

**Decolonising Religious Education:
The Learner Factor in the Implementation of Naturalistic Approach to RE in
Chivuna, Zambia**

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Abstract

Since independence in 1964, the provision of Religious Education in schools has followed the path of a 'religious naturalistic approach' based on a religious inclusive curriculum policy. However, some learners' knowledge of non-Christian religions seems to be scanty, especially in some rural areas where Christianity seems to dominate probably due to the ripple effects of colonisation. Guided by Michael Grimmitt's conceptions and value assumptions of 'Religious Absolutism' versus Religious Equality, the study aimed at assessing the learners' knowledge of non-Christian religions in Chivuna Community of Mazabuka district, and to examine the challenges bordering on the learner factor in the implementation of the naturalistic approach in RE. The descriptive design was used along with a qualitative method to gather data which was analysed using SPSS, based on a sample of 74 respondents from two Primary schools. The findings of the study indicated that the knowledge of non-Christian religions in some learners was quite shallow, and lacking in others. Factors that led to learners' poor knowledge of non-Christian religions, such as poor reading culture, lack of physical exposure to non-Christian religions, and learners' rural background, were identified and analysed. The study made the following recommendations: (1) that only well-trained teachers should be allowed to teach Religious Education in schools, (2) teachers to be creative enough in their teaching, by using such methods as blended learning (3) to improve the reading culture (4) to utilise the expertise of guest facilitators from non-Christian religions in the teaching of RE.

Keywords: Neutralism, Absolutism, Religious Education, Chivuna.

1.0 Introduction

The provision of Religious Education in Zambia at the Primary and Secondary school levels has followed the pattern of a 'religious neutralistic approach' where the teaching of the subject in schools has been based on a religious inclusive curriculum policy. This is a non-imperialistic stance that has accommodated the content of other religious traditions such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and African Indigenous Religion on the school curriculum, despite Zambia having maintained her predominant allegiance to Christianity, a religion introduced to the country by her colonial masters. Conducted in 2021, this study, therefore, looked at the learner factor in the implementation of the neutralistic approach to Religious Education in the Chivuna rural community, in the Southern Province of Zambia.

1.1 Statement of Problem

Since the Educational Reforms of the 1970s, Zambia's Religious Educations syllabuses at Primary and High School levels have included not only Christianity but Islam, Hinduism and African Traditional Religions. Religion is expressed in followers, institutions, buildings (places of worship) and texts (scriptures) and teachings. Not all adherents of non-Christian religions are present in the rural areas and quite likely rural learners may not be able even to tell what African Indigenous Religion is in their own contexts. This prompted this study to find out the extent to which rural learners in Chivuna know about non-Christian religions.

2.0 Theoretical Framework

The research was underpinned by Michael Grimmitt's conceptions and value assumptions of '*Religious Absolutism*' versus '*Religious Equality*'/'*Neutrality*' ideological influences on Religious Education. This is an advocacy for the need to re-examine value assumptions in educational curriculum, given the fact of cultural, religious and ideological pluralism and recognising the value-laden nature of any educational enterprise (Grimmitt 1987:15). Grimmitt calls for the task of establishing an acceptable basis for teaching religion in schools, one which enables 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 informs 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. 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. 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’ (Ibid: 39). Such a stance has been resisted in religious pluralistic (malt-faith) societies, such as Zambia.

The current education system in Zambia has embarked on a religious neutrality conception of religious education which is in conformity with Grimmit’s advocacy. This conception received widespread support in the post-independence era. It seeks to treat all religious views and beliefs within the context of education as claims of equal value. Religious neutrality is informed by the phenomenological approach to the study of religion, which requires the learners to suspend (bracket) their preconceptions and beliefs in order to allow or objective understanding of religion.

2.1 The Current RE Syllabuses in Zambian Schools

Dr Melvin Simuchimba carried out a study to analyse the current Religious Education syllabuses in Zambian schools. The study revealed that there is a need for a lot of improvements if the current syllabuses are to meet the expected educational standard of promoting an open, critical and rational understanding of the religions taught in schools. At the time of his study, he observed that the 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). His call for inclusiveness in teaching RE is based on the following official aim statement from the Ministry of Education:

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).

