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Beyond Phenomenology: Teaching African Traditional Religions in a Zimbabwean University

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Abstract

The crusade by the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe witnessed in 1999 during the Constitutional Commission's outreach programme was designed to have Christianity declared the official religion of Zimbabwe. This has the danger of claiming all the religious space for Christianity. This article examines the implications for the teaching of African Traditional Religions (ATRs) in the University of Zimbabwe. It is argued that the preponderance of Christianity and the emergence of church-related universities pose as potential threats to the viability of ATRs as an area of academic enquiry. If ATRs are to retain their status as an important component of human religious history, there is need for a proactive approach. The article argues that although the phenomenological method has been popular in the study of ATRs, it may not be adequate. If the marginalisation of ATRs is to be overcome, there is need for more radical pedagogical techniques in religious studies.

Introduction

The history of education in Sub-Saharan Africa is inextricably linked to the activities of various Christian missionary bodies. As part of the process of “civilising” the African, education was always high on the missionary agenda. While there was co-operation between church and state in African education (Siyakwazi, 1995) there was also

friction when missionaries felt that colonialists were not preparing Africans for leadership. It is from this control of the education system that Christianity has been able to claim a large share of the Zimbabwean spiritual market.

This high visibility of Christianity has led many people to assume that Zimbabwe is a Christian country (Chitando, 1998b:74). During the blitz for a new constitution in 1999, the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ) staged a high-profile campaign to have Zimbabwe declared a Christian state. Critics were surprised by this move since the country is already a *defacto* Christian country. A distinctively Christian ethos pervades Zimbabwean society. Christianity occupies a special place during state occasions and receives prominence on state-controlled radio and television. It generally represents the face of "modernity and progress." Most funerals in Zimbabwe, including those of non-practitioners, are conducted according to Christian rites (Moyo, 1996). Thus for the EFZ, declaring Zimbabwe a Christian country only meant recognising legally what is already obtaining on the ground.

The general dominance of Christianity in Zimbabwe has found expression in the Zimbabwean education system. A multifaith approach, apart from the declarations of intent and a few tentative steps, largely remains a matter of pronouncement. Although the curricula recognise the radically plural nature of Zimbabwe's religious economy, christianity continues to occupy a dominant position at all levels (Peresuh, 1998:87). What are the implications for the teaching of African Traditional Religions (ATRs)? Given that ATRs have suffered at the hands of both benign and hostile Christians, how may they be rescued from theological reductionism? Should ATRs be taught "phenomenologically and objectively?" This article wrestles with these questions and argues that the teaching of ATRs at both state and church-related universities requires an assertive and positively empowering approach. This article seeks to :

1. Trace the images of ATRs in Religious Education,
2. Outline approaches that have dominated the study of ATRs, and;
3. Argue for the need to transcend description in the teaching of ATRs in institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe.

Images of ATRs in Religious Education

That ATRs have been negatively portrayed by different categories of early Western writers has been well-documented. ATRs have been described as primitive, childish, backward, unsophisticated, and a host of other unpalatable labels (p'Bitek, 1971:1). Some of the reasons for the wholesale condemnation of indigenous religions included the perceived racial and cultural superiority of the West, arrogance, lack of understanding of local systems of thought and the utilisation of speculative theories. Amateur anthropologists, travellers and missionaries approached ATRs while putting on Western spectacles. Thus, "In their variety and contradictions, the discourses explicitly discuss European processes of domesticating Africa" (Mudimbe, 1988:67).

Had the jaundiced descriptions of ATRs been coterminous with colonial enterprise, the post-colonial phase would have been more promising for ATRs. Unfortunately, the struggle to have ATRs recognised as an intricate part of human religious history is far from being over. In textbooks, scholarly journals and university courses on "World Religions," ATRs remain marginalised (Lewis, 1990:313). Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism receive extensive coverage whilst ATRs are overlooked. Dubious and contestable criteria are applied to include and exclude ATRs from the elite league of "World Religions" (Fitzgerald, 1990:109).

