



New Lesotho integrated curriculum: The missed but not lost opportunity for decoloniality of Religious Education

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Abstract

This current conceptual paper argues the following points: First, that coloniality created and elevated Religious Education above other subjects in Lesotho schools. Second, the same coloniality contributed into the downfall of Religious Education it once encouraged. It rejected any reforms to purge school religion from “religiousness.” Third, the recent introduced integrated curriculum contributed in bringing back Religious Education, at least to the equivalent position with other disciplines. However, coloniality retains its egotism which may lead to the missing of the opportunity offered by the integrated curriculum. The paper, nonetheless, contends the flexibility of the new curriculum as opposed to traditional curriculum provides room for resuscitation of Religious Education as a school subject. The new curriculum is a framework rather than the old which came as a finished product to be eagerly consumed by teachers and learners. Lastly, decoloniality process is recommended as an urgent move towards keeping the subject in corresponding level with other classroom subjects.

Keywords: coloniality, decoloniality, curriculum framework, integrated curriculum, Religious Education

Introduction

The Lesotho integrated curriculum was progressively introduced in phase pilot model from 2012 beginning at grade 1. In 2016, primary or lower basic education level was sufficiently completed. The current curriculum was extended to junior secondary or senior basic education in the years between 2017 and 2019 (Ministry of Education and Training, 2016). The curriculum typically prescribes a paradigm shift in the Lesotho education system. It touched at the core values and patterns of the traditional curriculum. There is a change of curriculum as a package or a finished product ready to be eagerly consumed by teachers and students, to a curriculum as simply as a guiding framework. There is a change of the subject based syllabi, to learning areas. There is a change in standardised level classification to grade mode. There is a modification in the classroom where teachers delivered predetermined content, behaviour, skills and experiences to spontaneous concrete world learning experiences. There is a change of standardised progression from one grade to another to a thorough continuous assessment (Ministry of Education and Training, 2009).

These changes credibly warrant vast areas of enquiry on how they affected the entire Lesotho education system, the specific school subjects and the pedagogy. The current paper takes an interest in Religious Education as a school subject. The questions it seeks to address are: How the curriculum change has affected Religious Education as a school discipline? What opportunities these changes present to Religious Education? Are those opportunities taken for advantage? If yes, how, and if no, why and how can they be utilised for the viability of the field of study? What are the challenges posed on Religious Education? How are they overawed? The systematic interpretive literature review was used to select the appropriate literature that provides insights to these inquiries. The data from different literature sources was synthesized to unpack answers for the interrogations. The concept of decoloniality was used to guide analysis and to advance arguments germane to the issues confronting the interface between Religious Education and the integrated curriculum.



Religious Education towards integrated curriculum

Prior to the inception of the integrated curriculum in Lesotho, Religious Education underwent two historical epochs: the period of motherhood to formal education system and the era of marginalisation. The period when Religious Education assumed motherhood to formal instruction began with the arrival of the missionaries in the 1830s, down through colonialism and post-colonialism to the late 1980s. The first missionaries to introduce Western formal education in Lesotho were the French Protestant Christian missionaries at their arrival in 1833. It was further spread through by the arrival of the Roman Catholic missionaries and the Anglican Church missionaries in the early 1860s and late 1870s respectively. The missionary education, Muzvidziwa and Seotsanyana (2002:2) stated, was totally 'religious.' Mission schools were developed for the exclusive aim of spreading the church doctrine. The intro of the classroom based education was aimed at promoting reading and writing literacy to prepare Basotho for the study of the Bible, learning Christian values and philosophical systems. Teachers in mission schools were supposed to be strong believers in corresponding Christian denominations.

During colonial rule in the late 1860s, Religious Education continued to maintain its missionary inherent features of propagation of the Gospel and religiousness. Although the colonial government realised a need to purge the education system from religiousness, Thabane (2002) and Mosisili (1981) argue it failed to interfere due to fiscal implications of constructing alternative government-controlled schools. As a consequence, it resorted to supporting the already existing schools under church administration through small grants. A denominational education system with more emphasis on Christian education persisted until independence in 1966.

The church continued to wield more influence in education after Lesotho gained independence in 1966. Although there was the establishment of non-denominational public teacher training institution in 1975, National Teacher Training College (NTTC)(Thelejani, 1990), the then Minister of Education and Culture confessed that; "the Lesotho government decided to continue to give the churches substantial powers over education and wishes to do so even in the future" (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1975:1).

