

THE PLACE OF RELIGION IN THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN NIGERIA: THE ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE*

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Introduction

I have been commissioned to write a lead paper on the theme: "The Place of Religion in the Educational System in Nigeria: The Islamic Perspective" for the 20th Annual Conference of the Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions. This is an assignment which I am delighted to accept (in spite of the short notice given), because I see this as an opportunity for re-establishing the relevance of religion in our curriculum bearing in mind that this has been questioned in a recent revision of the National Policy on Education made by the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC). The problem posed by this revision has engaged the attention of a sister organisation—The Nigerian Association of Teachers of Arabic and Islamic Studies (NATAIS) of which this presenter is the current President, but I consider the Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions (NASR) to be a more appropriate body to tackle the problem because it is the body that brings together scholars from our diverse traditions: African Religion, Islam and Christianity. I therefore congratulate NASR for the choice of this theme.

In attempting to discuss the subject before us, it may be appropriate to focus on the following: The issues involved in choosing an educational system generally; the revolution of the educational system for Nigeria and the place of religion; the effect of the National Policy of Education on the study of religion in our schools, especially at the secondary level; and the implications of the revised policy for the study of religions.

Influences Affecting the Character of an Educational System

Influences affecting the character of an educational system are many. Cramer and Browne (1956) mention seven, namely: the sense of national unity; the

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general economic situation; basic beliefs and traditions including religious and cultural heritage; the status of progressive educational thought; language problems; political background; and attitude toward international co-operation and understanding. Kosemani (1995), in discussing education and national character, classified them as four namely: history, politics, economy and sociology.

The historical factor gives any educational system its history, how it began and how it grew. For instance, in Nigeria the enterprise of education was initially undertaken by the Christian missionaries due to the lukewarm attitude of the colonial administration. The missionaries showed interest in education because they saw it as a useful tool to christianise the people.

In the parts of the country where Islam predated Christianity, the Islamic educational system continued to serve as an alternative system of education. State intervention in education by 1887; the regionalisation of education laws of the pre-independence period; the search for an educational philosophy in the post-independence period and the development of a unified system as a result of the civil war experience are all historical antecedents of the Nigerian educational system.

Political factors dictate the political context of the operation of the educational system. That is to say that the educational system operated by any society is a reflection of the political ideology of that society. For instance, the educational system in a democratic setting would promote democratic ideas while an educational system in a socialist setting would promote socialist ideas. Similarly, an educational system in an Islamic setting would promote Islamic ideas. The political factor also determines the place of education in the priorities of the nation, the national goals of education and the pattern of its administration (Taiwo, 1982).

The economic situation of a country dictates the level of educational opportunities which can be provided for its people. The absence of a buoyant economy can frustrate good educational plans. The educational system in Nigeria, like most countries, is tied to economic needs, hence the shift of emphasis from the liberal arts to science and technological education. The economic strength of Japan today is the product of its education's ability to produce relevant manpower in terms of the country's economic needs.

Lastly, the sociological factor has to do with the traditions and culture of the people, their attitudes and religion and even their languages, all of which influence an educational system. According to Gramer and Browne, of the fundamental beliefs which have influenced education, none is stronger than religion (1956:12). This is why the 1944 Education Act in England made it compulsory that in all schools controlled by the State, each school day should commence with a ceremony of religious devotion and that religious instruction should be a definite part of the curriculum.

In this country, before the obnoxious revision of the 1981 National Policy, religion had always featured prominently on our School Curriculum at the different levels of the educational system.

The Nigerian Educational System

The system which is known today as the Nigerian Educational System has been a product of educational enactments and recommendations of various educational commissions set up to formulate educational policies in the pre-independence and post-independence periods. The system was at the very beginning monopolised by the church missions. The system was consequently religion biased, intensely denominational and shallow in content. For the long period of the colonial administration the colonial education legacy was irrelevant to the needs of the people because it failed to take into consideration their socio-cultural background. The form of education bequeathed to the people tended to produce an educated class of pen-pushers. The system failed to lay the foundation of economic freedom by providing the expertise needed for industrial and agricultural development (NERC, 1981).