Though Dr Simuchimba did not focus on the Primary School RE syllabus, his observations and the official aim statement of the Ministry of Education are clear enough to suggest 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 conception seeks to treat all religious views and beliefs within the context of education as claims of equal value. It is, therefore, one conception that 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 the religious knowledge taught (Cox,1992).

3.0 Methodology

The descriptive design was used along with qualitative methods to gather data. The study sample comprised thirty-seven (37) grade seven learners from each of the two selected schools, bringing the total number of respondents to seventy-four (74). Purposive sampling and random sampling were employed in the study. Purposive sampling involved choosing respondents considered to be knowledgeable, well informed or because of their background knowledge on the topic under study (Kombo and Tromp, 2013). Random sampling was also used in selecting the rest of the learners so as to ensure that each respondent had an equal chance of inclusion in the study.

3.1 Data Collection

Primary data were collected through the semi-structured interview guides, focus group discussion, self-administered questionnaire and fill-in-the-blanks exercise. Secondary data were collected through the review of relevant materials based on the topic. The SPSS was used to analyse the data.

4.0 Findings

This section presents the findings of the study on the learner factor in the implementation of a religious naturalistic approach in the teaching of religion at two schools in Chivuna Community, and the discussion thereof.

4.1 Religious Affiliations

One angle from which one would assess adherence to the dictates of religious pluralism in a multi-faith nation of Zambia would be by finding out people’s religious affiliations in any given social setting. During the study, learners from the two schools were asked to indicate their religion and their denomination (in a case where one was a Christian). This was all because, in assessing the multi-faith stance in teaching RE in Chivuna, the various religious affiliations of respondents were going to be indispensable, as this would consolidate the ultimate findings. The results of the assessment were as tabulated below:

Table 1: Religious Affiliations of the Respondents

Religious Tradition	Denomination	Frequency	Percentage
Christianity	SDA	21	28.4
	Salvation Army	15	20.3
	Catholic	30	40.5
	New Apostolic	8	10.8
Non-Christian Traditions	Religious -	0	0
Total		74	100.0

Source: Field data

The table above shows that out of the Seventy-four (74) respondents, all were Christians and not affiliated with either the African Traditional Religion or indeed any religion of foreign origin. Within Christianity, denominational affiliations were as follows: 21 (28.4%) belonged to the Seventh-day Adventists (SDA), whereas 15 (20.3%) belonged to Salvation Army, 30 (40.5%) were Catholics and eight (10.8%) were from the New Apostolic church.

4.2 What Pupils Learn in Religious Education at Primary School Level

One of the aspects that constitute the curriculum content at the Primary School level is prayer. Learners are supposed to be taught how prayer and worship are done in different religions. This would accord the learners an opportunity to know why prayer and worship are important in one's life. Apart from this, pupils learn that different religions emphasise the need for hard work which helps them to come to the realisation that it is not only important to consume what others have worked for, but that they should also take part in the work itself. This is in line with the aim of the Basic Education aim statement which states thus:

...promote the full and well-rounded development of the physical, intellectual, social affective, moral and spiritual qualities of all pupils so that each can develop into a complete person, for his or her own personal fulfilment and the good of society... Promote positive social behaviour and skills for coping with negative pressures; encourage the formation of socially desirable attitudes; shape the development of a personally held set of civic, moral and spiritual values (MoE, 1996: 29-30).

Hinduism also emphasises an aspect of children relating to the environment so as to develop respect for both plant and animal life. The Primary School Syllabus also emphasises how different religious traditions place importance on the purity of marriage, as part of the taught content. The rationale is that pupils should be taught how to refrain from sexual immorality and preserve themselves for marriage. Another topic covered by the syllabus is cooperation. Learners are meant to learn about cooperation which is an important element for development at both individual and community levels. It also encourages the young ones to take part in taking care of the weak members and giving alms to the needy members of society. In Islam, this concept is well elaborated in what is referred to as 'Alms'. Learners are also taught the different holy scriptures and beliefs held by the religions. From the Holy Scripture, young people are expected to understand how death is viewed by different regions.

Religion has strong ties to morality as most religious traditions prescribe morality. These are found in many religious writings, guiding people on how they ought to live. One good example to cite is the Ten Commandants for Christians. Another aspect that makes content in Zambia's

Religious Education Primary School Syllabus is human behaviour. Religion plays the function of providing moderation of the behaviour of people in society as a result of the teachings it provides its adherents, for instance, it is common in all four Religious Traditions (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism) to uphold life and not to take it regardless of the situation as life needs to be respected.