However, not without fierce contestation, the church's control over schools and the centrality of Religious Education as 'the subject of importance' dwindled in the 1980s. In the area of the curriculum, there was an establishment of the National Curriculum Centre (NCDC) (UNESCO, 2010; Thelejani, 1990). This evolution, coupled with the nationalised teacher training, presaged the final phase of the denominational curriculum. There was, in addition, diversification of the curriculum to include practical subjects that link training with development aspirations of the country (Mosisili, 1981). The move further subverted Religious Education. In the year 2000, Lesotho introduced the Free Primary Education (FPE). To respond to the increased enrolment as a result, the government expanded coverage of both primary and secondary schools across the country. Government and community schools increased from 5% at the independence (Thelejani, 1990) to 15% primary schools and 31% secondary schools by 2014 (Government of Lesotho, 2015). All government and community controlled schools did not offer Religious Education. It was considered irrelevant to the country's development plan but simply religiousness. The popularity of Religious Education significantly waned. Religious Education teachers become restricted to the church schools.

Nevertheless, there were efforts to resuscitate Religious Education. Educationalists in Religious Education with government backing explored the possibilities of purging the subject off its religiousness. The approximation was to place it on the level footing with other subjects like Development Studies. The government could only accept Religious Education that promotes equitability as a key to development, maintain average quality standards and align with international protocols (Ministry of Education, 2002). In 1984, the NCDC designed a new national Religious Education syllabus that co-existed with Bible Study, and Religious



Instruction termed 'Developing in Christ.' The syllabus was developed through regional initiatives. It responded to the African Christian spirituality. The aim was contextualisation or Africanisation of the teaching of Christian faith. For a considerable time, it remained an Alternative Syllabus and was never made compulsory. Even though the syllabus was aligned to African Christianity with selected African beliefs and culture compatible with the Christian teachings, it remained peripheral and eventually dropped off (Wilson, 1998).

After consultation with international, regional and sub-regional education agencies, the NCDC Religious Education panel revised Religious Education curriculum in 2006 (Mokhatla, 2005; Molelle, 2006). The new proposed Religious Education deviated from the old Christian or Biblical studies. The syllabus was titled Religious and Moral Education. It was pluralistic in nature, incorporated development moral issues and adopted learner centered pedagogy (Mokhatla, 2005). However, it was fervently rejected by church authorities as a bad influence that exposes learners to other religious traditions. It was turned down after few years of trials in some church schools (Molelle, 2006). Evidently, not only church authorities are against Religious Education reforms, but Religious Education teachers as well. They seem to have accustomed to the conventional approach to the teaching of the subject (Mokotso, 2017). This was the situation of Religious Education prior to the introduction of the integrated curriculum. Arguably, it was at a marginal stage, restricted to church schools and patronised by its content against other social science subjects.

Religious Education within integrated curriculum

The debut of the integrated curriculum was the coming back of Religious Education. It offers the opportunity for Religious Education to be redeemed and be accorded its historical status, or at least be equal to other social science school subjects. The integrated curriculum classifies school subjects rendering to "learning areas." Religious Education is grouped under "Personal, Spiritual and Social" learning area with History, Development Studies and Health and Physical Education. The learning area is meant to:

- develop knowledge and understanding of the self
- develop appropriate skills and attitudes towards development and nurturing of positive relationships with others regardless of cultural, social, religious or political differences and special needs
- cultivate desirable attitudes, ethical and moral values for personal and social development (Ministry of Education and Training, 2009).

Indisputably, Religious Education features well in this area. The competences targeted by this area include demonstration of tolerance and respect of other people's beliefs, moral values and culture; respect of human rights to promote beneficial relations and responsible people (Ministry of Education and Training, 2009).

To a large extent, 'integrated curriculum' (Clark, 2006) or 'holistic curriculum' (Miller, 2006) integrates various educational components for a holistic human development including mind, body and spirit (MBS). The goal of the holistic curriculum is to foster personal holistic development focusing on intellectual, physical, creative and spiritual capabilities (Hare, 2006; Sumanjari, 2018). It divorces itself from the traditional curriculum, which was attentive to cognitive knowledge and acquisition of practical skills. The chief concern of the holistic curriculum represents the general personal development addressing all facets of human being; the rational, the physical, the emotional, the societal and spiritual aspect so that a profound transformation of the 'self' can be achieved (Rudge, 2010).