After independence, the need was felt for revision and remodelling of the educational system to reflect the aspirations of a sovereign nation and to bring about the desired change in society. To this end, a national conference on curriculum development was held in 1969 to review and identify new national goals for education in Nigeria. The report of this conference published as *A Philosophy for Nigerian Education* was used as a working document in the 1973 Seminar which was organised to make proposals for national policy on education. The Seminar's recommendations under the chairmanship of Chief Adebo and the Federal Government's White Paper gave birth to the 1977 National Policy on Education which is the basis of the Nigerian educational system as we have it today under the 6-3-3-4 structure.

The national education goals as spelt out in the National Policy contain clauses which normally promote the study of religion. These include: (1) the inculcation of national consciousness and national unity; and (2) the inculcation of the right types of values and attitudes for the survival of the individual and of the Nigerian society (National Policy, 1998).

It is in consequence of the conviction that religion can help to realise some of the national educational goals that religious education features on the curriculum of the 6-3-3-4 in spite of the shift of emphasis to functionality. Even then, religion is not given a pride of place in the system. This is because the 1977 policy makes it a core subject only at the Junior Secondary School Level while it is given optional status at the Senior Secondary School Level. This has undoubtedly affected the students' attitude to religious education, especially Islamic Studies as will be seen in the following discussions.

The Effect of Curriculum Structure on the Study of Religion

As we are fully aware, in the Secondary Schools, some subjects are popular among students while some are not. The popularity or unpopularity of a subject is determined first and foremost by the status accorded it on the curriculum. In other words, the attitude of the educational policy makers to particular subjects influences students' attitude in their choice of subjects. The subjects which are

listed as compulsory subjects at the Senior Secondary School Level enjoy popularity among the students and they are as follows:

1. English Language
2. One Nigerian Language
3. Mathematics
4. One of Biology, Chemistry and Physics
5. One of Literature in English, History and Geography
6. Agricultural Science or a Vocational subject.

The non-inclusion of any of the religions in the list of compulsory subjects accounts for their lack of popularity among the students. This is aptly illustrated in Table 1 below.

The 19 subjects listed in the table are mainly in the areas of humanities and science. They exclude vocational and technical subjects. Students' entries for each of the subjects in the examinations specified are recorded with their percentages and ranks in relation to the entry for English which is one of the compulsory subjects for which students must register. The following observations can be made from the table:

1. Most of the subjects show a steady increase in entries for the three years. Four subjects record fluctuations—Arabic, History, Chemistry and Physics. Only French records steady decline.
2. There is general consistency in the level of popularity of the subjects among students as shown in the table for the three examinations.
3. Christian Religious Studies (CRS) is ranked 9th in the three examinations as against the 17th place taken by Islamic Studies. This is a questionable disparity in view of the fact that the two subjects enjoy the same status. The reason is due to more favourable treatment given to CRS by the educational planners as will be seen below.
4. An addition of the percentage of entries in CRS and ISS (Islamic Studies) in each of the three examinations reveal that about 50% of the students are denied the advantage of taking religion each year. The overall percentage of the entries for the two subjects in 1991 is 52, and in 1992 it is 48 while in 1995 it is 47.
5. Arabic and French have the lowest entries even though Arabic fares better than French in the three examinations.

There is a need to know whether or not there is any correlation between the entries in the schools' examinations and the private examinations conducted by the same examination body. Table 2 below shows entries for the same subjects by private candidates for the years 1996, 1997 and 1998.

