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Students' representation of "other" religions: Unearthing the disconnect between curriculum content knowledge and attitudinal change

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ABSTRACT

With the unfortunate abundance of religious conflicts in the world, it is important that attention is devoted to how students position themselves in relation to religions they do not associate with. On this score, a section of scholarship in social studies education has examined students making meaning of religio-historical and contemporary happenings. Yet, questions relating to students' representation of "other" religions remain underexplored. From the Ghanaian context where this study is situated, official curriculum mandates teaching about religion, however, little to no evidence exist to support a claim that students' attitudes change after learning this curriculum. To explore the disconnect, a qualitative study of six Ghanaian elementary schools were conducted for a three-month period. Through interviews, observations focus groups and document analysis, students' representation of "other religions" were examined. Research outcome revealed that, students mediate their lessons on religion through the lens of their own experiences and metanarratives of their individual faiths. Consequently, they hold two forms of knowledge – authentic official knowledge used for examination purposes and secularized cultural knowledge used in practice. It is concluded that, the vestiges of colonialism and emergent imperialism are deeply implicated in students' discourses around religion. Therefore, the missing link between content knowledge and attitudinal change may be explained by the failure of pedagogy to acknowledge the impact of contextual happenings on the realization of curriculum objectives. A solution to this conundrum will be for educators to connect academic knowledge to the out-of-school socio-cultural experiences of students.

KEYWORDS

Curriculum, Religious representation, Africa, Qualitative Research, Multicultural Education

INTRODUCTION

With the unfortunate abundance of religious conflicts in the world, it is important that attention is devoted to how students position themselves in relation to religions they do not associate with. Such knowledge is useful in shaping curriculum and pedagogy towards preparing them to live in a diverse world. A growing body of research in social studies education has been focused on students' understandings of concepts and practices and their implications for teaching and learning (Barton & Avery, 2015; Mauch & Tarman, 2016). Studying students' religious knowledge and development in Swedish schools, Osberk (2019) reports that use of discursive pedagogies increased students understanding of religious concepts and general knowledge. Cornbleth (2000) examined US high school students' images of America and concluded that students held inconsistent and contradictory ideas because the traditional patriotic mythology that students are taught were at odds with their own experiences. Barton (2005, 2019) did a comparative analysis of students' thinking about human rights. Working with 116 students from Colombia, Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and the United States, and from varied school types, he established that "personal, community and national political factors influence students' understanding of where human rights issues are most salient" (p. 15).

Levstik and Groth (2005) examined Ghanaian students' conception of citizenship and its connection with national history. They observed that students' narratives were aligned with social studies curricula which emphasized unity in diversity. Students described their understanding of Ghanaians as "brave, persistent, and self-reliant people who unite across differences to build a nation" (p. 582). Similar observations were made by Ho (2010) whose investigation of Singapore secondary school students' conceptions of citizenship revealed that they did not differ from the narratives of the official curriculum and in some instances, students "repeated the same phrasing and perspectives found in the textbooks" (p. 228).

Other studies have been devoted to understanding categories of difference (race, gender, socio-economic status) and how they affect students' interpretation of happenings in society (Arnot, Chege, & Wawire, 2012; Barton & Avery, 2015; Flanagan, 2013). In comparative terms however, fewer studies have examined students' religious understanding and its impact on their interpretation of social endeavors. While some pioneering work has been done in this regard, they have largely centered on students' religious identity (Lopez, Huynh, & Fuligni, 2011; Peek, 2005), influence of school's religious climate on students' interpretation of contemporary news items (Mosborg, 2002); and students' interpretation of the Holocaust (Schweber, 2004; Schweber & Irwin, 2003; Spector, 2007). These works have been excellent at highlighting students making meaning of religio-historical and contemporary happenings, but questions relating to students' representation of other religions remain underexplored.

This gap in research is worrying given that religious misrepresentation, when allowed to flourish, can lead to: the suppression of minority views, resentment towards persons of different faiths, holding of entrenched opinions about one's religion, and insensitivity to others' beliefs, even incitement to hatred (American Academy of Religion, 2010; Faour, 2012; Hess, 2008; Jackson, 1995). This paper is written out of this need and examines students' construction of religious *otherness* in curriculum practice of public schools in Ghana. The guiding question for the inquiry was: how do Christian and Muslim students represent indigenous Ghanaian religion? Although contextually situated in Ghana, answer to this question has profound implication for teaching for religious pluralism globally.

BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Religion in the Ghanaian Context

Religion is an indispensable part of the life of Ghanaians and features prominently in all facets: from mourning to merry making, sowing to reaping. "Whether people are battling with disease, poverty, or political misrule, they turn to religious strategies for interpreting and coping with life's contingencies in ways that the average westerner might not comprehend" (Hackett, 2000, p. 104). For this reason, Africans (and by extension Ghanaians), have been described as notoriously and incurably religious (Mbiti, 1969; Parrinder, 1970).

Table 1: Religious Demographics of Ghana

Religion	Percentage of population
Christianity	71.2%
Islam	17.6%
Other Religions (Hinduism, Rastafarianism, Shintoism, Eckankar, Buddhism, Baha'ism, Judaism, Zethahil, Hare Krishna, Divine Light Mission, Ninchiren Shoshu Soka Gakkai, Sri Sathya Sai Baba Sera, Sat Sang)	1.8%
African Indigenous Religions	5.2%
No Religion	4.2%
Total	100%

Ghana Statistical Service (2010)

This notwithstanding, Ghana is not a religious state and the diversified nature of its population makes it difficult to describe in religious terms (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2010). As shown in Table 1, three major religions comprising Christianity, Islam and African Indigenous Religion (AIR), with their varied denominations, are recognized in Ghana. There are other faiths whose membership is estimated to be 1.8% and are known informally but are yet to be given official recognition. The International Religious Freedom Report (US Department of State, 2013) identifies these *minoritized* religions as including: Bahai Faith, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, Shintoism, Eckankar, Rastafarianism as well as Zetahil, - a unique religion that combines elements of Christianity and Islam. To protect the religious choices of individuals, the Constitution of Ghana guarantees the "freedom to practice any religion and to manifest such practices" (The Constitution, 1992 Article 21.1(c)).

Religion and School Ownership/Management in Ghana

Owing to the history of missionaries starting formal education in Ghana, the state and missions entered into a partnership in 1961 which made all hither to mission schools public, yet maintaining their religious identity and ideologies. While the state funds all such schools, the missions are still involved in their management and are allowed to implement their own forms of religious routines so long as they have parental consent (Kudadjie, 1996). The effect of this arrangement is the presence of two types of public schools: "mission-public and public-public"

schools. Mission partner schools are not a homogenous group. As Jenz (2012) argues, there is no single category of “mission.” With the denominational diversity of Christianity, Christian partner schools available include: Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, Seventh-day Adventist, Anglican, Evangelical Presbyterian and African Methodist Episcopal Zion Schools. Similarly, Islamic schools are either a partnership with orthodox Muslims or the Ahmadiyyah Muslim Missions. Schools which were established and totally managed by the state (public-public schools) are usually identified as Local Authority (LA), Municipal Authority (MA) or Urban Council (UC) schools, and are expected to possess a religiously neutral climate. This unique arrangement complicates our understanding of public schools as religiously neutral environments.

Postcolonial Theory and Religious Representation

To guide this work, I draw on postcolonial theory. With its focus on drawing structural imbalances in the relationship between the colonized and colonizer, postcolonial theory explores and speaks to the marginalization of subjects and knowledge, whose status was deliberately diminished to create the subaltern as the other (Radcliffe, 2005). Postcolonial theory has grown in scope and depth over the years, occasioning diversity of agenda and focus in terms of concepts. To facilitate a succinct exegeses of students’ religious representation I delimit this work to the concept of otherness.

Otherness is the result of a discursive process by which a dominant in-group (‘Us’, ‘the self’) constructs one or many dominated out-groups (‘Them’, ‘other’) by stigmatizing a difference - real or imagined - presented as a negation of identity and thus a motive for potential discrimination. (Staszak, 2008, p. 2)

In postcolonial literature, Otherness is used to stand for difference created out of representation done by the privileged Occident to show his distinctness from the subaltern Orient - the other (Said, 1979). In this process of othering, binary categorizations are made: “occident/orient, civilized/barbarian, modern/traditional, rational/irrational (or emotional), advanced/backward, knower/known, power/weakness, mature/immature” (Shin, 2009, p. 46). Central to the concept of otherness is asymmetrical power relationships where the occident imposes its value on the orient (Said, 1979) in “making statements about it, settling it, ruling over it, authorizing views of it, describing it, and teaching it.” (Staszak, 2008, p. 3). For instance, Said (1979) argues that “when an Oriental was referred to, it was in terms of such genetic universals as his ‘primitive’ state, his primary characteristics, his particular spiritual background” (p.121).

