AFRO-BRAZILIAN RELIGIOUS HERITAGE AND CULTURAL INTOLERANCE: A SOUTH-SOUTH EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

By
Elaine Nogueira-Godsey

Please do not use this paper without author's consent.

In 2001, the Third World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Forms of Intolerance in Durban, South Africa was perhaps the most critical event leading up to and influencing the creation of the Brazilian law 10.639/03, which was implemented in 2003. The law 10.639/03 added Africa’s History to the Brazilian educational curriculum. The revised curriculum sought to promote racial integration and to educate students about both Brazil’s postcolonial Afro-Brazilian culture and rich African heritage, strategically, replacing the European and North-American versions of Brazilian history taught in the subject of history. However, research shows that many people feel that the teaching of African culture, more specifically its religious traditions, are threatening their religious beliefs—beliefs derived from Christianity—which are embedded in society.

At the same time the aforementioned law was implemented in Brazil a new Religion Education Policy was adopted by the South African Ministry of Education. The new policy implemented a new curriculum on religion education, integrated into a subject named Life Orientation. Life Orientation is part of both primary and high school educational programs. This new policy was advanced on the basis of promoting diversity by teaching respect towards freedom of religious expression, a topic embedded in the SA’s constitution. The curriculum of the new South Africa was to draw upon South Africans’ interreligious solidarity in opposition to apartheid and denounce religious forms of discrimination and prejudice associated with the former regime. Unlike the teaching of religion during apartheid, the new policy prescribed a non-confessional approach. These directives clearly show the
new government’s commitment to the newly adopted South African motto, “Unity in diversity”.

This paper investigates the challenges to effective implementation of respective programs arising from teachers’ experiences. Based on an ongoing qualitative research and my own observations of educators from Brazil and South Africa, I believe that the shared challenges emerging from the interviews point to teacher’s unresolved issues with the teaching of different religions than their own. It is my view that educational research, in the field of religion education, has not yet sufficiently addressed the vestiges of the former confessional or doctrinarian pedagogies embedded in the teaching practices, particularly those from postcolonial contexts.

My interest in investigating the teaching of religion in public schools between Brazil and South Africa are based on my own experiences of being a Brazilian student of both systems of education. My approach to RE has been influenced by David Chidester’s work on the postcolonial study of religion and religions through a South African perspective, and an ongoing qualitative research project mentored by professor Abdulkader Tayob.

My research is part of two distinct, but currently in dialogue, research groups, called Southern Knowledge and Network for Religion and Education. Southern Knowledge is a research collaboration group investigating the politics of knowledge in the postcolonial context of Africa, Brazil and India (I will not be engaging with India today). The debate centres on the histories and ramifications of policies aimed at fostering racial integration, affirmation reaction and culture diversity. In Brazil this research is hosted by the History Department of the Federal University of Sao Paulo and in South Africa by the Institute for Comparative Religion in Southern Africa, directed by Prof David Chidester, in the Department of Religious Studies, University of Cape Town. As part of Southern Knowledge’s research activities, during November 2013, and August 2014, I interviewed in
four different states of Brazil, history teachers from public primary and high schools and postgraduate students specialising to teach Africa’s history. In the interviews, I aimed at finding out the teachers’ own experiences in teaching the new curriculum on Africa’s history, which also required from them the teaching of Afro-Brazilian culture and religion. From 2014, the Southern Knowledge research component in South Africa has strategically become an arm of the Network for Religion Education in South Africa, which is headed by Prof Abdulkader Tayob.

The Network for Religion and Education is hosted by the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Cape Town. From a postcolonial perspective the network’s research team investigate the role of religion education in post-apartheid South African schools and society. Existing literature points to the challenges of diversity, pluralism and parents’ concerns about religious nurturing. I am part of an ongoing qualitative research that raises the question of “How is Religion taught at South African Public Schools?” by investigating specifically “what challenges are faced by the primary school teachers in the presentation of the subject at schools?” It is central to such research the analyses of the influences of the particular social and religious contexts in which religion education is presented at primary schools.

The ongoing dialogue between South Africa’s Religious Studies Scholars, and Brazil’s History scholars has turned out to be an ideal resource that provides valuable information to scholars in Religion Education about the efficacy of the methods used to employ them.

