

# Religious Education Versus Moral Education in Schools



Melvin Simuchimba (Dr)  
University of Zambia

Melvin Simuchimba holds Doctoral, Master's and bachelor's degrees in Religious Education from UNISA, Leeds and UNZA respectively. He teaches Religious Education Teaching Methods in the Department of language and Social Sciences Education and is involved in other teacher education activities in the colleges of education. He is currently Assistant Dean I of the School of Education and Deputy Editor-in-Chief for the Zambia Journal of Education. He researches in the areas of Teacher Education, Religious Education and Religion and Society.

## Abstract

*The paper discusses Religious Education (RE) and Moral Education (ME) in schools with special reference to Zambia. The meaning of the two concepts is given before a critical examination of their relationship as school curriculum subjects is attempted. The paper then discusses the Zambian situation and approach to the relationship between RE and ME. Towards the end, the paper discusses the role of religious groups in RE and ME. It asks and tries to answer the question of whether RE should be left to religious groups while ME remains under state-controlled schools. The paper's conclusions are that RE and ME are inseparable as teaching one entails teaching the other and that the state rather than religious groups should be in control of RE due to the influential nature of religious beliefs and values in society.*

## Introduction

The issue of the relationship between RE and ME has been and still is one of the most difficult questions to answer or explain in educational theory. While some educationalists, especially those who are religiously inclined take ME to be part of RE or the teaching of religious beliefs, values and practices, others, especially those who are not religiously inclined, think that it is possible to have ME as an independent subject free from any religious basis. This article attempts to address this question with special reference to the Zambian education system. After analysing various arguments and theories pertaining to the relationship between religion and morality, the

paper concludes that RE and ME are inseparable; it also points out that in a democratic and pluralist society like Zambia, the state rather than religious groups or churches should be in control of RE and ME.

### **Meaning of Religious Education (RE) and Moral Education (ME)**

Before examining the relationship between RE and ME, it is important to understand the meaning of the two concepts.

In many English speaking countries today, Religious Education is widely seen as school curriculum subject with the educational aims of promoting religious literacy or a critical understanding of different religious traditions and helping to impart important life skills such as critical and analytical thinking, logical argumentation innovativeness and positive attitudes such as respect and tolerance for other people's views, beliefs and values (Simuchimba, 2005). However, in some sections of society the subject is still regarded as having the religious aims of promoting knowledge of the beliefs and values of a particular religious group and inculcating faith and commitment to the religious group's way of life. The former is the approach followed in Britain (England and Wales), Australia and New Zealand, while the later is the approach followed in the United States and France.

On the other hand, Moral Education is the inculcation of desirable positive attitudes, values and forms of behaviour in learners through the teaching of different religious and cultural beliefs. Since morality is an integral part of all religious and cultural beliefs and teachings, it is expected that moral values and behaviour will result naturally from the learning of these beliefs (Simuchimba, 2005). However, as partly explained in the next section, there have been attempts in some countries such as Britain to teach ME as a separate subject from RE (Schools Council, 1975), though not very successfully.

### **Relationship between RE and ME**

Since the mid 1970s in Britain and some commonwealth countries, there has been a movement to introduce ME or Personal, Social and Moral Education (PSME) on the school curriculum (Grimmitt, 1978: 261). The main reason given by the supporters of ME is that RE has failed to make pupils or learners morally upright, as expected by society. But are RE and ME two sides of the same subject or are they completely different subject areas? Can we have both on the school curriculum, or must we choose one of them? Is there a fundamental connection between them, even though there may be practical reasons for teaching them as separate curriculum subjects? These questions cannot be easily answered because the relation between religion and morality is rather a complicated one both historically

and philosophically. However, one way of answering the questions above is to ask and consider what is meant by the word 'moral'. According to Cox (1983: 89), there are at least two ways in which the word is used:

- i) 'Moral' refers to customs that a society demands that members should observe, and
- ii) The word refers to something imperative and higher than human choice or human custom, which makes an action wrong or right and which man and woman have to discover and strive to conform to.

Going by the first view, ME means teaching young people what elders and society have decided as good behaviour and ensuring that the young learners are trained to obey by habit (*Ibid.*). The problem with this approach is that it excludes critical debate of the customs and beliefs, since the customs and beliefs are already held as true and valuable. This exclusion and restriction of debate is contrary to the requirements and demands of modern education.

Going by the second view, the 'something' or higher principle which determines whether an action is morally wrong or right is the Supreme or Transcendent Being variously referred to as God, Allah, Brahman, etc. According to this view, religion and morality go together. This means that teaching a person religion (such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, African Traditional Religions, etc.) also includes giving them moral training. RE and ME are, therefore, not separable. The problem with this approach too is that in modern democratic and multi-cultural and multi-faith society, ME based on the teachings of a particular religion or a number of religions will be segregative as some pupils and parents may not be religious at all. Such people and others concerned have freedoms and rights, which should not be violated through a religion-based ME programme in public schools. So if ME as a separate curriculum subject is to be accepted by all citizens, it must be based on moral criteria that have no reference to any kind of (religious) belief system. But is such an approach possible? Cox (1983) tries to answer this question by critically examining three ethical theories namely:

- i) Morals depend on Religious Belief;
- ii) Moral or ethical theory is derived from the Nature of Things; and
- iii) Moral Talk is the Dignifying of Personal Preferences.

