Rethinking the Religious Education Curricula in Nigerian Schools

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Abstract

This article traces the historical background to the polarised religious education (RE) curricula in Nigerian primary and secondary schools, highlighting some post-colonial interventions and backlashes. Using regional treaties and international human rights frameworks, this article considers the probable justifications for deploying the confessional model of RE, accentuating the possible violations of the principles of religious freedom necessitated by the deployment of the confessional pedagogical model in Nigeria's publicly funded schools. In consonance with contemporary trends in RE in Europe, Australia, Canada and South Africa, to mention a few, this article advocates the substitution of the currently deployed confessional, monoreligious education curricula with a non-confessional, multifaith RE curriculum. In emphasizing the potential benefits of non-confessional, multifaith RE, this article highlights how this model of RE respects, protects and fulfills the rights of the child which are unequivocally articulated in regional treaties and international human rights law. The article finally draws attention to strategies requisite for implementing non-confessional, multifaith RE in Nigeria's publicly funded primary and secondary schools.

Background

The religious education curricula in any country do not emerge from a vacuum. They systematically evolve, mirroring a country's religious history, traditions,

cultures and values. Also, they often reflect a country's educational history, development, needs, and any perceptible changes in a nation's socio-cultural and religious landscapes. Historically, the geo-political entity called Nigeria was inhabited by people belonging to several ethnicities.[1] Before the earliest contacts with the outside world, Nigerians lived under the governance of their respective paramount religio-political monarchs. Together with their sovereigns, they were adherents of different African Traditional Religions (ATRs), worshipping very complex pantheons of local and/or regional divinities (see Idowu 1973; Awolalu 1979; Olupona 1991; Thomas 2005). In these respects, Nigeria has, from pre-historic times, been a multiethnic, multireligious,[2] and multicultural society.

Contrary to the notion that its population had no education before the earliest contact with the outside world, Nigerians from time immemorial received indigenous forms of education. Traditional/indigenous educational systems in Nigeria, as in other parts of sub-Sahara Africa, prepared individuals to take up their roles as 'cultured' members of their respective society. It offered practical training in indigenous professions. These included native medicine/herbalism, midwifery, priest-crafts, and blacksmithing, among others. Different instructional techniques such as apprenticeships, initiation rites, incantations, dirges, folklores, riddles, proverbs and experimentations were deployed in the enculturation and vocational training of its people (see Woodhouse 1985: 121-123; Omolewa 2007).

Two major contacts with the outside world, however, transformed Nigeria's traditional education systems, altering its social, cultural and religious landscapes. The first was with the Muslim Arabs. During the 9th century CE, Islam penetrated West Africa. It subsequently entered Northern Nigeria — through trans-Saharan trade routes — during the 11th century CE (see Trimingham 1970; Willis 1979; Levtzion 1994; Badru 2006). Over the centuries which followed, Islamic/Qur'anic schools mushroomed across Northern Nigeria[3] so much so that by the 15th century CE, Islamic/Qur'anic education system had already become fully entrenched in this part of the country. These Islamic/Qur'anic schools featured peripatetic and formalised/institutionalised systems, whilst teaching and learning took the form of *lectio* and *memoriter*, i.e. reading aloud and rote memorization (Clarke 1978: 133). The curriculum in these Islamic/Qur'anic schools featured Islamic law, mysticism, Arabic grammar and Qur'anic exegesis. It further incorporated morals, ethos and ethics in Islamic societies. Using the confessional approach, these schools provided Islamic education for generations of Hausa-Fulani children, initiating them into the Islamic tradition and facilitating the continued entrenchment of Islam in Northern Nigeria (Falola 1998: 1).

The second contact was with the Europeans. During the 15th century CE, Capuchin monks from Portugal introduced Roman Catholicism to the Itsekiri people and their neighbours in Mid-West Nigeria. However, it had all but fizzled out over the following two centuries (Erivwo 1979). In 1842, Thomas Birch

Freeman of the Wesleyan Methodist Movement and Henry Townsend of the Church Missionary Society (an evangelical branch of the Church of England) arrived in Badagry, Southwest Nigeria. Freeman and Townsend successfully re-introduced Christianity to Nigeria. Other Christian missionaries soon arrived to evangelize and establish their denominations in Nigeria.

From the onset, these missionaries realised the unequivocal place of Western education in the evangelization of the indigenous population: potential Christian converts needed a level of literacy in order to understand and accept the Christian message. Thus, as missionaries moved from place to place setting up churches, they simultaneously established mission schools where children were concurrently provided with Western education and nurtured in the Christian faith. Using the confessional model of RE which aimed at proselytizing pupils, the RE curricula and collective worship in these mission schools exclusively focused on Christianity. Christianity thus spread like wildfire across Southern Nigeria[4] through the thirst and hunger for Western education. In fact, "the missions," as Isichei aptly observes, "had almost a monopoly over education. In 1942 they controlled 99 per cent of Nigeria's schools, and 97 per cent of all students were in mission schools" (Isichei 1995: 270). At that time in the history of Southern Nigeria, mission was synonymous with education whilst education was the gateway to prominence and prosperity (Isichei 1995: 270).

