A FRAGILE AND DIVISIVE UNITY OVER RELIGIOUS EDUCATION CURRICULUM IN UGANDA

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ABSTRACT

Although Uganda is legally defined as a secular state, it is one of the most 'religious' nations in the world in terms of its rich religious though mostly volatile history and current record numbers of religious adherents compared to those who describe themselves as atheists or agnostics. The introduction of Islam, Anglican and Roman Catholic religious belief systems in Uganda ushered in an era of competition for converts which inevitably led to conflicts, including religious wars.

Formal Education, mainly through missionary education, centered on promoting denominational identity and despite government efforts to legislate on the need for religious education to address the first national goal of education of 'promoting national unity and harmony', the Christian Religious Education (CRE) and the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum have largely remained catechetical and not dialogical, which compounds the already existing tensions between members of different religious denominations as illustrated by interviews done in schools. There is a need to review the curriculum to address the gaps cited in this article that seeks to address the multi-religious composition of schools and society to safeguard against religious tension and conflict which are proving to be endemic.

Keywords: secular, atheist, agnostic, Islam, Anglian, denominational, catechetical, dialogical, curriculum.

RELIGIOUS SCENE OF UGANDA

Before the advent of Islam, introduced by Arab traders in 1884, and Anglicanism, ushered in by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) from Britain in 1877, and Roman Catholicism, brought in by French Roman Catholics in 1879, African traditional beliefs were the main religious creeds practiced by the local populations. Despite the existence of some conflicts among the adherents of African traditional religion(s), the competition for power among chiefs in Buganda, for example, only became more intense with the onset of foreign religions (Oded 1995, 62).

The uneasy relationship between the Muslim Arabs, the Anglican Britons and the French Catholics resulted in creating different power centers in Buganda, thereby resulting in conflict. The historical religious conflicts which involved African traditional religious adherents, Christian (Roman Catholic and Anglicans) and the Muslims, were motivated by political, economic and religious reasons (Mwesigwa 2014, 67).

Between 1888 and 1892, religious wars were fought in Buganda with the resultant effect of distribution of power and resources depending on the victors and vanquished. Religious alliances were a key feature of the religious wars and these included a war between Roman Catholics, Muslims and Protestants (or Anglicans) who united to fight King Mwanga who at the time allied with African traditional religion(s). Another war took place between Roman Catholics and Protestants (or Anglicans) who fought against each other and then together battled against Muslims (Mwesigwa 2014, 43).

The establishment of formal or secular education in Uganda was pioneered by European missionaries and not the British colonial government that took over political

leadership in 1894 when Uganda was declared a British protectorate, as Sekamwa posits:

> The aim of missionary education from its introduction in Uganda from 1877 to nearly 1925 was to establish Christianity and its practice in the country and to convert as many people as possible to that faith. Other educational aims were secondary. (Sekamwa 1994, 224)

Although the colonial government established regional government-founded schools in 1956 with a view to neutralize the increased denominational nature of education in Uganda, and despite the first post- independent Uganda government introducing a policy to neutralize religious-founded schools, the effect of denominational nature of education is evident to the present day. Largely ignored is the national educational policy review that provided for the curriculum to promote respect and understanding of other religions (Watson 1993, 44).

RELIGIOUS COMPOSITION AND THE LEGAL CONTEXT OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

The most recent population census for Uganda affirms that Uganda is a strongly 'religionized' country where only very few people do not identify with a particular religion. Religious identity is even easily distinguished through the naming of children. The problem though is that a good proportion of Ugandans, whilst belonging to and identifying with their respective religious traditions, also subscribe 'underground' to African traditional religion(s) in a syncretistic manner, echoed in the dictum that 'Christianity in Africa is a mile wide and an inch deep.'

Table 1: Population of Uganda by Religion 2014

Roman Catholic	39.3
Anglican (Church of Uganda)	32.0
Islam	13.7
Pentecostal	11.1
Seventh Day Adventists	1.7
Eastern Orthodox	0.1
Baptists	0.3
Unaffiliated	0.2
Traditional Religion	0.1
Other religions	1.4

The 2014 census reveals that while there was a drop in the population of Roman Catholics and Anglicans (Church of Uganda), there was an exponential growth among Pentecostals and a slight increase among Muslims. The intense evangelization by the different religious denominations and faith traditions is greatly responsible for the changing demographics of Uganda. Tension and conflict have been part of the evangelization and it is for this reason that education policy has always been cognizant of this aspect.

