

# **Confronting the Exclusive Dominance of Christianity in Zimbabwe's Advanced Level Divinity Syllabus through Africanisation**

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## **Abstract**

In the light of the Christian religion's exclusive dominance of the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus (9154) in present day Zimbabwe, what could be a more attractive way to also incorporate the religion of the indigenous people of Zimbabwe? In answer to this question, we will first situate the exclusion of the indigenous religion from the syllabus in the context of the colonial experience that demeaned and considered it as unqualified to be part of the syllabus. This has given rise to the exclusive dominance of the Christian religion in the syllabus. Second, the current Advanced Level Divinity Syllabus is critiqued with the objective of highlighting that its exclusive dominance by the Christian religion ought to be contested. Third, we argue that it is necessary for the government to Africanise the curriculum so that it genuinely accommodates both the indigenous people of Zimbabwe's religion and other religions including Christianity. This is a matter of justice that seeks not only to establish parity between the religion of the indigenous people of Zimbabwe and others, but also to reject the contestable position that there are some religions that are more superior to others. Though some have attempted to critique the dominance of the Christian religion in the so-called 'Religious Studies' syllabus, no one has pointedly and systematically undertook to propose the Africanisation of the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus in present day Zimbabwe in the manner that we intend to do. The novelty of this article thus resides in its attempt to employ the Africanisation discourse in order to democratise the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus in present day Zimbabwe.

**Keywords:** divinity, syllabus, Christianity, colonisation, Africanisation, multi-religion

## **Introduction**

The questioning of the continued dominance of the Christian religion in religion-related subjects in 'postcolonial' Zimbabwe's school curriculum is not new. The works by Museka (2012a), Museka (2012b) and Gwaravanda, Masitera & Muzambi (2013), and Machingura & Mugebe (2015) are some that have attempted a critique of the *status quo* and its tendency to sideline the religion<sup>1</sup> of the indigenous people of Zimbabwe from the curriculum. Our task in this article is to compliment the brilliant scholarly efforts that have already been made so far by specifically focusing on the critique of the Advanced Level Divinity Syllabus<sup>2</sup>.

We note that the Advanced Level Divinity Syllabus is exclusively dominated by content that is derived from the Christian religion at the expense of the religion of the indigenous people of Zimbabwe (ZIMSEC Divinity 9154). This is despite the fact that the National Culture Policy of Zimbabwe (2015: 24) stresses the need 'to promote respect and tolerance among different religions, beliefs and value-systems in the country'. In light of this situation, we seek its Africanisation: a task which we suggest ought to be driven by the government. By this, we mean that the syllabus ought to be realistically changed so that it accommodates both the religion of the indigenous people of Zimbabwe and other religions<sup>3</sup> (see Chemhuru 2016: 419; Ramose 2016: 546-

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<sup>1</sup> Though, the indigenous ethnic groups in Zimbabwe have indigenous religions that they identify with, we use the term 'religion' in reference to these religions, because of the apparent commonalities that they share.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this article, by 'Advanced Level Divinity Syllabus', we are referring to the Zimbabwe School Examinations Council (ZIMSEC), Divinity 9154, Advanced Level syllabus that is in use from 2013 to 2018. The Cambridge Advanced Level Divinity syllabus, which is still written mainly in some private schools in Zimbabwe, is excluded from the present article. The reason for our focus on the former is that it is locally designed and is written in all public schools.

<sup>3</sup> We are happy to note that part of the fundamental changes to the 'Advanced Level Divinity syllabus' that this article proposes have started to be

547; Mungwini 2016: 524). In doing so, it is inadequate to expect students to simply apply what they learn from the Christian religion to their existential situation. This, to us, reflects cosmetic changes to the syllabus that do not realistically speak to the necessity of Africanisation of the Advanced Level Divinity Syllabus which we seek to defend in this article. This constitutes our point of departure in this article.

As we critique the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus, our thesis differs from that of Museka (2012a), Museka (2012b), Gwaravanda, Masitera & Muzambi (2013), and Machingura & Mugebe (2015). While these thinkers focus primarily on the Junior Certificate and Ordinary Level teaching of religious education (except in the case of Museka (2012b) who makes reference to the Advanced Level Divinity Syllabus), our focus is pointedly on the limitations of the Advanced Level Divinity Syllabus in respect to its exclusive dominance by one religion. Yet, the religious demographics in Zimbabwe point to a diversity of religions that the various segments of the population adhere to: Christians<sup>4</sup> 81.66%, Ethnoreligions 15.86%, Agnostics 1.01%, Muslims 0.73%, Bahai 0.32% and Others 0.42% (Gwaravanda, Masitera & Muzambi 2013: 222). In the light of the diversity of religions which segments of the population of Zimbabwe adhere to, it is curious that Christianity exclusively dominates the Advanced level Divinity syllabus. In light of this *status quo*, we call for the Africanisation of this syllabus.

