

## The Separatist Religious Education In Uganda: An Unhealthy Approach To Interreligious Dialogue And Extremism

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Interreligious dialogue is one of the potential approaches to help societies overcome differences and resolve religious conflicts. The majority of Uganda's population constitutes different sects of Christians and Muslims. While currently, there may not be severe religious conflicts to raise alarm in Uganda; there are cases of religious intolerance that may culminate into religious terrorism. Religious intolerance is a fertile ground for religious fundamentalism and extremism. Whilst education has been recommended as a potential to discourage and combat religious terrorism, the approach to religious education in Uganda may instead breed religious terrorist tendencies. The article is a culmination of documentary analysis of several documents including the national educational and syllabus. These documents spell out the goals, objectives and the subject content.

**Key words:** Interreligious Religious; Dialogue; Religious Education; Extremism; Terrorism; Approach.

### GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS

**RE:** Religious Education

**IRE:** Islamic Religious Education

**CRE:** Christian Religious Education

**NCDC:** National Curriculum Development Center

**NAAM:** National Association for the Advancement of Muslims

**UMSC:** Uganda Muslim Supreme Council

**UPC:** Uganda People's Congress

**IRCU:** Inter Religious Council of Uganda

### INTRODUCTION

Several parts of the world continue to experience the ugly activities of terrorism attributed to religious intolerance that results into religious fundamentalism and extremism. There is a relationship between religious fundamentalism, dialogue and terrorism, religious fundamentalism is potential for religious terrorism yet religious dialogue is a great potential remedy to both religious fundamentalism and terrorism. Moreover, education is earmarked as a potential channel to combat terrorism. As British Prime minister, Theresa May [18], "Schools now have a legal duty to prevent young people from being drawn to terrorism". Further, as Pratt [12] observes, "religion may not be the single cause of terrorism, but religious elements of it feature strongly in the belief systems associated with terrorists' violence and can also feature in other important fostering factors for terrorist violence, such as the use of rhetoric". In this article, I argue that an approach selected to Religious Education in schools has potential to contribute either positively or negatively to interreligious dialogue.

Uganda is a multi-religious country with majority population comprising of Christians of various sects including Roman Catholics, the Anglicans, and the Pentecostals. The Muslims sects include the Sunn, the Shia, Ahmadiyya and the contested Tablig. The rest constitute small percentages as indicated in the table below.

**Table 1: Percentage distribution of the population by Religion 2002-2014**

<b>Religious Group</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2014</b>
Catholics	41.6	39.3
Anglicans	36.7	32.0
Muslims	12.4	13.0
Pentecostal/Born Again/Evangelical	4.7	11.1
Seventh Day Adventists	1.5	1.7
Traditional	1.0	0.1
Baptist	-	0.3
Orthodox	0.1	0.1
Others	1.9	1.4
Non Religion	0.9	0.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source: UBOS: National Population and Housing Census 2014**

### **Religious fundamentalism and terrorism in Uganda**

Uganda may not be among the countries of hardcore terror acts of religious fundamentalism. However, as remarked by Abimanyi [1], Uganda has had near-brushes with religious warfare based on fundamentalist religious views. Similarly, the spokesperson for Uganda Muslim Supreme Council (UMSC) was quoted to have admitted the presence of religious intolerance which is a fertile ground for religious fundamentalism. Traces of the presence of religious fundamentalism were evidenced by the July 11, 2010 terror attacks of double bombings on the Ugandan sports fun that left 80 dead and many others injured. It is critical to note that Ugandans played a major role in the collaboration with the Alshahaab terrorists in the killing of Ugandans [2]. It is against such instances that Abimanyi [1] concluded that Uganda is a 'volatile state, only waiting for a matchstick to ignite'.

Besides, there are occasional internal acts that reflect religious intolerance and extremism in Uganda. These acts are between Christians and fellow Christians, Muslims and Muslims and between Christians and Muslims. There are reports that Muslims in the different parts of the country commit acts of persecution to Christians, most especially the Pentecostals. For instance, the East Africa Correspondent [7] reported that a pastor and eight others went missing in Uganda after Muslims beat and raped the congregation. In a related incidence, on April 21, 2016 the Morningstar reported that a Muslim mob demolished Nalugondo Church of Uganda at about midnight [6]. The mob was shouting, "We cannot live together with neighbors who are infidels. We have to fight for the cause of Allah". The Muslims in this area also destroyed people's livestock, pigs, which are a source of the income. The mob shouted praises to Allah that, "Allah only is to be worshipped, and Muhammad is his prophet" [7]. In the same vein Raymond [13] recounts instances when Muslims commit acts that reflect religious fundamentalism towards Christians. While there are reports of Muslims attacking Christians, cases of Christians attacking Muslims are not uncommon either. Remembering that the central Buganda Kingdom underwent outbreaks of bloody Muslim-Christian wars beginning the 1880s, and that Idi Amin outwardly favored Muslims and also that Muslims suffered revenge attacks after his ouster in 1979. It is arguable that elements of fundamentalism do linger in Uganda.