During the British colonial rule in Nigeria (1st January 1901–30th September 1960), the colonial administration deployed direct rule in Southern Nigeria where Christian missionaries were encouraged to establish mission schools. The colonial government needed Western-educated employees to take up clerical, administrative and teaching jobs in the same way that businesses required a literate workforce. Thus, the first generation of Nigerians to receive Western education in these missions schools not only became clerical and administrative officers, teachers, catechists, salespersons, health and hygiene officers, to mention a few, they were also the élites of the new era. The material benefits of Western education soon became obvious, making it extremely attractive for both children and parents.[5] Thus Western education was, historically, not only deployed in evangelizing the population in Southern Nigeria, but also utilised in grooming a workforce for the civil service and corporate businesses.

The colonial government handled the situation in Northern Nigeria differently. Having subdued this region through military conquest, the British deployed the method of indirect rule and governed Northern Nigeria through the Emirs. This meant that in the area of education, for example, rather than abolish the pre-existing Islamic/Qur'anic schools, these were allowed to continue to exist alongside newly established Government Muslim Schools (see Isichei 1995: 272; Clark 1978: 134). In the latter, which fizzled out in the 1920s, the curriculum which excluded Christian Religious Knowledge (CRK) featured Islamic Religious

Knowledge (IRK), Arabic and English languages, arithmetic/mathematics, integrated science, and social studies, to mention of few.

Given, however, the influence of Islamic education, faith and ideology on the structure and culture of Northern Nigeria, Western education was adjudged by the Northerners as the chief tool for spreading non-Muslim ideology and culture, particularly Christianity. To this end, the Hausa-Fulani people deemed Western education — in spite of the exclusion of CRK from schools' curriculum in this region — to be incongruous with their existing culture and religious ideologies. For the same reason, the "Emirs prevented Christian missionaries from establishing schools within their Emirates" (Clarke 1978: 133-4; see Hackett 2001: 541). An outcome of this, as Hackett rightly observes, is that the Northerners "did not gain as many of the benefits of Western education as their southern neighbours. This resulted in a lasting and destabilizing dichotomy that is firmly imprinted on the historical memory of Nigerian Muslims" (Hackett 2001: 539).

Through people's movement around the country — usually in the contexts of job offers and/or transfers and trade/commerce — Islam and Islamic/Qur'anic schools gradually penetrated the South (specifically the Southwest) in the same manner that Christianity progressively permeated the North. Given the demise of Government Muslim Schools, the need re-emerged, particularly in Northern Nigeria, for its re-establishment and/or the establishment of mission schools. This was with a view to provide Western education for children of Southern origins, particularly those from Christian families whose parents placed great value on Western education.

Whilst the career prospects associated with Western education compelled some Muslim parents (especially in Southern Nigeria) to send their children to mission schools, others exclusively sent their children to Qur'anic schools for the fear of exposing them to Christian proselytization.[6] As the number of Muslim parents who recognised the potential dangers of exposing their children to Western education grew, the quest for the establishment of Government Muslim schools (where IRK and other curriculum subjects, excluding CRK, would be taught) increased enormously. In areas with sizeable Muslim population, this led to the establishment of publicly funded Muslim schools where Islamic education was successfully combined with Western education.

Thus, by the time Nigeria gained its independence from British rule in 1960, almost by default, children of whatever religious affiliation attending Christian mission schools studied compulsory, confessional CRK. Such pupils also participated in compulsory School Assemblies which took place at the beginning and end of each school day. These Assemblies featured elements of Christian Worship which, amongst other things, included Christian hymns and songs, bible readings, biblical exhortations, and prayers. In some cases, pupils were also compelled to attend Sunday school and Sunday worship in local parish churches

to which respective mission schools were affiliated. Similar practice was in vogue in Muslim schools. Children of whichever religious background attending these schools undertook compulsory, confessional IRK, and attended compulsory School Assemblies. These featured Muslim prayers and recital of Qur'anic passages. Such pupils were also obligated to attend the Jumaat service (i.e. Friday Prayers) in the community mosque(s).

Some Post-Colonial Interventions and Backlashes

Following its independence, Nigeria — like several other developing nations that have emerged from beneath the veil of colonialism — made several attempts geared towards divesting itself of its colonial heritage. In the area of education, several reforms were made. One such reform was government takeover of schools[7] from churches which established and administered them (see Adesina 1973). Another major reform was the requirement contained in the National Policy on Education. Without any references to the study of African Traditional Religions (ATRs) and New Religious Movements (NRMs),[8] this policy document provides that CRK and IRK should be taught in all primary schools.

More importantly, the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria provides that "no person attending any place of education shall be required to receive religious instruction or to take part in, or attend any religious ceremony or observance if such instruction, ceremony or observance relates to a religion other than his [or her] own, or religion not approved by his [or her] parent or guardian" (Section 38:2). The constitution further provides that "no religious community or denomination shall be prevented from providing religious instruction for pupils of that community or denomination in any place of education maintained wholly by that community or denomination" (Section 38:3).

In spite of the unambiguous stance of Nigeria's national policy on education and the unequivocal constitutional provisions concerning religious education and observance, Nigerian schools have hitherto failed to comply. For example, publicly funded schools situated in predominantly Christian communities and private Christian schools exclusively provided CRK in the same way that similar schools located in predominantly Muslim communities/states exclusively offered IRK. Ignoring the religious freedom of children who together with their parents belong to minority religious groups in such jurisdictions, both religious communities maintain they have constitutional rights to provide RE which conforms to the religious convictions of the majority of parents/guardians.[9] However, in publicly funded schools with relatively equal number of pupils from both religious communities, Christian pupils customarily studied CRK whilst their Muslim counterparts, by default, opted for IRK.[10] It is in respect of this phenomenon that Hackett writes, "despite educational reforms, two single-tradition programs for

religious education remain, with parallel exam programs in Christian Studies and Islamic Studies. These divisions are also reflected in the manner in which religious education is taught as a standard [i.e. basic curriculum] subject (usually with moral and religious aims) at the primary and secondary levels" (Hackett 2001: 550).