Such representations were not just kept circulating as myths. To the contrary, the Occident created a body of theory and practices that legitimized such representations. In the context of religion, a fifteenth century body of dominant literature created taxonomic systems of religious classification - Christianity, Judaism, Mohammedanism and idolatry. This categorization demarcated the sanctified domain of Western religions from the perdition state of “idolatry” (Masuzawa, 2005).

Postcolonial research draws attention to encounters between people who have been separated from each other, geographically and historically, and “who come into contact in ways that involve conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and conflict” (Pratt, 1992 cited in Shin, 2009, p. 42). At the very core of postcolonial theory is representation - who represents, what is represented and the power dynamics involved in these. In examining students’ attitudes towards AIR, notice was taken of the complexities inherent in religious connections in school settings and the need to unearth somewhat hidden religious classifications that empower

groups to (mis)represent others. Postcolonial theory is thus useful here in analyzing identities, power and representation as enacted in a complex milieu of religious diversity.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is written out of a bigger qualitative study that examined students' representation of religions. In this paper, the focus is on students' attitudes towards religions they do not associate with. A phenomenological frame is used describing the perceptions of students emanating from their experiences with African Indigenous Religion (AIR). The purpose is "to illuminate the specific, to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors in a situation" (Lester, 1999, p. 1). The research was approached from a hermeneutical phenomenological orientation focusing on students "text of life" in relation to AIR (Creswell, 2007). Data were generated from several students to establish commonalities, disparities and ambiguities between their ideas of AIR. All students in this study demonstrated some knowledge of AIR and were ready to share what they perceived it to be.

A total of eighty-four students were involved in this research. Participants were selected from six public schools with unique characteristics - Islamic public school with majority students being Muslims (Akwei Allah), Catholic public school with majority Christians (St. Andrew), Seventh-day Adventist school with majority Muslims (James White), Islamic public school with majority Christians (Naagode) and two public schools, Dinpa and Adasa, with Christian and Muslim majority respectively. As varied as the school types were, the research benefitted from a wide array of persons with different backgrounds whose participation generated very valuable data.

Students from Grade 8 were recruited because they were the most senior of all the students in the basic schools. In each of the schools, I visited classrooms and solicited for volunteers. In situations where more students showed interest than were needed, a representational balance in terms of gender and religious affiliations were considered. For every school, the number of students selected ranged from ten to twelve.

Table 2: Student Respondents demographic information

School	Akwei Allah	Naagode	James White	St. Andrew	Dinpa	Adasa
Respondents (N)	10	12	11	12	12	10
Religious Demographics (N)	7 S. Muslims 3 Christians	7 Christians 5 S. Muslims	6 Christians (4 SDAs & 2 Pentecostals) 5 S. Muslims	8 Christians (5 Catholics & 3 Pentecostals) 4 S. Muslims	10 Christians 2 S. Muslims	5 Christians 5 S. Muslims

* S. Muslims (Sunni Muslims)

To generate data, qualitative methods of focus group discussion (FGD), interviews, ethnographic observations and document analysis were employed. At each of the six schools, participants were engaged in a focus group discussion. The discussion aimed at soliciting their personal views on religious pluralism, their schools' religious climates, classroom discourse on religion and their opinions about religions they were not affiliated with - the other religion.

Open-ended questions were asked and students gave their responses as and when they had something to say. Following the principles of deliberative pedagogy (Hess, 2008), students agreed to ground rules for discussion prior to the start of all deliberation. Some of these included respecting other people's opinion whether one agreed or not, allowing others to show disagreement with one's position, taking turns to make statements and issues about confidentiality. The discussion at each school lasted approximately 45 minutes except at two schools (Naagode and Dinpa) where there were two separate meetings for the discussions lasting 30 minutes each. As a discussion facilitator, I posed questions and regulated the flow of discussion. At certain times I raised counter arguments when discussion was turning unidirectional and tried to play the "devil's advocate" for voices that were not represented.