### **The seeds of a separatist Religious Education in Uganda**

Seeds of separatist religious education were sown by the first Christian missionaries and Arab traders. They introduced Christianity and Islam respectively in Uganda and indoctrinated their converts. The Arabs, the British and the French transplanted their national and religious hatred and suspicions to Uganda [14]. They sowed seeds of hatred, suspicion and antagonism that divided Ugandans to the extent of fighting each other. The converts developed hatred against each other, began competing against each other and subsequently, foreign missionaries led Ugandans into religious wars against each other. As Terry Muck [17] observed, Ugandan religious lives manifest the missionary urge, "when one is seeking to convince converts by arguing for the truth and efficacy in their faith, a we/they mentality is unavoidable". For instance, the Protestants from France didn't introduce religious objects such as the catholic rosary and statues. The two groups of Christian missionaries taught about Jesus Christ, called him differently, the Roman Catholics from France called Him *YezuKristu* and the Protestants called Him *YesuKristo*.

The subject of Religious Education is prominent at all levels of Uganda's education national curriculum. Since missionary times, Religious Education is highly regarded as a values subject and in some schools it is compulsory. However, Religious Education is separated into Christian Religious Education (CRE) and Islamic Religious Education (IRE). Students in secondary and high schools choose either to study CRE or IRE, not both. In most cases, they choose to study what is familiar to them, that is, Christians choose CRE as Muslims choose IRE. The other religious faiths, such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism are not heard of in the curriculum yet there are populations that follow them in Uganda.

### **Religious conflicts in Uganda today**

As any religiously pluralistic society, Uganda has had its share of religious conflicts. On the one hand, there are interreligious and on the other, interfaith conflicts. As mentioned earlier, Uganda has several sects of Christian faith as well as Islam. The differences within members of the Christian faith were most vehement between 1885 and 1886 when adherents to Christianity persecuted and exiled each other. Bloody fights within Christian converts were perpetuated by missionaries who reinforced the fights with military weapons. On the one hand, Anglicans fought Roman Catholics and on the other, Muslims fought both Anglican and Roman Catholics. Today, there is relative peace between the different Christian faiths. However, the differences within the Islamic faiths have continued to manifest among adherents. Kateregga [18] observed that Muslim wrangles have existed in Uganda since the Arab traders introduced Islam. Firstly, the traders followed different interpretations of the Quran and Hadith, for instance, the Ahmad Ibn Ibrahim's group that came from the east African Coast hardly agreed with 1879 group of Muslim traders that came from Egypt and Sudan. Such theological differences continued there developed a section of Badru Kakungulu and Sheikh Abdullah Ssekimwany; Secondly, when Christian missionaries established schools, Muslims were closed out as such schools were conversation centers for Christians. Without education, Muslims could only be wood choppers, butchers and taxi-drivers. They suffered social injustices as they were discriminated against and remained a disgruntled group in the society.

Thirdly, since Muslims were already divided, they were vulnerable to politicians with selfish interests. They got further divided along political lines; the Uganda People's Congress (UPC) supported a faction that established the National Association for the Advancement of Muslims (NAAM) which used the government to takeover mosques that belonged to Kibuli faction. Conflicts within the Islamic faith continue today as Aljazeera [3] reported that Muslims live in fear because of attacks on Muslim clerics across the country. Some people have openly blamed these killings on the ideological struggle within the Muslim community. Muslims continue to be divided and oppose their leaders to date.

