

Religion in South African education: A divisive or unifying force?

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Abstract

Religion promotes not only tolerance among societies with different backgrounds, but also serves to enhance human society. In contrast, however, religion is seen to be the cause of conflict and division around the world. Hence, it is crucial that schools handle the teaching of religion in schools with greater care. This paper aims to share schools' experiences of religion-in-education policy change in South Africa – whether it unifies or divides them. It concludes that religion in education is neither a divider nor a unifier. Nonetheless, the approach that schools adopt towards the teaching of religion to learners remains a concern.

Keywords: Conflict management, policy implementation, religion-in-education policy, religion as a divisive force; religion as a unifying force; South Africa

Introduction

Controversially so, religion is viewed as a 'double-edged sword'. The phrase can be interpreted to mean that, 'depending on its use, religion can easily arouse emotions of love or hate, construction or destruction, peace or war' (Ntim 2012). As a social phenomenon, religion has its roots in faith and unity, and it aims to create a cohesive bond among its members. Furthermore, it has the potential to create an indivisible bond among persons with the same beliefs and gives a collective identification to members of the same faith (Agbiji and Swart 2015; Koehrsen 2017; Sadowski 2017). In contrast, religion can become seriously destructive if misused by bigots and intolerant rabble-rousing individuals and groups. Cases such as September 11; the fighting in the Central African Republic between Muslims and Christians; Buddhist and Rohingya Muslim hostilities in Myanmar; religious conflict in Northern Ireland; and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict

(Svensson 2013; Burstein 2018) are a few cited examples.

The field of education has never been immune against the conflicts that sprouted from conflicting religious interests. Relentlessly, “religion” as a learning area in schools has been the subject of countless debates on the “confessional” and “non-confessional” approach of its teaching. The former promotes obligation towards a specific religion (i.e. Islam, Catholicism), whereas the latter focuses on provision of information about religion/religions to expand learners’ understanding on the different worldviews and eventually promote tolerance for other religions (Boeve 2016; Sultana 2022). The tensions surrounding the teaching of religion in schools have led to the frequent revision of education policies and curricula of many countries. It is against this backdrop that I found it imperative to investigate the implementation of the revised curriculum to discover whether religion in South African schools remains a divisive or unifying force.

The aim of this paper is twofold. I firstly present how the education systems of several different countries, including South Africa, deal with the teaching of religion. Secondly, I attempt to unpack the practices of these systems to explore whether religion is indeed a divisive or a unifying force. In doing so, I bring into perspective experiences of school principals in South Africa in implementing the religion policy in their schools after 2003. School principals’ participation in the study that underpins this paper was in their private capacity rather than as their response to directives from their provincial departments of education.

I therefore reviewed relevant literature using the so-called “funnel approach” where a flow of discussions emanates from the international, continental, and then local perspectives. I engaged search engines such as YouTube videos, Google, Google Scholar and SAGE journals to search for any literature that could assist in answering this crucial question. I engaged search terms and phrases like “religion as a divisive factor”, “religion

as a unifying factor”, “religious conflicts in schools”, and “religion as a source of conflict and peace”. I limited my search to a range of ten years (2012 – 2022) in order to combine recent and not so old sources. I discarded any work outside these search perimeters.

Rethinking the religion curriculum in schools

Research evidence suggests that the global community are not satisfied with the manner in which most of the states in the world deal with the issue of religion in public education – the manner that perpetuates divisions, hence a need for rethinking the matter (Van der Walt 2011; Saldaña 2015). For instance, the teaching of religion as an educational and not a religious or confessional practice is increasingly accepted as the only legitimate and reasonable pedagogy that unifies the plural societies. In this view, religion should be studied in its plural manifestation in local contexts and for an increasingly globalising world. Scholars and policy makers in diverse countries (Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Canada, Australia, and South Africa) have accepted and therefore promote the unifying pedagogy to religious education (Tayob 2018; Sultana 2020). For example, for the first time in the history of Pakistan, schools are about to offer a new subject – “religious education,” where learners from minority religions study their own traditions rather than choosing between studying Islam (a subject called Islamiyat) and ethics (Ikhlaiyat) (Panjwani and Chaudhary 2022), the approach that has promoted divisions for a reasonable number of years.

