



RELIGION AND NATIONAL VALUES: REFLECTIONS ON SOME ASPECTS OF BASIC EDUCATION CURRICULUM IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempted a critical reflection on the new national curriculum for basic education in Nigeria. It examined the status of religion in the previous curriculum vis-a-vis the new curriculum which merges two dominant religious studies with civic education, social studies, and security education into one subject labelled – Religion and National Values (RNV). The writers discovered, among other things, that religion has become a mix bag of blessings and curses in Nigerian society. It was also discovered that the old curriculum reflected much of indoctrinations, breeding religious ignorance and intolerance. The new curriculum, on the other hand, is found to be inclusive and embracing, and takes into cognizance the pluralistic nature of Nigeria. This paper concluded that the new curriculum is capable of helping Nigeria to achieve the desired goal of harmonious and peaceful co-existence, given some little modifications. The paper thus recommended that Nigeria's educational planners should set up a monitoring team to enlighten the populace and dispel the so-much propaganda against the innovation; and to oversee its implementation in every school (public and private). It also suggested that religious educators should shift from using the approach of 'learning religion' to 'learning from religion' approach, which could eschew religious ignorance and intolerance from the mindset of the present and oncoming generations.

KEY WORDS: Religion, values, old curriculum, new curriculum, basic education.

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INTRODUCTION

Right from the dawn of humanity, religion has been a vital and the most pervasive phenomenon of human life. Adogbo (2000) was not exaggerating when he asserted that to understand human history and human life, it is necessary to understand religion. This means that religion has primordial value in human life. This is why humans have been essentially labelled as *homo-religio* (religious beings). The influence religion exerts on human beings could be both positive and negative in the society, especially in Nigeria where there seems to be many religious fanatics and fundamentalists. Mbiti (1989) had pointed out that Africans are notoriously religious; each people has its own cherished religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates all the departments of life so well that it is not easy or even possible to isolate it from people's ordinary life. Mbiti's assertion suggests that the African is so religiously inclined, that religiosity could be seen in everything he/she does. Studies in comparative education show that religion is one of the major determinants of nations' education systems. This is why the policy-document on education in Nigeria made provisions for religion in the school system (Oroka, 1990). It is a vital factor considered in curriculum planning and development of education policy because it is a phenomenon that regulates every aspect of human life.

In spite of the vital role of religion in the school and the society, unfortunately, it has been used to instigate bloodshed and intolerance in Nigeria. History records how religious wars were fought between Christians and Muslims in the Middle Ages which took the lives of many. For instance, in Christians' attempt to wrest Jerusalem, the centre of Christianity, from Muslim adherents, holy wars were declared in the form of Crusades. Christianity had settled in the Middle Ages and integrated the whole of Europe, and Islam the whole of Arabia. The Muslims in the bid to spread Islam waged religious wars and seized Jerusalem from the Christians. Between 970 and 1040 AD, forty-eight famine years were recorded and from 1085 to 1095 AD, conditions worsened. Misery and unrest prevailed widely. This made Pope Urban II in 1095 to declare a crusade which was in its general conception a rescue operation of the holy places from Muslims' hands. He summoned all Christians to participate in the rescue operation with a promise of plenary indulgence to all participants. On the whole, about six crusades were organized and lasted from 1096 to 1292, a period of two centuries (Ubrurhe, 2000). It was a blood moment of power tussle. In Nigeria, religion has led to the creation of dichotomies, which normally erupt from religious ignorance and intolerance among adherents of religious groups. Ubrurhe (2000) reported cases of religious intolerance reaching their apogee in 1986 when Babangida registered Nigeria as a member country of the Organization of Islamic Conference. This singular action of Babangida divided the Nigerian citizenry into two major religious camps. The Babangida's malady is on its large scale even in the present administration. Religion has, indeed, been perverted in the Nigerian society to portray both a blessing and a curse. But much of these maladies are precipitated by sheer ignorance and inability to understand and tolerate one another.