### **Inter-religious/ Interfaith dialogue**

Defined as the encounter and interaction of individuals, communities with members of different religions and faith traditions [9]. Interreligious dialogue is a springboard to talks, sharing and exchange of ideas between people of different religions and faith traditions. Interreligious dialogues were first conceived at the interreligious encounter of the 1893 parliament of the world's religions in Chicago. Interreligious dialogue is underpinned by the concepts of equality of all human beings, "All men are created equal" [16]. The basis of interreligious dialogue is communication between followers of different religious in order inform each other to overcome ignorance about each other's doctrines and practices. As Bagir [4] observes that the "majority of Christians and Muslims continue to view each other detailed ignorance". Interreligious dialogue promotes understanding each other's beliefs, traditions, customs, practices and cooperation for social justice, conflict resolution, tolerance and peaceful co-existence between people of different religions and faith traditions. In his speech, the pope explained that when followers of different religions engage in dialogue, they discover their common dignity and common values, which society needs in order to overcome power plays and work for the common good [5].

Interreligious dialogue is crucial as it provides room for members of different faiths and sects to learn about each other. As a process by which we learn new ways of thinking and behaving, education is the best means to promote interreligious dialogue, nurture responsible citizens who can transform and liberate African society from dominance, exclusiveness, violence and religious conflicts [9].

Contrarily, as observed from the syllabus and curriculum, the practice of Religious education follows a mono approach. In this case, through RE, religious extremism finds its way in schools. RE continues to poison the minds of children and the young people-subliminally, subconsciously or unknowingly. The current separatist/exclusivist practice of RE may prepare children on the paths of radicalization into violent extremism [10].

In Uganda, Inter Religious Council (IRCU) was established in 2001 and unites religious leaders from all the Christian sects and Islam. Its objectives include;-to promote multi-religious collaborative dialogue on issues of common interest and concern among the different faiths based on shared moral commitments in Uganda and in relation to other parts of the world and to advocate for peaceful co-existence, tolerance, human rights, justice and reconciliation for harnessing the unique similarities and differences in faiths, traditions, ethnicity, beliefs and action. However, Uganda's education system is not structured in such a way to contribute to the efforts of the IRCU. Instead, it is designed to separate learners into two groups, the learners of Christian Religious Education (CRE) and Islamic Religious Education (IRE) just as the early missionaries designed it. It is against this backdrop that I argue that the current RE practice is separatist, exclusivist, anti-dialogical and a foundation to extremism.

### **The separatist approach to Religious Education in Uganda**

Seeds of separatist Religious Education were sown by the first Christian missionaries and Arab traders. They introduced Christianity and Islam respectively in Uganda and indoctrinated their converts. The Arabs, the British and the French transplanted their national and religious hatred and suspicions to Uganda [14]. They sowed seeds of hatred, suspicion and antagonism that divided Ugandans to the extent of fighting each other. The converts developed hatred against each other, began competing against each other and subsequently, foreign missionaries led Ugandans into religious wars against each other.

In Uganda education curriculum, RE is understood as teaching and learning about one's own religion; it is a mono-religious education (or some would say instruction) by nature. Mono-religious education enhances the internalization of one's own religious faith. In case issues from other religions are mentioned, they are taught from the perspective of a particular religion. Besides, the Uganda Education Act [20] mandates faith based schools to participate in the running and making decisions concerning such schools. Arguably, the Religious Education policy creates a divide between CRE and IRE curriculum. The "...Religious Education syllabus is composed of two parts namely, part A: Christian Religious Education (CRE) and part B: Islamic Religious Education (IRE). Individual schools will decide which part(s) they want to teach, depending on their religious population and facilities available" [24].

Clearly, RE is divided into two categories, Christian Religious Education (CRE) and Islamic Religious Education (IRE). Learners choose either to study CRE or IRE, and some Christian schools choose not to teach IRE and vice-versa. In this case, schools founded by Christians in most cases choose not to teach IRE and schools founded by Muslims choose not to teach CRE.

Consequently, Christian Religious Education CRE is purely Christian and Islamic Religious Education is purely Islamic. Each syllabus, CRE and IRE are distinctive from each and each of the content is unique, there is no overlap, no comparison, no relationship and target different categories of learners. For instance, the high school NCDC states that, "the IRE syllabus is based on an assumption that the student has a solid background in Islam at least up to O level. The NCDC further states that the "IRE syllabus covers the study of different aspects of the Holy Book, the origin and development of Islamic legislation, Islamic political, social, economic, religious and cultural history, Sharia and its application, and the interplay between Islam and other civilizations". Arguably, the student of IRE at this level must have chosen IRE at a lower level. It is also arguable that a child chooses either CRE or IRE basing on the family religious faith. As Stott [15] observes that parents feel morally bound to instruct their children in religious matters, therefore, children often take-up their parents religious ways including worship.