The desire by the nation/state to promote national unity, mindful of the fragile religious relationships between denominations, is emphasized by the promotion of national unity, which is point number three of the National Resistance Movement (NRM) current government's Ten Point political programme which specifies, 'Consolidation of national unity and elimination of all forms of sectarianism' (Museveni 1997, 217).

Similarly, 'Forging national unity and harmony' is Uganda's first national goal of education (Uganda

Government 1992, 6). The biggest question though is to what extent the Religious Education curriculum has addressed the promotion of national unity and harmony and the safeguarding against religious intolerance and discrimination, two of the greatest social ills of Uganda as a nation/state (Mwesigwa 2014, pp. 36-39).

The legal status of Religious Education in the Uganda curriculum derives from the significance of the religious composition of the country and the volatile religious history. Post-independent governments have endeavored to maintain a balancing act of the different religious traditions by defining Uganda as a religiously neutral country, thus legally defined as a secular state. The term 'secular' in describing the Uganda nation seems to have been derived from an interpretation of the Uganda Constitution Article 5 Part 1 of Chapter 2, entitled: The Republic of Uganda, which states that 'Uganda is a sovereign state and a Republic' (Uganda Government 2015). Further to this is Article 7, entitled non-adoption of a state religion which specifies that, 'Uganda shall not adopt a state religion' (Uganda Government 2015, 31).

Uganda's definition as a 'secular state' is contradictory since religion is a dominant part of the people's lives and the identity of the nation. The national motto of Uganda is: 'For God and My country' and the national anthem has got phrases like: 'Oh Uganda may God uphold thee', which constitutes deep religious sentiments that evoke and echo the religious life of the nation. All local and national political functions begin with prayers that are led by different religious leaders, alternately, to reflect the diverse religious composition of the country (Mwesigwa 2014, 42).

The trend of the religious composition of the country shows that unlike many other countries where religion is increasingly being relegated to the periphery in a post

Christian era (Mangalwadi 2009), in Uganda people are becoming more 'religionized', the major challenge being religious rivalry, tension and conflict that often accompany diversity.

LIMITATIONS OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION CURRICULUM, AIMS AND TEXT-BOOKS TO PROMOTE UNITY IN DIVERSITY

Religious Education curriculum in Uganda is distinctly restricted to Christian Religious Education (CRE) and Islamic Religious Education (IRE) syllabi. The policy statement on Religious Education reads:

The Religious Education syllabus is composed of two parts, namely, Part A: Christian Religious Education (CRE) and Part B: Islamic Religious Education (IRE). Individual schools will decide which part(s) they want to teach, depending on their religious population and facilities available (NCA 2000, 515).

From the outset this policy statement does not acknowledge other religions apart from Christianity and Islam, yet the 2014 census shows that there are other minority religious traditions, traditional religion adherents and unaffiliated religious groups. While discussing the role of an RE teacher in a multi-religious environment, read *et al* (1995, 7) argues for the need for RE teachers to be aware of the commitments of students or nonreligious commitments so as to give due respect to their different standpoints (Watson 1993, 7; Hughes in Wright and Brandom 2000, 36). The failure to provide for students of other religious traditions in this policy statement creates a dilemma of not attaching significance to minority groups

which can play out in the form of religious intolerance and discrimination.

Although the Ugandan Christian Religious tradition is presented as a monolithic tradition in the curriculum and despite the fact that the Joint Christian syllabus for primary and secondary schools was formed in 1974 by the Roman Catholic and the Anglican (COU) faith traditions, the Joint syllabus doesn't give prominence to the concept of unity in diversity, nor is the syllabus interpreted the same way. The practice of the Roman Catholic teachers to teach the Joint Syllabus in Roman Catholic schools and Anglican (COU) teachers in Anglican (COU) schools raises doubt on the 'unity in diversity' concept to be fully realized.