In fact, the unifying approach appears to be the global norm. For instance, in Asia, the curricula regarding religion have seen such reviews since the 13th century when Estonia accepted Christianity (European Studies on Religion and State Interaction 2012) and up to the late 1990s, when religious education was taught in some public schools,

mostly in primary classes and at the upper secondary school level (Mwale and Chita 2017).

A non-confessional and multi-religious approach towards the teaching of religion in schools slowly took shape from the 1950s onwards in European countries particularly Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and the United Kingdom (Tayob 2018). Therefore, as part of a larger societal process of democratisation, as well as for the increased pluralisation of society in general and the classroom in particular (from the 1970s), these countries proposed religious education as a subject to be taught in schools. As a result, faith related activities in Europe have increasingly veered towards promoting understanding of and respect for different religions with the aim of promoting unity amongst diverse religious societies. For example, in contrast to the traditional teaching of religion, religious education in the UK nowadays focuses on the basics of different religions and traditions (Heland-Kurzak 2016). For this reason, learners who do not merely accept the religious messages but demand debate, discussion, and more attractive formulations, based on wider experience than only the Christian religion, tolerate this approach.

Religion in public schools in the United States has long been a controversial issue, even after the court ruling in 1963 that paved the way for the teaching of religions in schools and universities in a non-confessional way (Tayob 2018). The exact line between constitutionally protected religious activities and impermissible state-sponsored religious indoctrination remains under dispute (Heland-Kurzak 2016) and divisions are therefore inevitable. A similar experience was observed in some parts of Australian such as Wales where the 1880 Act provided that,

... Children will spend four hours devoted to secular instruction and not more than one hour shall be set apart when children may be instructed by a clergyman or other religious

teacher... and in all cases the pupils who receive religious instruction shall be separated from the other pupils of the school. (New South Wales State Government 1880).

Nonetheless, some Christian denominations (i.e. Catholics) objected to education being controlled by secular authorities and therefore continued to establish separate schools where the teaching of religion was carried out using a confessional approach (Babie 2021; Rymarz 2012). Not only that, efforts were made by prominent figures to deter Christian parents from sending their children to public schools condemning the "principle of secularist education" saying that public schools were "seed plots of future immorality, infidelity and lawlessness (Huth, Brown and Usher 2021; Buchanan 2018). I regard such practices and behaviours to be the “seed plots of divisions, hatred, and religious illiteracy”.

Looking at this phenomenon from the African perspective, we cannot ignore the fact that religion and Christianity in particular, has been used as a weapon of division amongst the Africans since the colonial era with many indigenous Africans, south of the Sahara being Christians or Muslims by day and traditionalists by night (Matemba 2021b). For instance, in Zambia, churches used primary schools as instruments of their mission where Religious Education was church based much of the colonial period and post-independence (Carmody 2022), the approach that the first president of Zambia - the late Kenneth Kaunda (1964–1991) extremely opposed because of its nature of influencing divisions:

...we cannot afford to add religious divisions to tribal differences...I happen to be one of those odd people who feels

equally at home in a cathedral, synagogue, temple or mosque
(Carmody, 2022).

In an attempt to transform the approach to teaching religious education and/or religion in schools, countries like Zambia introduced policies such as Education Reforms in 1977 and Educating our Future: National Policy on Education in 1996 whereas Nigeria and Kenya have addressed religious diversity in the classroom by introducing separate programmes for Christians and Muslims (Mwale and Chita 2017; Sulaiman 2016; Fatima 2014).

Despite the policy directives in these countries, the pedagogical approach of education about multiple religious traditions remains divisive where Christianity is in dominance (Mokotso 2019; Okunoye 2019; Ilechukwu1 & Ugwuozor 2014; Ndlovu 2013). For instance, a mind-set that the role of Religion Education (RE) is to help learners from other religions to become Christians has developed amongst some practitioners. For example, a Malawian study found an entrenched position from a church official who stated:

We do not accept Islam being taught in our schools essentially because we Christians desire to convert Muslims to our religion and thus it defeats logic on our part to teach a religion we want children to convert out of (Matemba 2015).