We contend that the realistic change to the present Advanced Level Divinity syllabus is necessary in order to enable the co-existence of the religion of the indigenous people of Zimbabwe and other religions. We consider the call for the Africanisation of the Advanced Level Divinity Syllabus as a novel contribution to the already existing literature on the necessity of the liberation of the so-called ‘Religious Studies syllabus’ in Zimbabwe from its exclusive

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implemented beginning 2017 with this syllabus being replaced with ‘Family and Religious Studies syllabus’ which has, as its contents, Indigenous Religion, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. However, those who wrote Advanced Level Divinity examinations in 2017 were still using the curriculum which we are critiquing in the present article.

<sup>4</sup> Even though, demographically, Christianity appears to be the dominant religion in Zimbabwe, it can be noted that the self-confessed Christians in Zimbabwe also doubles up as adherents of the indigenous religion (Chavhunduka 2001: 4).

dominance by the Christian religion. As we shall submit later on in the article, this fundamental change in the content of the curriculum necessarily ought to be accompanied by a change of the title of the present syllabus. We will argue that the title 'Divinity', as it is employed in reference to the syllabus, is contentious in regard to its focus.

The method that informs this study is the historical-analytic method. This is basically a combination of the historical and analytic methods. The historical method involves the discussion of how history helps in understanding the present and mapping the future (Schneider 1963: 201) while the analytic method involves the critical analysis and interpretation of basic concepts (Owolabi 2001: 150-151) that are used in a certain discourse in order to draw lessons that could be used to interpret the present and inform the future. As stated by Kosterec (2016: 84), '... one uses an analytic method to obtain, decode or make explicit information which is hidden, encoded or entailed by the information in a pre-existing knowledge base'.

The historical-analytic method is relevant to this study because it combines the discussion on how the past has and continues to influence the present and shape the future as well as the critical analysis of such connections with the objective of drawing certain conclusions. In this regard, we find it necessary to look at how the colonial encounter in Zimbabwe accounts for the present situation and how such a *status quo* could be changed so that things could be perceived and done differently in future. An analysis of the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus in Zimbabwe shows that it exclusively draws its content from the Christian religion: a position that has been in existence since the inception of colonial rule in the country. Having noted the untenable situation whereby the religion of the indigenous people of Zimbabwe has been excluded from the official curriculum, we suggest its Africanisation so that the indigenous people's religion co-exists with other religions such as Christianity.

In pursuit of the objective of this article, we have set the following as points of discussion. We begin by noting how Zimbabwe's colonial experience has led to the partial destruction of the religion of the indigenous people of Zimbabwe and the elevation of Christianity to the position of exclusive dominance of the school syllabus. It is this injustice that was inaugurated through colonialism which remains in place up to the present day. In the second section, we critique the current Advanced Level Divinity Syllabus. The objective is to highlight its problematic exclusive dominance by the Christian religion. In the third section, we present a case for the Africanisation of the

Advanced Level Divinity Syllabus. Reasons for the necessity of such an undertaking are stated. We argue that the liberation of the Advanced Level Divinity Syllabus in Zimbabwe from its exclusive dominance by the Christian religion is long overdue. This is especially necessary given that its recipients in Zimbabwe are predominantly the indigenous people whose religion is curiously excluded from the subject content. We, therefore, seek to argue that this is an act of injustice that ought to be remedied through the Africanisation of the syllabus. We now proceed to show how colonialism has led to the partial destruction of the religion of the indigenous people of Zimbabwe and the elevation of the Christian religion to the position of the sole and authentic religion that deserves exclusive dominance of the school syllabus.

### **Colonialism and the Indigenous Religion**

From the period of colonialism to the present neo-colonial period in Zimbabwe, hegemony has remained the defining character of the relations between people from the dominant culture and the indigenous people (Shamuyarira 1975: 57; Bourdillon 1976: 9-15; Belfiglio 1978: 197; Mungazi 1985: 196; Hungwe 1994: 1). In the quest to subjugate the indigenous people of Zimbabwe, their membership to human beings *qua* human beings was conveniently doubted. The denial of the humanity of the indigenous people and indeed their religion laid the ground for the imposition of the hegemonic powers' paradigm and the attempts at destroying that of the indigenous people. This is true of the manner in which the religion of the indigenous people was denigrated and replaced with the Christian religion.

In order to impose their own religion and thought systems on the indigenous people, the colonial settlers and their missionary accomplices had to conveniently deny the existence of a religion among the indigenous people of Zimbabwe, that deserved recognition and respect as their own (Gelfand 1968: 65; Gelfand 1981: 62-65; see *also* Wiredu 2003: 27; Wiredu 1998: 17; Taiwo 1998: 9; Kaoma 2016: 63). For this reason, the indigenous people of Zimbabwe disliked missionaries and their colonial counterparts (Gelfand 1968: 69). As a result of the resistance that the imposition of the Christian religion faced, the colonial settlers and missionaries had to force the indigenous people to embrace it (Shropshire 1933: 411; Zvobgo 1976: 42; Zvobgo 1986: 43). Since the missionary activities and colonisation were administered simulta-

neously, it is reasonable to consider these two as operating in common purpose in order to attain the colonial project (Parker 1960: 175; White 1996: 18; Smit 2016: 24; Kaoma 2016: 66-67).

