



CONFERENCE PAPER

Reflecting on the Teaching of Islam in Religious Education Teacher Education Programme at the University of Zambia

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ABSTRACT

The research was aimed at establishing how Islam was taught. A historical inquiry complemented by thematic analysis of the phenomena helped in drawing meanings and inferences. Findings revealed that Islam was descriptively taught (indefinite model) through lecture methods, alongside having (occasional) guest speakers. I argue that while the content introduced diverse aspects of Islam, trainee teachers were not adequately equipped on how to deliver the subject content. This resulted in selective teaching of the content on Islam. The question of who is qualified to teach Islam in a public university remained unresolved. An explicit and responsive teaching model would do.

KEYWORDS

Islam, religious education, teacher education, teaching model, university education

Introduction

This paper reflects on how Islam was taught in a public university as part of the teacher education programme for Religious Education (RE) in Zambia's secondary schools. This is because since its inception, the teaching of Islam in teacher education had not been evaluated despite concerns during student teacher observations that most of them had avoided covering topics on Islam. Mulando (2011) also confirmed the selective teaching of certain topics among teachers of RE. This therefore called for the need to examine what was taught

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on Islam in teacher education and how it was taught so as to contribute to the quest of producing competent RE teachers.

Reflecting on how Islam was taught in a public university was important given the growing influence of Islam as part of Zambia's contemporary religious history. In a historical overview of the religion in Zambia, Phiri (2008, p. 3) noted that despite "representing a small minority of the population... Islam had become a significant component of both the religious and socio-political landscape of Zambia ... its impact on society has opened up new horizons for the understanding of contemporary Islamic dynamism". Statistical reflections of the Muslim population stood at 0.5% in the 2000 National Census representing a minority group of the country's population (ZDHS, 2007, p. 34). The 2016 *International Religious Freedom Report on Zambia* (2016, p. 2) stipulated that of the estimated population of 15.5 million people in the country, the U.S. government estimated that "nearly 2% of the population is Muslim with smaller numbers of Hinduism, Baha'is, Buddhist, Jews, and Sikhs".

Historically, Muslims have made significant contributions in Zambia. For instance, they have supported government's work in areas such as education and health provision. In addition, Muslims have been responsive to social problems in different communities by reaching out to orphans and the vulnerable, and initiating developmental projects (sinking of boreholes for water provision) (Zambia News and Information Services, June 15, 2018). Largely, Muslims have been major players in commerce and trade. As traders, they were among the earlier migrants that entered Zambia in the early 19th century succeeded by another group reported to have been of Asian origin – Gujaratis from north-western India arriving at the beginning of the 20th century. The latter had a dominant role in the economy of the country (Phiri, 2008, p. 5). Although Islam came to be associated with Indians and the Yao traders, the statistics have come to embrace other groups that "include an ever-increasing number of indigenous convert and immigrants communities from other African countries, especially from West Africa and Somalia" (Phiri, 2008, p. 6; U.S. Department of State Report, 2016, p. 3).

Most importantly, other than the growing presence of Islam in the public sphere, public schools also had a good representation of children or learners who were practicing Islam. As such, the manner in which RE teachers handled Islam in their lessons was crucial; hence the inquiry into how the teachers were being prepared to teach the religion. The University of Zambia (UNZA) was targeted for the inquiry because it was the first institution to offer a degree programme that included Islam in its content for teacher education.

The inquiry is based on document review and interviews with UNZA staff members who had been involved in the teaching of Islam in the teacher education programme. The paper argues that what was taught on Islam, how and why it was taught manifested intricacies for RE and trainee teachers. While the content introduced teachers to diverse aspects of Islam, the teaching approach of the subject did not adequately equip the trainee teachers on how to deliver the subject content in schools. This resulted in selective teaching of the content on Islam by

RE teachers. In addition, the guest speaker versus the members of staff handling the content on Islam pointed to the unresolved question of who is qualified to teach Islam in a public university like UNZA. The next segment provides a brief contextual background to the teaching of Islam at the UNZA.