Like any other African country, South Africa has been a victim of racial and religious divisions for decades as I discussed below.

Contrasts in religion education: pre-apartheid South Africa and the apartheid regime

During the pre-apartheid era, state schools in South Africa were conducted according to colour and race with racially mixed state schools and religious education was directed towards a conversion of faith. In accordance of the Biblical instruction manual that was

published in 1990, learners were expected to embrace a particular version of the Christian faith (Department of Didactics, 1990). That is, the main reference book for the teaching of religious education was the Bible and only committed and church members became teachers. As a result, the co-existing religions such as African Tradition were marginalised and religious divisions became evident.

By contrast, under the apartheid regime, the National Party (NP) government introduced the Christian National Education (CNE) with Christian confessionalism and triumphalism driving religious education. This approach led to a claim that South Africa is “*a Christian country, therefore learners must be taught in Christian faith*” (Marx, 2002), the claim that robbed South Africans the right to religious freedom and expression. Instead, the religious education of the apartheid era promoted racial and religious divisions. As scholars like Makoella (2009) put it, the Christian dogma underpinning the curriculum “*had nothing Christian about it*”. Rather, it entrenched racial hatred through a separate and unequal schooling system, while at the same time it ignored what were regarded as minority religious and belief systems (Frankema 2012; Marashe et al. 2009).

In echoing the racial analogy highlighted above, Damons (2016) cites the words of an unknown South African teacher, “*the religious education curriculum in South African schools is based on the Calvinistic teaching of the Afrikaans Dutch Reformed churches in relation to Bible, God, Sin, and Salvation*”. The declaration of the Bantu Education Act of 1953 – *the segregation law that legislated for several aspects of the apartheid system* – further strengthen the coincided racial and religious divisions in South African education system. Subsequently, in 1976, the *Afrikaans Medium Decree* of 1974, which forced all black schools to use both Afrikaans and English as languages of instruction from the last year of primary school, led to the Soweto Uprising in which more than 575 people died, at least 134 of them under the age of 18 (Byrnes 1996).

Religion education's post-apartheid era

Soon after its election to power and in an attempt to redress the past inequalities and to eliminate religious divisions, the South African government decided that it was necessary for all religions to be treated equally, also in education. The ultimate goal is to teach learners to respect religious diversity in their interaction with others while at the same time promoting religious unity at their early schooling age.

Consequently, the National Policy on Religion and Education (hereafter religion-in-education policy) was promulgated in 2003. This policy replaces Religious Education with *Religion* Education with the aim of making knowledge of different beliefs and values an integral part of the formal, national school curriculum in a democratic South Africa (Roux 2012a). This aim was primarily informed by South Africa's core constitutional values and human rights, namely freedom of religion, conscience, thought, belief and opinion, as well as equity, equality, (unity – *own emphasis*), and freedom from discrimination (Republic of South Africa 1996a).

Religion-in-education policy discourse

In spite of its clearly educational aims (Chidester, 2006) the religion-in-education policy provoked a storm of controversy (Chisholm, 2005 with dividing opinions from the public. While the sector of the public identifying with minority religions welcomed the policy, the same policy received severe criticism from Christian communities. Research evidence suggests that the implementation of the religion-in-education policy was delayed until 2003 due to lengthy and highly charged debates. According to Roux (2001), attempts and initiatives to change the religion education programmes in schools were received with outright hostility by many individuals and groups in the religious, educational and public spheres. For instance, petitions, letters and appeals from religious

constituencies that opposed the religion policy flooded the national Department of Education (Chidester, 2006; Chisholm, 2005). While teacher unions, universities, non-governmental organisations, government departments and other members of the public made submissions supporting the overall direction of the revision, certain Christian and home-schooling groups also prepared for holy war with the Minister of Education (Chisholm, 2005).