Individual interviews followed after focus group discussions and involved students who demonstrated strong opinions during the discussion. The interviews were offered to provide an opportunity for them to voice the concerns that they could not share in the group. Similarly, students who were less vocal also interviewed as individuals to provide a less intimidating environment for them to express their thoughts. During one such interview, a student confessed to not speaking much because he was not fluent in Twi, the language used for the discussion. Although they were allowed to could use any language, the student said he did not want to be seen as odd by speaking English so he kept quiet most of the time (Ampiah, 2011).

General school observations centered on school start procedures, closing routines, religious activities such as prayers, singing of religious songs, as well as students' interactions with religious objects (hijab, the crucifix, ablution kettle etc.). At the Islamic schools, students learned Arabic, performed ablution, and visited the mosque every day at one o'clock pm for a 15 minutes prayer. At the Christian schools, I observed the singing of hymns and other Christian songs during school assemblies; the students also had weekly worship services which were compulsory regardless of students' religious affiliation. Religiously affiliated accoutrements were also noted.

Data Analysis

Data generated for the study included 320 minutes of video footage of FGDs, 410 minutes audio interview recordings, observation notes, and audio recordings of school routines. Since some of the interviews were conducted in Twi (a Ghanaian language), the video and audio recordings were translated and transcribed simultaneously. Qualitative analysis software – MAXQDA was employed to clean up data, organize and analyze. The first step in the process was data winnowing, a processes of focusing in on some of the data and disregarding other parts of it using the criteria of relevance (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A first read through of the data gave a general sense of direction of responses received. Following Madison's (2005) point of view analysis strategy, a priori codes – otherness, ambivalence, hybridity, mimicry and others - informed by the theoretical framework, were assigned to relevant data. An iterative process of combining, realignments, deletion codes continued until themes emerged. Codes such as hybridity and mimicry were abandoned later because not enough data were observed to be relevant to these codes. While at it, different data sets were triangulated as a means of ensuring rigor and trustworthiness of the research. For the purposes of this paper, findings related to the theme of otherness is presented. To protect anonymity of respondents, all names used in this report are pseudonyms.

FINDINGS

The study revealed that Christian and Muslim students dissociated with African Indigenous Religion (AIR) and in the process of *othering*, represented it as expired, barbarian, backward and heathen (Shin, 2009). The *othering* of AIR shaped by Christian and Islamic metanarratives and AIR rituals and practices are explored here.

Christian/Islamic metanarratives shaping otherness of AIR

It was observed that students' representation of AIR as "other" was influenced by their Christian and Islamic metanarratives. Based on these faith-inspired grand storylines (Schweber, 2006), students created a criteria that measured the validity of every religion. Acceptable religions to them are those that possess features that are similar to theirs - scriptures and formal place of worship, and founder - and since AIR did not possess any of these, some students described it as archaic. While Christian and Muslim students demonstrated appreciation of Islam and Christianity respectfully, their representation of AIR is that of the *other*. Consider the following statements generated from student interview and focus group discussion:

... when God came to this earth, he brought only one religion [Christianity] ... Muhammed brought Islam and for AIR, somebody just worships an object until it is engulfed with some spirits. God created the human being and all the objects so why should they worship it. (Kofi, a Christian student in Akwei Allah School)

Allah sent his messenger to come to this world and they have brought the true religion [Islam]. Allowing them [AIR worshippers] here would not allow for us to see the true religion. What Allah hates most is to have another god. He abhors it. (FGD of Islamic students in Naagode)

God says we should not worship any idol ... by pouring libation, traditionalists demonstrate they don't believe in God. Idols are man-made objects. (FGD of Adventist students at James White school)

When God was throwing away Lucifer, some of the spirits resided in rocks, trees etc. so if you worship those, you are not worshipping God. (Asante, a Christian in Dinpa School)