Probable Justifications for Confessional Religious Education in Nigerian Schools

To teach pupils about their own religious traditions (if any) in schools ostensibly has certain justifications. For example, it could be argued that for individuals to be accepted as 'cultured' members of any societies, such persons are expected to uphold certain values, ethos, morals and codes of conduct. These morals and values are, in some societies, remotely or intimately ingrained in religion(s). If these societal mores must be perpetuated, the underpinning religion(s) ought to be preserved.[11] Durkheim (1912) perceived religion as a functional force which not only reaffirms societal cohesion and camaraderie, but which also reinforces collective worship, morals and beliefs amongst members of a society. He maintained that if, over a significant length of time, individuality overthrows communality, individual's beliefs and convictions deteriorate, necessitating fortification.[12] Cox and Cairns similarly argue that "all cultures have up to the present had their religions and when, as in the latter stages of the Roman Empire, the religion decays then the culture decays with it" (1989: 76). Thus, as religion shapes individuals and societies, belief systems have been intergenerationally transmitted, using oral and visual forms of representation, myths, and rituals. In different parts of the ancient, modern and postmodern world, the school system provides an avenue through which certain religio-cultural values are intergenerationally transmitted. As such, for some parents, religious communities and their leaders (not only in Nigeria, but also in other parts of the world), the task of RE is to preserve the respective community's religio-cultural heritage, norms and values. Thus, if and when the *raison d'être* for incorporating and retaining RE in schools' curriculum is for religio-cultural perpetuation, the major rationale would be to nurture pupils within a particular faith.[13]

The confessional approach to RE is thus geared towards religionizing, moralizing, and initiating pupils into, and nurturing them within, a particular faith tradition (see Slee 1989: 127; Hobson and Edwards 1999: 18). Or, as Hermans puts it, "it is a matter of initiating novices to the religious community in such a way that they become (fellow) custodians of religious practices and thus assure the future of the religious community" (Hermans 2003: 340). It is to all intents and purposes aimed at the formation of pupils' ethnic or national religious identity (Schreiner 2002: 89), culminating in the continued entrenchment of a particular religious tradition.

Given the fact that the loss of a people's socio-religious traditions culminates in the loss of their identity, the deployment of the confessional pedagogical model of RE is sometimes premised on its potential to not only perpetuate specific faith traditions, but also prevent the loss of associated religio-cultural identities. It is as a sequel to this that Slee observes that it is "the public duty of the state to transmit to successive generations certain moral and...values, assumed to be essential to the continued coherence of society" (1989: 127). Thompson corroboratively argues that "the state has a duty to instruct its citizens in those structures, institutions and virtues that both constitute and legitimate it" (2004: 69). Writing with special reference to the UK RE context, Thompson further argues that British "institutions, customs and mores derive from the Christian faith, it is perfectly legitimate and even necessary for the state to preserve, in its educational system, an important place for the teaching of this faith...to give a committed presentation of Christianity is to aid the preservation of the society itself" (2004: 69, 70). The situation is not different in the Arabic civilization. Because societal values in Islamic societies are deeply rooted in the Islamic faith, "[t]he first course of study," as Neill appositely observes, "consisted in reading and reciting the Qur'an. It was the study of the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet — the hadith — that drove the curriculum of Muslim schools" (2006: 483).

In spite of its religionizing tendencies, this pedagogical approach to RE — for as long as it makes legally satisfactory opt out provisions for pupils who do not want to be exposed to confessional RE — is endorsed by regional treaties[14] and international human rights law. Whether or not they belong to a faith tradition, individuals have a "right to have access to education in the matter of religion or belief" (Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, Art 5:2).

Considering the fact that Islam, Christianity, ATRs, and NRMs is a part and parcel of who some Nigerian pupils and their parents are, these religious traditions underline certain values and ethos with which some pupils are identified. It also underscores such pupils' personalities and religio-cultural identities. As such, nurturing such pupils in their own faiths (Islam, Christianity, ATRS, and NRMs) culminates in the fulfilment of certain aims of education articulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). These include "the development of the child's personality" (Art 29:1a) and "the development of... his or her own cultural identity...and values" (Art 29:1c). It further ascertains that such pupils are not deprived of "the right to enjoy [their] own culture [and] religion" (UNCRC, Art 30; see International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Art 27). These potentially engender such pupil's development of "self-awareness", permeated by conscious enthusiasm for their own religio-cultural identity, and pragmatic, affirmative sense of their personal uniqueness, self-worth, religiosity, morality and spirituality (see QCA & DfES 2004: 13).

Also, for as long as States Parties[15] ascertain that the moral and religious education of any such pupils conform to their parents' or guardians' religious and philosophical convictions, this aspect of the child's education could be adjudged to be in consonance with the principles of religious freedom. These principles are ensconced in regional treaties and international human rights frameworks[16] (see International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights [ICESCR], Art 13:3; ICCPR, Art 18:4; Migrant Workers Convention, Art 12:4; UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education, Art 5:1b; Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, Art 5:2; the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child [also called the ACRWC or Children's Charter], Art 11:4; European Convention on Human Rights [ECHR], Art 2 of the First Protocol; American Convention, Art. 12:4; the Arab Charter, Art 30[c]).