The Christian campaign consisted of several Christian organisations argued that the religion-in-education policy violated their human rights and constitutional freedom of religion (Chidester, 2006). In a memorandum handed to the Department of Education in Cape Town, McCafferty (2003) pointed out that there was no need for the policy, claiming that so-called incidents of religious discrimination were few and a far between. It was also argued that there was already sufficient legislation in place to ensure that discrimination does not take place, and to deal with it if it does occur. Concerns were raised about the values espoused in the curriculum, the notion of religion versus religious education in the curriculum, the inclusion of 'radical sex education', teaching children the worship or praises and values of other religions, the proposed banning of devotions including prayer from school assemblies, a lack of market competition, and an emphasis on State-imposed values (Chisholm, 2005).

Horn (2003) also had strong religious objections to the policy on teaching and learning about religion, religions and religious diversity in South African schools, contending that the pedagogical methods of the then, 'Outcome-Based Education', applied to the teaching and learning of religions, would expose learners to dangerous contact with spirits. In principle, Outcome-Based Education promoted a student-centred, lively, engaging, and participatory approach to teaching and learning (Coetzer, 2001) but Horn's concern was that the Outcome-Based Education emphasis on 'experience and

active participation' implied that learners would, for example, have to 'participate in dances that induce spirit possession'. She claimed that learners would be exposed to the risk of not only learning about an indigenous African world-view, but would also be participating in spiritual practices based on magic and, ultimately on Satanism, because magic, she observed, 'always has Satan as its source' (Horn, 2003). It is evident from the preceding discussions that the inception of the religion-in-education policy in South Africa has never been that easy from both the national and provincial levels. It is therefore important to understand its implementation by schools.

Religion-in-education policy implementation in schools: Divisive or unifying?

In terms of Section 16(1) of the South African Schools Act of 1996 (hereafter the Act), the governance of every public school is vested in its governing body (SGB) whereas Section 16(3) provides that the professional management of the school is the responsibility of the school principal (Republic of South Africa 1996b). However, in his/her capacity as the Head of the School and the Ex-officio of the Department of Education, the school principal automatically becomes the member of school governing body. Sections 20 of the same Act allocates the development and adoption of school policies including those pertaining to religion to the school governing body while their implementation remains the responsibility of the school management – the school principal and the academic staff (Republic of South Africa 1996b). It is therefore important to understand how school principals implement this controversial policy and whether their implementation practices and processes strive for unity or division. To facilitate this analysis and provide a structured guide to the discussion, policy development, teaching about religion and religious diversity, learner admissions and educator appointments, as well as religious observances became elements of scrutiny.

Policy development and implementation

As indicated earlier on, Section 20 of the African Schools Act of 1996 gives the SGB the powers to develop and adopt school policies, including those pertaining to religion (Republic of South Africa 1996b). In their description of the ways in which policies are developed and implemented in their schools, it was evident that school principals in Nthontho (2013) became the “appropriate authorities” who drafted the religion-in-education policies of their schools (Republic of South Africa 1996a, 1996b). They drafted the policies either together with the chairpersons of the school governing body or with the members of the School Management Team (Xaba 2011).

According to them, they applied the “majority” principle to decide on religions that must form part of the religious observances policy of the school. In other words, priority was given to religious orientations of the parents or learners who were in the majority. For instance, since most of the parents and learners came from the Islam community, a school would ultimately decide to subscribe to Islamic ethos. In so doing, these schools appear to be promoting religions in majority while they unfairly discriminate against those in minority. In this way, schools are not just and fair (van der Walt 2011) in their approach and therefore perpetuate divisions amongst community members from these religions.