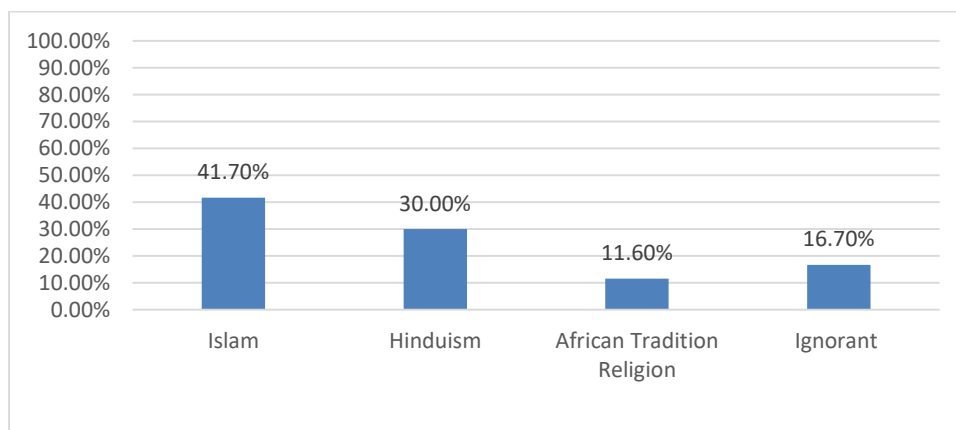
4.3 Religious Pluralism Reflected in the Syllabus

The Primary School Religious Education syllabus demands that Learners cover various aspects of the four main religious traditions in Zambia namely the African Indigenous Religion (Commonly referred to as African Traditional Religion), Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. Religious living ranging from names and importance of gods in people's lives, prayer, friendship and love, and how people should relate to gods are part of the taught content. Other topics that come across all religious traditions include the lessons on how to pray, teachings of praise and worship and happiness. Junior Primary School Syllabus also demands that by the time children are getting to the third grade they learn about the different places of worship from different religions, the Holy Scriptures and suffering and death, discipline and punishment, religious faith and the family.

4.4 The Role of Religious Education in Teaching Grade Seven Learners about Other Religions

One of the research questions asked learners to indicate whether they knew other religious traditions, apart from Christianity. The findings revealed the following:

Table 2: Pupil's Knowledge of Non-Christian Religion



Source: Field data

The results in the table above show that Islam was mostly known by learners with a score of Forty-two per cent (41.7%), followed by Hinduism with Thirty per cent (30%). The least was African Traditional Religion with only Twelve per cent (11.6 %) of the pupils being aware of its existence, while another considerable number of learners (16.7%) expressed ignorance of the existence of any other religion besides Christianity.

Respondents were asked about the role of RE in teaching the Grade Seven learners about non-Christian religions. A total of fourteen (14) Grade Seven learners were approached for an interview, which represented Nineteen per cent (19%) of the total research population. The choice of targeting grade seven classes and not lower levels of learners in this case was thought to be appropriate in this inquiry that required more reflection and analysis on the side of respondents. The responses were summarised in the table below:

Table 3: Values Learners get from Non-Christian Religions

Values	Frequency	Per cent
Worship and hard work	5	35.7
Co-operation	2	14.3
Purity of marriage	2	14.3
Almsgiving	2	14.3
Respect	3	21.4
Total	14	100.0