The Polarised Religious Education Curricula: Possible Violations of the Principles of Religious Freedom?

The practice of subjecting pupils in publicly funded schools, irrespective of their religious background(s), to compulsory, confessional monoreligious instruction and collective worship without putting in place adequate opt out provisions indisputably violates the principles of religious freedom.[17] The UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education provides that "no person or group of persons should be compelled to receive religious instruction inconsistent with his or their conviction" (Art 5: 1b). Similarly, the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief declares that whilst "every child shall enjoy the right to have access to education in the matter of religion or belief in accordance with the wishes of his parents or...legal guardians", no child should be "compelled to receive teaching on religion or belief against the wishes of his parents or legal guardians, the best interests of the child being the guiding principle" (Art 5: 2). Analyzing the status-quo of RE in Nigerian schools within the contexts of Nigeria's interreligious conflicts, and in the light of international human rights frameworks, Hackett observes that the current RE scenario engenders "the further polarization of Nigerian society along religious lines," culminating in "probable violations of the principles of religious freedom" (2001: 538; see Chidester et al. 1994: 74).

Further, the deployment of 'hard' monoreligious education[18] in the delivery of CRK and IRK in Nigerian schools potentially raises problems. For some pupils, this would imply that either the 'truth-claims' of one religion are right and the other wrong, or the 'truth-claims' of both religions are wrong. Besides, this model — in the hands of Christian and Islamic fundamentalists (ee Chidester 1994: 73–4) — potentially engenders overzealous proselytization whilst inspiring

possible ideological segregation. Thus, apart from impeding the acquisition of the knowledge and understanding of the religious traditions of the 'Other' (at least within the school contexts), it potentially facilitates misconceptions and misgivings about the faith traditions of the 'Other'.[19] These are undesired outcomes not only in a society which is multiethnic, multicultural and multireligious with history of centuries of inter-ethnic wars, but also in a country which for several decades have been witnessing fatal interreligious conflicts (see Falola 1998). Moreover, whilst some interreligious conflicts occurred on the streets of Nigerian towns and cities, several other fatal interreligious conflicts emerged on the premises of Nigerian schools, colleges and universities, spreading into townships and cities (see Falola 1998: 3-4; Hackett 2001: 551-7).

Replacing Confessional, Mono-religious Education with Non-Confessional, Multifaith Religious Education in Nigerian Schools

Taking into consideration Nigeria's multiethnic, multicultural and multireligious character,[20] its unreserved acceptance of regional treaties and international human rights frameworks, its nascent democracy, and its domestic constitutional provisions which allow for religious freedom,[21] there is an urgent need, in publicly funded schools, for a pedagogical shift from monoreligious instruction to non-confessional, dialogical, multifaith RE.[22] Empirical research have shown that in different countries (e.g. the United Kingdom, Germany, and Norway, to mention only three) RE teachers and researchers have experimented with the capacity of dialogical, multifaith RE to help pupils (mainly, though not exclusively, non-Christian [e.g. Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs] migrant children and children of European origins) successfully build bridges across religious, ethnic and cultural divides (see Schweitzer and Boschki 2004; Sterkens 2001, Streib 2001, 2006; Leganger-Krogstad 1999 & 2003; Weisse 1996, 2003; Ipgrave 2001, 2002, 2003). Understandably, the social-cultural and ethno-religious climates of Europe and Nigeria differ. Nonetheless, it seems plausible to suggest that if the diversity of experiences, perspectives, understandings, opinions and thoughts within Nigerian classrooms and schools are acknowledged and harnessed, these could translate into resources upon which beliefs and values could be sensitively discussed. Motivated to ethically engage with difference; encouraged to sensitively interrogate the beliefs of the 'Other'; and, inspired to sympathetically share and learn from one another, pupils — with the aid of a variety of methods, strategies, and structured activities/exercises which can facilitate dialogue in schools — could be stimulated to engage successfully in interfaith dialogue.

In discarding mono-religious instruction, non-confessional, dialogical, multifaith RE should feature the major religious traditions duly represented

in Nigeria. Thus, rather than aim at religionizing or indoctrinating pupils, the primary concern of the proposed multifaith RE curriculum should be to facilitate pupils' 'learning about religions' and 'learning from religion' (see Grimmitt 1987: 225). The body of religious knowledge could be acquired theologically, philosophically, phenomenologically, experientially, sociologically, anthropologically and historically.[23] Whichever epistemological approach is to be deployed, the adoption of this model of RE should be premised on the notion that postmodern, globalised, 21st century societies (including Nigeria) are socially, ethnically, culturally and religiously pluralistic in nature. Given the inextricable link between religion, ethnicity and culture, this aspect of the education of Nigerian children should recognize, within Nigeria's national curriculum, the major religions duly represented in the country (see Milot 2007: 22; OSCE/ODIHR 2007: xv). Favouring the equality of all religions, this model should recognize the fact that there are multiple ways through which human beings explore/seek divine 'reality'.

Pedagogically, instead of merely featuring the major religions represented in Nigeria, those religious traditions should be presented to pupils, each in their own terms. In other words, Christianity, for example, must not be conveyed to pupils from Islamic perspectives, and vice versa. Cognitively, the multifaith RE curriculum should seek to help Nigerian pupils: (1) to gain an understanding of religions, vis-à-vis, its various dimensions, origins, history, doctrines, pluralism, influences upon adherents; and (2) to engage intellectually with the character and demands of the 'ultimate questions', considering solutions which different religions proffer to different problems associated with the 'ultimate questions'. Affectively, it should aim at encouraging pupils to become interested in religions and in helping them to show respect for different religions and their adherents. Volitionally, whilst this model should recognize the importance of religions in the socio-cultural and moral development of pupils, it should leave the transmission of religious beliefs, values and ethos to homes and religious communities (see Hermans 2003: 336ff).