When the objectives of RE are educational, the young people in school get an opportunity to be taught aspects of all religious traditions, their core tenets, the dimensions of religion and each one of them spread and created an impact in history in the different parts of the world. However, while there could be a few cases who divert from the norm, each learner chooses to learn their own religion. In this way, a Christian limits him/herself to CRE and a Muslim to IRE. Yet, as a subject with educational goals, Christians should learn about Islam and Muslims should learn about Christianity. Besides, since the world is increasingly becoming pluralistic with diverse religious faiths as well as atheism, learners need to learn about others religions such as Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, Shintoism, Bahai and the religious movements that come up. In addition, they also need to learn that long before the coming of foreign missionaries, the Christians and Muslims, the African people had their own traditional religious beliefs and practices. Conversely, the African children end up disregarding their own cultural religions. Moreover, religious concepts taught in schools are not presented as claims but as universally accepted truth.

### **The Separatist Goals of Religious Education in Uganda**

Each strand of RE has its goals, objectives and content, There are no cross cutting themes or content between IRE and CRE.

### ***Purpose and aims of IRE***

Concerning IRE, the National curriculum syllabus [24] aims and objectives are distinctively for furthering an understanding of the Islamic faith. For instance, the aims of teaching IRE are stated as follows;

- i. To cultivate in the student a deeper understanding of Islam and its relevance in life today.
- ii. To equip the student with an adequate basis for further study of the subject.
- iii. To deepen the student's knowledge of Islam by exposing him/her to the basic sources of faith.
- iv. To introduce the student to the origin and development of the Islamic legislation.
- v. To enable students appreciate the rich Islamic heritage with particular reference to its political, social, economic, religious and cultural history.
- vi. To enable the student appreciate that Islam is one of the major civilisations that has enlightened the African continent.
- vii. To enable the student realise that there is a trend of Islamisation of African culture.
- viii. To enable the student appreciate the fact that Islam can ably thrive in the absence of the Arab culture.

Moreover, the curriculum further states that the IRE syllabus is based on an assumption that the student has a solid background in Islam. The document adds that syllabus covers ... the Holy Book, the origin and development of Islamic legislation, Islamic political, social, economic, religious and cultural history, Sharia and its application, and the interplay between Islam.

### ***Purpose and aims of CRE***

The national curriculum syllabus clearly states that the purpose of CRE is to deepen the Christian faith to the learners summed in the phrase 'instilling Christian values in learners' [23]. It is tenable to conclude that it is only appropriate to instill Christian values into Christian children. The aims include;

- i. To develop an awareness and knowledge of God's presence and purpose in the world as revealed through His creation, the Bible, the Christian community, the life and teaching of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit living in the church today;
- ii. To develop Christian virtues of love, joy, peace and service in the child, and build a personal Christian ideal to inspire his/her development and maturity;
- iii. To live a committed Christian life following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ;
- iv. To get knowledge of the teachings of the Bible and apply it in the Christian life or churches today;
- v. To appreciate the common elements in traditional religion, other religions and Christian beliefs;
- vi. To develop the Christian moral values of honesty, concern for others, sharing, tolerance and justice;

## **CONCLUSION**

The separatist RE aims and content implies that RE is faith based. The faith based schools always construct places of worship within their compounds, mosques for Muslims and churches for Christian schools. Students are obligated to attend religious instruction which is confessional in nature, sometimes this takes place in the place of worship or even in class. Children are obliged to say daily prayers, participate in religious practices, celebrate religious functions in a special way. For example, while conversion of faith may not be compulsory, but there are children who get motivated and convert to the faith of the school. While such a religious environment is provided to the learners may not be a motivation for extremism, the separatist teaching of RE in classes provides a fertile ground for extremism. RE becomes a

continuation and an illumination of the respective faith dogmas initiated to children by their parents and their religious communities. The separatist approach to RE is exclusive and often doctrinal in approach. The content reflects religious absolutism, where each faith is presented as universal truths than claims. RE does not explain the fact that human understanding is limited and no faiths can exhaust the whole truth. RE is internal; it further closes or draws students into their own religion without exposing them to the existence of any other religious beliefs. It may lead students towards denial of other ways of salvation, for example, the IRE does not expose Christian students to Islamic beliefs about salvation and vice-versa. The separatist teaching of Religious Education makes learners vulnerable to religious extremism. RE therefore does not contribute towards interreligious dialogue in Uganda.

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