Religious problem in Nigeria

It is a common knowledge that religion is a strong element which arguably exerts the greatest influence on the thinking and lives of a people. In Nigerian society, religion has played a vital role in inculcation of values both in the education system and the larger society. But in spite of its vital role, religion has been malignantly used to fuel bloodshed, ignorance, sharp divisions and intolerance among adherents. The Nigerian child appears to be regularly indoctrinated in one particular religious belief and sometimes programmed to develop hatred for other religious belief system. The resultant effect of this situation is religious ignorance and intolerance. Religion which is supposed to foster peace, tranquility and harmony has become the main cause of conflict and crisis in Nigeria. The foregoing explains the brouhaha which greeted the recent launch and implementation of new nine-year-basic-education curriculum which merged religious studies with three other subjects. The merge was necessitated by the desire of the federal government to conform to the latest educational practice all over the world, which reduces the heavy loads of subjects on the child and offers him/her the opportunity to concentrate on fewer subjects with some mastery. This merge resulted in some unrest, propaganda, agitations and vilifications from Christian and Muslim bodies, and some stakeholders in education. This study was thus a critical reflection on the old curriculum vis-à-vis the new curriculum, with the view to adumbrating the viable and better choice for the system of basic education in Nigeria.

Religion, God-consciousness, value-inculcation and school curriculum

The capacity of religion in the school system to direct the attention of the child to his/her creator and enforce moral values on the consciousness of the child has been debated over time. The diversities in religion with consequential diversities in the understanding of God, and the values to be inculcated on the child, have made some scholars over time to call for a postponement of religious education to later time in the life of the child, or an outright expunge of religious education from the curriculum. To quench such agitations, Grimitt in Hull (2002) made an exposé on three major approaches applicable to religious education in the school system. These approaches are of great benefits to the foregoing discussion. The scholar, in his observation, noted that there are three major approaches that could be adopted in the teaching of religion - they are:

- learning religion
- learning about religion, and
- learning from religion

Learning religion is a situation where a single religious tradition is taught as the religious education curriculum and it is taught from the inside, so to speak. The teachers are expected to be believers in the religion themselves and the object of the instruction is to enable students to come to believe in the religious sect or to strengthen their commitment to it. This type of religious education may be described as proceeding from faith to faith. Typically, a specific religious sect controls the curriculum and the methods of teaching rather than these being controlled by the education system itself. This type of religious education is challenged, however, whenever and wherever there is religious pluralism. This is due to the fact that this particular



approach to religious education encourages indoctrination and also does not accord the child freedom to determine the kind of religion he or she may want to accept and practice. This was the approach adopted by the early Christian missionaries who introduced formal education to Nigeria (Fafunwa, 1974). This approach was also what was adopted in the Qur'anic Schools in the Northern Nigeria beginning from the fifteenth century. It is basically the approach adopted in the old curriculum, wherein, CRS is expectedly taught by a practicing Christian, and IRS is equally taught by a practicing Muslim. This practice has been the bane of religious tolerance with consequential conflicts in Nigeria.

In the second approach, instead of religion being taught from the inside, religion is taught, as it were, from the outside. There are courses in some American high schools, for example, on the Bible as literature. The essential point is that the Bible is not handled as a religious/sacred book of a certain community of faith, but as a literature, that is, from a different, non-religious perspective. Sometimes this kind of religious education may be called 'education in comparative religion' and may be based on some anthropology. Sometimes, indeed, the subject is called 'religious studies,' and often it follows one or more of the various disciplines evolved by the study of religion such as the history of religions or the phenomenology of religions, or the ethnography of religions. This approach may be called 'learning about religion' because of its descriptive and historical approach. It tends to appear as a reaction against the first approach (the mono-religious 'learning religion'), and is often motivated by the desire to create a purely educational form of religious education, one which will not be open to the charge of indoctrinating or giving an unfair advantage to any particular religion. This approach does not create sentiments in mind of the learner, for the learner is not compelled to adopt any particular religious belief system.

However, the second approach presents certain limitations, according to Hull, which finally gave rise to a third kind of religious education. This is 'learning from religion.' The difference between 'learning from religion' and the first option of 'learning religion' is that in the latter case, pupils are expected to participate in the beliefs and practices of the religion being taught. Conversely, in the 'learning from religion' approach, the distance between the students and the religious content, which is typical of 'learning about religion,' is strictly maintained. Yet, at the same time, the life-world of the student, rather than the internal structure of the religion, and the second kind (learning about religion) is controlled by the scientific study of religion. The third kind of religious education (learning from religion) becomes a discipline within educational studies. It is for this reason that 'learning from religion' is receiving increasing attention and support from professional religious educators. This kind of religious education has as its principal objective, the humanization of the students, that is, making a contribution to the students' moral and spiritual development (The process for achieving or implementing this form of education, derived from Grimmitt's innovation, shall be discussed later in this paper, under recommendations, on page nine, to avoid tautologies). The sole purpose of this approach is to illuminate the mind of the child in moral consciousness and spiritual development and not to compel the child to adopt a particular type of religious system.