The hegemonic people's religion was considered as important in grounding and shaping '... the professional, academic and moral training of their subjects' (White 1996: 18). It was also intended to pacify the dominated people so that they could regard colonisation and the imposition of Christianity as positive developments (Hungwe 1994: 6). Perhaps Hilliard III's (1978: 112) contention that colonialism turned the truth upside down captures the manner in which the religion of the indigenous people of Zimbabwe was trivialised and suppressed. It was assumed that the hegemonic culture had a template of what religion is and ought to be (see Jeater 2005: 1 & 3). What the indigenous people of Zimbabwe regarded as religion was dismissed as such on the basis of the template of the hegemonic culture. With reference to the 'lenses' that the colonial authorities used to perceive the indigenous people of Zimbabwe, Jeater (2005: 1) argues that 'most of these lenses distorted rather than clarified their view of the African people in front of their eyes'. This hazy understanding of the conquered people might explain the contestable views about them, their belief and thought systems.

In defending the imposition of Christianity on the indigenous people of Zimbabwe, Keigwin (1923: 17) reports that 'the fundamental necessity of Christian teaching for those who have been led to abandon much of what was to them their religion should always be recognised'. The assumed superiority of the hegemonic culture's own civilisation<sup>5</sup> and religion over those of the indigenous people provided the basis for the imposition of their religion on the indigenous people. Yet, as Gelfand (1981: 62) argues, 'the Black man never asked for this 'civilisation' but was expected to receive it with open hands'.

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<sup>5</sup> There is a widespread, though contestable, tendency by some people from the dominant culture to consider themselves as the sole authors of civilisation. As a result, people from other geopolitical centres are excluded from the genus that has contributed to world civilisation (see Austin 1975: 28; Gelfand 1968: 66; Gelfand 1981: 62; Jeater 2005: 2). Yet not all civilisations are 'Western' in origin. In fact people from other geopolitical centres have always contributed to global civilisation. It is contestable for some people from the dominant culture to appoint themselves as the sole authors of civilisation which, as a matter of necessity, ought to be accorded transcultural appeal and dominance.

The denigration of the religion of the indigenous people of Zimbabwe has led to its exclusion from the school and university curricula. As Chitando (2005: 181) argues, ‘the current low status of ATRs<sup>6</sup> in the academic study of religion is largely due to the tendency by missionaries to minimise the indigenous traditions of Africa’. It was considered as not worth placing it at the position of parity with the dominant culture’s religion (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2007: 188). In fact, the indigenous religion did not fit the dominant culture’s understanding of religion (Viriri 2004: 350). As a result, the religion of the dominant culture, that is, Christian religion, became the sole religion that was taught in the school curriculum.

It was the principal responsibility of missionary societies to establish a significant number of schools (Chimhundu 1992: 97; Morris 1930: 38) and to ‘educate’ the indigenous people of Zimbabwe to accept the superiority of Christianity and its agents (Gelfand 1968: 66). Since their objective in Zimbabwe and elsewhere was to spread and convert people to the Christian religion, the education that they imparted had a strong bias to the Christian teachings (Murray 1935: 229; Colclough, Löfstedt, Manduvi-Moyo, Maravanyika & Ngwata 1990: 35; Chimhundu 1992: 96; Summers 1994: 5; Chitando 2001: 177).

The religion of the indigenous people of Zimbabwe was relegated to a case study of what religion ought not to be. As Gelfand (1968: 65) argues in reference to the missionary’s lowly view of the indigenous people’s religion: ‘yet-with certain notable exceptions-he did not bother to inquire any further as to the beliefs of the African but adopted a superior attitude based practically entirely on first impressions’. The injustice of the decision to exclude the religion of the indigenous religion from the school curriculum is indisputable. This was indeed an alienating experience (Pwiti & Ndoro 1999: 143). Yet, the indigenous people were expected to be grateful to the dominant culture for graciously introducing to them that which they did not have in their culture, that is, a ‘civilised’ religion (see Taiwo 1998: 9-10). The assumed absence of a ‘civilised’ religion among the indigenous people of Zimbabwe before the arrival of the colonial settlers is considered as a fact of history. However, this is contestable. The indigenous people of Zimbabwe indeed had a religion that spoke to their lived experiences but which the dominant culture simply denigrated and trivialised.

We take the deliberate exclusion of the indigenous people’s religion

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<sup>6</sup> By ATRs, Chitando (2005: 181) is referring to African Traditional Religions.

from the school curriculum as an attempt at destroying it. It is largely incontestable that the Christian missionaries were eager to destroy the religion of the indigenous people (Chavhunduka 2001: 3) for some reasons. The missionaries and colonial settlers knew that the indigenous people of Zimbabwe were strongly attached to their religion (Zvobgo 1981: 42). As a result, they resisted the colonial system and attempts at converting them to Christianity during the 1896-7 uprisings (Zvobgo 1981: 42). The religion of the indigenous people of Zimbabwe was considered as one of the catalysts for their spirited resistance to colonisation and conversion to Christianity (Msellemu 2013: 146). Military force had to be used in order to end opposition to the imposition of colonial rule and Christianity. In order to completely destroy the spirit of resistance among the indigenous people, the religion of the indigenous people became a target for suppression (Zvobgo 1980: 42). This was done in order to weaken its influence on the indigenous people (Pwiti & Ndoro 1999: 147). For Zvobgo (1980: 43), 'schools became nerve centres of Christian work by serving as places where Christian values and beliefs were systematically inculcated'.