In a nutshell, non-confessional, multifaith RE should encourage pupils: to acquire the knowledge and understanding of different religions (including theirs, if any); to identify and acknowledge differences between religious traditions and the associated communities; and, to appreciate the complexities of identities (religious, ethnic and secular). Pupils should further be stimulated to recognize the tensions existing between different religious identities, by way of gathering evidence, assessing arguments, discriminating amongst authorities, constructing counterarguments, and challenging truth claims (Noddings 1993: 7). It is in children's best interest to expose them to diverse religious and ideological worldviews (see LaFollette 1996: 159-69). Such exposure helps them to juxtapose wider religious and ideological worldviews (provided by the liberal, secular state, through publicly funded schools) with parental indoctrination and monolithic

religious nurture (which the child may be subjected to, if at all, in their homes and religious communities). It therefore bequeaths such children with 'open future possibilities.' This enables them, as they mature, to have options to choose from, in an intellectual and responsible manner (see Purdy 1996: 155; Machan 1996: 16-22; Pritchard 1996: 96-7).

Further, it is held that liberal, pluralistic, democratic states potentially benefit from citizens who acknowledge, respect and show tolerance towards diverse religio-cultural ideologies and secular worldviews. This is especially so given the fact that religio-cultural differences and intolerance have, in different parts of the world (including Nigeria), not only exacerbated interreligious conflicts, but also aggravated civil unrests and the oppression of ethnic minorities. Considering the fact that multifaith religious education exposes pupils to wide ranging religious ideologies and (sometimes) secular worldviews, whilst simultaneously engendering open-mindedness towards religio-cultural ideologies and secular worldviews, it is in the interest of such states to encourage multifaith religious education in publicly funded schools (see Macedo 1995; Purdy 1996). Thus, in acknowledging the fact that religious illiteracy inhibits interfaith (and/or ecumenical) dialogue, the acquisition of religious knowledge should be seen as a prerequisite for successful dialogue. Thus, rather than dwell exclusively on 'impartial' or 'objective' description of religions, pupils are to be encouraged to acquire the knowledge and understanding of their own religious traditions (if any) whilst simultaneously engaged in interfaith dialogue. Ultimately, these could help to foster social cohesion within religiously pluralistic societies (see Hermans 2003: 334ff; Raasch 2007: 91-7) such as Nigeria. Potentially, it could help to ameliorate Nigeria's perennial, fatal interreligious conflicts. Arguably, knowledge and understanding of religions and religious pluralism in multiethnic, multireligious and multicultural societies (such as Nigeria) does not automatically result in 'tolerance' and 'respect' for the worldviews of the 'Other' (Malone 1998: 17). Nonetheless, "ignorance increases the likelihood of misunderstanding, stereotyping, and conflict" (OSCE/ODIHR 2007: 9).

It seems plausible to suggest from the foregoing that the adoption of non-confessional, multifaith RE in Nigerian schools would, amongst other things, enable pupils to 'learn from' and 'learn about' those traditional religious values which remotely or intimately underpin their various ethnicities, cultures and societies. This would facilitate an important aim of the child's education enshrined in the UNCRC. This provides that States Parties shall ascertain that the education of the child is directed to the development of respect for the child's cultural identity, values and the national values of the country of the child's origin and/or residency (UNCRC Art. 29:1c; see UNCRC Art 29:1a; Art 30; ICCPR Art 27). It would also help to facilitate the acquisition of certain transferable skills which accrue from intellectual engagement with different religious traditions.

These skills, which include critical, complex, and comparative analysis of diverse worldviews and philosophical engagement with pluralism, could prove very useful in other spheres of pupils' lives.

Further, the adoption of non-confessional, multifaith RE in Nigerian schools would further help to attain other aims of education enunciated in the UNCRC. This provides that States Parties shall ascertain that the education of the child is not only geared towards "the development of respect for…civilizations different from his or her own" (Art 29:1c), but also prepares him or her "for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin" (Art 29:1d).

Strategies for Implementation

First and foremost, the Nigerian government, particularly officials and agents of the Ministry of Education at the State and Federal levels, must acknowledge the fact that the current religious education dispensation in the nations' publicly funded schools contravenes Nigeria's national policy on education. It also violates Section 38, subsections 2 and 3 of the 1999 Constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria. To this end, the Ministry of Education should be committed to, and embark on, the re-orientation of education policy makers, local, state and national government agencies, representatives of examination boards, head-teachers, teachers, pupils, parents, religious communities and their leaders, and other stakeholders. A government 'white paper'[24] articulating the rationale for non-confessional, multifaith RE in the Nigerian context should be carefully drafted, published and widely circulated. This should emphasize the need for pupils to learn about their own religious traditions (if any). It should also accentuate the importance of studying other religious traditions. In re-orientating the entire population,[25] existing interfaith organizations (e.g. Muslim-Christian Dialogue Forum) and ecumenical associations (e.g. the Christian Association of Nigeria, CAN) should also be fully consulted.