Source: Field data

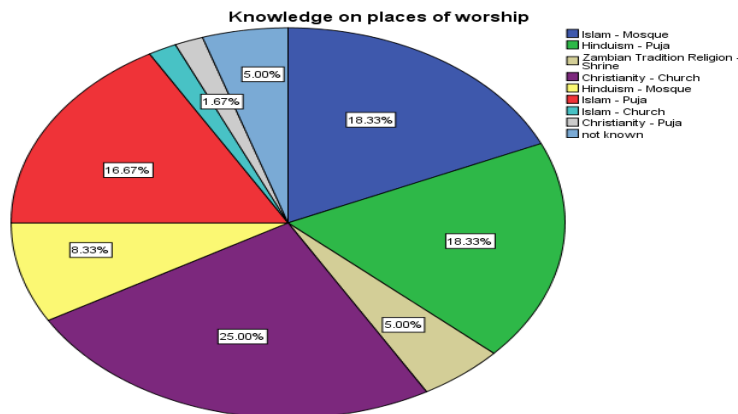
From a total of 14 respondents, five (35.7%) said that RE helped learners with issues of worship and prayer and gives them a sense of responsibility as religions encourage hard work, whereas two (14.3%) said that RE encourages cooperation hence nurturing tolerance of children who might belong to different religions. Another two (14.3%) said that among the many things that learning brings is the art of sharing (almsgiving). Further, two (14.3%) said that RE instils in learners the values of purity of marriage, as it encourages learners to be faithful to themselves and remain pure for marriage. However, three (21.4%) of respondents said that the subject promotes respect that is of God, fellow human beings and the created world.

From these findings, we can deduce that even though learners had predominantly affiliated with Christianity, they were able to appreciate certain values taught by other religious traditions. This takes us to another pertinent question, that asked learners

4.5 Learners' Knowledge about Places of Worship

The research was also concerned with finding out from learners about the knowledge they had on religious places of worship. The findings reflected varying levels of learners on respective religions, as shown below:

Figure 4: Knowledge of places of worship



Source: Field data

As can be seen in the diagrams above, eleven pupils (18.3%) were able to mention the Mosque as a place of worship for Islam; another Eleven (18.3%) associated the Puja with Hinduism; Three (5.0%) of the respondents indicated that the shrine was the place of worship for the African Indigenous Religion and Fifteen (25.0%) associated the Church with Christianity. Five (8.3%) said that a Mosque was a place of worship for Hinduism; Ten (16.7%) of the respondents indicated that a Puja was a place of worship for Islam while One (1.7%) respondent said the Church was a place of worship for Islam; another One (1.7%) indicated that Christians worshipped at a place called Puja; and Three (5.0%) of the interviewees expressed total ignorance saying they did not know any place of worship for any religion.

5.0 Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings of the study. The main purpose of the research was to establish the extent to which learners in Chivuna area were informed about non-Christian religions. The objectives of the study were: first to establish the role of RE in teaching Upper Primary learners about other religions, secondly, to determine the knowledge of learners about non-Christian religions and to ascertain the extent to which learners appreciate non-Christian religions. This chapter discusses the findings of the research, based on the themes arising from the findings.

Learners' Knowledge about None-Christian Religions

a) **Islam:** To most respondents, Islam was a religion whose adherents are called Muslims, who use the Quran as the sacred book and whose God is called Allah. They were able to explain that Islamic men attend prayers on Friday at the Mosque. They were also able to explain that Muslims have five pillars, although of these pillars respondents were only able to state almsgiving which was barely explained. But there were a good number of interviewees who were not sure about whom a Muslim was and what religion he or she belonged to. For most such respondents, Islam was one religion and Muslim was yet another religion. In the thinking of the researchers, some of these discrepancies may not have been the case with schools in urban areas. One would wonder whether the Social Studies syllabus is in this case fulfilling what it is intended to achieve. Elements of Islamic prayer, dress code, places of worship, name of God and the day on which they attend prayer are all well elaborated in the Pupils' Texts books, but surprisingly the interviewees struggled to relate these to their knowledge.

b) **Hinduism:** Most respondents had scanty information on Hinduism. They were able to state that Hindus use the Vedas and the Bhagavad Gita, but in most instances, they were saying that the Quran was the holy book of the Hindus. They were not able to correctly articulate the name of the place of worship for the Hindus or correctly mention the name of their God. Most respondents had challenges mentioning the name of the Hindu God. Researchers attributed all these strings of inconsistency in the respondents' knowledge of non-Christian religions to the

little or lack of encounter with the practitioners of those particular religions in the area. Researchers also noticed that the questions asked by respondents on Hinduism seemed to be very alien, which showed that non-Christian religions in Chivuna were not being fully appreciated by the rural learners. This problem may be a result of the inability to read or teachers' poor pedagogy. The following excerpt from the Learner's Book shows that some effort has been made to explain some Hindu concepts to learners who are, unfortunately, functionally illiterate:

Batobela ci Hindu baitwa kuti mba Hindu. Basyoma muli ba leza banji. Kweendelana aci Hindu, ngo'mbe ncinyama cilemekwa. Ba Hindu balijisi mabbuku ajisi luyiisyo lwabo. Balasekelela ciyanza ca kumwensya ciitwa kuti Diwali (Banda, Muraya and Esther 2017:13-14). Translated to mean: 'the followers of Hinduism are called Hindus. They believe in many gods. The cow is the most respected animal, and they have religious books that contain their teachings. They also celebrate a religious Festival known as Diwali.