It is generally assumed that a “World Religion” is marked by institutional differentiation, having a known founder, espousing a clear soteriological path, being transnational and possessing sacred writings. Interestingly, some religions like Hinduism, though often classified amongst “World Religions,” do not have single founders, offer many paths to salvation and tend to be confined mainly to the Indian sub-continent. What needs to be underlined is the fact that “some so-called world religions have more in common with some of the so-called aboriginal religions than they do with other so-called world religions” (Turner, 1996:79). The marginalisation of ATRs is therefore based on tenuous grounds.

Cognisant of the centrality of religion to African dignity, research into ATRs thrived in the politically significant 1960s decade. Departments of Religious Studies were established in West Africa, as well as in Eastern, Central and Southern Africa. This second phase of the study of ATRs - by Africans in Africa - has been characterised by many positive developments. The different aspects of ATRs such as the Supreme Being, the ancestor cult, rites of passage, sacred places and sacred practitioners and others have been explored. In addition, the inclusion of ATRs in Religious Education has been actively pursued. In Zimbabwe this has meant acknowledging that pupils need to “take the culture and wisdom of their people seriously and to reflect on the values inherent in them” (Griffiths, 1991:41-42). As shall be shown below, this has come after a struggle, and much more remains to be done.

The predominance of Christianity in Zimbabwe’s education system during the colonial period has persisted in the post-colonial dispensation. A particular reading of Christianity as a pure, disembodied soteriological system has held sway. This explains why “main-line” churches through the Advisory Board for Christian Education “have expressed some reservations on the introduction of the multi-faith approach to

Religious Education" (Moyo, 1988:205). They also continue to be suspicious of the inclusion of ATRs. Most of the key personnel in "historical mission churches" share a puritanical attitude to Christianity and can not countenance the notion of ATRs being treated at the same level as Christianity.

Approaches to African Traditional Religions

It is however folly to assume that ATRs are relics from the past and that Zimbabwe has moved beyond the hold of "archaic" traditions. Most of the BA Honours dissertations in Religious Studies submitted to the University of Zimbabwe between 1984 and 1996 show an interest in aspects of ATRs (Verstraelen, 1998:121). Indeed, a review of the titles shows that students are at pains to investigate their religious context by pursuing issues such as ancestors, alien spirits, witchcraft and sorcery, avenging spirits and others. Most of these Zimbabwean students seek to recover their religious heritage and to appropriate it in the contemporary context. Only a few are willing to research into smaller, migrant religions like the Baha'i Faith, Buddhism, Rastafarianism and others. This openness to ATRs and the willingness to clarify its concepts poses serious pedagogical questions. How may students be empowered to affirm the value and dignity of Zimbabwe's religious past? Although anthropological approaches have been influential in the study of ATRs (Bourdillon, 1993), they have been overtaken by African theological and phenomenological methods. The following section seeks to highlight the influence of the latter approaches on the study of ATRs.

ATR as a Preparation for the Christian Message

The majority of lecturers in Departments of Religious Studies/Theology/Education at Zimbabwean universities are Christians. As already mentioned, this is a direct result of

the influence of Christianity on the education system. It is not surprising that the study of Christianity and its sources occupies a disproportionately large place (Verstraelen, 1998). Apart from perpetuating a "Bible Knowledge" approach, there is the attendant danger that other religions are evaluated on the basis of Christian norms. The scientific, non-evaluative, comparative approach may be compromised at both church-related and state universities.

The Ghanaian traditionalist Kofi Asare Opoku has protested that ATRs have always been interpreted by non-practitioners who tend to engage in theological reductionism (Opoku, 1993). The temptation is real for African Christian researchers to teach ATRs by scouring for "usable elements" in constructing an indigenous Christianity. This tendency can already be detected in African Theology which celebrates Africa's religious past only to the extent that it finds "fulfilment" in Christianity (Chitando, 2000).

To teach ATRs as the "seeds of Christianity" is to deny them an independent right to exist. It is to succumb to a false evolutionary scheme in which Christianity becomes the highest form of religious expression, thereby relegating ATRs to the "primal" category (Cox, 1996). While the early missionaries could be forgiven for engaging in such "theological hooliganism," the Zimbabwean scholar stands indicted. The early missionaries were proponents of the absoluteness of Christianity and were too quick to condemn African spirituality. Thus, "the tendency to subordinate ATRs to Christianity can also be interpreted as a subtle form of cultural imperialism with the notable exception that it is the African himself who reduces his own culture and religion to an inferior position!" (Ndlovu, 1997:24).