Curriculum reform is another important strategy requisite for introducing multifaith RE in Nigerian schools. The design of a new RE curriculum featuring all the World Religions and NRMs duly represented in Nigeria should involve all the stakeholders. These should include experts in education curriculum, education law and policy, religious studies, and interfaith/ecumenical dialogue. Also, agents of examination boards, religious studies teachers and schools' head-teachers/principals as well as leaders and representatives of the major religious bodies in Nigeria should be duly represented in the RE curriculum reform process. These should be duly consulted in the process of curriculum design. They should also be fully involved in making decisions about course materials (e.g. textbooks) which — in the views

of members and leaders of, as well as academic experts on, each religious tradition — satisfactorily convey the 'truth claims' of the respective religions.

Tailoring initial teacher training/education in RE towards the multifaith approach, and widening existing RE teacher's knowledge of World Religions and NRMs are other vital strategies necessary for successfully implementing the proposed multifaith RE curriculum. Teacher training institutions (e.g. Colleges of Education and Institutes/Faculties of Education in Nigerian Universities), offering initial teacher training/education programmes for prospective RE teachers and in-service training courses for existing RE teachers should re-design their syllabi. Chidester, et al. aptly noted that "the first university department of religious studies in the world — the first department, that is, dedicated to the modern study of religion and religions — was established in 1949 at the University of Ibadan [Nigeria]" (1994: 72). Subsequently, scores of religious studies departments have been established in different Nigerian universities, delivering the academic study of religions in a critical, pluralistic, and non-confessional manner.[26] This seemingly implies that departments of religious studies in Nigerian universities are crucially important in this venture. To this end, cross-curriculum collaboration between Institutes/Faculties of Education and Religious Studies departments in Nigerian universities should be intensified. This should be with a view to ascertaining that qualified teachers and trainee-teachers of RE acquire sufficient knowledge and understanding of the major religious traditions represented in Nigeria.

Also, initial teacher training programmes should facilitate the acquisition of pedagogical skills vital for delivering multifaith RE in an objective, critical and pluralistic manner, without indoctrination. Existing RE teachers and RE teacher trainees should be made to understand that the primary aims of teaching religions in publicly funded schools are: to sensitize pupils about religions, not proselytize them; to expose pupils to religions, not impose religions on them; to inform pupils about different belief systems, not conform them to any religious beliefs, and that the pedagogical approach should be educational, not devotional (see Ontario Court of Appeal 1990). In order to attain these, it is recommended that teachers of religious education deploy a combination of phenomenological[27] and anthropological/interpretative[28] approaches (Whaling 1983; Connolly 1999; Antes, Geertz & Warne 2004) not only in the acquisition of the knowledge and understanding of different religious traditions represented in Nigeria, but also in communicating the body of religious knowledge to their pupils in an objective and pluralistic manner, without indoctrination.

Conclusion

The case for non-confessional, multifaith RE in Nigerian schools is continuously underpinned by Nigeria's domestic idiosyncrasies vis-à-vis, its multi-ethnicity,

multiculturalism, multi-religiosity and incessant interreligious conflicts. As a member of the international community, the need for non-confessional, multifaith RE is further underscored by international phenomena like globalization, religious pluralism, religious fundamentalism, organised terrorism, inter-racial and inter-religious tensions within postmodern societies, to mention a few. In these circumstances, the need for Nigerian pupils to learn to engage with the sympathetic understanding of their own religion (if any) and those of 'Others', each in their own terms, cannot be overemphasised. Similarly, the need for Nigerian pupils to possess the ability to independently interact with, and interpret, religious data as well as make informed judgments about religious and cultural issues cannot be underestimated. These are crucially important not only for reacting towards, or countering, stereotypes and misrepresentations of religions, but also for ameliorating religious conflicts. Whilst the polarised RE curricula does not seem to lend itself to pupils' acquisition of these skills, multifaith RE potentially does. To this end, Nigerian pupils should be exposed to the worldviews of different religious traditions represented in their socio-cultural milieus (and possibly beyond) — worldviews that should be accurately, empathetically and sensitively interpreted, represented and presented to Nigerian pupils. To facilitate this, a paradigm shift from 'hard' monoreligious education to non-confessional, multifaith RE seems imperative.

Notes

[1] If we take ethnicity to mean people sharing ancestral, linguistic, religious, and cultural commonalities (which have been inter-generationally transmitted and sustained), differentiating or distinguishing them from others either through 'external categorization' and/or 'self-identification' (see Brubaker, Loveman and Stamatov 2004: 32), Nigeria, the most populous African country, has more than 250 ethnicities within its geo-political boundaries. The most populous and politically influential of these are as follows: *Hausa* and *Fulani* 29%; *Yoruba* 21%; *Igbo* (*Ibo*) 18%; *Ijaw* 10%; *Kanuri* 4%; *Ibibio* 3.5%; and, *Tiv* 2.5% (*The World Fact Book*).

[2] Although *The World Fact Book* suggests the following figures of religious affiliation: Muslim 50%, Christian 40%, indigenous beliefs 10%, these seem unreliable because it neither takes cognizance of Nigerians belonging to Eastern religions and New Religious Movements (NRMs) nor accounts for people with no religious affiliation. Hackett argues that there are approximately 45% Muslims, 37% Christians, and the remainder of the population (18%) being people with no religious affiliation as well as adherents of ATRS, NRMs and Eastern religions. It must, however, be stressed that religious affiliation statistics for Nigeria are neither officially available nor reliable. For instance, for fear of political manipulation, the last national census (1991) did not take account of people's religious affiliation (2001: 538, supra note 3).