Practically so, Duma (2010) cites a case where the parent component of a rural school governing body did not agree with the principle that pregnant girls should be allowed to attend school until the time they give birth, despite the fact that Section 9(3) of the Bill of Rights prohibits direct or indirect unfair discrimination against anyone on one or more grounds, including pregnancy. In another case, the religious observance policy stipulates that all learners must attend religious morning assemblies at school. In terms of Section 15(2) (c) of the Schools Act, the attendance of religious observances at

a school is free and voluntary. In contrast to the dividing practices above, one of the school principals in Nthontho (2013) challenged the religion-in-education policy of his school by protecting a learner whom the school governing body wanted removed from school because she had fallen pregnant. This demonstrates the school principal who understands his role to be uniting rather than dividing school communities.

Teaching about religions and religious diversity

Apparently, religion education appears as a topic within the Life Orientation subject. The Life Orientation as defined in the National Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement, is a unique and fundamentally compulsory subject in the Further Education and Training Band – Grades 10-12 in that it applies to a holistic approach to the personal, social, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, motor and physical growth and development of learners (Department of Education 2012, 8). For this reason, the Life Orientation curriculum in the Further Education and Training Band addresses six topics including “Democracy and Human Rights” under which religion education is taught. By implication, the topic of religion in South African public schools remains insignificant – a ‘drop in the ocean’ when compared to the entire Life Orientation curriculum (Nthontho and Addai-Mununkum 2021). It is therefore inevitable that the teaching and learning of religion education does not get the attention that it deserves. Where it does, it remains stereotypical and promotes religions in majority while degrading those in minority.

For instance, the school principals that participated in a study by Nthontho (2013) acknowledged that teachers in their schools do not give religion education the attention it requires – often due to their lack of knowledge of religions other than their own (Elliott et al. 2019). This remains a sad reality for the fact that until 1997, the majority of public schools officially based the teaching of religion on Bible Education (mono-religious

Christianity) (Ferguson and Roux 2003). Therefore, there is no doubt that the majority of teachers, school principals and parent governors in public schools are products of schools that exposed them either to a single religion only, or to no religion at all, with some schools having completely removed the teaching of religion from the school curriculum (Sulaiman 2016; Ferguson and Roux 2003). As a result, teachers find it difficult to change their perceptions of and attitudes towards other religions (Giorda and Giorgi 2019; Makosa 2017; Bakker and ter Avest 2014). Hence a single-faith based approach to the pedagogy of religion education prevails and continues to divide religious communities. On a different view, Zilliacus (2013) acknowledges that although teachers make an effort to take learners' religious diversity into account, religious, cultural, as well as age differences in the classroom place high demands on them. As a result, they frequently take a traditional rather than a modern perspective on plurality in religious instruction by assuming learners' religious belonging (Fatima 2014; Nthontho 2020). In response to addressing religious diversity in their schools, some school principals would either secure supporting material and resources and/or arrange staff development opportunities as they enhance the teachers' lacked religious knowledge and pedagogical skills in this topic (Nthontho and Niewenhuis 2016). It is with these kind of school principals that the spirit of unity in diversity could be felt.

Learner admissions and educator appointments

As the history tells, the South Africa's Constitution of 1996 introduced religious changes and policy reforms (Republic of South Africa 1996a). These changes brought with them some unifying initiatives such as that religiously oriented schools (schools with a religious ethos) started appointing educators and admitting learners despite their faith or convictions (Zilliacus 2013). While they maintained the *status quo* (Van der Walt

2011), schools with a Christian, Islam or Hindu character would modify their approach by orientating new appointees and parents of new learners about the ethos of the schools. For instance, they allowed appointees and learners from other religions to excuse themselves from morning assemblies that would be Christian, Islam or Hindu oriented (Nthonto 2018, 2020). Learners from the Muslim community, for instance, are also permitted to leave school early on Fridays to attend mosque at 12:00. With such allowances, the schools eliminated practices involving religious assemblies and services that would perpetuate division among the stakeholder groupings within their schools.

However, most of these initiatives appear to be at the surface whereas actual practices take place underground. For example, in 2014, an Organisation for Religious Education and Democracy (OGOD) in South Africa filed an application in the Gauteng High Court pursuing to forbid six public schools from marketing themselves as exclusively “Christian” or as having a “Christian ethos” (Thamm, 2014). The High Court in Johannesburg condemned such practices by schools in 2017 stating that no public school may promote a single religion to the exclusion of other”.