It is obvious from above, that religion has been taught in Nigerian school system over the years with the adoption of the first approach. This has instigated some scholars to raise questions on the inclusion of such studies in the school system, majorly due to the varieties of religious perspectives. Such disputes have prompted various scholars like J. Rousseau and F. Froebel to assert different opinions regarding the place of religion in the curriculum. Rousseau in Sutherland (1988) had posited that child is not capable of understanding religious teaching and therefore such teaching should be postponed to adolescence when the individual's mind has matured sufficiently to be able to cope with these concepts. Sutherland, Rousseau did not take into cognizance that religion is part of the socialization process of the child, that is, the same way the child learns how to smile when impressed and angry when offended, is the same way the child internalizes religious values. Rousseau did not also take into consideration the place of religion in maintaining social equilibrium in the society. For Rousseau to suggest that religion should be postponed to adolescence is to alienate the divine nature from human beings and undermine the importance of religion in the human life.

On the other hand, Sutherland (1988) lends credence to Froebel who had asserted that from an early age, a child is aware of the Divine and can respond to teachings about the Divine creation. Kibor (2004) quoted Froebel to have said,

All existence originates with, and is united in God, the divine and universal presence. All beings comprise an external natural dimension and an internal spiritual dimension and are sustained by the divine energy ... that is their essence. Since the purpose of existence is to reveal God, it is the person's destiny to become conscious of his/her divine interior essence and to reveal this dynamic inner force through its externalization (Kibor, 2004)

Upon this premise, Froebel's goal of education is stated in terms of a relationship with God. Education consists of leading a child as a thinking, intelligent being, growing into self-consciousness, to a pure and unsullied, conscious and free representation of the inner law of divine unity, and in teaching him/her ways and means thereto. For Froebel, natural phenomena make concrete what is in the mind of God. All existence including human nature is subject to the universal law of development that manifests itself in divine essence. Development occurs when this unfolds according to a prescribed, patterned sequence. Education is the exposure of the divine presence in the universe to the child, and this is to begin in childhood (Akinsanya, 2015). An early education is important because children by nature are good. Many educators and philosophers have argued either in support of Rousseau or Froebel. The present researchers however contend that religion should remain in the school curriculum, and be taught *via* the third approach discussed



above. Introducing religion from the onset in the child's life enables the child to develop sound morality, but teaching religious beliefs in an attempt to indoctrinate the child, if need be, should be left for the homes or religious organizations, and not the classroom.

Some inadequacies in the old curriculum

A critical look at the old curriculum reveals that it has its root in the Christian missionary and Islamic Qur'anic school curricula. These curricula later formed the basis by which the policy makers formulated the policy on religious education in 1977, and its various revisions. This submission finds support from Ihedinma (2004) who had stated that although the policy on education was not explicit on the participation of religious organizations in its curriculum planning and implementation, the Catholic religious education curriculum contributed significantly to various governments' educational provision. In developing a religious knowledge curriculum for Christians and Muslims only, the curriculum planners appeared to have taken for granted the diverse religious cultures in Nigerian society. Accordingly, he asserted that the old religious knowledge curriculum lends to a mono-faith confessional approach to the study of Christianity and Islam. The implication of this approach in a national curriculum design is the tendency for the State to be involved in nurturing pupils into a particular religious faith; a duty that belongs to faith groups and individual homes. This approach does not adequately equip pupils to live and respect other faith traditions in their multi-faith society. In the strength of the position of Ihedinma (2004), it becomes clear that the old curriculum on religious education was associated with some inadequacies which have significantly contributed to religious intolerance in Nigeria.

