

**ESSENTIAL APPROACHES TO CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: LEARNING AND
TEACHING**
A PAPER PRESENTED TO THE SCHOOL OF RESEARCH AND POSTGRADUATE STUDIES
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This book, “*Essential Approaches to Christian Religious Education: Learning and teaching*” (2018) written By Prof. Christopher Byaruhanga begins with a quote from Wanda Alberts. Alberts says:

It has become obvious also to the general public that religion is not a relic from the past which is gradually going to disappear, but which is very much present in societal and political life in various regions of the world.¹

Since the 19th century, Christian religious education as it is known today has been part of the Ugandan panorama. It began in Uganda with the arrival of the Anglican and Catholic missionaries in 1877 and 1879 respectively. The missionaries emphasized that education should be regulated by the church. Reading Centers, which eventually were transformed into formal schools, were established in every place where a mission station was opened. The expansion of mission schools in Uganda was quite dramatic, and both Church Missionary Society (CMS) and Roman Catholic missionaries were at the center stage of this development. Although the missionaries were against the establishment of a Christian state in Uganda, they wanted Uganda to be a Christian nation.

In pre-independent Uganda, Christianity was the only religion taught in schools. The Anglican and the Catholic missionaries used Christian religious education as one of their most effective ways of evangelizing and converting Ugandan students to Christianity. At that time, there was no uniform syllabus and mission schools taught different denominational syllabi that were in line with their religious beliefs and practices. In pre-independent Uganda, the teaching approach varied from indoctrination to confessionalism. In order to preserve its religious beliefs, the pre-Christian Uganda used education as a means through which religious knowledge was communicated to the young and the old. The aims/goals of religious education were mainly two namely,:

- a. To prepare the young people for the transition from the infant stage to maturity. The content of religious education was therefore defined by the needs of society and every adult was qualified to instruct the young people. In most cases, the young people’s reasoning and personal reflections were suppressed.
- b. To develop an awareness of and respect for the religious dimension of life. In pre-Christian

¹ Wanda Alberts, Integrative Religious Education in Europe: A Study-of-Religious Approach (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 25.

Uganda, morality was derived from God and the adult members were regarded as teachers of religion. God remained the canon against which the moral standard of everybody in society was measured.

Religious education at that time aimed at producing a person who was obedient, loyal and of acceptable character.

The methods used to educate the young and the adults were mainly in the form of instruction and indoctrination. There were some advantages attached to this kind of approach to the teaching of religious education namely:

- i. Religious education was done according to what the local context demanded and not what the teachers managed to teach. What the students learnt was approved by the community.
- ii. Religious education was concerned with the transmission and continuation of values and norms from one generation to another through the process of socialization and initiation. The subject content was never alien to the students and to the community. That is why the method of content delivery was experiential and practical.

A student was motivated to learn not because of the certificates, diplomas and degrees he or she was expected to receive at the end of the “program” but because he or she developed an interest to learn in order to accomplish a religious task within the given community.

Was it necessary to move away from the traditional religious education approach to the present day type of religious education namely Christian religious education? The following are some of the disadvantages to the traditional way of teaching religious education:

- (a) Students had to accept whatever was taught without question. Since they were expected to be passive learners, there was no way how they could choose between the various alternatives.
- (b) Religious education was characterized by conformity to the religious rules of the given society. Students were not given the opportunity to think through the concepts being taught. They therefore accepted every material imposed on them by their teachers.
- (c) The methods employed did not encourage independent thinking among the students. The teachers regarded themselves as a source of knowledge and enjoyed giving instructions to students in a communal manner.

Uganda has no state religion and the freedom of religion is guaranteed by the National Constitution. In spite of having a large Christian population, the religious traditions of people from outside Uganda are respected. Christian religious education is provided in private founded schools,

church founded schools and government founded schools. However, religious education in secondary schools is generally conceived of as special instruction in Christianity.

Since 1962 when Uganda became politically independent from Britain, the Ministry of Education has paid greater attention to the development of new national curricula for schools. As regards Christian religious education at the secondary school level, the major development took place in the 1970s when the Bible-based confessional syllabus was replaced with an ecumenically oriented syllabus. Since the 1970s, the type of Christian religion that is being taught in secondary schools in Uganda is called Christian religious education. This is a form of secondary school religious education in which students of that particular Learning Area are separated from the rest to learn about Christianity within a religious framework. By the 2016, many secondary schools in Uganda had shifted from syllabus 224, which was bible-oriented to syllabus 223 which was social-anthropologically oriented.