Context of Teaching Islam at UNZA

As the first public university, UNZA was mandated to train teachers for the newly independent Zambia. The need for teachers in RE at graduate level prompted the School of Education to rethink what the University could do to address the shortage of RE teachers in the country. A 1978 situation analysis regarding the teaching staffing positions for RE in 119 Zambian Schools revealed that out of the 348 teachers teaching RE, only 40% (138) were Zambians, while 60% (210) were expatriates. Of the total number of teachers teaching RE, only 165 were qualified RE Graduate Teachers, broken down into 8% (13) Zambians and 92% (152) expatriates.

This background information was used by the *Committee on the provision of Religious Studies at UNZA* to justify the introduction of Religious Studies as a Minor programme for prospective secondary school teachers. Other than the urgent need for RE teachers in schools, the introduction of the new senior secondary syllabus entitled “Christian Religious Education (2044)”, which had been approved by the Examination Council of Zambia for implementation in schools pointed to the need for more teachers. Since the focus of the approved Senior Secondary school syllabus focussed on Christian teachings, comparative studies on Islam, Hinduism and traditional beliefs (U.S. Department of State Report, 2016, p. 3), Islam needed to be part of the course content at UNZA. Thus, Religious Studies as a Minor and later as a Major were introduced for secondary school RE teachers.

The programme has a four-year structure which enabled students to study aspects of religion from different perspectives. Under this programme, a Minor in Religious Studies offered courses like Introduction to Religious Studies; Religious Change in Africa; Religion and Values; Religious Studies Methods; Moral Philosophy; Philosophy of Religion; and Sociology of Religion (Flynn, 1997, p. 1). It must be noted that from the onset, RE teacher education at the University was being approached from a Religious Studies standpoint. From the list of courses that were offered, Islam featured as one of the world religions introduced to trainee teachers during their first year of studies, while in their second year, Islam was referred to as one of two religions that brought about change in Africa. In the third year, it was covered under Religion and Values.

In the 1990s, the migration from offering a Minor to a Major after the senate's approval of a proposal to upgrade the Religious Studies programme to a Major in 1992 coincided with the revision of courses in the University to suit the change from term to semester system. The initial courses were split into two semester courses. The Introduction to Religious Studies course gave a broad overview of Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Indigenous African Religions. Initially, the course

was designed to enable students to identify the function of religion, explain the historical development of selected belief systems, and illustrate contrasts of interactions between these systems in Christianity and Islam, taking into account changing social and political conditions. Later on, after revision, its objective was to look at religion as a worldwide phenomenon so as to identify its personal and social dimensions in relation to the world today.

Under the revised programme, in the first year of undergraduate studies, Islam was covered under the themes of basic concepts of Islam, an account of the life of the prophet Muhammad, the Quran, and the history and structure of the religion. In the second year, Islam was presented in a course on Religion and Ethics which adopted a descriptive approach of ethics in religions of the world. This course used examples from various religions to provide a comparative and critical analysis of personal and social ethics on topics such as family and marriage, community and work, justice and integrity. At third year level, Islam featured in the course the Impact of Christianity and Islam on Africa. In this course, the impact of two major world religions in Central and Southern Africa was assessed using the concepts of conversion and inculturation.

Over time, the course content on Islam in the Religious Studies programme has not changed apart from the development and introduction of an elective course on History of Islam in Africa, which addresses the geographical and social setting of Islam, the influence of Islam on the idea of the supernatural, the nature and destiny of man, morality, the economic sphere and material culture, the juridical sphere and customary law, the social order, and the life cycle of Islam (Proposal for a minor programme in Religious Studies, paper SE/80/07). There was satisfaction that Islam was adequately covered as the introductory course as it provided full coverage of the religion alongside the additional courses in later years of study.