The suppression of indigenous people's religion and its exclusion from the school curriculum enabled the missionaries and colonial settlers to rule without much resistance. However, this did not totally succeed in suppressing and breaking the bond of the dominated people with their own paradigms. The indigenous people continued to uphold belief in their own religion (Chavhunduka 2001: 3) even though the dominance of one religion was entrenched and foisted through the school curriculum. The resilience of the indigenous religion in the face of serious attempts at totally destroying it gives us hope that it can be resurrected from this *status quo*.

Quite surprisingly, at 'independence' in 1980, the basic character of colonial education was retained by the new government. In the sphere of religion, the Christian religion retained its exclusive dominance of the Advanced level Divinity syllabus. The curriculum and the administration of examinations remained the preserve of the University of Cambridge in Britain. Even though the Zimbabwe government expressed the need to localise the Ordinary and Advanced level examinations as way back as 1983, Zimbabwe School Examinations Council Act (ZIMSEC ACT 1994) was enacted in 1994 with the first ZIMSEC Advanced level examinations being written in 2003. The stated political reason for the localisation of the curriculum is that 'localization ensures the end of colonial curricula in Zimbabwe' (<http://www.zimsec.co.zw/about-zimsec/>).



Yet, localisation did not translate to the co-existence of the Christian religion and other religions such as that of the indigenous people of Zimbabwe. The reason for the failure to change the syllabus could be located in the tenuous nature of the ‘independence’ that Zimbabwe attained in 1980. It was basically ‘independence’ in name but in reality, very little has been done to overturn the prejudicial narrative pertaining to the status of indigenous religion when compared to the Christian religion. Below, we seek to carry out a critical analysis of the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus with the objective of establishing the need to change it so that it also derives part of its content from the religion of the indigenous people of Zimbabwe.

### **The Current Advanced Level Divinity Syllabus (9154)**

We begin this section by noting that it is unclear why the syllabus is referred to as ‘Divinity’. The term ‘divinity’ seems to point at some supernatural being that is considered as having some powers to control human life and the environment in general (Smith 2016: 279-280). Yet the content designated as thus is not solely confined to some ‘divinity’ but covers various aspects of the religious belief system of some people. As a result, the term ‘divinity’ becomes misleading. In the light of the contentious nature of the term ‘divinity’, we use it with caution in the present article. In addition, even if its use is to be granted, its monotheistic and mono-focal stance shows that its content does not embrace other ‘divinities’ and the belief systems that can be derived from or attributed to them. It is possible that, besides the Christian ‘divinity’, there are other ‘divinities’ in existence. In this light, the suggested change to this syllabus ought to embrace diverse ‘divinities’.

Because of the contentious and mono-focal nature of the term ‘divinity’ in describing the content of the syllabus, we suggest that it ought to be replaced with the title ‘Advanced Studies of Religions’. We propose this name in the light of the equally contentious nature of the term ‘Religious Studies’ (Smit & Chetty 2016: 153). Considered as a purely academic discipline, the term ‘Religious Studies’ seems not to capture the rigorous intellectual endeavour that the subject pursues. To call it ‘Religious Studies’ is to dilute its disinterested, critical and objective attributes. The implication of such naming is that the parameters within which religion is ‘studied’ are set and defined by the religion being studied. It simply becomes a ‘religious study’ of a particular religion and not an objective and truly detached study which can

be done by anyone irrespective of whether one is a believer or not.

Yet a thoroughly academic study of religions ought to be conceived as operating at a level different from the subject matter being studied. For the study of religion to attain a truly objective and unbiased mode, it ought to be strictly considered as a study 'of' religion. As a study 'of' religion, it ought to proceed from a position of detachment and objectivity which will then render its outcome a truly academic study of the subject matter. Our consideration of the 'Advanced Studies of Religions' as a 'second-order activity' and religion as a 'first-order activity' is informed by Hick's (1990: 1-2) thesis that 'philosophy of religion' is a 'second-order activity' while religion is considered as a 'first-order activity'. Religion becomes the normative discipline that is critically studied at the meta-level. In our view, the critical, unbiased and objective study of religions is captured in the proposed title 'Advanced Studies of Religions'. The reference to 'religions' is actually an announcement of our resolve to reject the questionable stance that the Christian religion is the only authentic one and worthy of being studied (see Smit and Chetty 2009: 340). We now turn to the analysis of the so-called Divinity syllabus.

Three papers constitute the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus. The papers are 9154/1, 9154/2 and 9154/3. Students are supposed to study two of these three papers of which 9154/1 is compulsory. Paper 9154/1 is concerned with issues pertaining to the section of the Christian Bible called the 'Old Testament'. Papers 9154/2 and 9154/3 are focused on the study of the defined sections of the Christian Bible called the 'New Testament'. In this connection, it appears that the issues that constitute the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus are purely defined by the geography and the people who reside in this geographic space. Any attempts at making them transcultural in appeal and application are outright conjecture. On the basis of this position, we seek to argue that the syllabus totally does not speak to the religion of the indigenous people of Zimbabwe.

