

CONTROVERSY OVER THE INCLUSION OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES IN POST PRIMARY EDUCATION CURRICULUM IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Within the sphere of educational curriculum practices, religion was seen to contribute significantly and uniquely, to the education of the whole person and if designed in a way that is appropriate for the young persons' age and stages of development, good religious education honours the freedom of conscience of the young persons while revering their family faiths and/or beliefs, traditions and expectations. This paper presents the controversy over the inclusion of religious studies in post primary education curriculum in Nigeria. Debate over the removal of Christian religious study from Nigeria secondary school educational curriculum has continued to generate heated argument among scholars from both religious and academic background. Parents are worried by what they described as an effort on the part of federal courts and civil liberties organizations to relegate God and religious sentiment from public schools, an action, they believe, infringe upon the First Amendment Right to the free exercise of religion. Various reasons have been advanced by different scholars regarding the exclusion of religious study in educational curriculum in institutions of learning. Some scholars see the inclusion of religious study in institutions of learning as a violation of the constitution. The study concluded that religion remains pivotal in our societal development and restoration of values. The recent removal of religious studies in the educational curriculum and introduction of civic education stands to eliminate various merits associated with religious education. Such removal might seem profitable in the short run. However, long term consequence might outweigh the present merits.

Keywords: Controversy, Religious Studies Inclusion, Secondary Education Curriculum

Introduction

Debate over the removal of Christian religious study from Nigeria secondary school educational curriculum has continued to generate heated debate among scholars from both religious and academic background. This similar trend was once experienced in other parts of the world. In the United States, nearly 50 years after the Supreme court issued a landmark ruling striking down school-sponsored prayer, Americans have continued to battle over the place of religion in public schools, especially in the classroom which has become one of the most important battlegrounds in the broader conflict over religion's role in public life (Davis, 2004). Parents are worried by what they described as an effort on the part of federal courts and civil liberties organizations to relegate God and religious sentiment from public schools, an action, they believe, infringe upon the First Amendment Right to the free exercise of religion. This was collaborated by the national council for social studies in (2014) submissions that the study of Christian religious studies should be an essential part of social studies curriculum. The body opined that knowledge of religion is not only a characteristic of educated person but necessary for effective and engaged citizenship in a diverse nation and the world at large.

The introduction of religious study in institutions of learning like colleges are the fallout of decline in moral values across the globe. Consequently, some nations adopted religious education to be taught in schools to make up for this deficiency. In Norway, the discussion about freedom of religion has been strongly linked with the debate on religious education in public schools (Leirvik, 2002). In Nigeria, the introduction of religious study follows the British extension of their control over Nigeria during the 19th and 20th centuries. As model schools were set up in the colonial period, Islamic religious knowledge was included as a subject of study in the Northern States while Christian religious education was also included in the Southern States in the same way (Lemu, 2002). The success experienced in both northern and Southern states engineered the complete introduction of Islamic and religious studies across the federation.

Within the sphere of educational curriculum practices then, students of various religious studies were often separated into different classes where they would be taught by properly trained teachers of their own respective religions (Lemu, 2002). Until in early 1980s, the government carried out a comprehensive review of the educational system. All subject syllabi were revised and more attention was given to moral education based on religious values. As at this time, there

was an attempt by the secularists to eliminate “Religious Knowledge” whether Christian or Islamic studies in favor of “moral education”. Both Christian and Muslim bodies resisted the effort on the grounds that Christian and Muslim parents would want their children to be brought up in the religion of their parents. Byrne(2014) in reaction opposed the suggestion that time might be taken from Religious Education in order to increase the focus on literacy, numeracy science or information technology and posited that it is educationally inappropriate.

Since the introduction of religious studies in Nigeria, there had been no major changes. Each syllabus contains minor elements of information about other religions and about African traditional religion (Lemu, 2002). The relative peace observed in schools with students of different religious backgrounds show that faith can be expressed in schools without friction between students who are exempted from a certain religious studies and adherents of such religion. In spite of the relative peace observed in the classroom, the recent removal of Christian religious study has sparked off outrage. It was reported that the federal government have excluded the Christian Religious Knowledge from the secondary schools educational curriculum while retaining the Islamic studies (CAN, 2017; Nwachukwu, 2017), an act the government has consistently denied but insisting that both the Islamic Religious Studies and Christian Religious Studies together with civic education, social studies and security studies have been merged into a distinct “Religion and National Value” (Junaidu, 2017.).