Reflections on the Teaching of Islam at UNZA

While some participants were of the view that there were no specific pedagogies for teaching each religion's content, the phenomenological and interpretive approaches were deemed favourable because it was thought that beyond these approaches, one would easily slide into the un-educational, confessional zone. For this reason, the lecture method was the dominant method of delivering the content. The lecture method was largely centred on descriptions of different aspects of Islam. Field visit or outings to specific places of interest were rarely used. This could be due to a number of reasons, such as large numbers of students, logistical challenges, and limited time to manoeuvre amidst tight timetabling.

Occasionally, guest speakers were invited to give talks on different topics. This approach was often used before 2005, but it has recently been sparingly employed. The following were some of the reflections from some members of the Department on inviting guest speakers to talk to students about Islamic topics, "[w]e have gone into

slumber, undoing what Flynn and Carmody started... Carmody never minded that, it does not bother me as long as students learn stuff from the horse's mouth... I and Mr. Chanda are not Muslims" (Interview, November, 2017), This statement highlights that the founders of the initial Religious Studies programme invited Muslim guest speakers to class and used them as a teaching tool for students to learn about Islam. However, with time and especially after the Missionary lecturers left, there were some hesitation to continue engaging the guest speakers as demonstrated in the following comment:

I invited two groups, one looked at Islam while the other looked at Baha'i faith, ...I kept on interjecting him [former speaker], he wanted to start promoting the faith. The results were positive though. (Personal Communication with Lecturer, 2017)

Another participant noted that "...Muslims have been calling for a confessional approach claiming that teachers are misrepresenting Islam... We do not teach from a commitment perspective but take an academic view point for all the religions..." (Personal Communication with Lecturer, 2018). These perspectives that show the fear of indoctrination are not a preserve of Islam, but cut across all other evangelising religion. It is for this reason that one participant noted that:

The choice Islam and all other religions had to make in modern pluralistic societies was whether they want their religious beliefs to be taught in a secular educational manner in public schools or to set up their own strictly private schools where they could teach their beliefs in a confessional manner. (Personal Communication, February 2018)

Though there were such fears of indoctrination, the majority of the participants in the study pointed to the need to reignite the involvement of Muslim guest speakers as shown in the following statements:

I think it is important to have guest speakers, we just need to guide them by specifying what we want to be covered in their talk... by specifying I mean limiting what they are going to talk about to what is in the course outline/content. (Personal Communication, 2017)

You need the voice of a practicing faithful also, so I think... (Personal Communication, November 2017)

If we argue that confessionalists can't teach, then we are missing it. There should be debate on this... Islam is submission to the will of Allah. The teaching must be organized around that... within that submission is doing what is morally correct. So following the dictum of learning about and from religion, that is good source of morality for the learner I suppose... Education indoctrinates, that is

the bottom line because it aims at changing something in humans... (Personal Communication, February 2018)

It is suffice to note that the methods of teaching Islam sparked off diverse views especially in relation to the involvement of guest speakers. This scenario mirrors the challenges Islam has faced in the public sphere, which necessitated the Muslim-Christian dialogue. Cheyeka (2012) notes that Zambia is one of the best examples in Southern Africa of how well Christians and Muslims relate with one another, a good relationship that is not based on “tolerating” one another, but on ignorance to the point that to many ordinary Zambians a Mosque is “Indian church” or church *yaba Chawa* (Yao chapel).

Conclusion

The paper reflected on the teaching of Islam in a public university in the teacher education programme. As part of the Religious Studies teacher education programme, the study established that Islam was adequately covered in terms of content. The methods of teaching Islam were, however, met with diverse views, which pointed to the big question of who should teach Islam in a public university. This manifested in the divergent views on the involvement of guest speakers, by teaching staff (lecturers).

While their hesitation were associated to indoctrination, the paper has argued that all religions that evangelise are vulnerable to this reality; hence the need for religions to rethink what can be taught and how it should be taught. This hesitation to openly approach religions was in turn reflected in student teachers’ selective teaching of RE in schools as observed by other scholars. For this reason, the paper calls for continued Muslim-Christian dialogue in academia so as to foster sound relations based on knowledge and not ignorance.

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