Another complex issue is that Pentecostals now comprise 13.2% of Uganda's population, yet they did not participate in the formulation of the Joint Syllabus, nor do they have any say in its articulation.

In the East African region: Kenya, Tanzania, Burundi and Rwanda, like Uganda, continue to provide for a single faith curriculum that promotes a particular religion to the exclusion of others. This goes against the prime principle underpinning the study of religion in an educational context which should not be 'to evangelize or induct pupils into predetermined religious view-points but to create capacities to understand and think about religion' (Schools Council Publications 1971, 37). Rwanda, mainly in view of the after-effects of the 1994 genocide that saw an ugly side of the use of religion in not only dividing citizens but also in witnessing the killings under the 'guise' of religion, introduced a blend of a single faith curriculum but which gives opportunity to pupils and students to explore other religions and values and issues outside religion in order to promote respect and tolerance to people of other faiths and ethnicities (Rwanda Education Board 2015).

In Uganda, the revised Christian Religious Education (CRE) and the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) aims have not been any better in addressing the concept of unity in diversity which is essential in promoting respect and understanding of other religions and other belief systems in a multi-faith or 'secular' society that Uganda is.

THE PRIMARY SCHOOL CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AIMS OF 2000

The 2000 revised Primary School CRE aims are contained in Volume Two of the Uganda Primary School Curriculum and are specified thus:

1. To develop awareness and knowledge of God's presence and purpose in the world as revealed through His creation, the Bible, the Christian community, the life and teaching of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit living in us today.

2. To develop Christian values of love, joy, peace, service and build a personal Christian ideal to inspire his/her development and growth to maturity.

3. To live a committed Christian life following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ.

4. To acquire the practice of praying alone and in fellowship with other Christians.

5. To get knowledge of the teaching of the Bible. 6. To appreciate the common elements in traditional and other religions and Christian beliefs.

7. To develop the Christian moral values of honesty, concern for others, sharing, tolerance and justice.

8. To develop personal qualities of leadership to serve others in the community.

(NCA 2000, 516)

The sixth CRE aim is the only one out of the eight that addresses inter-relationship between a Christian pupil and pupils of other religious traditions. Even then, the aim is only concerned with appreciating commonality between Christianity and other religious traditions and not how to explore them in view of 'learning about' and 'learning from' but for Uganda's context even more so, promoting respect for other religions or non-religious philosophies, thus reducing tension and conflict.

PRIMARY SCHOOL ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION (IRE) AIMS OF 2000

The revised 2000 Primary School IRE aims as contained in Volume Two of the Uganda Primary School Curriculum book published by the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) are mainly concerned with spiritual nurture of pupils and are catechetical and not dialogical. The IRE 2000 aims are to enable the student:

1. To experience and live as a practicing Muslim at school and at home, thus enabling her/him to appreciate God's relationship with her/him and her/his relationship with others in different situations.
2. To enrich her/his life and develop the whole personality.
3. To foster reconciliation between Islam and her/his cultural values of the individual learner for happiness, stability in character, peace in an individual, in the home, the community and the nation at large.
4. To acquaint herself/himself with the teachings of the Quran.

5.   To appreciate and internalize the value and practice of the teachings of Islam as taught in the Quran and as practiced by the Prophet to develop a sense of morality in the individual learner according to the teachings of Islam.

6.   To grasp the basic concepts of Islamic theology so that she/he can recognize where Islam and Christianity overlap and where they differ.

7.   To study the principles and the life of Prophet Muhammed.

8.   To trace the origin and development of Islamic civilization, culture and describe the significance of Islamic historical events to the spread and development of Islam.

9.   To live an integrated life and live in harmony with others. (NCA 2000, 599)

Eight of the revised aims of IRE are concerned with enabling pupils to become practicing Muslims and the sixth aim, similar to the primary school CRE aim (see page 15 above) meant to assist a Muslim pupil to compare Islam to Christianity without necessarily engaging with issues of respect and understanding, let alone aid, the promotion of unity in diversity.