This was in order to find out whether any of them has no reference to any belief system at all. His finding and conclusion is that all moral choices and actions are based on some kind of opinion, belief, or hypothesis, which can either be religious or secular (*Ibid.*: 99).

From the forgoing, it is clear that for a religious person, morality is inextricably bound up with his or her beliefs or faith. Similarly, a non-religious person's moral choices are influenced by a belief even if the belief may not involve

God. So moral decisions depend on assumptions or beliefs about the nature of human beings, the nature of the world in which they live and about the responsibilities they have to the world and to their fellow human beings.

It is equally clear that there is a clear link between ME and RE. RE includes a study of the beliefs that groups of people hold and how these beliefs influence their response to problems of conduct (*Ibid.*: 100; Schools Council, 1975). Problems of conduct and how to respond to them are part of the ME.

Therefore, although moral knowledge might be distinct from religious knowledge and although it might be possible to have ME and RE as separate curriculum subjects, RE and ME are very closely connected and should reinforce each other well when taught together as one integrated subject.

### **Zambian Situation**

In Zambia, ME has not existed as a distinct curriculum subject but as part of Religious Instruction (RI), RE and now Spiritual and Moral Education. Moral values and behaviour are expected to result naturally from the learning of religious and cultural beliefs and morality is taken to be an integral part of these beliefs.

During the pre-educational or missionary phase of Zambian RE, it was expected that moral values and attitudes would be learned from Christian beliefs only, and each Church denomination taught its own doctrines, beliefs and moral values in its primary schools. Different syllabuses of Bible Knowledge constituted the secondary school RE curriculum. However, since the 1977 educational reforms, it has been recognised that moral and spiritual values come from various religious traditions and not only from one dominant religion. In the Second Republic (1973-1990), it was also mandatory that socialist and humanist values from the then national philosophy called Zambian Humanism form part of the moral education programme in social science subjects like RE. Therefore, the RE subject panel at the Ministry of Education/Curriculum Development Centre came up with the following aim statement:

- 1. The main aim of spiritual and moral Education is to enable pupils to appreciate spiritual, moral, and religious values and behaviour based on them. This appreciation is drawn from four main religious traditions in Zambia (namely: Christianity, Hinduism, Indigenous Zambian Beliefs, and Islam), and from the religious elements of the Zambian philosophy of Humanism (MoE, 1983: 3; ECZ, 1984: 3).

In line with this aim, the major goal or aim of school education covering RE and ME in the current national education policy document, *Educating Our Future* is to promote the development of 'a personally held set of civic,

moral, and spiritual values' and the ability to freely express one's ideas, (including beliefs) and exercise tolerance for other people's views (and beliefs) (MoE, 1996: 5).

Since the early 1980s, RE has officially been referred to as Spiritual and Moral Education (SAME), though the name 'RE' has persisted in schools and common usage. Under recent and current curricula reforms in the country (MoE, 1996 and 2003), RE has become part of an integrated area of learning called Social, Spiritual and Moral Education (SSME) in the colleges of education and Social and Development Studies (SDS) in primary/basic schools.

So as can be seen from the foregoing, especially from the three names used for the subject area: SAME, SSME, and SDS, Zambia has been consistent with the view that RE and ME are like two sides of a coin and cannot easily be separated. In the policy documents, the religious aspects of the subject matter or knowledge of Christianity and other religions are provided for under 'spiritual values', while the moral aspects are provided for under 'civic and moral values'. Thus, current Zambian RE syllabuses at both primary/basic and secondary/high school are pluralistic or multi-faith with a large component of or emphasis on ME (Simuchimba, 2005: 215).

### **Role of Religious Groups**

Given the controversial nature of RE as a curriculum subject, the following questions may be asked: What would be the role of religious groups and churches? Should RE be left to religious groups while ME is taught in public schools? As already explained above, ME is not completely free of religious beliefs and teaching ME means teaching certain religious beliefs and values, and is therefore, the only problem we need to deal with in a democratic and pluralist society/country. There are two ways of dealing with this problem:

- i) Exclusion of RE - in order to be neutral and fair to all the religious traditions existing in society, RE should be excluded from public, state-run and state-sponsored schools so that any kind of religious teaching is left to individual religious groups to carry out in their own private schools,
- ii) Inclusion of RE- in order to be fair to all the religious groups, there should be a neutral, state-controlled but consultative RE programme in schools, which embraces as many religious groups as practically possible.

