinary level predominantly imparts a one-sided Christian content that is exclusively user-friendly to those pupils who are Christian in their faith. Pupils who are non-Christians are alienated because their spirituality is not catered for in the Christocentric curriculum. Despite the recommendations of the Nziramasanga Presidential Commission Report on the Inquiry of Education and Training (1999), Religious Education is taught to advance the principles and doctrines of Christianity as a faith system. This state of affairs brings the critical issue of human rights to the fore in the education. The religious rights, interest and aspirations of other pupils who are non-Christians are stifled through education. The basic question that naturally comes forth is: Do schools exist to dispense an inclusive pedagogy that liberates or an exclusive pedagogy of the oppressed that indoctrinates? Judged in the backdrop of the current Religious Education curriculum, the Zimbabwean education system is exclusive. We note with great concern that Christianity is deemed superior whilst other religions are taken as inferior and so do not feature prominently in the teaching and learning processes in schools. This dichotomy evokes Human Rights issues in the education system because Christianity is situated at the 'centre' of pedagogy at the expense of other religions that are relegated to the 'periphery' of pedagogical experiences. Linked to human rights issues, it means that certain freedoms of some pupils are sacrificed on the altar of indoctrination. Therefore, the present curriculum abrogates the rights of non-Christian pupils in schools. In light of this backdrop, some contemporary dons of the curriculum theory in Zimbabwe like Ndawi and Maravanyika (2011:11) bemoaned that 'the cost of reversing this historical phenomenon entrenched over a hundred years... (is) too colossal to contemplate'. Whereas this observation is valid to a certain extent, but here is an opportunity to engage the inclusive Multifaith paradigm, specifically in the teaching and learning of Religious Education in schools in Zimbabwe.

The study advocates the proper re-fortification of the Multifaith approach in the teaching of Religious Education as a school discipline. The Multifaith approach was given the nod by the Zimbabwean government in 1991 to be the 'in-thing' in the teaching and learning of Religious Education. The new methodological dispensation was meant to replace the Life Experience approach that was associated with ethos of the old colonial Religious Education syllabus that was confessional and biblical in ethos. A year later in 1992, Ter Haar, et al, wrote a book entitled; African Traditional Religion in Religious Education: A Resource Book with Special Reference to Zimbabwe. In their own words, the authors claimed that the work was a 'basis for a

textbook for use in a genuinely Multifaith context to religious and moral education in Zimbabwean secondary schools' (1992:3). This citation is relevant in as far as it shows that, although it is slow in its implementation, the Multifaith approach has come a long way in Zimbabwe's education system. Perhaps the sluggish nature is accounted for by the fact that the teachers themselves, as policy implementers in classrooms, were not professionally re-aligned to manage change methodologically speaking. However, it is prudent to state that, in the context of the vitality of the Human Rights, the basic principles of the Multifaith paradigm do respect pupils' interests, aspirations and abilities in a democratic pedagogical environment in schools.

Moreover, it can be asserted with justification that another merit of the Multifaith paradigm is that it opens up a platform for an interreligious dialogue for pupils as they interact in classrooms. Currently, the Religious Education curriculum at Ordinary level does create a balanced space for dialoguing. As things continue to be in schools in Zimbabwe, the dialogue that takes place between either Christianity and African Traditional Religion or Islam and African Traditional Religion or Christianity and Hinduism is like a dialogue between the 'lion and the lamb' (Ter Haar, et al, 1992:35). This means that dialoguing is influenced by some hostility and pre-judgments amongst students as learners. In addition, the quality of dialoguing is based on the superior-inferior stereotypes that learners hold. Thus, what currently obtains in schools is that learners who are Christian in faith hold dormant stereotypes at the expense of the other learners who profess non-Christian faith systems in society. This is a tendency of doing indoctrination in schools, which is a mark of disservice and must be perceived as violation of basic Human Rights in Zimbabwe today.

## 7. Concluding Remarks

The teaching and learning experiences of children in the discipline of Religious Education in the school curriculum remain a matter of grave concern to a number of stakeholders drawn from the civil society and the government bureaucracy itself. The study established that the current education system continues to be conservatively elitist in nature and its morality is largely informed by the dominant ethic of Christianity. Other religions, notably African Traditional Religion, Islam, Hinduism, Baha'i Faith, Rastafarianism and Buddhism appear to exist at the periphery in the 'rainbow' of religions and pedagogical experiences in the Zimbabwean school system. This scenario is a re-play of ethnocentrism, a fact that is a product of multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-religious composition in the contemporary sociological profile of the Zimbabwean society. If this triangulation of the existential categories of race, culture and religion is not respected, then human alienation comes to the fore and in the context of the teaching of Religious Education, human rights would be disastrously compromised. Instead, therefore, we are convinced that the proper attitude required for the teaching and learning of Religious Education in schools must be 'reverence for reverence'. The essence of this attitude is aptly posited by Max Warren (cited by G. Lubbe, 1990:208) when he rightly writes, thus: 'Our task in approaching another people, another culture, and another religion is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on men's dreams. More serious still, we may forget that God was here before our arrival'.

In light of the foregoing insights, the study concludes by suggesting the following two recommendations: Firstly, the schools must create free democratic spaces where pupils, irrespective of their religious affiliation, learn to dialogue to each other 'outside the box'. The conviction is that genuine dialogue will avoid indoctrination. If Religious and Moral Education as a school discipline is to be authentically didactic, the learners must be exposed to reflective horizons embedded in all the religions given that they are resources and sources of an ethic of morality necessary for the development of a 'total person' who is spiritually, psychologically, emotionally and culturally well-rounded. Secondly, the teaching and learning experiences in the discipline of Religious Education should inculcate the inclusive spirit of responsible citizenship anchored on the universal values of human integrity, tolerance, accountability and abiding love. Thus, there is the urgent need for fresh curriculum innovation in the discipline of Religious Education in order to incorporate the indigenous African philosophy of *ubuntu* (humanness). But, perhaps another related issue that must be communicated along with the envisioned innovation in education is the need for professionally in-servicing the teachers who will implement and fortify the Multifaith instructional materials

and the perceived philosophy of ubuntu which creates the total person who is a role model in society.

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