The following observations can be made from Table 2:

**Table 1: Senior School Certificate Examination (Schools)
1991, 1992 and 1995**
Statistics of Entry

Subjects	Aug./Sept. 1991			May/June 1992			May/June 1995		
	Entry Figure	% in Relation to English	Rank	Entry Figure	% in Relation to English	Rank	Entry Figure	% in Relation to English	Rank
Agric. Sc.	220,221	74.76	5 th	273,040	73.9	5 th	361,973	77.96	5 th
Arabic	765	0.25	18 th	983	0.26	18 th	773	0.16	18 th
Biology	285,690	96.98	3 rd	358,961	97.17	3 rd	453,353	97.6	3 rd
Chemistry	116,526	39.55	7 th	142,379	38.54	8 th	133,188	28.68	12 th
Commerce	80,803	27.43	12 th	114,227	30.92	12 th	175,819	37.86	8 th
CRS	111,179	37.74	9 th	132,051	35.74	9 th	171,332	36.9	9 th
Economics	240,224	81.55	4 th	313,072	84.75	4 th	434,315	93.54	4 th
Eng. Lang.	294,568		1 st	369,391		1 st	464,270		1 st
French	542	0.18	19 th	436	0.11	19 th	229	0.04	19 th
Geography	164,832	55.95	6 th	206,748	55.96	6 th	268,740	57.88	6 th
Government	115,412	39.18	8 th	151,366	40.97	7 th	253,694	54.64	7 th
Hausa Lang.	47,053	15.97	16 th	51,011	13.8	16 th	56,376	12.14	16 th
History	51,330	17.42	13 th	61,597	16.67	14 th	58,790	12.66	15 th
Igbo Lang.	52,482	17.8	14 th	54,798	14.83	15 th	67,894	14.62	14 th
Islamic Stds.	40,876	13.87	17 th	45,714	12.37	17 th	47,787	10.29	17 th
Lit. in Eng.	102,540	34.8	10 th	124,884	33.8	10 th	147,982	31.87	11 th
Mathematics	294,079	99.8	2 nd	365,491	98.94	2 nd	462,273	99.56	2 nd
Physics	96,742	32.84	11 th	124,351	33.66	11 th	120,768	26	13 th
Yoruba	75,932	25.77	13 th	113,879	30.82	13 th	160,256	34.5	10 th

**Table 2: Senior School Certificate Examination (Schools)
1996, 1997 and 1998
Statistics of Entry**

Subjects	1996			1997			1998		
	Entry Figure	% in Relation to English	Rank	Entry Figure	% in Relation to English	Rank	Entry Figure	% in Relation to English	Rank
Agric. Sc.	236,167	66.3	5 th	310,528	68.6	4 th	560,738	80.77	5 th
Arabic	531	0.14	19 th	602	0.13	19 th	4,228	0.6	18 th
Biology	305,657	85.82	4 th	396,588	65.52	5 th	690,060	99.39	3 rd
Chemistry	125,247	35.16	10 th	164,408	36.32	10 th	204,105	29.4	12 th
Commerce	180,497	50.68	7 th	226,587	50.06	7 th	284,187	40.93	8 th
CRS	138,639	38.92	9 th	174,870	38.6	9 th	269,027	38.75	9 th
Economics	345,068	96.89	3 rd	439,840	97.17	3 rd	659,124	94.94	4 th
Eng. Lang.	356,129		1 st	452,608		1 st	694,227		1 st
French	766	0.2	18 th	1,385	0.3	18 th	731	0.1	19 th
Geography	165,173	46.38	8 th	212,724	46.99	8 th	428,761	61.76	6 th
Government	223,224	62.68	6 th	287,089	63.42	6 th	401,302	57.8	7 th
Hausa Lang.	10,403	2.92	17 th	11,584	2.55	17 th	93,528	13.47	15 th
History	28,116	7.89	15 th	30,784	6.8	15 th	70,917	10.2	17 th
Igbo Lang.	52,163	14.6	14 th	60,662	13.4	14 th	114,444	16.48	14 th
Islamic Stds.	16,664	4.67	16 th	19,113	4.22	16 th	87,058	12.54	16 th
Lit. in Eng.	121,881	34.22	11 th	155,892	34.44	12 th	237,462	34.2	11 th
Mathematics	355,083	99.7	2 nd	451,541	99.74	2 nd	694,215	99.9	2 nd
Physics	119,181	33.46	12 th	156,338	34.54	11 th	189,301	27.26	13 th
Yoruba	103,229	28.98	13 th	130,821	28.9	13 th	244,276	35.18	10 th

1. All the subjects listed on the table show a steady increase in entries for the three years except French which records a fluctuation.
2. As in Table 1, there is a general consistency in the level of popularity of the subjects among the students as shown in the entries for the three years.
3. Interestingly, CRS is again ranked 9th in the three examinations as against the 16th place taken by Islamic Studies.
4. An overall percentages for CRS and ISS in each of the three examinations reveal that more than half of the students did not enter for religion.
5. Arabic and French still remain the least popular subjects, though Arabic enjoys more popularity if we consider the total entries for each of the subjects for the three years.