The ninth aim is explicit in expecting pupils to develop interpersonal relations with pupils of other faiths. However, there is a challenge for pupils of other faiths who may attend Muslim-founded schools that are grant- aided by government. Wouldn't it imply that these should be candidates for conversion to the Muslim faith? If so, would this be the intention of government policy? Not at all! But that might indeed be the interest of foundation bodies.

SECONDARY SCHOOL CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION (CRE) AIMS OF 1970'S

The Secondary School CRE aims are expressed in the Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB) Regulations and Syllabuses. These are stipulated thus:

1. To study man's understanding of his relationship to God and fellowmen in the Bible, in the history of the Church and in the African traditions.

2. To deepen the student's awareness of his relationship with God and his fellowmen through Jesus Christ.

3. To present an understanding of the present Church in East Africa, making him aware of the circumstances from which this structure has arisen. 4. To introduce him to a range of service to the Church in the life of the nation.

5. To help the student to appreciate the contribution of the Church in East Africa to the Universal Church.

6. To develop the student's understanding of the African world view and of his background generally.

7. To develop the student's ability to relate elements of his African traditional religious views with those of his Christian world view.

8. To develop the student's ability to evaluate what he is seeing and experiencing daily in light of the African traditional religions and Christianity.

9. To develop the student's knowledge of those elements which are common to traditional religions in East Africa with the main variations and detailed study of one of them.

(Uganda National Examinations Board 1996, pp 48-49)

While the first five aims are exclusively concerned with spiritual nurture of students within the Christian Religious tradition, the sixth, seventh, eighth and ninth aims of Secondary School CRE give prominence to the resourcefulness of the African traditional religion(s) in enabling students to appreciate the evolution of the concept of worship and belief in a Supreme Deity in Africa prior to the onset of Islam and Christianity. The exploration of the African traditional religion(s) might be a key resource to enable students appreciate the existence of other non-religious philosophies.

The lack of exploration of other religious traditions like Islam, which is a significant religious tradition in Uganda, suggests that Christian students will not develop good interpersonal relations with Muslims or members of other minority religious traditions reflected in Uganda's census. Muslim students who attend Christian-founded schools that are grant-aided by government, which is a very common practice, will be brought up to appreciate Christianity as the default religion since they will be subject to proselytization. All religious-founded schools, depending on which foundation-body they belong to, always conduct daily morning prayers and Church services or Juma prayers are normally compulsory (2014).   In view of the historically disadvantaged position of Muslims and their continued complaints against discrimination by the mainly Christian-dominated and Christian-led country (Kayunga 1994), it will be difficult to ensure unity and harmony.

SECONDARY SCHOOL ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION (IRE) AIMS

Unlike the Secondary School CRE aims, the IRE aims have provision for inter-personal relations between Islam and

other religions. Nonetheless, IRE aims are mainly concerned with spiritual nurture of students within the Islamic Religious tradition as specified below:

a) To develop in the student an appreciation of and a positive response to spiritual and moral values based on belief in God as expressed in the Holy Quran and in the teachings and exemplary life of Prophet Muhammed (Peace Upon him).

b) To help the student develop a sense of awareness of belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood, and have respect and tolerance for other religions.

c) To help students develop an awareness of the Muslim community and how it came into being by studying the history of its civilization with specific reference to East Africa.

d) To help the student develop a sense of awareness of interaction between faith and good works through the study of Islamic doctrines, rituals and festivals based on the Holy Quran, Hadith and FIqh. (Uganda National Examinations Board 1996, 49)

The assumption of the IRE Secondary School aims is that they are for Muslim students who will be introduced to Islamic doctrine and practices that will result in a groomed Muslim student. The challenge with this aim is that in a majority of Muslim-founded but government grant aided Secondary Schools, we have a good number of Christian students who attend mainly because of nearness of the school to their homes or its good academic standards. Since Religious Education is taught according to the religion of the foundation body and since there is no exclusion clause in the policy, Christian students will therefore be subjected to a curriculum of nurture within the Islamic faith! Religious tension and conflict are inevitably part of this

situation in Muslim and Christian founded schools (Mwesigwa 2014).