In asking educators in Brazil and SA to speak about their experiences in teaching the new curriculum, I noticed two challenges implicating the curriculums’ implementation that were indisputably raised in every interview. Those are the poorly developed textbooks and the educators’ poor knowledge of the subject.
The school textbooks have been charged by the Brazilian teachers as being not only poorly written, but also as perpetuating the portrayal of the black people as only suffering slavers. As a result, some teacher’s stated that much of the teaching relied on historical assumptions around this big “country” called Africa. This, in return, cultivates a prolonging of religious and cultural stereotyping. Conversely, In South Africa, I have observed that in the school libraries all but one of the textbooks on South Africa’s religious tradition, were authored and printed by European houses.

It is indeed an historical landmark when a people acknowledge that most of their own history or religious culture have never featured in the history books. Yet, it is tragic irony when the same people choose not to use local scholars’ work to develop school curricula and methods to approach this marginalised history of religions. Both South America and South Africa host some of the most eminent scholars in religious studies. The lack of dialogue between Religious Studies Scholars and specialists in Education calls for a deeper investigation of the underlying reasons that prevent the government from asking help from local scholars working at the intersection of history and diversity of religious traditions.

This paper argues that while the teacher’s poor knowledge of the subject is in part the result of the poorly written books, it is also the result of deficient methods developed by both governments to promote pluralism and diversity. In South Africa, the National Policy on Religion and Education set up clear goals for teachers and specialists in the field to expose learners to the diversity of South African religious society. However, they do not offer a textbook definition on religious literacy or specific training to approach religion from a multi-religious viewpoint. In Brazil, the law 10.639/03 requires teachers of Africa’s history to also implement lessons on Afro-Brazilian religions, but for which the teachers are not qualified or trained. It seems that both governments have unrealistically relied on the teachers personal investment to promote racial integration by learning and teaching about histories of religious
diversity. From here, I directed my attention to analyse in which ways that the SA and Brazil shared histories of Christian proselitization via educational curriculum have contributed to obstructing an effective implementation of the Policy on Religion Education and law 10.639/03.

The problem is likely deeper than ill-informed teacher or poorly written books: many teachers might not want to teach the new curriculum. I see two possible intertwining reasons for this fact. First, one’s own personal commitment to their faiths. It is relevant to analyse how the educator’s own ethical and perhaps spiritual conflict about teaching other religious tradition than his or her own influences on their investment in learning and teaching about histories of religious diversity. Second, what does religion as a concept means to Brazil and South Africa? Although, 12 years have past since the implementation of both curriculums. I have observed that the challenges raised by the teachers are likely to be from the same nature: people’s unresolved issues with the manifestation of different religious practices and the vestiges of a confessional approach still present in the cultural fabrics of South Africa and Brazil’s respective societies.

In Brazil, most teachers reported that increasingly children and parents are becoming resistant against learning and accepting the importance and authenticity of Afro-Brazilian culture and religious traditions. This resistance is the result of popular notions that Afro-Brazilian religions are an expression of paganism. Throughout history, Afro-Brazilian religious traditions have been ostracised by Christianity and stigmatised as pagans. Among the population, pagan religions often mean constructed by the devil with the intent to steer Christian believers towards the wrong path.

In part, this issue is related to the fact that the Brazilian educational curriculum has never addressed religion as a concept. Therefore, teachers struggle to escape their own limitations. In addition to this, there is a real fear that the teaching of other religions is
tantamount to proselytizing for them. In Brazil, since colonization there has existed a practice of combining education with the dissemination of Christian values. From 1910, the Brazilian constitution defines the country a secular state and, in theory, religion in education should be approached from a non-confessional and unbiased perspective. In reality, religion has been taught through the religious studies subject, which it has been unofficially and, at times officially, the Catholic Church’s leaders job the writing up of the curriculum. For more than a century Brazil’s youth have been taught to distinguish between good and bad behaviour and to promote principles of citizenship, including racial and religious diversity, from the Catholic Church’s point of view.