In our search for the reason why there is a wide disparity between the CRS and ISS entries, we discovered that one major factor is the gross inadequacy of teachers employed for the latter and this is confirmed in the Table 3 below.

Table 3 shows the number of teachers employed for each of the subjects listed in Lagos State. English has the highest figure with an average of 6 teachers per school. CRS has 903 teachers (which places it at number 6 on the list) with an average of 2 teachers per school as against 496 for ISS with an average of one teacher per school.

It is important to note that the five subjects which have a higher number of teachers than CRS are all compulsory. This is to us commendable as it will further promote the teaching of the subject in the school, but what is good for the goose should also be good for the gander if justice and equity are be maintained. I know this is the trend in the South Western States in spite of the fact that the population of Muslim and Christian students more or less strike a balance in the zones.

The 1998 National Policy Revision

While we were complaining that the status given to religious education on the curriculum undermines the importance of religion, the 1998 revision made by the NERDC did further damage to the subjects by making CRS and ISS optional also at the Junior Secondary School (JSS) level. The curriculum is now restructured to make the following subjects compulsory at the JSS level:

1. English Language
2. French Language
3. Mathematics
4. Language of Environment
5. A major Nigerian Language other than that of environment
6. Integrated Science
7. Social Studies or Citizenship Education
8. Introductory Technology

**Table 3: Lagos State Teaching Service Commission
Teacher Population Distribution Based on Subjects, July 1991**

No. of school students population	679,181
Teacher population	19,479
No. of secondary schools	369
Ratio of teacher to school	52.79

	Subjects*	No. of Teachers	Average per School
1	English	2,107	5.7
2	Mathematics	1,811	4.9
3	Yoruba	1,189	3.2
4	Agric. Science	1,188	3.2
5	Biology	1,028	2.78
6	CRS	903	2.4
7	Health Education	867	2.3
8	Social Science	788	2.1
9	Economics	718	1.9
10	Int. Science	686	1.85
11	Physical Education	665	1.8
12	Business Studies	634	1.7
13	Chemistry	575	1.55
14	Intro. Tech.	546	1.47
15	Government	539	1.46
16	French	504	1.36
17	ISS	496	1.34
18	Art	484	1.31
19	Commerce	479	1.29
20	Geography	465	1.26
21	Account	460	1.24
22	History	443	1.2
23	Physics	373	1
24	Lit. in Eng.	362	0.98
25	Music	174	0.47
26	Igbo	96	0.26
27	Add. Maths.	70	0.18
28	Arabic	48	0.13
29	Hausa	38	0.1
30	Shorthand	24	0.06

*Subjects listed exclude vocational ones.

We see the inclusion of French on the list of core subjects as an aberration. French is now made compulsory not only at the JSS and SSS (Senior Secondary School) levels but also at the primary school level. To me this is crazy. We have just seen in our analysis that French is one of the least popular subjects in our schools. If any other foreign language is to be made that prominent, to us it should be Arabic which is more relevant to our people in view of the long history of the subject in our land. Our education policy makers should be made to realise that Arabic is indigenous to Nigeria.

Secondly, we see the inclusion of Citizenship Education rather than Religious Education (Islamic and Christian) as a misnomer in a country whose citizens attach serious importance to religion. This we see as a deliberate attempt to 'kill' Islamic and Christian Studies. Perhaps due to our educational policy makers' aversion to religion, they are ignorant of the fact that so called citizenship education is embedded in religious education. In Islamic tradition, the adage *hubbul waṭan minal imān* (love of homeland is part of faith) is well entrenched. Those who retained religious education in the 1981 revised policy must have appreciated the role religion can play in character training and the moral development of youth.