From these statements, Kofi and the other students opined that for a religion to be legitimate it should have a founder. Their evaluation of AIR is based on Christian and Islamic feature of monotheism, identifiable founder and unflinching devotion to God. Students could not fathom anything that does not satisfy these criteria being legitimate. Similarly, their attitude to other minority religions follows same representations with one student remarking "they are all like AIR, they worship idols". Muslim and Christian students respected each other's religion. Adwoa of Adasa school explained that Islam and Christianity are like "children of a common mother", vividly distinguishing "the other" (AIR) from the "normal" (Abrahamic religions). Masuzawa (2005) explains that occidental literature that categorized world religions stretched the category "Christian" to include Jews and Muslims whilst "idolaters" was defined to include non-Christians. The students' representations are therefore a manifestation of colonial residues that are still prevalent in the socio-cultural milieu and in the official knowledge.

Otherness in rituals and practices

Students' description of the otherness of AIR can again be observed in their perception of AIR practices. Students demonstrated in their response that AIR is not only diabolic in belief, but it actualizes it through the "bad" things AIR worshippers do. When questioned why they did not like AIR, here are some of the responses I elicited:

AIR use blood for their rituals. It is all deception because they take chicken and other animals from people but they don't return them after the rituals. (Kwame - a Christian in Akwei Allah School)

Their use of blood, and idols is forbidden in Islam. (Hamza - a Muslim in St. Andrew School)

I just don't like the traditionalists. I think they are scary. I see them in movies and they use skeletons and other stuff. (Musa - Muslim in Naagode school)

...because AIR belongs to the forest and not in classrooms. I see them on TV and all they do is not good. (Josephine - A Christian in James White School)

They do bad things like killing innocent people. (FGD of Christians in a Dinpa school)

AIR is worse, a Christian would not say he is going to a pastor to do Sakawa¹ but AIR priest do. (FGD of Muslims in Naagode School)

Majority of students in this study confessed to never observing AIR service before, yet, they described them as bloody, using animals for rituals, killing innocent people, and aiding internet scams (Sakawa). Musa's remark appeared several times in the discussion when he was questioned how they could describe them in these terms without any close encounter. From their responses it became clearer that students' descriptions were based on local television shows and movies, mostly sponsored by Christians and which seek to portray AIR in inferior light. In the narratives of local movies like *Ɔsoro taa w'akyi* (heaven backs you), *Bayifoɔ Akwadaa* (A child with witchcraft), and *Evil Forest*, there is a protagonist whose barrenness, joblessness, poverty, ailments are traced to family member(s) who has engaged an AIR priest to cause those misfortunes. At the *deus ex machina* of the plot, a Christian pastor reveals this mystery, prayers are said and the powers of the AIR priests are dismantled resulting in a sudden turn around for the protagonist. Thus, students' experiences with AIR is mediated through movies which coupled with their religious beliefs make them represent AIR in this light. This confirms Barton and Avery's (2015) assertion that students understanding of societal practices are shaped by everyday messages conveyed through media.

During focus group discussions, I occasionally reminded students about their lessons on AIR and how it contradicted what they were expressing in the discussion. In most cases, students admitted to learning about AIR but not believing what they learn to be true. According to them, their lessons on AIR were more about factual knowledge which they memorize to reproduce on tests. As expected, the extreme testing regime in Ghana compels schools to teach about AIR but doubts exist about students making real meaning of the content. Statements such as "I would write that in exams but I don't believe that to be true" goes to confirm the fears of scholars that extreme forms of accountability only results in dictation of facts, memorizations and less learning (Pope, 2003; Valenzuela, 2004).

¹ Sakawa is a Ghanaian terminology that is used to describe a person who indulges in internet scam.

By contrast, the deliberative environment created by focus group dialogues provided an avenue for students to express their thoughts, defend their positions and engage with knowledge in ways that were absent in their classrooms (Hess, 2008). Discussions got more interesting with a group of Christian students at St. Andrew, as I tried to compare some AIR acts to practices in Christianity.

Interviewer: Don't you think traditional worshippers are not popular because you have these thoughts about them?

Student 1: No, it is because their religion is used to cause deaths. When you go to a traditional priest to kill your brother for you, they would do it.

Interviewer: What about some Christian pastors who do that?

Student 2: For them, they are false prophets, their punishment would be from God

Interviewer: You also accuse them of idols, how different are theirs from the images I see in this school?