[3] The population of Northern Nigeria — with the exception of Central Nigeria, also

referred to as the Middle Belt — has since the advent of Islam remained predominantly Muslim.

4 Southeast Nigeria remains predominantly Christian, whilst Islam and Christianity is deemed to be evenly represented in Southwest Nigeria.

5 Some children, on the one hand, wanted to escape farms, become educated and subsequently take up white collar jobs. On the other hand, whilst some parents felt that their children's abandonment of farms for schools would lead to shortage of labour in the farms — historically being one of the reasons why many raise very large families in traditional African societies so that their children could help them out on the farms — these sooner (or later) realised the need for their children to receive Western education, become professionals and join the club of élites of the new era. For this reason, many parents sent their children to mission schools.

6 Irrespective of their religious background, children attending mission schools were, historically, compelled to replace their indigenous African or Muslim names (whichever applied) with Christian names. Given the inextricability of indigenous Nigerian/African and/or Muslim names and peoples' religio-cultural identities, the obligatory substitution of those names with Christian names violated children's right to enjoy their religion, culture and identity (UNCRC, Art 30).

7 Many of those who championed government takeover of schools were themselves Christian converts and products of Christian mission schools. Following their successful educational pursuits in Nigeria and abroad, these élites formed nationalist movements which successfully campaigned for, and secured, Nigeria's independence from British colonial rule. However, because one year after Nigeria's independence, 80% of pupils, teachers and institutions at the various strata of Nigeria's education system remained under the full control of Christian missionaries, these nationalists feared continued colonial domination. They contended that because the Nigerian government and parents carried 95% of the financial burden of education, civil (rather than ecclesiastical) authorities should be in full control of the nation's schools. It was also thought that by taking over schools from the various missions, curriculum secularization, uniformity and centralization would be achieved, culminating in the improvement of educational standards (see Adesina 1973: 492-493). Whilst the take-over of schools helped to achieve curriculum centralization, the standards of education never improved. Instead, it monumentally deteriorated. As such, the churches have, over the past three decades, relentlessly called on the government to hand back mission schools to their erstwhile proprietors. In some states of the federation many of these schools have been handed back to the founding missions. These have subsequently been faced with the huge task of revamping the ailing standards of education in Nigerian schools.

8 New Religious Movements (NRMs) have, indisputably, become part and parcel of Nigeria's religious landscape. For a detailed study and nuanced discussion of NRMs in Nigeria, see Hackett 1987.

9 The constitutional right referred to here (i.e. Section 38: 3 of the *1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria*) is only exercisable in any place of study wholly maintained by a religious community/denomination, rendering the invocation of such a claim/right in publicly funded schools to be inappropriate and unconstitutional.

[10] The West African Examination Council — the body which conducts General Certificate Examinations (Ordinary and Advanced Levels) throughout West Africa — does not help matters. It only allows students to take either CRK, IRK, or ATR, preventing them from being examined in a combination of any of the three major religious traditions represented in Nigeria.

[11] In scholarly circles, the relationship between *moral education* and *religion education* is profoundly contested (see Stopes-Roe 1983; Cox 1983; Getz 1984). Whilst this is not the thrust of this article, it is pertinent to note that some scholars (see Nduka 1980; Boateng 1983; Obidi 1984) maintain that the inextricability of morality and religions (especially in traditional African societies) underscores the inseparability of moral education and religion education, and hence the similitude, inclusivity, and complementariness of these two curriculum subjects (see Chidester 1994: 102-3). Conversely, however, some scholars (e.g. Wilson *et al.* 1967) have argued for the rational autonomy of morality and religion. Maintaining that moral education and religious education are two distinctive, albeit related areas of educational and social concern (*Journal of Moral Education* 1985: 7), it has been argued that the collective ideologies of morality which moral education teaches pupils have no religious affinity, foundation and underpinning (Sealey 1983), explicating the reasons why the educational roles of, and the rationale for, moral education are adjudged in moral education circles to be independent of those of religious education.

[12] Conversely, however, some would align themselves with Marx (1853) who argues that "religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo" (cited in O'Malley 1977: 131).

[13] This may be permissible in a country which — through self-identification and external categorization — is not only considered a religious nation-state, but also adjudged a mono-cultural and mono-religious country. Besides, in socially, ethnically, culturally and religiously pluralistic, secular states the deployment of confessional pedagogical model of RE in publicly funded schools raises the vexed question of whether or not there are any justifications for expending public funds not only in indoctrinating and nurturing pupils in specific faith traditions, but also in propagating and entrenching specific religious traditions.

[14] These are human rights documents emanating from conventions and treaties held at regional levels (e.g. Africa, Europe, Arab nations, and the Americas), and signed up to by countries belonging to the regional organizations (e.g. the European Union, the Organization of African Unity, the League of Arab Nations, and Organization of American States, to mention a few). Unlike international human rights conventions and treaties which have the *force of law* in countries which are signatories and across various regions of the world, regional treaties only apply within the specified region to countries who are signatories to such treaties.

[15] These refer to countries that are signatories to regional and international human rights

conventions, treaties and declarations.

16 The Nigerian government is a signatory to the regional treaties, Conventions and Declarations cited in this article, excepting: (i) the ECHR; (ii) the American Convention; and, (iii) the Arab Charter. These have been exclusively signed up to by: (i) member States of the Council of Europe; (ii) the nations of the Americas (also known as Organisation of American States [OAS]); and, (iii) League of Arab States, respectively.