It is however misleading to dismiss the use of Christian perspectives in teaching ATRs. This approach is potentially liberating in that it allows students to appreciate close similarities between the two traditions. While they may have been brought up to pour scorn on traditional practices, attitudes change when Christianity is shown as engaging in similar practices. A good example lies in the frequent ritual sacrifice of chickens, goats or cattle in Zimbabwean indigenous religions. When it is demonstrated that Christianity revolves around the concept of the sacrificial death of Jesus, fresh perspectives may be attained.

The emergence of church-related universities in Zimbabwe such as Africa University, Solusi University, Great Zimbabwe University, and the proposed Anglican Church-sponsored university, all including theological studies, is an important development. Unlike the missionary period when higher education was designed to foster the denial of African identity, these universities can be used to rehabilitate Zimbabwe's cultural pride. ATRs can be accorded pride of place at these post-colonial "sites of struggle." Christian higher education in Zimbabwe can be used as a strategy for developing a contextually relevant approach. Thus, "This approach acts as corrective to past condescending and superior attitudes among missionaries and assists original people to recover and value many of those traditions which have been suppressed or attacked by westerners for several generations" (Cox, 1991:229).

Phenomenological Approaches to ATRs

Cognisant of the limitations of filtering images of ATRs through Christian lenses, phenomenological approaches have gained increased currency. Although a detailed examination of this methodology lies outside the purview of this article, we may highlight the central tenets. Phenomenology seeks to look at religions on their own

terms, avoid value judgment, cultivate empathetic imagination and provide accurate descriptions of religious phenomena (Streng, 1991:4). Phenomenology of religion generally seeks to promote “objectivity” where particular religions are shown as believers appreciate them. The dictum “the believer is always right” constitutes a central feature of the method.

Phenomenology of religion endeavours to equip the researcher to bracket out all biases, pre-conceived beliefs and prejudices. It refrains from evaluating truth claims made by religions, while enjoining researchers to be sensitive to the adherent’s point of view. It upholds a positive perspective on religion, attacks unbridled subjectivism, as well as seeking to promote religious tolerance. The approach highlights structural similarities between religions and has appealed strongly to religious educators. Thus, “the methodological act of bracketing and ostensibly holding the matter of religious truth in abeyance is seen as not only contributing to teacher neutrality but also freeing teachers from having to address the potentially divisive issue of how the different religions should be assessed” (Barnes 2000).

As illustrated below, the phenomenological approach posits very attractive notions. Indeed, it has attracted many religious educators. It purports to provide a final solution to all methodological problems associated with teaching and researching in the area of Religious Studies. However, its assumption that one can achieve complete objectivity is problematic. In investigating any religion, “each person brings with him cultural, social and psychological understandings which are in part hidden to his consciousness” (Cox, 1996b:28).

Teaching ATRs phenomenologically implies the provision of “appropriate activities aimed at broadening the pupils’ outlook, such as keeping in touch with society, by

inviting experts to articulate and demonstrate aspects of traditional religion such as the music and drama associated with it" (Shoko, 1991:70). Alongside this emphasis on the veritable insides of the believers, "phenomenology of religion has played a crucial role in the move away from religious *instruction* and toward religious *education* (Arthur, 1995:447-8). While religious instruction seeks to increase the student's conviction in a particular tradition, religious education provides academic knowledge about the diverse religions of the world. It is the openness advocated by the method that has endeared it to African teachers of religion. The approach promises methodological liberation to ATRs. In Zimbabwe, the phenomenological approach has been particularly attractive because it allows ATRs to be treated as independent and adequate religions in their own right (Chitando, 1998a:111).

A number of writers have called for an application of the phenomenological method in the teaching of ATRs at various levels. This approach is highly rated due to its emphasis on neutrality and accuracy. In addition, it integrates the historical dimension in a helpful manner (Turner, 1981). A phenomenological approach to indigenous religions allows students to appreciate the issue of regional and local variations. In Zimbabwe, the invention of ethnic identities which are reinforced by distinct religious practices has been manipulated by shrewd politicians. By adopting tools from phenomenology, teachers may equip students to celebrate diversity instead of regarding it as a mark of "otherness." Thus "phenomenology may even contribute to the resolution of the problem of the unity or plurality of African religions" (Ikenga-Metuh, 1984).