Student 3: Catholic images are similar to the idols of AIR

Student 4: No the images of Catholics are just Mary and Jesus. We believe we can talk to Mary and she would beg Jesus on our behalf.

Interviewer: ...and how is that different from AIR worshippers approaching God through ancestors?

Student 5: The AIR worshippers use images of fearful objects like lion and wild animals

Student 3: the Catholic Church takes a lot from AIR, they use statues just like them

Student 4: Stop referring to Jesus and Mary as statues

Student 3: But they are not real Jesus and Mary, they are statues

In this instance, the denominational diversity of Christian students comes into play as they debated the otherness of AIR. All the participants in the discussion perceived and represented AIR as idol worship and explained that their dislike for adherents of AIR is based on the Biblical imperative barring Christians from associating with them. However, students differed in their perception of what idol worship entails. Non-Catholics did not see a difference between images of Jesus and Mary and images used in AIR but Catholic students perceived those as legitimate because the characters are well known and accepted, whereas those of AIR were wild and scary. Even as students unanimously misrepresented AIR based on ideas from their Christian beliefs, there was a disparity in terms of how their denominational influences positioned idol worship.

DISCUSSION

That AIR is misrepresented has been well researched and documented in literature (Beyers, 2010; Masuzawa, 2005; Meyer, 1998). However, the ways in which students denigrate it in sharp contrast to what they learn in classrooms is most worrying. Ghana's post-independence cultural philosophy has been to correct the wrongs of colonialism and restore pride in a national heritage. Schools have therefore been assigned the important role of teaching pupils about Ghanaian culture (Meyer, 1998). To do this, the basic school curriculum devotes two subjects to the project: (1) Ghanaian Language and Culture and (2) Religious and Moral Education. Among other things these subjects aim inculcate in students, religious knowledge that will promote pluralistic engagements so they grow up as responsible adults able to make sound decisions in today's changing world (Anti, Ntneh, & Sey, 2002). Of paramount importance here is AIR which undergirds most cultural practices, yet occupies liminal status in the Ghanaian religious sphere.

It is interesting to note that students learn from official knowledge that AIR incorporates “belief in a transcendent Supreme Being or God; ancestral spirits who are venerated; lesser deities who are often associated with palpable objects like trees and rocks; as well as charms, amulets and talismans employed for protective purposes” (Thomas, 2012, p. 67). From an examination of students’ notes and exercise books, it was observed that students’ writings confirm their knowledge about AIR. For instance, one class assignment required students to list some beliefs of AIR. A student, Gifty, answered:

- a. Belief in Supreme being
- b. Belief in totems
- c. Belief in Ancestors
- d. Belief in lesser gods

Intriguingly, this same student would argue that AIR adherents do not worship God. In a focus group discussion, I elicited students’ response to their teacher inviting an adherent of AIR as a resource person. Gifty responded:

“I will not allow an AIR adherent in my class because they are not God’s followers. The Bible says we should not associate with unbelievers and since traditionalists do not believe in God, I will not allow them to teach me.... I will allow a Muslim because they believe in Allah which is the same God we worship.”

Data about Gifty and many other students of similar persuasion make clear that students hold two forms of knowledge which are antithetical to each other (Coe, 2005). Through expressions such as “we write that answer on tests”, students distinguish official knowledge from “real” knowledge. While real knowledge to them is based on experiential learning acquired from, and usable in their socio-cultural environment, the official knowledge (school knowledge as they term it) is learnt from didactic instruction and it is to be reproduced during tests. In exploring the reasons for this disconnect between official knowledge and students’ “real” knowledge, I find answers in the socio-cultural milieu within which curriculum enactment takes place.