17 In theory, Nigeria's government has — through the 1999 *Federal Constitution* — made adequate opt out provision for pupils wishing to be exempted from religious education and religious observance, particularly where these do not conform to their parents'/guardians' religious and philosophical convictions. In practice, however, Nigerian schools have flagrantly failed to comply with the relevant constitutional provision. This is, therefore, not a policy problem, but implementation quandary.

18 Two types of monoreligious education could be identified. These are 'hard' and 'soft' monoreligious education. The 'hard' version is exclusively concerned with one specific faith tradition e.g. Christianity. "If other religions are mentioned at all", Hermans observes, "one talks 'at' them, not 'with' them" (2003: 338). "In this 'hard' version", as Hermans further explains, "one is hardly called upon to take note of other religions" (2003: 337-8). The 'truth-claims' of the particular religious tradition is conveyed to pupils as 'absolute truth.' The 'soft' version, on the other hand, takes the view that other religions are channels through which different people seek spirituality/religiosity. Moreover, spirituality and religiosity are not exclusively confined to one religion. Consequently, this version considers different faith traditions in the RE curriculum, enabling pupils to engage with diverse religious worldviews, albeit, from the viewpoint of the particular faith tradition (e.g. Christianity) (Hermans 2003: 338).

19 These misconceptions/misgivings arise from the fact that in some cases, the knowledge and understanding of the religious worldviews of the 'Other' which some pupils acquire outside classrooms is sometimes very negative. Religious publications appearing in the forms of pamphlets, books and video/audiotapes, or speeches made at religious gatherings/crusades are often the sources of pupils' misinformation.

20 Contemporary scholars of RE have argued that in considering approaches to religious education, due attention should be given to the issues of religious and social plurality (see Heimbrock 2001, 2004; Rüpell and Schreiner 2003; Scheilke 2001; Schreiner 2001; Streib 2001).

21 Section 38, subsection 1 of the *1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria* provides that "every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance." The right to religious freedom is further guaranteed in the African Charter (Art 2).

22 Arguably, this is old news in the field of RE in many parts of the world. In the UK, for example, through the pioneering efforts of Ninian Smart in the late 1960's (see Smart 1968, 1979) and his cohort of researchers on the Lancaster Project, and those of Eric Sharpe, in the early 1970's (see Sharpe 1975a and 1975b), the RE curriculum became revolutionalised (see Jackson 1997: 8-10). Thus, from the early 1970's, Nigeria's former

colonial master, Great Britain, abandoned confessional, mono-religious education for non-confessional, phenomenological, multifaith RE in publicly funded schools. Subsequently, some Commonwealth nations particularly Australia, Canada and South Africa had undertaken similar curriculum reforms. Sadly, however, Nigerian schools (public and private) are yet to catch up with this pedagogical development in RE. Almost fifty years after its independence, the status-quo of religious education in Nigerian schools mirrors those of the colonial era. There is no empirical study that I am aware of which confirms any efforts to implement non-confessional, multifaith, dialogical RE in Nigeria's publicly and privately funded schools.

[23] These epistemological approaches to the acquisition of (religious) knowledge, sometimes designated as models of RE, are often deployed in 'learning about religions' and 'learning from religion' (see Hobson and Edwards 1999: 22-3 and Keast 2007: 73-114).

[24] In drafting the government 'white paper', it is suggested that the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* (OSCE/ODIHR 2007) should be duly consulted and possibly adapted to the Nigerian situation.

[25] Adherents of different religious traditions in Nigeria seemingly have no problems with teaching religions in schools. However, some would have to be persuaded that the exposure of their children/wards to multifaith RE is neither aimed at converting them to another religion, nor geared towards the subjugation of the study of one religious tradition by the other.

[26] In spite of Nigeria's pioneering role, the academic study of religions in an impartial, non-confessional, and pluralistic manner is, paradoxically, yet to be imbibed in Nigerian schools (see Chidester *et al.* 1994: 73).

[27] In this context, the deployment of the phenomenological approach, amongst other things, obliges teachers of RE to engage with Edmund Husserl's two major principles of understanding. These are *epoché* and *eidetic vision* (Sharpe 1975: 5; King 1983: 39; Jackson 1997: 15; Erricker 1999: 77). Whilst the former entails 'bracketing out' or 'parenthesizing', i.e. refraining from, or suspension of value-judgment, and the relinquishment of assumptions, stereotypes "or typecasts on the part of the investigator regarding any aspects of the phenomenon which do not belong to the universal essence" (Sharpe 1975: 6). The latter, on the other hand, "aims to grasp the essence of phenomena by means of empathy and intuition" (King 1983: 39). In other words, eidetic vision "seeks to peel away the extraneous attributes, to lay bare the object that is before one" (King 1983: 39). In short, RE teachers must interact with religious data and phenomena (to be taught pupils) in an *impartial* and *sympathetic* manner.

[28] The deployment of anthropological/interpretative approaches implies that the investigator pays detailed attention to *insiders' views*, also known in social and cultural anthropology as 'folk evaluation' or 'folk analysis'. This approach hinges on the investigation of human behaviours from the insiders' point of view, through the analysis of the cognitive processes of the people under study. The researcher should be concerned with empathetic *interpretation* of (religious) data and sympathetic portrayal of the (religious) phenomena under investigation. These should help to overcome the problem of *misrepresentations* and stereotyping of religious traditions.

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