

**Decolonising Religious Education in a Multi-faith Nation: Teachers' Voices on the Naturalistic Approach to Teaching RE in Chivuna, Zambia**

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**Abstract**

*Conducted in 2020, this study documents the voices of teachers of RE on their experiences of using the multi-faith 'naturalistic' approach in teaching Religious Education. The objectives of the study were: to describe the experiences of teachers of RE in using the Religious naturalistic (inclusive) approach in teaching RE, to establish the value of the approach and the challenges teachers faced in implementing it. The study was underpinned by Michael Grimmitt's conceptions and value assumptions of 'Religious Absolutism' versus 'Religious Equality'/'Neutrality' ideological influences on Religious Education. The descriptive design was used to highlight the voices of teachers, based on qualitative methods and using structured interviews from two schools in Chivuna. Data were analysed using SPSS, based on a sample of 14 respondents. It was found that Most of the teachers were fairly contented with teaching non-Christian religions; they were focused on teaching these religions and were in support of the multi-faith approach that encouraged non-Christian religions to be part of the school curriculum. However, few respondents had their contrary view that non-Christian religions were not supposed to be part of the school curriculum in Zambia. One of the reasons they advanced was that Zambia was a Christian nation.*

**Keywords:** Chivuna, Multi-faith, Naturalistic approach, Religious Education, Voices of teachers.

## **1.0 Introduction**

Since Zambia's independence in 1964, the provision of Religious Education at both Primary and Secondary School levels has followed a non-imperialistic path whose stance on teaching the subject has been that of 'religious naturalistic'. This entails the inclusion of as many world religious traditions in the school curriculum as possible. At the primary school level, this approach has seen the accommodation of content from the four main world religions namely Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and the African Traditional Religion. This has been despite Zambia's unwavering allegiance to Christianity, a religion introduced to the country by her colonial masters. Conducted in 2021 this study, therefore, looked at teachers' voices on the Naturalistic Approach to teaching RE in Chivuna, a rural community in Zambia's Southern Province.

### **1.1 Statement of Problem**

Since the Educational Reforms of the 1970s, Zambia's Religious Educations syllabuses have included not only Christianity but Islam, Hinduism and African Traditional Religion. Despite the attempts made at analysing the challenges faced in implementing the religious neutralistic approach to teaching RE, the authors of this article observed, from their formal and informal interactions with teachers, that rural teachers' views on the analyses of the challenges seem to be inadequate. The perspective of the Chivuna rural community itself seems to be missing. This prompted the inquiry, whose expectation was to contribute to coming up with a holistic perspective on teachers' views, from both rural and urban contexts.

## **2.0 Theoretical Framework / Literature Review**

The study was premised on Michael Grimmitt's conceptions and value assumptions of '*Religious Absolutism*' versus '*Religious Equality*'/'*Neutrality*' ideological influences on Religious Education. Grimmitt advocates for the need to reexamine the value assumptions on educational curriculum where the teaching of RE is concerned, given the fact of cultural, religious and ideological pluralism and recognising the value-laden nature of any educational enterprise (Grimmitt 1987:15). He calls for the need to establish an acceptable basis for teaching religion in schools, one which requires the study of religion to conform to educational principles while preserving the integrity of those religions which are studied. This, he contends, is an essential

prerequisite for the formulation of the curriculum. He contends that in the 1930s and 1940s, it could be assumed that the beliefs and values contained within the Christian revelation provided not only the essential underpinning of English culture but the basis for communal life as well, including that of the schools. He observes that there was then one conception of religious education – that which instructed pupils in the Christian faith, inducting them into the Christian interpretation of human experiences, and inculcating in them Christian values (p.39). This conception presupposes an imperialistic relationship between religion and education in which Christian values and beliefs are applied to education and exercise a normative function within the education enterprise. It is a conception informed by an ideology of ‘Absolutism’ (p.39). Such a stance has been resisted in religious pluralistic (malt-faith) societies, such as Zambia.