What is perhaps more disturbing is the hypocrisy that motivated the review. Here, I am making reference to the controversial paper that gave birth to the 1998 revised policy which gives the impression that the revision was a premeditated one to relegate our disciplines to a lower status. The paper is the keynote address delivered by the Executive Secretary of NERDC at what is tagged the National Feedback Conference on School Curricula organised by the NERDC in December, 1997.

The Chief Executive of NERDC enumerated the following as the factors necessitating the redesigning of the curricula:

1. Dictates and directives from government for inclusion of new content or new versions of existing content (e.g. Citizenship Education, War Against Indiscipline (WAI) tenets and Mass Mobilization for Social Justice and Economic Recovery (MAMSER) principles);
2. Global world demands (e.g. environmental education, drug abuse education);
3. Requests by professional bodies (geology, consumer education, Science Technology and Society (STS) and Statistics);
4. Complaints by Stakeholders (e.g. demand for removal of modern mathematics and moral education as subjects on their own from the school curriculum).

The points raised here are puzzling. What baffles one's imagination more is the mentioning of the complaints by the Stakeholders that religion should be removed. Who are these Stakeholders? Certainly they must only exist in the wild imagination of the NERDC boss.

This should be seen as a serious challenge for the scholars of religion. The challenge is, not how to resist the relegation of our disciplines to its current

status because I know the NERDC cannot win this battle. Rather the challenge is how to teach our subjects in a way to make them have the desired effect on moral regeneration of the youth. This is because the people advocating the removal of religions from the curriculum believe that the teaching of religion has lost its effect, seeing the extent of moral degeneration among the youth. There is, therefore, the need to redefine the aims of teaching religion in our schools. The aim of teaching religion should not be for indoctrination or conversion. This is the impression one has reading through the aims of CRS teaching at the SSS level, namely:

1. To provide more opportunity for Nigerian youths (not Christian youths?) to learn more about God and develop their faith in Him.
2. To develop the young to accept Christ as Saviour.
3. To enable the young to recognise Jesus as the founder and sustainer of the Christian church.
4. To enable the young to accept the guidance of the Holy Spirit in their daily activities.

It is only the fourth aim which talks about developing a Christian attitude and moral values. The picture is different when we look at the aims of teaching Islamic Studies:

1. To prepare students spiritually, morally, socially and intellectually for their role as Muslims in the adult world which they are entering.
2. To give them an insight into the broad view of Islam in both the past and the present.
3. To enable them to practise all their religious duties properly.
4. To enable them further with their studies of Islam, formally or otherwise.

The important point to note from the above objectives is that the planning of the Islamic Studies curriculum is based on the expectation that the learners would be Muslims. Therefore, the question of conversion does not arise.

Considering the magnitude of moral decay Nigeria has experienced over the years, Mr. Chairman, there can be no greater dis-service anybody can do to this nation than to undermine the position of Islamic and Christian Studies on our curriculum.

A society like Nigeria that is corruption-ridden, and whose citizens are overwhelmed by acts of gross indiscipline, needs a complete overhauling of its school curriculum in which religious education takes a pride of place.

I therefore conclude with the following recommendations:

1. In view of the recent call by the Federal Government for moral rebirth, religious education (Islamic and Christian) should be made compulsory at all levels of our educational system.

2. In view of the fact that Arabic is a recognised language of international diplomacy like any other modern European language and in view of the fact that the language has a very long history of usage in the country, it should be given equal recognition with French. Indeed the two should be made alternative electives on the curriculum.
3. Conscious efforts should be made by Government to recruit teachers of Islamic Studies to bridge the gap between this subject and CRS since they are alternative disciplines. There is no excuse for a dearth of ISS teachers any more, with the recognition of the certificate of the Islamiyyah School System in most States of the Federation.
4. Whenever the National Policy on Education is to undergo a review, NERDC must ensure that professional bodies such as the Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions, the Nigerian Association of Teachers of Arabic and Islamic Studies, the Nigerian Association of Biblical Studies and the Nigerian Association of Christian Studies are consulted in order to make the necessary inputs.

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