As stated in the introduction of the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus (ZIMSEC Divinity 9154):

The syllabus gives the students the opportunity to: 1. develop knowledge and understanding of some key religious teachings and issues in the Old Testament and New Testament; 2. develop skills in interpreting and comparing views expressed in recent academic study in the chosen areas; 3. attempt an informed response to religious and

moral issues arising out of their study; 4. demonstrate application of major lessons or issues learnt to the Zimbabwean context.

The first point to note and put to question here is that the students are expected to study and attain knowledge of the ‘Old Testament’ and ‘New Testament’. Even though it is important to learn religions from other geopolitical centres, it is imperative for the indigenous people of Zimbabwe to also study and know their own indigenous religion.

This is the major limitation of the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus. The impression drawn from such a syllabus is that the Christian religion is the sole and authentic religion that deserves exclusive dominance of the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus in Zimbabwe. Yet to accept this view is to disregard the fact that the indigenous people have their own religion that reflects their own lived experiences. As Museka (2012b: 55) argues, ‘no opportunity is provided for open and genuine educational engagement with other religious systems’.

The denigration and downgrading of the religion of the indigenous people to the level of a peripheral religion that does not deserve to co-exist with the Christian religion in the school curriculum was considered as necessary in the dominant culture’s civilising mission. The content of the present Advanced Level Divinity syllabus reflects this questionable thinking. Keigwin (1923: 12) actually identified religion and education as ‘powerful agencies’ that fostered ‘progress’ among the indigenous people. The imposition of the Christian religion on the indigenous people was actually taken as a positive move in rescuing them from their ‘dark’ past (Challiss 1982: 113). This is contestable because the imposed colonial education and religion have been blamed for attempting to destroy indigenous religion and education. Far from being an agent of ‘progress’, the exclusive dominance of the Christian religion in the syllabus was and remains an alienating experience (Lebakeng, Phalane & Dalindjebo 2006: 73).

Magesa (1997: 16) submits that there has been emphasis on the need for interreligious dialogue with the objective of promoting worldwide peace. In fact, realistic dialogue between Christianity and the indigenous religion has failed to materialise (Chavhunduka 2001: 3). As Magesa (1997: 16) argues, ‘on the contrary, contact between Christianity and African Religion has historically been predominantly a monologue, bedevilled by assumptions prejudicial against the latter, with Christianity culturally more vocal and

ideologically more aggressive. Therefore, what we have heard until now is largely Christianity speaking about African Religion, not African Religion speaking for itself'.

We concur with Magesa (1997: 16) that Christianity has, for long, put to silence the religion of the indigenous people. Instead of seeking dialogue between Christianity and the indigenous religion, efforts were actually made to destroy the indigenous religion (Chavhunduka 2001: 3). Yet for realistic dialogue to be achieved, it ought to proceed from the position of parity and respect of each other's religions. The lack of dialogue that leads to the co-existence between Christianity in particular and the indigenous religion is apparently noticeable in the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus in Zimbabwe which is exclusively dominated by the Christian religion.

With reference to the teaching of religion, Museka (2012a: 25) argues that the curriculum does not reflect the cultural diversity of the people who constitute the Zimbabwean society. This is true of the present Advanced Level Divinity syllabus in Zimbabwe. Students are exclusively taught some aspects of the Christian religion as if they do not have their own religions that speak to their peculiar cultural experiences. Yet, what is taught in the school system and the so-called formal education institutions has significant impact on the impressions and minds of the students. If one religion is taught in these institutions and others are left out, the unexpressed thought is that that which is included in the syllabi is superior to that which is not. As a result, the religion that is not included in the curriculum faces near total extinction as the curriculum of the school system is mistaken as the authentic arbiter of that which is worthy of study and that which is not.

The exclusion of the indigenous religion from the content of the present Advanced Level Divinity syllabus in Zimbabwe becomes a serious threat to the prospects of its continued existence. The requirement for students to 'demonstrate application of major lessons or issues learnt to the Zimbabwean context' (ZIMSEC Divinity 9154) is deceptive and contentious as we will demonstrate below. The idea that this requirement may foist on the students is that they do not have a religion that is worth studying. It becomes necessary to study a religion that does not speak to their lived experiences and then attempt to draw and apply some 'lessons' learnt from it to their peculiar lived experiences. Understood in this way, this requirement is detrimental to the continued existence of the religion of the indigenous people of Zimbabwe. In light of this situation, we seek to argue that the syllabus ought to be

Africanised. We now turn to a discussion on the prospects of Africanising the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus in Zimbabwe.

### **Africanisation of the Advanced Level Divinity Syllabus**

The term ‘Africanisation’ shares some similarities with some terms in that it does not admit of a single and uncontentious definition. It is a term that has been understood differently by those who have attempted to define it (Van der Walt 1997: 55, Horsthemke 2004: 571; Horsthemke 2006: 454; Nkoane 2006: 52). Yet, as Botha (2007: 205) states, ‘the dominance of Western supremacy in the past and the resistance against it play a major role in the epistemology of Africanisation’. The pursuit of the various definitions that have been ascribed to the term ‘Africanisation’ is not the mandate of the present article. What we seek to do is to draw the basic idea that we think aptly defines this term. In this regard, we appeal to Ramose’s (1998) understanding of Africanisation. For Ramose (1998: vi), Africanisation ‘... holds that different foundations exist for the construction of pyramids of knowledge. It holds further that communication is possible between the various pyramids. It disclaims the view that any pyramid of knowledge is by its very nature eminently superior to all the others’.