Njoku and Njoku (2015) noted that the major aim of including CRS in the education curriculum was to raise generation of people who could think for themselves, respect the views and feelings of others, appreciate dignity of labour and those moral values specified in the broad national aims as good citizens. CRS is designed to achieve many goals in the lives of the pupils ranging from teaching the pupils about God to the teaching of moral values which is geared towards shaping human behaviour. These values are embedded in the stories and events recorded in the bible (drawn from the life of Christian and other mystical beings). Notwithstanding the lofty aims of CRS, studies showed that learners' moral attitude have not improved greatly especially at this era (Cookey in Akinkugbe, 1994; Akinsanya, 2012). Meanwhile, an appraisal of CRS curriculum contents revealed that the subject has the potentials required to build one's moral character. This shows that because of the narrow mindedness of those who are implementing the curriculum, it has failed to fulfill its purpose. The purpose of including religion in the curriculum has been abused because the attention is shifted from national aim to parochial/sectional aim; instead of religion producing the ideal individual with the spirit of patriotism and tolerance, religion now produced individuals with religious sentiments who may not even like to work in the same place with others having different religious belief. There is thus a need to have a more inclusive religious curriculum which would allow the child to have a grip of some other religious tenets in the Nigerian society so as to understand and tolerate one another.



RELIGION AND THE NEW CURRICULUM

The specific role of religion in the school system is to equip the individual with moral values and bring them close to their creator. It was the understanding of the vital place of religion in the school system and the society that made the developers of the new curriculum to consider it necessary to have an inclusive curriculum on religion which could foster unity and tolerance. The rationale behind the bold step was to raise a generation that would be able to live above religious ignorance and sentiments, and cooperate with one another for peaceful co-existence. Igbokwe (2015) had argued that the school curriculum is a dynamic and open document that is constantly changing with the needs, challenges and aspirations of the society. This means that the curriculum in the first instance is not a static document; it undergoes changes with the needs and aspirations of the concerned society. Hence, Igbokwe (2015) submits that the federal government revised basic education curriculum in 2012 in line with global best practices, which has made Kenya to reduce her subjects at the basic education level to seven; Tanzania to eight subjects; USA to six subjects; Malaysia and Indonesia to nine subjects, among others.

The curriculum revision process involved identification and grouping of related disciplines such as Christian Religious Studies/ Islamic Studies, Social Studies, Civic Education, and Security Education to create a new composite labelled *Religion and National Values*. Key concepts in the former curricula now form integrating threads for organizing the contents of the new subject into a coherent whole. The reason behind this merge is that the subjects are related and they handle the same domains – moral/ethical values and basic understanding of God and the universe. It should be noted that this merge was done for other related subjects, such as *Basic Science and Technology*, which is a merge of hitherto Basic Science, Basic Technology, Physical & Health Education and Information Technology. The new curriculum thus affords Nigeria the opportunity to conform to the latest educational practice all over the world. A child brought up under this curriculum would focus on few subjects and have mastery knowledge of those subjects. He will also become tolerant of other people's religious belief systems and would be more willing to cooperate in working with people of different religious belief.

Wambui and Amukowa (2013) have similarly argued that the new curriculum is an integrated approach which is the fusion of some related subjects that had been taught separately; it is an infusion through merging of different themes, topics or areas of learning that were hitherto considered separate subjects and examined by separate studies in the old system. The new curriculum lays emphasis on what is technically called - life approach experiential strategy of learning and teaching, in which the experiences of the learner forms the basis for introducing new concepts and makes the learner the starting point. One is, however, not oblivious of the fact that any new curriculum presents new challenges to the teachers, for it requires new knowledge and skills, and methodology to effectively implement it. It also requires the in-servicing of teachers to keep abreast of the new changes in teaching-learning strategies. At the school level, implementation of these changes is considered central to the teacher's role, and the importance of implementation cannot be overemphasized and so is teacher participation in the implementation process of the curriculum in their schools. Ihedinma (2004) in his doctoral thesis proposed a way out for religious education in Nigeria. His



proposal marks the attainment of a full integration of the individual child into a harmonious and tolerant society which is made possible through a well-coordinated school curriculum.