From the expert above, it is clear that Hinduism is covered from a very young tender age of the learner in primary grades.

c) **Zambian Indigenous Religion:** the facts about this religious tradition were barely mentioned by the respondents as it appeared to be unfamiliar to most of them. The only aspect that was correctly mentioned was that the followers of this religion believe and worship ancestral spirits for protection from any harm. A few were able to state that the believers in Zambian tradition and culture go to the *Malende* (i.e. rain shrine).

Pupils' Knowledge of Places of Worship and Holy Books

Pupils seemed to have limited knowledge of the places of worship. In Islam, respondents said that their place of worship is called the Mosque, though the majority said that their place of worship is the Puja. A few also pointed out that Muslims go to Church for prayers. Respondents stated that Muslims use the Quran as their sacred book although some still said that the Muslim Holy book was the Vedas

a) **Hinduism**

Most respondents said that Hindus hold their prayers in the Puja. They would not state anything beyond this showing that they have limited information on Hinduism. Others said that Hindus go to worship at the Mosque. On this particular question, no respondent said Hindus worship in

churches. The situation on this question was like that of Islam above as only a few got it correct and said the Vedas were the sacred text of the Hindus. The majority of the pupils said that the Quran was used by Hindus as a holy book. From the findings, it was clear that Hinduism is not being fully appreciated as there are aspects of prayer and devotion that learners can get from the practice of the Hindus and use in their own daily worship and meditation.

b) Christianity

The question on Christianity was mostly correctly answered by most respondents. Almost all said they attend worship at the Church and that they use the Bible as the holy book. Generally, Christianity is seen as a superior religion in the community of Chivuna as anything that is not Christian is dreaded and is considered to be corrupting learners from the correct and true religion. The learners also unconsciously pick this notion as they get to class thereby not appreciating non-Christian religion. It is for this reason that Mackney (1984:138) argues that:

Christians have been as uncompromising about the superiority of their religion as anyone else, and their record of intolerance and persecution is unenviable. In particular, their attitude towards the Jews has been an acknowledged disgrace, and there is much reason for penitence...Each religion, in theory, prizes humanity and tolerance, and it is important that theory should be translated into practice.

Most of the reasons for the seemingly incorrect answers were a result of the learner's inability to read in the official medium of communication English. The aims of lower and middle Basic Education to ensure that pupils acquire essential literacy, numeracy and communication skills hence shaping the development of a personally held set of civic, moral and spiritual values (MOE 1996) has been severely challenged in Zambia. This, therefore, entails that the people leaving upper primary in rural schools do not fulfil the demands of the minimum requirement of being able to read and write.

5.1 Learners' Poor Reading Culture

One of the problems found by the study to have contributed to frustration with the efforts of the neutralistic approach to teaching RE was the learners' poor reading culture. This meant learners not appreciating or being unable to rip from the benefits of available written resources on world religions. The situation was that most learners only got in contact with books at schools and not any other place.

The problem of poor reading culture and the repercussions thereof is something that cannot be over-emphasised. Research conducted by Joseph Hachintu on the "Effects of Poor-Reading Culture among Distance Education Students' Academic Performance at Kwame Nkrumah University in Zambia" revealed the effects of students' poor background on academic performance (Hachintu JK, *International Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education*, January 2017). Another observation in consistence with Hachintu's findings is one made by Zambia National Union of Teachers (ZNUT) Secretary General Newman Bubala (in *Zambia Daily Nation*, November 22, 2016) where he noted that "lack of reading material in many Zambian communities resulted in poor reading culture". He attributed the lower reading levels in the country to the lack of learning/reading material, especially at primary schools level across the country. As a result of this, he said, teachers were finding difficulties in monitoring children's performance in schools because readers were few in most cases. As if to suggest a combination of multifaceted factors working together to compound the poor reading levels, Bubala further brings in the teacher factor in the reading problem. Teachers, he observed, never spend much time on learners when it comes to teaching how to read, instead of being part of the solution to what he termed as an alarming culture of poor reading. Given the current status quo where reading culture is concerned, he contended that it was the duty of teachers to support and implement Government policies aimed at improving reading habits among learners, instead of spending much of their time discussing politics as the case seemed to be at the time. Concerning parents being another factor in poor reading habits, the ZANUT Secretary-General said it was high time they (parents) invested in the education of their children by playing a supplementary role to the Government efforts. He observed that one way they would do this was by buying necessary reading materials for their children because the Government alone could not afford them.