The recognition of the diversity of religions is important in refuting the contestable thinking that there is one religion that necessarily ought to exclusively dominate the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus in Zimbabwe. For the purposes of the present article, the term ‘Africanisation’ is used to refer to the realistic change of the *status quo* that excludes the indigenous people’s paradigm from what is taught and studied so that the syllabus embraces it and other paradigms. In respect to the objective of the present article, Africanisation calls for the co-existence of the indigenous people’s religion and other religions in the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus. This is a direct response to the exclusion of the religion of the indigenous people from the syllabus.

Museka (2012a: 25), Museka (2012b: 56), Gwaravanda, Masitera & Muzambi (2013: 230), and Machingura & Mugebe (2015: 136) appeal to what they refer to as the ‘multi-faith approach’ as a corrective to the present exclusive dominance of the Christian religion in the study of religion. According to these authors, the ‘multi-faith approach’ recognises the diversity of religions through incorporating them into the syllabus and teaching them.

This is a brilliant proposal. While we agree with them in regard to the objective of this proposal, we seek to differ with them in regard to the terminology that ought to be used in order to capture this commendable proposal.

The thesis that we defend is that religion is not reducible to faith. Religion is much broader and expansive in respect to its scope compared to faith. In fact, faith is just but a constituent part of religion. Faith's fixation with the 'belief' in the unknown and unproven renders it inadequate to capture the truly academic stance of the study of religions. In this light, we propose the use of the term 'multi-religion approach' in place of the term 'multi-faith approach'. By this reasoning, the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus ought to genuinely allow the co-existence of the religion of the indigenous people of Zimbabwe and other religions.

However, for the Africanisation of the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus to be attained, the reality of the existence of diverse religions first ought to be accepted. The acceptance of the reality of indigenous religion is not an easy task in the light of the level and extent of its demonisation in present day Zimbabwe—a problem that originates at the inception of the missionary and colonial rule in Zimbabwe (Chavhunduka 2001: 3). The intriguing part to this problem is that even after the end of direct colonial rule in Zimbabwe; the Christian religion's indigenous converts continue to portray their own indigenous religion in a negative way. We attribute this to enduring mental colonisation. This is an outcome of their colonial experience that denigrates the indigenous religion and exclusively promotes the Christian religion. This is despite the removal of those who foisted the Christian religion on the indigenous people of Zimbabwe from positions of direct political control.

In this connection, mental decolonisation of the indigenous people becomes imperative if the contestable denigration of the religion of the indigenous people is to be refuted and rejected. Though it has proven to be a difficult task to deconstruct the mental colonisation that the indigenous people have endured, it is a worthwhile endeavour if the indigenous religion is to be resurrected from its position of forced dormancy. The supposed superiority of the Christian religion over the indigenous religion ought to be rejected. It ought to be rejected because religion principally reflects the circumstances and lived experiences that produce it. It becomes questionable to attempt at ranking religions.

In the light of the exclusive dominance of the Christian religion in the education curriculum, Museka (2012a: 25) calls for a 'paradigm shift' in order for the curriculum to embrace the cultural diversity of the Zimbabwean society.

This is considered as necessary in order for other religions, including that of the indigenous people, to be included in the changed curriculum. While Museka (2012a: 25) suggests a ‘paradigm shift’ as a corrective to the exclusive dominance of the syllabus by one religion, we seek to differ and suggest a ‘paradigm change’ in respect to the present Advanced Level Divinity syllabus in Zimbabwe.

A ‘paradigm change’ demands a realistic transformation of the *status quo*, that is, a change of a fundamental nature. The established way of doing things ought to be transformed so that a completely new way of doing things is established. In arguing thus, we are inspired by Ramose’s (2003b: 137-138) thesis that realistic change of the educational curriculum is possible if there is a ‘paradigm change’ and not a ‘paradigm shift’. A ‘paradigm shift’ is tenuous because it has to be attained within the already existing and established parameters (Ramose 2003b: 137). Yet a ‘paradigm change’ seeks to dismantle these established parameters. The reasoning is that a ‘paradigm shift’ does not realistically overturn the *status quo* but simply lead to cosmetic changes. In the context of this study, the dominance of the Christian religion in the syllabus is retained. The need for a ‘paradigm change’ becomes imperative if parity between diverse religions in the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus is to be established. We now turn to a consideration of some reasons why it is necessary to Africanise the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus in Zimbabwe.

### ***Reasons for Africanising the Syllabus***

It is necessary to state and explain reasons that we consider as important in justifying the Africanisation of the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus in Zimbabwe. The *first point* for discussion pertains to the dominance of the school system in imparting knowledge to the recipients. The school system as it exists in present day Zimbabwe has colonial roots. When the missionaries and the colonial settlers settled in Zimbabwe they imposed their school system on the indigenous people (MacKenzie 1993: 46).