### **2.1 An Analysis of the Current Zambian School RE Syllabi**

Commenting on the current RE Syllabuses in Zambia, Dr Melvin Simuchimba (2001) says it is clear from the ongoing analysis of the official aim of Zambian RE that they need a lot of improvements if they are to meet the educational standard of promoting an open, critical and rational understanding of the religions. He observed that, at the time of his study, syllabuses 2044 and 2046, respectively, were weak in content because they were confessional, uncritical and not inclusive or pluralistic enough. In terms of approach, the two syllabuses were one-sided as 2044 had more of the ‘Life themes’ approach and 2046 the ‘systems’ approach only. He argues that a good RE syllabus needs to combine the two approaches so that it can be fair to both religion and education (Simuchimba, cited in ZANGO, *Zambian Journal of Contemporary Issues*, and 2001:14). Though Simuchimba touches on the need for inclusiveness in the teaching of RE, his analysis focused on the two High school syllabuses, and not the primary school one.

Dr Simuchimba’s analysis and others premised on the defense of the naturalistic approach in the teaching of RE in Zambia are against the general backdrop to the requirement by the education system to deliver an RE curriculum based on multi-religious approach, based on the following official aim statement:

*The main aim of Spiritual and Moral Education is to enable pupils to appreciate spiritual, moral and religious values and behaviour based on them. This appreciation is drawn from the four main religious traditions in Zambia,*

*namely: Christianity, Hinduism, Indigenous Zambian Beliefs and Islam (Ministry of Education, 1996:3).*

From the foregoing, it, therefore, seems clear that the teaching of RE in Zambia is in line with Michael Grimmitt's conception of religious education which he refers to as 'Religious Equality/Neutrality'. This approach to teaching RE has received widespread backing in the post-independence era. It seeks to treat all religious views and beliefs within the context of education as claims of equal value. It is, therefore, a conception which is informed by the phenomenological approach to the study of religion, which requires learners to suspend (bracket) their preconceptions and beliefs in order to allow an objective understanding of religious knowledge taught.

### **3.0 Methodology**

In order to collect the required information, the study used the descriptive design along with qualitative methods, owing to the qualitative nature of the research. The study sample comprised fourteen (14) primary school teachers, seven (7) from each of the two selected schools in Chivuna rural community of Mazabuka district. A purposive sampling method was employed in the study. Purposive sampling entailed choosing all teachers of Religious Education (RE) in the two target schools. This was in adherence to the requirement that these informants were "considered to be knowledgeable, well informed or because of their background knowledge on the topic under study (Kombo and Tromp, 2006).

### **3.1 Data Collection**

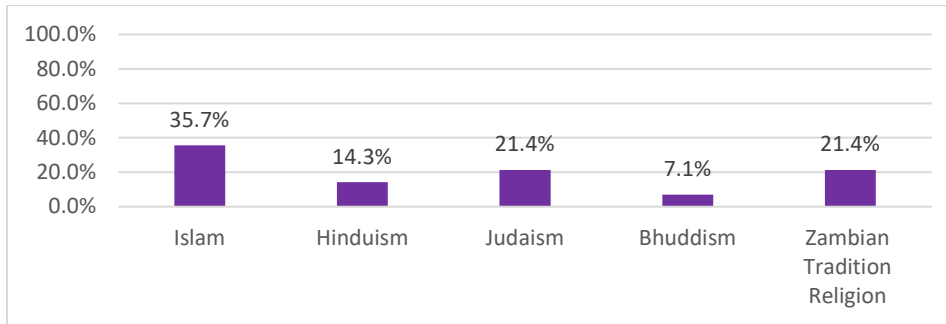
Semi-structured interview guides, focus group discussions, and self-administered questionnaires were used to collect Primary data. Reviews of relevant material based on the topic were done to collect the needed secondary data for the study. The SPSS was used to analyse the data.

### **4.0 FINDINGS**

In getting the ideological influence on the teaching of RE in Chivuna, the study first sought to find out from the respondents about the religious traditions other than Christianity, on which religion they were more contented in teaching. This would set the basis for the researchers'

understanding of the preferred ideological approach upon which teachers based their assumptions in RE. The responses to the question that asked teachers to indicate the non-Christianity religions they were more contented with were as shown in the table below:

**Figure 1: Teachers’ Response to the Question on which Religions they were More Contented**



*Source: Field data*

Figure 1 above shows the responses of teachers to the question that asked them to indicate the names of the religious tradition they were more satisfied with teaching. The figure shows that Five (35.7%) were contented with Islam, Three (21.4%) stated that Zambian Traditional Religion contented them more, while the same number of respondents (another 21.4 %) said Judaism satisfied them. Further, Two (14.3%) were more comfortable with Hinduism and only One (7.1%) was contented with Buddhism.