The 'spiritual' element is exceptionally vital in the holistic curriculum rendering to Miller (2006). It is the decisive characteristic that differentiates the holistic curriculum from the traditional curriculum. The term 'spirit' has a specific connotation to soul and cosmos. It stands for a



deep-seated human 'vital creative force' that precisely defines a human. It is so innate to the extent that all conventional sciences persistently fail to peck it along. It uniquely delineates the supernaturalism of a humane soul. It represents the being that adequately explains humane life as more than material, environmental and societal components. It is substantially admitted that this element can simply be promoted through spiritual intelligence (Miller, 2006). Spiritual intelligence promotes consciousness, identification of sacredness, sense of ultimate reality including the facts of pain and suffering, sense of transcendence, curiosity and love for the created beings (Huitt, 2010). The 'spirit' or 'vital force' effectuates the completeness and functioning of an individual human organism. Mortal nature is composed of both material (body) and immaterial (spirit and psyche) that are held together and enabled to function in unison by the vital force which is itself the soul (Mbaegbu, 2016). Thinking or mental actions are evidenced through bodily activities in contact with the temporal world and the inner self or the supernaturalism or the spiritual being. Religion is considered the basic school subject with the potential to unlock the viability of the vital force (Miller, 2006). Religious Education maintains a specific remarkable role in the current integrated curriculum. Accordingly, all schools irrespective of ownership are currently offering Religious Education.

However, it is likely the opportunity given to Religious Education by the current curriculum will eventually slip off for other options such as secular ethics ('human relations and ethical development', 'self-knowing and cultural identity', 'society and human rights', and 'the human being and the world' (Zilliacus & Kallioniemi, 2016:2). Lesotho adopted the interdisciplinary model of the integrated curriculum (Ministry of Education and Training, 2009). The problem with the model is that it does not totally change from the traditional disciplinary-based curriculum. As a result there is the possibility of the continuation of the classical curriculum (Jacobs, 1989; Drake & Burns, 2004). This model provided leeway for Religious Education to stick to the old content. Moral, spiritual and social issues are addressed from Christian and Biblical perspectives (Ministry of Education and Training, 2006).

This situation prompts some questions of; how can respect for other religions be encouraged in the context where other religions are marginalised? How beneficial relationships with others regardless of cultural, social, religious or political differences enhanced while one religion is promoted over others? How can there be holistic cognitive development when learners are not given opportunities to discover 'religion' as an academic discipline rather than propagation of the Gospel? How can Religious Education fit into the holistic curriculum while it disseminates selective knowledge? With all these questions in mind, the overarching concern is the rigidity of Religious Education to maintain the old missionary properties such as Christian centeredness regardless of educational reforms and changes. Without addressing the situation promptly, the opportunity of the coming back of Religious Education presented by the integrated curriculum is at stake.

Coloniality assumption frame

It is assumed the resistance to the teaching of reformed Religious Education, even after experiencing the likelihood of being dropped off, can be ascribed to coloniality. Tlostanova and Mignolo (2009), Quijano (2007) and Bulhan (2015) differentiate coloniality from colonialism. Colonialism refers to a certain point in time when one nation systematically dominates and exploits the other politically, economically and culturally. Coloniality in opposition refers to persistent patterns of power, mode of thinking and behaving that emerged from the contact between unequal nations. The one nation state considers itself superior, and the other made to accept its inferiority. It puts forward the promotion of Eurocentric hegemony that solicits to support and substantiate European monopoly of power, hegemonic knowledge, distorted truth, and deformed being of the colonized. In this sense, coloniality and colonialism are not identical or conterminous. Coloniality refers to the situation when there was/is a contact between two varied groups of people. The one group is induced into accepting its state of being viewed as savage and barbaric. It is depicted as demanding to be civilised by the other



group that considers itself to be the representative of civilisation and modernity. Historically, coloniality existed before direct colonialism (missionary turn), during colonialism and still continuing in the postcolonial dispensation (Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2009; Quijano, 2007; Bulhan, 2015).