This school system was principally foisted to impart the Christian doctrine and the barest of education designed to enable the indigenous people to be of useful service to the missionaries and colonial settlers (Taylor 1923: 2; Trevor 1927: 99; Shropshire 1933: 415-416; Peck 1966: 67; Austin 1975: 43; Challiss 1979: 220; Zvobgo 1981: 13; MacKenzie 1993: 50; Summers 2011:

134)<sup>7</sup>. Those who controlled the school curriculum employed it to attain their own objectives. As Apple (1993: 222) argues:

the curriculum is never simply a neutral assemblage of knowledge, somehow appearing in the texts and classrooms of a nation. It is always part of a selective tradition, someone's selection, some group's vision of legitimate knowledge. It is produced out of the cultural, political, and economic conflicts, tensions, and compromises that organize and disorganize a-people.

The content of the curriculum that the missionaries and colonial settlers imposed on the indigenous people of Zimbabwe was derived from their own paradigm and not that of the indigenous people of Zimbabwe (Peck 1966: 7). In order to reverse the *status quo*, this curriculum ought to be duly changed. This is necessary if we are to infuse into it the content that speaks to the lived experiences of the indigenous people of Zimbabwe. Most importantly, the content of what is taught influences the way and manner in which we access reality. If the content exclusively focuses on a non-indigenous paradigm, then its recipients are likely to conclude that they do not have a paradigm worth studying or simply that it is non-existent.

This has serious implications on these people's humanity. The content which is taught and indeed its authors or those associated with it are likely to be considered as having unparalleled superiority. The recipients of this content are thus considered as, and can indeed, through time, consider themselves as inferior to those who design and provide content for the curriculum. As Nyamnjoh (2012: 134) argues, the recipients of colonial education can suffer

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<sup>7</sup> As Bacchus (1993: 65) remarks, '... the colonial authorities were always aware of the potential social disruption which might be caused by having more 'educated' individuals in the colonies than the number of 'suitable' jobs available for them. To prevent this from happening they used 'practical education' partly to dampen the students' occupational aspirations and de-emphasise their preparation for white collar jobs. In addition, they severely limited the provision of educational facilities especially at the higher levels while the focus of the curriculum offered in the primary schools became symbolised by 'the Gospel and the Plough'. In this context, religion was indeed used as opium of the masses'.



‘... self-doubt, self-deprecation, and self-annihilation’. It is a situation that requires the concerned people to resurrect from it and reassert themselves as equal contributors to the production of knowledge. In this light, it is imperative to change the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus so that part of its content is derived from and speaks to the religion of the indigenous people of Zimbabwe. We thus consider Carnoy’s (1974: 1) thesis that ‘for an institution to play an important role in society, it must be ‘legitimate’: people who use it must believe that it serves their interests and needs’ as important to our call for the Africanisation of the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus. As it is presently constituted, the syllabus does not save the indigenous people’s ‘interests and needs’ in so far as it excludes content from their religion.

*Second*, in Zimbabwe’s secondary school system, the ‘Advanced Level’ is the normal gateway to tertiary education. In the light of its importance as a feeder to tertiary education, its curriculum ought to surely allow the co-existence of the indigenous people’s knowledge paradigm and others. The same ought to be necessarily done to prior levels of education. This is important because the content of the primary and secondary schools’ curricula greatly influences what is taught at tertiary level. It becomes imperative for this curriculum to embrace the contribution of the indigenous people of Zimbabwe to the stock of knowledge. In this light, if the indigenous people’s religion is excluded from the primary and secondary levels’ syllabi, its chances of being studied at tertiary level are diminished.

Though the universities in Zimbabwe that offer humanities may allow their students to study the indigenous religion, it is not given the same level of importance as given to the study of the Christian religion. While the study of the Christian religion has a solid base that stretches way back to pre-school, the indigenous religion does not have the same firm base in the school curriculum. It is not surprising that at tertiary institutions, the study of religion of the indigenous people is given less importance compared to that of the Christian religion. In this light, it becomes necessary to change the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus so that it incorporates the religion of the indigenous people of Zimbabwe. This will enable students who decide to pursue ‘studies of religions’ at tertiary level to take the study of indigenous religion seriously. Indeed, we consider the Africanisation of the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus as a way of reasserting the parity of the indigenous religion and others.

*Third*, the indigenous people of Zimbabwe have a right to learn their own religion in addition to other religions. This speaks to the necessity of

justice. It is necessary for them to also learn a religion that derives from their own existential situation. Despite its contested meaning, the term 'democracy' emphasises the imperative to observe and respect the freedoms of individuals. This could be extended to the freedoms of individuals to know and study their own religions in addition to other religions. As Ramose (2003b: 137) argues, the change of paradigm is necessary if natural and historical justice is to be attained by the dominated people. Indeed the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus requires such a fundamental change so that it allows the co-existence of the religion of the indigenous people of Zimbabwe and other religions.