While government claim to appreciate the importance of religious education in bridging this loophole, it has continued to act differently by the stoppage of morning devotion in schools which resultant effect has been the increase in armed robbery, kidnapping, boko haram insurgents and prostitution among the youths. Based on these incidents, the National Council for Social Studies (2014) opined that religious literacy dispels stereotypes, promotes cross-cultural understanding and encourages respect for the rights of others to religious liberty. The growing controversy about the alleged removal of Christian Religious Studies and the retention of Islamic Studies in post primary Schools has been a thing of concern. Arising from these, the paper is meant to educate the general public on the need for or against the inclusion of Religious Education in Secondary Schools

The Need for Inclusion of Religious Studies in Post Primary Education Curriculum in Nigeria

Religious education contributes significantly and uniquely, to the education of the whole person and if designed in a way that is appropriate for the young persons' age and stages of development, good religious education honours the freedom of conscience of the young persons while revering their family faiths and/or beliefs, traditions and expectations. (Byrne, 2013). Chesaro (2003), Kowino, Agak, Obiero-Owino, Ong'unya., (2011) and Waithara (2014), opined that students' moral competencies were greatly influenced by the Christian religious education curriculum. They highlighted the fact that the impact on religious education curriculum on students' moral competencies was highly dependent on the teaching methods adopted by the teachers. In *Abington vs Schempp* (1963) Associate Justice Tom Clark wrote for the United States Supreme Court: "it might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religions or the history of religion and its relationship to advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historical qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible when presented objectively as part of a secular programme of education, may not be effected consistent with the first Amendment". In a similar way, Yusoff and Zailani (2013) and Zakariah, Abdullah & Hamid (2013) noted that religious education had a significant positive influence on students' moral competencies. This was collaborated by Davies (2004) submission which stated that incorporating religious education leads to the development of positive attitudes and skills in students. This skill according to Davies (2004) included investigation, empathy, synthesis, interpretation, evaluation, application, reflection, analysis, and expression.

Itolondo (2012) observed that inclusion of Christian religious education in school curriculum had boosted students' performance in the school certificate examinations, in that many pass the subject in credit and above grades. The prevailing moral, social and ethical issues in the nation calls for remedy and intervention, hence the inclusion of religious studies is a panacea, especially for fighting the prevalence of corruption that has been looming in the country.

Argument against Religious Studies in Secondary Education

Various reasons have been advanced by different scholars regarding the exclusion of religious study in educational curriculum in institutions of learning. Some scholars see the inclusion of religious study in institutions of learning as a violation of the constitution. Pearson (2017) argued

that incorporating religious education is a way of violating the constitution. In his reason, he asserted that governments cannot fund religious institutions since funding them counts as the government regarding one religion over another. State schools are funded through taxpayers' money but taxpayers have varying religious beliefs. Schools that choose to incorporate religion, such as through teacher-guided prayer, can lose government funding. However, due to freedom of religion, students should be allowed to express themselves in religious ways.

It is on this found that Nigerian constitution needs review in that going through it, one discovers that the 1999 constitution has dual ideology with it, probably Islamizing Nigeria and Secularizing her. A close look into the constitution reveals that sharia is mentioned 73 times, Islam-28 times, Grand Khadi-54 times and Muslim- 10times while there is no mention of Christian, Christianity, Church, or Christ at all in the supposed secular constitution.

In addition, Pearson (2017) posit that inclusion of religion in educational system is in conflict with science. According to him, religion can sometimes come into conflict with scientific consensus. Some Christians find the theory of evolution and the scientific proposed age of the Earth to be violations of their religious beliefs. Pearson (2017) maintain that science classes are meant to teach the scientific method and conclusions that are derived from the scientific method. This concept was enhanced by Marked by Teachers (2017) which noted that science and religion have lots of conflicts, and "a Jewish student remarked that although she believed in creationism, she was confused about the conflicts between the Bible and evolution, and said, 'There is no actual proof that God created earth.'" (Cosner, 2008).

Other scholars hold that the inclusion of religion in educational system leads to violation of religious belief. While others still opined that religion is neutrality. Children who are taught about different religious viewpoints and non-religious perspectives can make up their own minds about what they want to believe. In this regard, state schools can teach about religion in terms of historical and social context. However, they must provide a broad range of religious viewpoints and present the religious information from a neutral stance (Pearson, 2017). Itolondo(2012) pointed out that qualifying in religious studies does not guarantee employment. He observed that those who qualified and are teaching it complain of lack of recognition by government unlike the attention given to mathematics, languages and science. The latter teachers are motivated, given incentives and recognized.

Conclusion

Religion remains pivotal in our societal development and restoration of values. The recent removal of religious studies in the educational curriculum and introduction of civic education stands to eliminate various merits associated with religious education. Such removal might seem profitable in the short run. However, long term consequence might outweigh the present merits. Religious education is a sineque non in schools in that it contributes to personal reflection and development of young people. It is recommended for inclusion because it prepares youths for citizenship, combats intolerance and gets them ready to engage people of different religions, beliefs and character with civility and respect. Knowledge of religious studies is quite important in understanding ethics, literature, art, history and even politics, socialization, human existence, culture, geography and language. It is therefore recommended that, the federal government should thread with caution as to issues that relate to religion in the country.

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