CONTENT OF CRE AND IRE TEXTBOOKS AND THE MULTI-FAITH CONTEXT

The CRE primary and Secondary School Christian Living Today Books are largely concerned with the promotion of the Christian Religious tradition as expressed in the religious beliefs, practices and values. There is not much deliberate effort put in addressing the multi-religious nature of Ugandan society, let alone the religious composition of the students.

The CRE pupils' textbook for Primary Six pupils (1976) explores the concept of Christian brotherhood and sisterhood without relating it to the different Christian religious denominations that we have in Uganda. The challenge with this curriculum is that teachers are not able to relate the topic to the daily experiences in the school and community setting. Since the textbooks do not give due recognition to the different Christian religious denominations or even other religious denominations, these pupils will not be able to relate well with each other as we shall discuss in subsequent section (see pages 2021) on evidence for religious discrimination and intolerance.

While the content of the new Primary School IRE pupils' books does not deal with other religious traditions as required by the expectations of the revised IRE aims, IRE secondary school text-books present the Islamic religion as superior to the Christian religion thus:

'Most western writers hold that Prophet Moses (Musa) initiated Judaism, that Prophet Jesus (Isa) initiated Christianity and that Prophet Muhammed (May peace of

Allah be upon all of them) initiated Islam. Muslims disagree with this statement. They claim that Prophet Muhammed (May peace of Allah be upon him) did not preach a new religion, but merely completed the mission of earlier Prophets, which was, in essence, the same message and guidance from God. They thus declare Islam as the perfection of the religion of God left incomplete by the prophets before him' (Quraishy 1978:1)

Quraishy, therefore, sums up the curriculum intention of IRE in secondary schools as intended to nurture Muslim students in their faith and enabling them to appreciate how uniquely placed it is above the Christian religious tradition. The Secondary School text-books of Islam: Book One and Book Two are concerned with the spiritual nurture of students within the Islamic Religious tradition through exploring the practices of Islam (Quraishy 1987: xi) and Islam as the ultimate religious faith.

Prophet Jesus (Isa) according to Islamic teaching was a forerunner of Muhammed. While this might be a generally accepted Islamic teaching, a curriculum that is cognizant of the place of Jesus (Isa) in the Christian Religious tradition and mindful of the presence of Christian students in a Muslim founded school, would have approached the subject more sensitively to safeguard against religious offence that may result to Christians in the class and thus lead to tension and conflict.

EVIDENCE OF DISCRIMINATION AND INTOLERANCE IN CURRENT TRENDS OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

There is evidence in the public spaces, especially through media and the research I conducted in secondary schools in

Uganda, to show religious uneasiness in the relationships between students of different religious traditions. In the year 2000, the Roman Catholic Church raised a complaint against the government for the unfair process of restructuring Primary Teachers Colleges which had resulted in withdrawing government support to 14 Roman Catholic PTCs, retaining only 7 while 22 Church of Uganda PTCs (Anglican Church identity) were to be supported. Although the Ministry of Education technical committee made a report on the restructuring of PTCs, including criteria of looking at relative equity in the share of government supported PTCs among major religious denominations, the political pressure resulted in the rescinding of the recommendations.

A Parliamentary Investigation team dated 18th April 2000 concluded by recommending that six Roman Catholic PTCs that had been closed be reopened. The underlying problem was that at the time, the Minister of Education Hon Dr. Kiddu Makubuya, was a member of Church of Uganda (Anglican), and it was assumed perhaps that he influenced the technical team. Religious intolerance, perceived or real is part of the psyche of a majority of Ugandans. According to *The Daily Monitor* newspaper of 23rd July 2001, a lead article said, 'Catholics unhappy with cabinet appointments.' This article was followed by another of 1st October 2001 in which Hon Winnie Byanyima, the then Member of Parliament for

Mbarara Municipality, said: 'President Y.K. Museveni (Church of Uganda member) was ignoring Catholics and Muslims in his social, economic and political programs.

Real or imagined, the societal evidence for complaints about religious discrimination and intolerance is a result of a curriculum that these politicians were exposed to during their upbringing, perhaps ironically echoing the New

International Version Bible message of Proverbs 22:6 which reads: 'Train a child in a way he should go, so that when he is old, he will not turn from it.' The current curriculum will need to be reviewed to address these challenges, mainly through addressing mindset challenges that are formed at lower primary and secondary school levels.