Connected to the above, the liberation of the indigenous people of Zimbabwe will remain a mere possibility if it does not translate to embracing the indigenous people's paradigm in all facets of life and state functions. The indigenous people ought to be allowed to speak for and of themselves (Ramosé 2003a: 118). The era where people from the dominant culture ascribe themselves the prerogative to define and speak for the indigenous people ought to come to an end. As Nkrumah (1965: x) argues, a state that is under the control of hegemonic powers is not in control of its affairs. This insight that we draw from Nkrumah (1965: x) is important as we seek to justify our thesis for the Africanisation of the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus in present day Zimbabwe. The present syllabus basically confirms the view expressed by Nkrumah (1965: xiv) that the independence that the indigenous conquered people of Africa have attained is nominal. Realistic independence in respect to the study of religion ought to mean the wholesale change of the *status quo* with the objective of establishing parity between the indigenous people's religion and others (see Mndende 1994: 123). However, the present constitution of the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus does not speak to the realistic independence of the people of Zimbabwe.

The Africanisation of the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus is actually one attempt at attaining its realistic independence from the control of the dominant culture. By this reasoning, we seek to dispel the notion that independence necessarily means proceeding in the same way and pattern as was done before by those who were in direct control of the indigenous people before 'independence'. Independence ought to reside in the manner in which the indigenous people deconstruct the *status quo* so that it accommodates their voice and paradigm that were previously suppressed and ignored. The Advanced Level Divinity syllabus is one example of a relic of the hegemonic relations between the colonial settlers and the indigenous people of Zimbabwe

that urgently require to be realistically changed.

Implicit in our call for the Africanisation of the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus, is the imperative to liberate the minds of its recipients. We proceed to argue that though the Africanisation of the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus is important in enabling the co-existence of the indigenous people's religion and others, it will remain a tantalising possibility if the indigenous people's minds remain conditioned to think that they do not have a paradigm of thought which is their own. It is important for the indigenous people of Zimbabwe to realise that their present condition of dependence on people from the dominant culture in regard to philosophy, epistemology and, in particular, religion is not testimony to the absence of the same from among them. It is indeed an outcome of the condition of conquest that they endured that reduced them to barely inferior beings that cannot be considered to have attributes that their conquerors had (Tawse-Jollie 1927: 100; Huggins 1953: 625; Whitehead 1960: 194; Jeater 2005: 9).

It becomes imperative to seek the mental liberation of the indigenous people so that they can freely resuscitate their religion so that it can compete with other religions in the transformed curriculum. As observed by Museka (2012b: 65-66), attempts at enabling the co-existence of religions through changing the curriculum has faced resistance principally from the indigenous people themselves. For Museka (2012b: 65-66), some indigenous people, especially those who categorise themselves as Christians, reject the co-existence of the Christian religion and other religions such as the indigenous one. This shows that though externally the indigenous people of Zimbabwe claim to have attained independence from the direct control by people from the dominant culture, they are still in very much in colonial mode.

Since the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus and the examinations are designed and prepared by an indigenous examinations board, it remains curious why the curriculum retains an exclusively Christian paradigm. As Wiredu (1998: 21) argues, if it is not because of the colonised condition of mind, '...ordinary common sense dictates that one should not jettison what is one's own in favor of what has come from abroad for no reason at all'. It is instructive here to also appeal to Nkrumah's (1965: ix) thesis that colonialism has mutated into neo-colonialism. Both colonialism and neo-colonialism are systems of domination. As colonialism mutated into neo-colonialism, nothing fundamentally changed.

The overt display of dominance by people from the dominant culture

has been conveniently replaced by covert means of entrenching dominance. The curriculum is one such means through which the dominant culture retains its dominance over the indigenous people. However, as wa Thiong'o (1981: 129) argues, '...like colonialism before it, neo-colonialism has not completely succeeded in silencing the resistance culture'. This enduring existence of the 'resistance culture' among the indigenous people gives hope for the quest to fundamentally change the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus so that it allows the co-existence of the indigenous religion and other religions.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In this article, we have attempted to present a case for the Africanisation of the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus in present day Zimbabwe. The motivation behind such a contention is that this syllabus is exclusively dominated by a religion that is non-indigenous despite the fact that the indigenous people of Zimbabwe have their own religion that speaks to their existential circumstances. Yet, the religion of the indigenous people of Zimbabwe is excluded from content of this syllabus which students are supposed to study. In the light of this anomaly, we have suggested the Africanisation of this syllabus as a corrective to the present situation. We considered this dimension as a novel contribution to the debate on the need to transform the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus.

In concluding this article, we seek to suggest that the Africanisation of the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus in Zimbabwe can be enhanced by way of putting in written form aspects of the indigenous people of Zimbabwe's religion that still exists in oral form. It goes without saying that the other religions that the indigenous religion has to compete with in the transformed curriculum such as the Christian religion have sizable published materials on them. The same cannot be said of the indigenous religion (see Museka 2012b: 62).

By so suggesting, we are not defending the thesis that the written word is superior to the oral one. Our contention is that the written literature is the one in use in the school system. It is thus imperative for the indigenous people of Zimbabwe to put their religion in written form so that its literature can co-exist with literature from other religions. This literature from the indigenous religion and other religions can then be used to create an Africanised cur-

riculum. But, as we have argued in this article, the mental liberation of the indigenous people of Zimbabwe is imperative if they are to consider their own religion as comparable to religions from other geopolitical centres. Mental liberation of the indigenous people of Zimbabwe becomes necessary in advancing the thesis for the Africanisation of the Advanced Level Divinity syllabus.

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