#### **4.1 The Question about where more Focus on Teaching was Placed**

Further, on the question that asked about teachings’ views on where much focus of the current teaching in RE was placed, the following were the responses:

**Table 2: Main Focus of RE Teachings in Schools**

<b>Focus</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Teaching all Religions	8	57
Christian Faith Formation	3	24
Enhancing Bible Teachings	2	14
Increasing knowledge of (Christian) God	1	5
Total	14	100.0

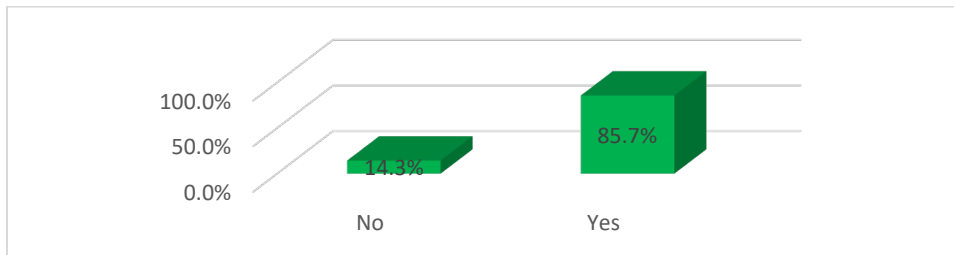
*Source: Field data*

The table above shows some variations in teachers' responses. Eight (57%) of the teachers indicated that much of the focus of RE content was on teach about all religions (i.e. Christianity and other world religious traditions), whereas Three (24%) said the concentration in the content was much on Christian faith-formation. Further, Two (14%) had opined that the focus of the subject was on enhancing the biblical teachings while the opinion of the remaining One (5%) was that RE focused more on increasing the knowledge of the Christian God.

#### **4.2 The Necessity of Including Non-Christian Religions in Religious Education**

Teachers were asked to indicate whether they were comfortable with the current inclusive approach to RE in schools which necessitated the inclusion of non-Christian Religion in the curriculum. Their responses were as shown below:

**Figure 2: Teachers' Views on the Inclusion of Non-Christian Religions**



*Source: Field data*

As can be seen from Figure 2 above, the opinion of the Twelve majority teachers (85.7 %) teachers was that non-Christian religions should be included in the curriculum and taught along with Christianity, while the Two minority (14.3 %) indicated a reserved view that the subject should not include the content of other religions.

#### **5.0 Discussions**

The following religions were mentioned as being taught in schools; Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and the African Traditional Religion. On what appeared to be a somehow strange note to the researchers, there were few respondents who gave the impression in their response that there were no other religions taught to learners apart from Christianity.

### **5.1 Contentedness of Teachers on the Current Multi-Faith Approach to RE**

Concerning the views of teachers on whether they were satisfied with the current approach that encouraged the inclusion of other content from non-Christian, the general response seemed to be that of being affirmative, though within the general categorisation of ‘non-Christian Content,’ there were varied preferences on non-Christian religious content, depending on individual teachers’ preferences. From what appeared to be their indisputably preferred Christian religion, Islam came second (with 35.7%), followed by African Indigenous Religion (commonly called African Traditional Religion) and Judaism respectively, each scoring 21.4% on the preference rating. Hinduism rated 14.3 per cent and among the six (6) major world religions taught in the Primary School Syllabus, Buddhism came last in terms of preference with 7.1 per cent.

The study further sought justification from teachers to their (varied) justifications in the manner they expressed satisfaction with non-Christian content on the school curriculum. One recurring justification for their assertions was given with special reference to one religious tradition – the African Indigenous Religion. Those who were not comfortable with teaching this religion in schools explained that certain African Traditional Beliefs encouraged hatred and brought about fighting in society because of one belief this religion supported, that there was nothing like a natural death. According to this religion, and in the views of the respondents, every death especially that involving humans, was attributed to some unforeseen forces. Each death had a cause and therefore, people sought intervention from spiritual mediums or witch-finders to determine the cause of death. This, therefore, makes African Traditional Religions remain on the periphery in Religious Education in so far as the teaching is concerned (Carmody, 2004).