First, students’ othering of AIR and its adherents can be seen as an effect of cultural imperialism, an insidious form of colonialism that is more difficult to detect and resist (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1998). Derogatory terminology used by students to misrepresent AIR is just a rehash of teachings of missionaries that “ridiculed indigenous beliefs, called customs into question, undermined self-confidence, [and] eroded respect for traditional authorities” (Porter, 1997, p. 367). Following the lead of Comaroff & Comaroff (1991), Western religions, particularly Christianity, should be seen as more than just a religion, but “part of the historical anthropology of colonialism and consciousness, culture and power” (p.11). Said (1979) has said that the occident’s representation of the other is not maintained in myths, but the conscious creation of knowledge that is used to legitimize such depictions. This was the case with Western religions’ construction of AIR as existing in pre-historical past – an archaic religion that was practiced by ancestors. In this description, it is contrasted with modern Christianity which exists in the present. Students’ representation of AIR as “expired,” “belongs to the forest” and manmade should be conceptualized within this body of knowledge created to support missionary activity, but has since been legitimized in mainstream discourse and passed on to students as official knowledge.

Perhaps this body of knowledge has been perpetuated and propelled through the ages by new movements in the Christian front. The emergence of a new wave of Christianity, which

Robbins (2004) refers to as Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity (PCC) brought with it a new passion and zeal to evangelize "the heathen" through whatever means possible. Whereas earlier orthodox Christianities (Catholics & Protestants) condemned connections with AIR, PCCs have done so with more vigor, requiring all their followers to "make a complete break with the past" (Meyer, 1998, p. 3). AIR has been reinterpreted by Pentecostal Christians to include Satan's blood covenant with fore-fathers who did not worship God but the devil. On account of these dictates, it becomes necessary for persons living in the present to rupture with traditions of the Ancestral past embodied in AIR (Meyer, 1998).

Alongside such teachings about AIR in their churches, PC Christians have launched radio and televangelism programs which seek to bring their message into people's homes. According to Asamoah Gyadu (2010) the preaching of interventionist theology, healing, deliverance from bondage, and empowerments of living are the highlights of such media messages. The media has thus become the means by which society is made to appreciate "spiritual underworld of Satan and how he works to keep people suffering through ill-health, demon-possession and oppression, failing marriages, collapsing business ventures, [and] extreme poverty" (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2010, p. 136). One thing that is certain is the fact that the name Satan as used in such contexts is synonymous with AIR. Meyer (1998) argues that Satan is believed to be operating in the guise of indigenous spirits, thus, "through the image of the devil, old spirits and deities are integrated into the discourse as 'Christian' demons" (p. 322).

Thus, it makes sense that Josephine, a Christian student in a Catholic School attributed all her descriptions about AIR to what she saw on TV. Besides Christian themed movies, students are bombarded daily with radio and TV programs that attribute all misfortunes to Satan working through AIR and its adherents. Students' representation of AIR adherents as engaged in bad things such as "killing people" "doing Sakawa" "deception" "using blood and idols" are just a few of the statements they see and hear from the media about AIR. Indeed this was echoed by a teacher when I asked about students' representation of AIR. Hamza, a Muslim teacher at an Islamic school said:

Well, the fact is Ghana in general has sidelined AIR. It looks as if it is evil and that is how we perceive it so the children might say 'this person worships idol'. I think it is us Christians and Muslims who have made it so. We denigrate AIR but we sneak out to the shrines....I would say it is about parents, teachers and religious leaders. Most of the time, we make it look devilish and you have already told the child the Devil is bad and so how do you expect them to appreciate devilish religion?

This statement makes clear the perceived nexus between AIR and evil in the prevailing societal discourse. Hamza is very frustrated about the misrepresentation of AIR and blames society in general for perpetuating untruths which make his work as a teacher difficult.

Hamza might be right about difficulties he is encountering in helping students to unlearn misrepresentations of AIR. During my fieldwork, I observed that the schools themselves perpetuate the hegemony of Christian and Islamic religious beliefs. While the official curriculum expects students to appreciate AIR evidenced in the trilogy of Supreme Being, gods and Ancestors, mission-public schools neutralize this effort by making students sing Christian songs, a number of which is a direct attack on AIR. In one such song the students of Dinpa used to march to their classroom titled *yen nana nom som abosom* (our fore-fathers worshipped idols), the Christian song derides ancestors for worshipping idols and pledges the commitment of the current generation to worshipping Jehovah. Given such conflicting information about religion,

most students stick to their family's religious identity (Lopez et al., 2011) making them prone to bias and misrepresentation of AIR.