This specific social reality reveals the need for a religion education programme developed by those in religious studies and not the Catholic leadership. This religious intolerance, in a sense created in the classroom, has not only impacted the development of a healthy learning environment, but also put into question the main strategy adopt to implement the law and by the fault one of the aims of the law, racial integration via history education. As it stands few pupils can distinguish between African and Afro-Brazilian history, culture and religion. This association has lead many people, including non-religious, to resist their own history of Afro-Brazilian religious traditions as authentic due to fear of proselytization.

Furthermore, the underlying reasons holding the development of religion as a concept by the Education Ministry is an issue that must be brought to the centre of the debate in educational research. I wonder if what holds the government to ask help from religious studies scholars to prepare their teachers in a more official capacity is in part due to religious studies still being seen as theological preparatory courses. And if this is the case would this resistance be due to prejudice against confessional methods or fear of a more critical approach to religion? In my view, the roots of both questions can be found in the vestiges of
an embodied confessional practice embedded on the cultural fabrics of the postcolonial world.

In South Africa, religion played a major role in both sustaining and resisting the apartheid regime. Although most South Africans are religious people, following a number of different religions, under apartheid only one particular Calvinist form of Christianity was respected and favored over all other forms of religion. The South African education system under apartheid was called ‘Christian National Education’. As a system based on racism, however, it was not really national since there were different kinds and standards of education for different so-called racial groups. Although in SA the implementation of a new curriculum seems to be more integrated into society than in Brazil, there have been many public cases of religious intolerance and discrimination in the classroom.

In an interview with Debbi, a South African primary school teacher for the past 30 years and who currently teaches RE to grade 5 learners, I listened to her passionate description of the values in teaching RE from a multi-religious and non-confessional approach at public schools. In order to illustrate her commitment to the subject’s outcome of multi-religious integration, Debbi proudly pointed out that she always starts the subject’s first day of the year by asking the Catholic children to identify themselves, after identifying them, she promises that she will attend the confirmation day of them all. At that moment, Debbi stopped and looked at me shocked, she said: “I am a terrible teacher! How could I been showing such appreciation to the Catholic children and not to the other religions?” At that time, I thought: “Debbi’s insight illustrates the importance of training for teachers. Perhaps small efforts from the government to better prepare the teachers would make a huge difference”.

It was not long after when she told me that everyday she starts and ends the school day with a prayer. I asked: “A Christian prayer?” “Yes”, she replied, and before I could
further question her reasons to not give the same opportunity to the other religions, Debbi explained that for her it is important to teach the children about values and respect, “children must learn to say grace at lunch time,” Debbi added to the conversation. Please keep in mind that this is a public school in which proselytization is illegal according to South African law. And despite Debbi’s previous insight about the multi-religious approach, she could not recognise, on her own, that teaching and encouraging Christian prayer is also a form of proselytization. Debbi’s examples reveal the deep-seated religious bias operating in the post-apartheid context. It directs our attention back to questions on how can teachers foster inter-religious respect and respect in a multi-cultural context without a definition of religious literacy?

Embodied forms of a confessional approach to religion education are revealed upon exploring the relationship between religion and the broader cultural context. Thus, colonisation does not extend only to the economic and political spheres of a people, but also the religious and psychological. These spheres must be analysed as intertwined sets of our historical context. The educational curriculums in Brazil and South Africa have not sufficiently addressed the subjectivities that have been created in these spheres.

It is implicit in the discussion proposed in this paper that those obstructing an effective implementation of law 10.639/03 and SA’s Religion Education Policy, are not necessarily against the curriculum’s goals of racial integration. In Brazil, the main issue is not against the teaching of Africa’s history, but what accompanies the programme: the teaching of Afro-Brazilian culture and religion. The investigation on what Brazilian people understand by religion emerges as central to the advocacy of one of the law’s main foci, racial integration. I heard many teachers supporting their views against the law by saying, “Brazil é um estado laico. Thus, it is not acceptable to impose upon children other cultures and religions.” However, by classifying all non-Christian religions as other, the supposed
civilizing role that Christianity has played in (conquered) societies is left intact. Conversely, in South Africa, the main issue is not the teaching of different religious traditions, but the teachers’ inability to move away or recognise in their own practice the confessional pedagogical approach to religions.