Some criticisms against the new curriculum

A major source of worry concerning the new curriculum is the problem of portraying the persons, significance and teachings of Jesus Christ (the founder of the Christian faith) and Prophet Mohammed (the Prophet of Islam) to our children in a way that might not cause religious upheavals in the country. This is because the two religions do not seem to have a unified viewpoint. The Bible and the Qur'an appear not to be on the same page on major issues about God and man. One of the most objectionable challenges to Religion and National Values (RNV) is that it might force Christian children to memorize and recite the Qur'an, while Muslim children would be made to study Biblical texts. It may also encourage children to disobey their parents if they forbid them to follow Allah or Jesus Christ. Two prominent religious leaders, the Sultan of Sokoto, Alhaji Sa'ad Abubakar, and the Archbishop of the Catholic Archdiocese of Lagos, Most Rev. (Dr) Alfred Adewale Martins, have condemned this move, calling on the Federal Government to maintain the separate teachings of these faiths to avoid unnecessary confusion and conflicts. They reminded the Federal Government that Nigerians have inalienable right to religious freedom. Furthermore, the Child's Rights Act of 2003 preserves the right of the child not to be exposed to any religion contrary to that of his/her parents (or guardians as the case may be). They considered RNV as a vain and reckless attempt to "harmonize" Christianity and Islam, which is as impossible as mixing water with oil. They regarded it as unconstitutional, unpatriotic and unwarranted; they vehemently opposed and condemned it. They even labelled it as a surreptitious move to impose the preferred faith of some adherents on the rest.

A critical look at the above positions could tempt one to opine that the two religions purportedly have something to hide. If there is nothing fishy in the said religions; something the leaders are afraid of being exposed to the innocent child, why can't they allow a simple exposition of their faiths to adherents and non-adherents, for objective consideration? It could be noted also that the above critics have overlooked and perhaps undermined the ability of the child to think and conceptualize knowledge offered to him or her. The child is a thinking and discerning being capable of fathoming, creating and re-creating experiences presented with objectivity. The child should be offered variety of experience, leaving him/her with the decision on the most viable approach to the understanding of God and moral values.

CONCLUSION

From the forgoing, it could be concluded that the new curriculum on religion and national values has the capacity to undertake the sole responsibility of building in the child moral consciousness and recognition of the place of divinity. A critical look at the arguments against the new curriculum revealed that they are subjective and undermine the discerning abilities of the child. The ability of the child to think and conceptualize knowledge offered to him/her has also been undermined. The child is a thinking, feeling and acting being capable of creating his/her world and belief system when learning materials are presented objectively. The



new curriculum offers the child a golden opportunity to make comparisons and later choices as he/she matures. On the basis of the foregoing contention, the paper concludes that religion continues to be the regulating factor in every human society. Religion, despite its critics, will continue to exert the greatest influence on man because man is essentially *homo religio*. In the Nigerian society, religion would continue to be a determinant factor in every sector of her economy because African people are notoriously religious. The old curriculum was inadequate for a pluralistic society like Nigeria whose people seem to have strong inclinations for religion. The new curriculum on *Religion and National Values*, taught via the approach of learning from religion, appears to be the only hope for Nigeria to remove religious ignorance and intolerance from the mindset of the present and oncoming generation.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusion reached in this paper, the researchers wish to recommend that the Nigerian education system would be able to affect the nation positively, if the new curriculum on RNV, taught *via* Grimmitt's third approach to religious education, is put to practice. For the new curriculum to be well implemented, the minister of education in collaboration with educational planners should convey regular workshops and seminars at different levels, to give orientation to all religious educators and all education stakeholders on the need to put religious sentiments aside in the course of teaching the curriculum contents. Religious educators should be informed that the act of indoctrination of a particular religious belief is not the role of the teacher. That is, the State has no function to advocate for a particular faith in the school system. Different homes and religious bodies can conveniently indoctrinate their wards or adherents, but certainly indoctrination is not the business of the school. Government should make sure those who are trained, skilled and certified in religious education are the ones to teach the curriculum contents. Government should also make sure that every school (public and private) implements the curriculum. The school heads should monitor how the contents of the curriculum are being offered to children. This should be done with a keen interest in whether the teachers of the subject areas are using their influence to serve some personal interest.

Epilogue

The study sought to emphasize the peculiar role played by religious education in the curriculum. It was a defense of the new curriculum on religious education in basic education in Nigeria, with some little modifications. The study attempted to establish the fact that the old curriculum on religious education was inadequate; that it encouraged religious ignorance and intolerance which had generated many crises in Nigeria. This study therefore sought to raise advocacy for the acceptance of the new curriculum, with some modifications. It also advocated the exposure of the Nigerian child to diversities in the understanding of God through disparate religions. It is hoped that this paper would lay to rest some misunderstandings about the new curriculum for basic education, open-up better options to teaching religion in schools, and reengineer the capacity of religion to inculcate values on the consciousness of the Nigerian child.



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