Even more critical is the role of teachers in all these (see Achituv, 2013; Baurain, 2012; Ratsatsi, 2005; Sikes & Everington, 2003). Interviewing over twenty teachers, all of them expressed their commitment to teaching in a fair and nonbiased manner. However, other comments they made renders useless such confessions. For instance, when I questioned Sandra, a Catholic teacher about why she did not invite indigenous religious adherents to her classroom, she remarked:

Muslims call God Allah, it is the same God of Christians. Idol worshippers [*she immediately changes her characterization of AIR from Traditional worshippers to idol worshippers*] we know they go through gods and ancestors to reach God. I personally believe it is not the same God that we worship that they are worshipping. Muslims worship our God but idol worshippers worship something different. They rely on some other spirits.

Sandra here was expressing her personal opinion about religions but her statement does not differ in content from that of her students. This raises suspicion about how she represents AIR in her classroom. Students expectedly come to classrooms with prejudices and bias against religions other than their own. However, it is hoped that teachers will design and enact lessons that would broaden the perspectives of students, eroding their stereotypes and misconceptions of others. If teachers are demonstrating same bias as their students where lies a broader reasoning that would mitigate the impact of myopic consciousness?

To the extent that students do not demonstrate any change in their perceptions about the religious other is a demonstration of curriculum failure. The role of schools and teachers as mediators of learning cannot be over-emphasized (Mason, 2000). Moreover, the Ghanaian curriculum which is rigidly academic has overly emphasized the integrity of separate subjects and the neglect of connections between academic experiences and life beyond the school (Wraga, 2009). Ralph Tyler has long argued that:

The student is more likely to perceive the similarity between the life situations and the learning situations when two conditions were met: (1) the life situations and learning situations were obviously alike in many respects and (2) the student was given practice in seeking illustrations in his life outside of school for the application of things learned in school. (Tyler, 1949 p.18)

The absence of this connection between what is learnt in classroom, the schools' hidden curriculum, teacher ideology and identity, and real life experiences has resulted in students learning to deploy bits of information to pass tests but failing to connect same knowledge to their practical realities (Wraga, 2009). The enactment of a more impactful curriculum would have to connect all the dots.

CONCLUSION

It has been amply proven in literature, the immense contribution of teaching about religion in increasing religious knowledge, reducing prejudice, and promoting religious pluralism (American Academy of Religion, 2010; National Council for the Social Studies, 1984; Willaime, 2007). The inclusion of religion in the curriculum of Ghanaian schools is to achieve these goals (Ghana Education Service, 2008). This study has revealed that students still hold misconceptions about AIR in spite of their lessons on religion. They continue to interpret AIR practices through their Christian and Islamic metanarratives calling to question the impact of their lessons on religion. The missing link has been the failure to acknowledge the impact of contextual

happenings on the realization of curriculum objectives, and to connect academic knowledge to the lived experiences of students. Obviously, including religion in the curriculum is only half the problem solved. Without conscious efforts at critical pedagogy in the teaching about religion, lessons might end up reinforcing stereotypes and become counter-productive to promoting religious pluralism. Curriculum implementers ought to be mindful of this reality and suggest more innovative learning experiences that bridge the gap between classroom instruction and contemporary life outside school. Mulya and Aditomo's (2019) report on film making project about religious tolerance in Indonesia could be one such way of helping students unlearn their religious biased stereotypes and embracing open-mindedness in learning about other religions.

The role of teachers in fostering impactful learning experiences in religious education is crucial more than ever. To do this, teachers ought to make personal commitments to fair representations. Bracketing of faith has been suggested as a way to deal with teacher bias (Yaokumah, Opoku, & Annobil, 2010) but it might seem more challenging in view of the pervasive nature of religious thought. In place of faith bracketing, I suggest religious faith disclosure by teachers as a measure of checking their subjectivities. If teachers will disclose their religious faiths at first instance of their class, and seek the support of their students to stay unbiased, the pronouncement in itself will become a reflexive psycho-ideological check on them. At the same time, students will begin to monitor and draw their attention when teachers appear to be acting in a biased manner. Just as political ideology disclosure has been found useful to check against teacher political bias (Hess & McAvoy, 2008), the time has come for a paradigm shift from objectivist approach of faith bracketing to a more subjectivist way of dealing with teacher bias. This is one sure solution to making religious education realistic pedagogically and more impactful in practice.

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