Religious observances in schools

The religion-in-education policy of 2003 defines religious observances as activities and behaviours that recognise and express the views, beliefs and commitments of a particular religion, which may include gatherings of adherents, prayer times, dress and diets (Department of Education 2003). The Constitution, National Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement and the policy stipulate that religious observances may be conducted at state or state-aided institutions, provided that (a) those observances follow rules made by the appropriate public authorities; (b) they are conducted in an equitable

manner; and (c) attendance of such observances is free and voluntary (Republic of South Africa 1996a, 1996b; Department of Education 2012, 2003).

However, to-date, morning devotions (religious observances performed in school morning assemblies) in most of the schools continue to be religiously informed with other minority religions being marginalised (Nthontho 2019; Van der Walt 2011). Moreover, the schools do not allow learners and educators who subscribed to minority religions to observe their religions, either in terms of dress code or in terms of worship (Tam 2010). Some schools provide classrooms to be used by learners and staff who subscribed to minority religion while others excuse them from attending or conducting morning assemblies where religious orientations (for instance, Christian devotions) are observed (Nthontho 2018, 2020; Nthontho and Nieuwenhuis 2016).

Although there are a few signs of religious tolerance in some schools that could ultimately lead to religious unity, there is a serious trend of religious intolerance in other schools that has potential to fuel greater divisions amongst religious communities within and outside schools. For instance, in 2013 and 2014, two schools in Cape Town were compelled by the courts to review their uniform policy to accommodate learners wearing head scarves (Tayob, 2017). In 2010, Navalsig High School in Bloemfontein in the Free State instructed Lerato Motshabi to cut the dreadlocks on her head or be expelled. In a related case in 2011, Odwa Sitayaya faced the same threat for wearing dreadlocks at Joe Slovo Engineering High School in the Western Cape. Furthermore, in 2013, the Leseding Technical Secondary School in the Free State ordered Lerato Radebe cut her dreadlocks before being permitted into class (Tayob, 2017).

In conclusion of the above discussions, the author would like to highlight the important role that the school governing body play. That is, it is their responsibility to graft and adopt the school's policies including the one pertaining to religion. In addition,

they determine the content of the Life Orientation programme. In actual fact, they have a direct impact on areas that are discussed above. What remains unclear is how religion affects decisions about who could play a role in the governing bodies of the schools. Some light was shed by the school principal in Nthontho (2013), however, who pointed out, “*when I see potential in a parent, I would mobilise his/her nomination with two or three parent governors*”. This suggests that school principals have a greater influence in the nomination of members of the school governing body. The implication is that the school governing body in most schools is dominated by members from the same religious orientation. As a result, members from religions in minority are always out powered when decisions are made and that causes divisions amongst school communities (Xaba 2011).

Conclusion Carmody, 2021b

In determining whether religion in South African education is either a dividing or a unifying factor, the author of this paper used practical areas such as policy development and implementation, learner admission and educator appointment, teaching about religions and religious diversity as well as religious observances to analyse schools’ practices. From this analysis, it remained evident that religion in itself is neither a dividing nor a unifying factor. What transpired is that the manner in which schools deal with religion perpetuates either divisions or unity. Situations where policies are developed and implemented and the Life Orientation curriculum where religion appears to be insignificant and its teaching remains confessional appear to be politically oriented and create religious divisions between stakeholder groupings in the schools.

It is however important to indicate that while there is still a long journey towards religious tolerance and recognition of some religions, there are schools that demonstrate signs of tolerance and therefore advocate for religious unity through their practices. Since

the religion-in-education policies are fraught with tension, the author recommends that proper and suitable training be provided to the school governing body including school principals and teachers to assist the government's attempts at implementing them. The policies may pose moral dilemmas in schools with regard to people's understanding and expression of spirituality, diversity, morality and human nature. However, policies are meant to bring harmony and foster good working relationships rather than to cause conflict and division. A common understanding of these policies is therefore of paramount importance.

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