This kind of resentment to Zambia’s primal religion was not strange in the ears of researchers; it was common and typical of a reaction from the Christian notion of life, death and the doctrine of eschatology (Hill, *et al.*, 2008:415). As the literature and the rationale of RE in Zambia are concerned, the teachers’ argument is not correct because African Traditional Religion provides ethical, moral, religious and Spiritual values to its followers. Consequently, it gives meaning and direction to people about their relationship with the creator and how to relate to the environment and fellow human beings (Carmody, 2004).

## **5.2 On the Question of Including Non-Christian Religions in the School Syllabus**

On the inclusion of Islam and Judaism; respondents stated that Zambia is a Christian nation as such there was no need to include such religions in the syllabus, one male respondent put it that there was nothing good that learners directly benefitted from the inclusion of these religions. Such sentiments again showed that some teachers think that RE is Christian education. Notable about this response is that it was expressed by SDA teachers who probably viewed RE as a confessional subject.

As could be deduced from teachers' attitudes and responses during the study, the similar strings of ideological influences emanating from the supposed influence of Christian beliefs and bordering on teachers' Christian doctrinal dispositions seemed to have permeated through to cause negative attitudes towards other non-Christian religions, not only the African Indigenous Religion in this case. It could be further inferred that some teachers reflected the old missionary view of African Indigenous Religion who looked at the gospel as providing everything that Indigenous Zambians needed so that they could be Christianised – regarding Africans to be immoral, lazy and drunken, steeped in superstition and witchcraft and doomed for spiritual damnation.

Decolonising Religious Education, in this case, may mean suggesting to all those concerned such measures as recruiting the right and well-trained teachers – with all that it takes to handle the subject. This will mean avoiding the dependency on theologians or the clergy (nuns, priests, pastors, *et cetera*) as teachers of RE, as the case is in some schools. This should not mean disqualifying these from teaching the subject, but rather that if they are to teach, they should have, in addition to their theological training, an acceptable level of education and appropriate training to handle the subject.

Decolonising RE in a sense to remove certain strings of Christian preconceptions in the minds of teachers, which may be perceived as detrimental to the successful implementation of the religious inclusive/naturalistic approach to RE, may also imply encouraging teachers to use the



phenomenological method in teaching. The phenomenological method comes along with two aspects; epoche and intentionality. By epoche we mean suspending judgement, bracketing previous ideas, opinions or thoughts about the subject under study in order to allow new knowledge (Cox 1992).

## **6.0 Conclusion**

The study concluded that generally, the views of most teachers were in agreement with the fact that different religions should be included in the primary school curriculum because knowledge of different religions helps learners to have wider insights on spirituality, and moral education and enable them to make critical comparisons on various aspects of different religions. In the respondents' views, this fits well with the role of RE as espoused by the National Policy on Education through the statement "to enable pupils to appreciate the spiritual, moral and religious values", based on the four main religious traditions present in the country namely Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and indigenous Zambian Beliefs. However, the study also observed contrary views from 'dissident' minority respondents, some of whom were advocating for religious 'absolutism' (i.e., to allow only the inclusion of Christianity on the school curriculum) and those others who were particularly not in favour of the African Traditional Religion.

To the authors of this article, this suggested a sense that there is still a need to decolonise the teaching of RE completely in the minds of the select few teachers who still think that Religious Education is all about teaching Christianity at the expense of other religious traditions.

## **7.0 Recommendations**

If we are to fully decolonise the teaching of RE in Zambia, a nation which has embarked on an inclusive approach to teaching RE, the current study recommends the following:

1. To re-emphasise the need for a neutralistic approach to the education fraternity in The nation, and sensitise educationists on the same.
2. To recruit qualified Religious Education teachers in school, as opposed to merely allowing theologians without a teaching methodology background to handle the subject as the case seems to be in some schools.

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