In 2014, the Government of the Republic of Zambia, through the Ministry of General Education then, launched what was dubbed as “Let’s Read Zambia” mobilisation campaign aimed at encouraging parents to take a passionate interest in the education of their children, a move that was thought to help parents understand the challenges Government schools were facing in providing quality education. Captivated by this and other similar Government initiatives, Bubala urged parents to similarly take a passionate interest in supporting such initiatives aimed at improving the quality of education for their children. He extended the clarion call to the private sector and the general public, whom he urged to partner with the Government in supporting the development of reading culture among Zambians (*ibid*).

5.2 Lack of Exposure to Electronic Media

Chivuna being a rural community with small-scale farming as the main economic activity, the problem was compounded by most parents failing to buy their children reading materials and procuring solar energy needed for their computers. This obviously made it impossible for learners to be exposed to religious learning resources via technology thereby missing out on what would have reinforced the knowledge gained from the classroom on religions.

5.3 Lack of Exposure to Non-Christian Religions

The rural background of Chivuna subjected learners to a lack of physical contact with followers of non-Christian regions. The only few known non-Christian religious traditions in Zambia are the African Ingenious religion, Islam, Hinduism and to a less extent, Judaism. Of these regions, only the African Ingenious religion is familiar to the local community. This is because the adherents of the other three major foreign religions mostly reside in towns, especially along the line of rail. Among them are those of Asian origin who are mostly Hindus and Muslims. Because their main preoccupation is business, these two categories of people have preferred to reside in areas considered to be Zambia’s commercial zones. In this sense, most learners in the country’s rural settings are only acquainted with the African indigenous religion and Christianity. Lack of physical contact with adherents of other religions could be another reason explaining learners’ less knowledge about those religions.

5.4 Lack of Resourcefulness and Innovations in Teaching Methodology

By resourcefulness, we, for lack of a better term, mean being innovative in bringing rural people in contact with adherents of non-Christian religions, for instance, through conducting educational tours to purposively chosen religious institutions or sites. Utilising the expertise of individuals from non-Christian religions as guest facilitators during RE lessons could be another example that can be cited. We are not saying here, that these are prescriptions of the RE syllabus, but rather that given the peculiarity of the nature of the circumstance at hand; these may be examples of initiatives that can be used.

6.0 Conclusion

The focus of this study was to establish the extent to which learners in Chivuna were informed about the non-Christian religions, with specific objectives to establish the role of RE in teaching Upper Primary learners about other religions, determine the knowledge of learners about non-Christian religions and to ascertain the extent to which learners appreciate non-Christian religions. The research found that most of the respondents were aware of the existence of different religions in Zambia. Of these, the most known are Islam, Hinduism, and African Tradition Religion. The study however, found that some of the respondents were ignorant about the existence of other religions, while some were not sure of certain elements of non-Christian religions such as places of worship, the founders and sacred texts. Throughout the study, it was clear that learners' knowledge of Christianity emerged supreme to that of any other religion. Respondents generally shunned the African Indigenous Religion for reasons that it was a backward religion characterised by superstition and witchcraft.

7.0 Recommendation

In decolonising the teaching of RE in the multi-faith nation of Zambia, the study recommends the following: (1) to fully enforce the neutralistic/inclusive approach to teaching the subject (2) Promote the reading culture among rural learners (3) Introduce/improve the state of libraries, especially in rural areas (4) Encourage the idea of using experts from non-Christian religion as guest facilitators in RE lessons (5) Encourage educational Tours aimed at exposing rural learners to non-Christian religions (6) Teachers to incorporate the use of such technology as Televisions in their Teaching aids.

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