Approaching Zimbabwean traditional religions phenomenologically implies taking seriously the world-view of the believers. Too often, the spiritual entities from religions such as Christianity which include angels and the devil are celebrated, while local concepts such as ghosts and goblins are the subject of derision. Students end up

imagining that the focus of faith in Christianity has greater metaphysical possibilities than in indigenous religions. Phenomenological precepts allow learners to appreciate that the existence or non-existence of the object of faith in any religion is not subject to empirical verification.

Teaching ATRs using phenomenological insights thus goes a long way in allowing African students to appreciate the value of their religious heritage. It allows students to regard ATRs as pursuing the same goals as the so-called “world religions.” Since religion finds expression in all aspects of African life, university courses on ATRs are critical for students pursuing different programmes; not only those doing religious studies/theology/education. Phenomenological approaches highlight the extent to which ATRs are deeply rooted in the psyche of Zimbabweans. They show that these religions influence various aspects of life. Thus it has been rightly argued, “Anyone doing business in Africa - whether political, economic, educational, medical, religious or cultural - has to take it (ATR) into serious consideration” (Mbiti, 1996). This statement from the foremost researcher on ATRs reaffirms the centrality of the subject to the discourse on post-colonial Zimbabwean identity.

Despite the high rating of the phenomenological method in teaching ATRs, numerous criticisms have been expressed. The dominant criticism, which also inspires this article, is that the phenomenological approach is ideologically appealing but does not inspire commitment. “Thus, phenomenology is good enough for the beginning - but only for the beginning. It does not lead anywhere” (Klostermaier, 1976). The problem identified here is that the method avoids cultivating attachment to any particular religion - it seeks to promote a general understanding of religion. Another commentator argues that the phenomenology of religion “seems to be more of a preliminary exercise, a vital introduction which we need to complete before moving on to a conclusion” (Arthur,

1995:457). The phenomenological method is ideal as an initial technique for allowing students to access other people's religious truths.

Another criticism levelled against the phenomenological method in Religious Studies relates to its preoccupation with "scholarly" issues (Chitando, 1997). The method calls upon the researcher to uphold strictly academic concerns. Western proponents of the approach eschew any effort to introduce cultural awareness in students. One of the foremost critics of the inclusion of any other agenda in Religious Studies has been the Canadian scholar, Donald Wiebe. Wiebe contends that any concern with the spiritual liberation of the individual is sectarian and "will only contaminate the quest for a scientific knowledge of religion" (Wiebe, 1999). However, critics of this quest for knowledge for its own sake maintain that universities in Africa do not have such a luxury. Teaching religion, or ATRs in our case, should be accompanied by some concrete benefits. Repairing a battered African identity should therefore be an integral part of teaching ATRs in a post-colonial Zimbabwean university: whether state-sponsored or church-related.

Teaching ATRs in Zimbabwe: Beyond Description

While appreciable gains have been made in teaching ATRs in Zimbabwe, the foregoing discussion has shown that African theological and phenomenological approaches are limited. What is required is a more radical pedagogical technique; one that builds on the positive insights of the dominant methods and transcends them. Teaching ATRs in Zimbabwean universities should go beyond descriptive accuracy. Reminding students of the caricatures of African religiosity, the new approach should go further and equip them to accept and embrace the African world-view as valid as

any other. Teaching ATRs in private and state universities should inculcate cultural pride in the learners.

The proposal for teaching ATRs in an assertive manner is necessarily controversial and problematic. A number of issues may be raised against the proposed pedagogical route. According to many practitioners, the lecture halls of a university should be the last place for teachers to articulate their religious or cultural agendas. As we saw with phenomenology, the ideals of neutrality, descriptive accuracy and “treating everyone nicely” are cherished. Secondly, promoting cultural nationalism has been abused in some African countries such as the former Zaire where artificial “authenticity” programmes were mounted by the state. Third, ATRs may be regarded as a relic from the past and troubling young Zimbabweans with “dead” traditions may have no academic merit. Finally, the teaching of ATRs or more generally, religion, appears to be a sheer waste of resources in a world enchanted with technological sophistication. Does religion, let alone ATRs, have a role in the computer age?