As can be seen, the first approach means leaving RE under the control of the different religious groups so that the state and its educational departments and institutions are not accused of bias and individuals and groups of people

can enjoy their religious freedoms and rights fully. However, although the exclusion approach seems attractive and seems to be a good solution to the problem, religious beliefs and values are too important and influential to be left to religious groups and churches alone. It should be appreciated that like secular ideologies, religions and churches are 'religious ideologies', which claim to provide a total explanation of the meaning of life and would like their followers to hold only views that are consistent with their beliefs and values (Grimmitt, 1987: 48-49). So the dangers of religious illiteracy, religious indoctrination, religious fanaticism and religious conflict among young people and society in general are real if the state does not take any active interest in this area of education.

This is where the second approach of inclusion comes in; it means that the state, through the relevant Ministry (of Education) and departments (such as Curriculum Development Centre) is actively involved in the area of RE (and ME) by controlling the syllabuses in both schools and teacher education institutions. The syllabuses are designed in such a way that they are multi-faith, pluralistic and inclusive. The various religious groups are consulted during the process of syllabus preparation and review so that they give their suggestions and consent. The key religious beliefs and moral values of the different religious traditions found in a country are covered according to various types of themes and taught professionally by professionally trained teachers for the subject. This enables the state to adhere to democratic values in the implementation of public education and promote important attitudes and values in learners, including respect and tolerance for other people's views and beliefs, co-existence, mutual understanding and harmonious living.

### **The Zambia Experience**

After taking over primary schools soon after Independence, the state allowed the various churches to retain the 'right of entity' into the public schools for purposes of providing religious instruction (RI) to pupils. This meant that during RE periods, pupils or classes got divided, sat in groups according to their religious affiliation and received religious instruction from preachers and elders from the different churches in the area around the school. It was hoped that the churches would quickly work out a common RE syllabus, but this did not happen. Therefore, in 1972 and 1973, the state took control of the primary and junior secondary RE syllabuses: college lecturers designed common syllabuses which were agreed upon by the Christian Council of Zambia, representing all protestant churches and the Zambia Episcopal Conference, representing different Catholic Church groups. This marked the beginning of ecumenical or agreed RE in the country.

As the country became more culturally and religiously plural in the 1970s and 80s, the state was anxious to take the RE agenda beyond Christian ecumenism to inter-religious dialogue. Consequently, the 1977 National Education Reforms (MoE, 1977) culminated in the introduction of new multi-faith primary, junior and senior secondary school RE syllabuses in 1983/4 in which Christianity, Zambian Traditional Religion, Islam and Hinduism were to be taught.

Since then, the state has been fair and consistent in dealing with RE as a school curriculum subject and with the religious groups and churches as partners in this subject area (Henze, 1944: 24-25). The churches, through their umbrella organisations (the Council of Churches in Zambia, Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia, and Zambia Episcopal Conference and the Churches Education Secretaries Forum, have been consulted whenever there has been a major curriculum/syllabus changes affecting RE. The state has allowed the churches to supplement its efforts by funding and supporting RE teaching and other religious leaders as resource persons to help in teaching aspects of the syllabuses which they may not be very comfortable with.

Additionally, despite the declaration of the country as a 'Christian Nation' by the Second Republican President, F.J.T Chiluba in 1991, *Educating Our Future*, the current national education policy document adopted in 1996 remained fair to other religious traditions existing in Zambia by maintaining the principle of religious pluralism in RE. This was in keeping with Article 19 of the 1996 Zambian Constitution, which gives religious freedom and right to all citizens. Thus as explained under the aims of RE above, the policy document refers to RE in the neutral terms of 'moral and spiritual values' and Christianity is not given any special mention at all.

So while the state through the Ministry of Education has remained firmly in control of school RE syllabuses (through CDC) in the country, religious groups as important stakeholders or interests groups have been consulted at national level whenever necessary, and involved in the teaching of certain aspects of the syllabuses at local or school level whenever needed.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has shown that RE and ME are like two sides of the same subject area. The two subjects are so closely related that teaching one entails teaching the other, teaching a religion's beliefs and values also involves teaching that religion's ethical or moral code of conduct. As such, any attempts to separate religious and moral beliefs and values into two subject areas and teach them separately are likely to fail: even in countries where such attempts have been made, they have not been very successful. In

Zambia, ME has always been taken to be part of RE. National education policy and RE syllabus documents have provided and still provide for RE syllabuses that include a large component of ME, hence the names spiritual and moral education (SAME), social, spiritual and Moral Education (SSME) and social and development studies (SDS).

In modern democratic, culturally and religiously plural countries like Zambia, the teaching of religion and morality through RE is naturally controversial and it might be argued that it is better left to the religious groups themselves to undertake the teaching in their own private religious institutions. However, to avoid the dangers of religious intolerance and conflict, the state should take control of RE and ensure that educational RE syllabuses are used in schools. Religious groups and churches should be consulted if and where necessary, but the RE programme should not be left to them alone.

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**The University of Zambia  
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