The Muslim question is another sore part of the strained relationship between members of different religious denominations in Uganda. The Allied Democratic Force (ADF) is an Islamic body led and dominated by a military outfit based in the Democratic Republic of Congo, comprising of Ugandans who are committed to fighting and removing the Christian-led government of President Y.K. Museveni.

Kayunga in Mamdani (1994) attributes the rise of Islamic fundamentalism to the historically disadvantaged position of Muslims right from the colonial times. It is ironical that although the population of Muslims in Uganda is small (see Table on page 10 in Introduction section), the ADF is committed to establishing an Islamic State. The motivation could be grounded in the Islamic Religious Education at Primary and Secondary School IRE Curriculum that Islam is superior to Christianity (Mwesigwa: 2000; Quraishy: 1987).

Based on the Post-graduate Research that I carried out in 2000 in Mbarara Municipality and particularly in the non-religiously founded Ntare School, religious tension and conflict exist in Ugandan schools. The Roman Catholic student leader I interviewed argued that although the school was a government-funded school, unlike a majority of religiously-founded schools in Uganda, there was religious intolerance among students (Mwesigwa 2000: 200).

According to the student leader, Roman Catholic and Muslim students were demeaned and often ridiculed through school campus public talk, jargon and sometimes even in the drafting school policies. The Muslim student leader revealed to me that he was shocked when his fellow classmates asked him to forward their resolution, since he was at the same time class counselor, to the school administration appealing for pork to be added to the school menu, which was a taboo for Muslims (Mwesigwa 2000:201).

Such an action is a reflection of the lack of respect and tolerance or sensitivity for religious beliefs and values from members of other faiths, a key expectation of a multi-faith RE (Watson 1993:43; Jackson 1997:74; Arthur 1990:43).

In Uganda, we have had a backlash from the recently concluded presidential and parliamentary elections whereby the question of religion raised its ugly head, an indicator that peoples' mindsets are tuned to interpret even national political events from the perspective of religion instead of perhaps other dynamics.

According to *New Vision* of 22nd January 2021, the lead article reported that the Government blamed the National Resistance Movement (NRM) party loss of the votes in Buganda to the Catholic Church, which the Minister of Presidency, Esther Mbayo, attributed on the influence of the voting patterns through clandestine campaigns.

The Daily Monitor newspaper of 25th January 2021 raised a religiously sensitive point by quoting Hajji Mutumba Nsereko, the Head of Uganda Muslim Council's Public Relations Office proudly announcing how 50 Muslim Members of Parliament had been voted in the recently concluded parliamentary elections, describing it as a Muslim wave that would address the historically

disadvantaged status of Muslims in a Christian dominated country.

The subject of interplay between religion and politics in a negative way was raised too, following the Ugandan 2016 presidential and parliamentary elections (Alawa Henni and Sentongo Jimmy Spire 2016). The complaint about religion being a factor in political decisions of sections of Uganda's society is an indicator of the underlying challenge of the strained relations, tension and conflict.

CONCLUSION

Although Uganda is a 'secular country', denoting the religious neutrality of the country and despite the country being multi-religious with only a minority non-theistic, the aims of Religious Education are mainly focused on the spiritual nurture within respective religious traditions yet students of different religious traditions attend schools of single faith RE. The government of Uganda has been conscious of the historical religious conflicts and current tensions in directing its educational policy statements that would have guided the Religious Education Curriculum designers to provide for the promotion of national unity and harmony as the first national goal of education.

Unfortunately, this has not been given emphasis by religious faith traditions which are responsible for drawing the aims of Religious Education. There is a religiously fragile Ugandan nation whose children and youth are exposed to a potentially divisive curriculum that may promote religious intolerance and discrimination. Religious leaders, teachers and all key stakeholders need to be concerned about the current Religious Education Curriculum and call Government for a review of the Aims of CRE and IRE for a rethink of the purpose of Religious

Education in schools so that in addition to spiritual nurture of students there is an address of the aspect of promotion of national unity and harmony, Uganda's first national goal of Education.

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