It requires a longer narrative to do justice to all the concerns raised above. However, a number of responses can be formulated regarding the need for a more proactive approach in teaching ATRs in Zimbabwean universities. Granted that there ought to be a distinction between “professing religion and confessing religion” (Jaffee, 1999:284), the history of the marginalisation of ATRs calls for rethinking of this “golden rule.” The teacher of ATRs in Zimbabwe needs to actively pursue the question of the intricate nature of the relationship between religion and culture. Since colonialism undermined African identity, its rehabilitation includes allowing students to appreciate the African world view. Reinforcing the traditional religious identity is critical in Zimbabwe where Christian norms have dominated. Failure to be assertive in teaching ATRs implies that

the scales will be tipped in favour of “some cultural communities and ways of life and against others” (Halstead, 1995).

The introductory section drew attention to the preponderance of Christianity in Zimbabwe and the EFZ’s efforts to legally secure a monopoly for it in the country. The continued Christian influence on the education system is also seen in the emergence of church-related universities. While Christianity has clearly contributed towards national development, any self-respecting people should give primacy to their indigenous religions. Before Christianity can be appropriated, ATRs should be accorded pride of place in Zimbabwe. The eurocentric view of neutrality needs close examination in the light of how the tag “religion” was for long denied to ATRs. In this context, the teacher of ATRs should lean more towards the “guru” who motivates his students to appreciate the value of the religions, and less towards the “professor” who is cold, neutral and disinterested (McLelland, 1992).

The suggestion that teachers of ATRs in Zimbabwean universities should inculcate cultural pride in their students can be interpreted as a form of dangerous subjectivism and indoctrination. Conventional wisdom has taught us that the lecturer should walk a tight rope when it comes to matters religious. He/she should provide the facts and allow the students to make up their minds. This is the central conviction of the phenomenological approach as we demonstrated in the previous section. Had ATRs been fairly presented in the history of religions, all this would be quite persuasive. However, their systematic marginalisation and subordination to Christianity imply the need for a more courageous approach.

Empowering students to appreciate ATRs (without necessarily converting to them) implies demonstrating why they are religions worth of human allegiance, like any

other. Highlighting the role of ancestral religions in nationalist struggles in countries like Kenya and Zimbabwe constitutes an important step. Capturing the spirituality associated with dreams and visions goes a long way in allowing learners to recognise the mystical nature of indigenous religions.

The study is arguing that the trivialisation of ATRs by Christianity in Zimbabwe requires that educators should go out of their way to bring the two at par. Effective learning is prevented for as long as Christianity is understood as the paragon of human religiosity. Transcending phenomenological neutrality is necessitated by the disadvantaged position currently occupied by ATRs. Once ATRs have been catapulted to their rightful place alongside other religions of the world, we can reclaim and apply phenomenological techniques.

Finally, it has to be noted that the insistence on “objectivity” obfuscates the situatedness of all researchers and teachers. In our context, ATRs have been demonised and dismissed by proponents of Christianity and modernity. The task at hand lies in allowing students to recognise that the truth or falsehood of ATRs has the same balance of probability as that of any other religion. University lecturers of ATRs in Zimbabwe therefore have the task of equipping their students to appreciate, grapple with, and even embrace, indigenous religiocultural realities. Only a failure of nerve would stop them from executing such an educational and national duty.

Conclusion

We have already shown that the interest shown in ATRs by students in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Zimbabwe illustrates the continued relevance of ATRs. The cultivation of sensitivity to ATRs should not proceed in an ideological

manner, but should help students to embrace their heritage. Teaching ATRs in Zimbabwean universities should be part of the process of decolonisation and should employ a different pedagogy. Thus, "such things as music, visual imagery and ritual (including possession - performance) are key to indigenous religious instruction" (McCarthy Brown, 1991).

Inviting traditional healers, spirit mediums, traditional mid-wives and other sacred practitioners to class will diminish the "otherness" of ATRs. Visiting sacred places, attending rituals and participating in dances and seances also constitute key processes in helping students to realise that ATRs are indeed an "enduring heritage." It however requires another article to examine the techniques relevant to post-colonial research and teaching in ATRs. The present concern has been to illustrate the need to go beyond the descriptive approach that is currently in vogue. Undoubtedly, continued debate and research will be required before ATRs are fully integrated into the academic study of religion.

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