Coloniality assumption provides a framework to comprehend why stakeholders in Religious Education continue Christian-founded education. Coloniality began with the missionaries prior to classical colonisation, who taught Religious Education/Christian Education, not as a school subject, but propagation of the Gospel. The missionary evangelist Religious Education was based on converting Basotho who were presumably without religion or following heathen beliefs. Conversion to Christianity, propagated through both the church and school teachings advocated a total renouncement of heathenism and traditional customs that were considered to be incompatible with Christian life (Machobane & Manyeli, 2001). Christian life taught in church and schools was attached to 'civilisation' (in missionary terms). They were committed to intensify Christian Education to penetrate the ignorant native minds, with ignorance of spirituality, general state of moral deviance and literally having no mind of God (Machobane & Manyeli, 2001). Christian Education was consequently employed as a force for conciliation to enable colonisation and the cultural assimilation of Basotho.

During colonial rule, Christian instruction was implemented by laws (civil laws) which targeted traditional social structures that were determined to raise resistance to coloniality of power, being and mind. For instance, one Emile Ronald, a missionary and colonial agent in Lesotho recommended outlawing all customs and traditional practices that hold up the welded traditional fabrics of life. Ronald recommended the natives should be encouraged to adopt the favours of the habits of Christianity and civilisation. He suggested that to strip off the power of the chiefs and headmen that restored in traditional cultural and social structures, Christian Education was of paramount necessary (Machobane & Manyeli, 2001). He posited that:

The Duke of Wellington in his place in Parliament laid down the grand principle that it is primarily incumbent on a government to see that the humblest of its subject are taught their duty to God and man. No permanent peace and stability can be expected until the natives are improved and civilised, and civilisation without Christianity would be the greatest misfortune that could happen to them. It should be the task of the government, whilst aiming at the destruction of heathenism, to Christianise, improve, and civilise the people (p. 184).

Christian Education was, thus, controlled to suppress local political structures, cultural identity and classification of the colonised religion as primitive or irrational (Maldonado-Torres, 2020).

The missionary and colonial Religious Education is still continuing without compromise. An empirical study by Mokotso and Ntombana (2018) revealed why stakeholders in Religious Education continue to resist any teaching of religion which is not Christian-based and evangelistic in nature. Amongst other reasons, prime are mental attitude and religious illiteracy. In relation to mental attitude, it is asserted to teach one religion promotes belongingness, and those outside Christianity are not discriminated against. It is also contended Christian Education constitutes the underlying frame for the institution of Western formal education. Hence, any knowledge without Christianity is incomplete. Moreover, Lesotho is a Christian country, and all should be taught the national religion. It is argued, Christian education is taught without attacking other religious traditions or worldviews in order that those who do not belong may become proselytised by choice. On the level of religious illiteracy, there is a general perception that religion refers to Christian beliefs and patterns. While many Basotho believe in their traditional religious belief, they do not consider it religion rather the culture. And all other religions and worldviews do not stipulate to be termed religions (Mokotso & Ntombana, 2018). This position reflects the prospects of missionary Religious Education.



Decoloniality recommendations

If the failure to capture the opportunity of the coming back of Religious Education provided by the integrated curriculum results from coloniality, then decoloniality offers the therapy. The opportunity for decoloniality is bestowed in the curriculum itself. The integrated curriculum is espoused in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Framework (Ministry of Education and Training, 2009). Curriculum framework is different from the traditional curriculum which comes as a finished product ready to be consumed by teachers and learners. Curriculum Framework remains flexible allowing the continuous design and redesigning of syllabi within the boundaries of the set learning areas (UNESCO, 2017).

Decoloniality process attempts to convey other meanings that were somehow silenced by Western Christianity and civilisation, for example, indigenous worldviews. It highlights the restrictions of the Eurocentric Christian position of the universal truth and knowledge. Decoloniality is distinguished from the colonial version of Christianity and Western civilisation as a benchmark to describe, conceptualise and rank the colonised life, culture and religion. It operates in pursuit of breaking apart the spiritual hierarchy that privileges Western Christianity over non-Western/Christian spirituality that has been institutionalised in schools and the church. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) expounded, decoloniality calls for de-linking from the tyranny of Western universal epistemologies. It is self-actualisation of the ex-colonised to enact in critical rationality, embracing pluriversal epistemology rather than zealously conforming to the Western hierarchical and universal epistemologies. Pluriversal rejects the epistemological grounds that have conditioned the evolution of Religious Education, by accepting a Western Christian single natural and universal reality. Pluriversal, as decoloniality concept, goes beyond pluralism, which Querejazu (2019) argues, it is about tolerance within religious traditions. As Van Klinken (2019) argues, it breaks the binaries of matter-spirit and secular-sacred. It does not advocate for de-linking from Christian teaching, but proposes the teaching of Religious Education that draws from different worldviews.

The opportunity which Maldonado-Torres (2020) sees as provided by decolonial turn to religious study as an interdisciplinary by character, represents the possibility offered by the integrated curriculum. Pluriversal approach concurring with Querejazu (2019), is not something to be created, but something to be acknowledged. There had already been thrived discussions in religious pluralism, by its diverse nature as an interdisciplinary school subject and the introduction of integrated curriculum offers Religious Education triple prospects. Religious Education, posited Maldonado-Torres (2020) can engage in healthy scepticism of the powers bestowed to any discipline; convinced that a genre employed by any discipline is bound to be equal to the categories of other disciplines. The marginal place which religious studies occupied prior to the introduction of the integrated curriculum and the likeliness of recurrence can be sabotaged through decolonial pluriversity by all stakeholders in Religious Education.

It is true interdisciplinarity has some shortcomings for decolonial pluriversity, as Maldonado-Torres (2020) argues it operates within the already developed Western disciplines that cuddle coloniality epistemologies. It is also factual that coloniality is so profoundly rooted in ex-colonised who still feel compelled to protect Christianity against any sorts of educational intruders (Mokotso & Ntombana, 2018). However, the current conceptual paper proposes that all interested parties in Religious Education should engage with 'post-colonial reading' of religion and Christianity. The concept 'religion' did not exist amongst Basotho as defined and categorised in Western terms. It is, therefore, fitting to agree with Malay (2010) that the concept 'religion' and its study stand products of colonialism. They emerged from historical and culturally specific expansive processes of Western Christianity. Christianity has predominantly used as the archetypical example of a religion, and as a consequence, a fundamental yardstick to scale 'other religions.' It is still continuing to be utilised as an analytic framework in the study of religion. For instance, the recent category of 'world religions' is a



precise universalization of religion within characteristics, specifications of Christianity, often featuring sacred texts and proselytization.

Post-colonial reading, not de-linking the concept religion, provides an alternative meaning featuring appropriately within the integrated curriculum. The concept religion in Basotho culture, and of course all Africans, is properly characterised by the legendary African Indigenous religionist, John Mbiti. He contends that in African context, religion is an ontological phenomenon pertaining to the question of existence or being. It defines human existence and governs the general liveliness of an individual and the group. It “permeates all departments of life to such an extent that it is not easy or possible to isolate it” (Mbiti, 1999:1). Mbiti contends religion gives meaning to schooling, church, agriculture, politics, social gatherings, bereavement, behaviour, relationships with others and the cosmos – it is the general worldview. Viewing from decolonial perspective; religion aligns with the integrated curriculum. It shifts its subject of religion from ‘religiousness’ and ‘privatization’ to the concrete life situation, within ontological and epistemological hybridization framework.

In post-colonial reading, Christianity has definitely been de-Westernised, and what is now left is decolonisation of mind and ‘consciousness’ to accept that reality. De-Westernisation of Christianity is a result of series of decolonization forces. These include recognition that Christianity bears long history in Africa prior to missionary involvement; the issue of African Initiated Churches; and the spread of Classical Pentecost and Neo-Pentecostal Charismatic Movements (Van der Merwe, 2016). The outcome was the production of Christianity purged of Eurocentrism to appeal to the African holistic ontology (Van der Merwe, 2016; Fatokun, 2005). This kind of Christianity is not hypersensitive to the integrated curriculum.

Conclusion

The instant of the marginalisation of religion in schools was supposed to be defining for a need to decolonise the subject. Decolonisation of the study of religion can contribute to the sustentation of the subject in school curriculum. The once rejected Religious and Moral Education syllabus was comprehensive enough to respond to the learning experiences embraced by the integrated curriculum. The syllabus was designed to advance respect for other faiths and worldviews; develop productive relationships with others regardless of cultural, social, religious or political differences; and cultivate holistic cognitive development. Religion was designed to be studied as an academic discipline rather than as propagation of the Gospel. Because its content was diversified, it fits in to the holistic curriculum without providing selective knowledge. Since the current and flexible curriculum remains constant, there is nonetheless an opportunity to redeem the subject.

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