In 2017 a new curriculum was designed for S1 – S4 by the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Sports. This new curriculum gives students the knowledge and skills needed for success in modern society and lay a firm foundation for the world of work, self employment and further education. The new lower secondary curriculum has eight compulsory learning areas.² Religious Education³ is one of the eight Learning Areas of the Lower Secondary School Curriculum. For so many years, the CRE syllabus has only been changed by adding content and, despite the additions, important major areas have remained excluded. This new syllabus seeks to:

- i. Develop students' understanding, skills and competencies instead of them just acquiring religious knowledge.
- ii. Shift from teacher-centered methodologies to student-centered methodologies.
- iii. Replace content loaded text books that use difficult language with interactive student friendly text books.
- iv. Reduce the long hours of instructional time that do not allow students to explore what they have learned.
- v. Change the excess mass of subject content that is not delivering the required skills for the labor market in the region.

The Lower Secondary program of study in Christian religious education builds upon concepts, skills, attitudes and values developed in primary school. It also provides a sound foundation for further

2 These learning areas are: Creative Arts, Languages, Life Education, Mathematics, Religious Education, Science, Social Studies and Technology and Enterprise.

3 The student chooses to study either Christian religious education or Islamic religious education.

learning in the disciplines of Religious Education. A given school will decide to offer one or both Christian religious education and Islamic religious education depending on the interests of the school's foundation body. The student will choose to study either CRE or IRE throughout the four years.

Christian religious education is an integral part of the secondary school curriculum with the comprehensive purpose of aiding the growth of young people in Uganda to:

- a) Christian maturity so as to develop a positive awareness of one's own worth.
- b) Develop a positive attitude toward other people and their right to hold beliefs different from their own.
- c) Respond positively to what they believe to be the will of God.

In the secondary school context, the aim of Christian religious education is to sponsor within the students the full and mature expression of their faith in the person of the Christian message namely, Jesus Christ and the message of that person, namely, the coming-yet-present reign of the living God. This involves enabling students to claim the Christian story of the church as their own. At the secondary school level, Christian religious education, until 2017 has been an optional subject in Uganda. However, it has always been accepted as one of the subjects for university entrance.

In 2008 the Government of Uganda expressed the desire to exclude religious education from the secondary school curriculum. However, it came under severe attack from the religious bodies. Although Christian religious education is one of the eight Learning Areas of the Lower Secondary School Curriculum, it is at the moment in some ways set apart from other subjects. This is partly because it is one of those subjects specifically mentioned by the 1992 Government White Paper.⁴

The Government White Paper's mention of Religious education may be an indication of a genuinely unique element in Christian religious education and also a misunderstanding of what it is all about. There are people who look at Christian religious education and moral education as two sides of the same coin. They argue that morality is rooted in Christian religious education. They also argue that both the content and authority of morality are derived from Christian religious education, which in the long run helps to shape the moral values of the people and the nation as a whole. This might be one of the reasons why Christian religious education still enjoys government support in Uganda.

In the foreword to Religious Education Learning Area Lower Secondary Syllabus, the Minister of Education said, "Religious Education supports the learner, developing and reflecting upon his/her

⁴ Government White Paper on Implementation of the Recommendations of the Report of the Education Policy Review Commission entitled Education For National Integration and Development, 1992, 72-73.

values and contributing to his/her capacity for sound moral and ethical judgment.”⁵ Christian Religious Education is perhaps the only subject about which some controversy exists on the grounds that it advocates for a unique way of looking at life. Even among people who see some value in Christian religious education there exists, among areas of agreement, considerable differences of opinion on what they want the secondary school students to study.⁶

Why Christian religious education?

In Uganda no one wishes to return to the days of pre-independence when Christianity enjoyed a privileged status in formal education in general and Christian religious education in particular. In the present situation, such approach cannot be justified, even when the majority of the population adheres to the Christian faith. The majority of Ugandan religious educationists therefore endorse an approach that gives due respect to the major religions that a student of Christian religious education encounters every day in his or her community and at school. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that there are diverse views within the Christian traditions on Christian religious education. Although Christian traditions in Uganda have maintained diverse views on Christian religious education, a consensus has been reached on a number of reasons as to why it should be taught in secondary schools. Some of these reasons are:

- i. **Morality.** The core values such as equality, respect for human dignity that are contained in the Constitution of Uganda are all a manifestation of the moral principles that have shaped Uganda as a nation. Unless the education system promotes understanding of the core moral values, the values that are contained in the Constitution of Uganda will result in the kind of moral bankruptcy that is associated with the abuse of human dignity. Christian religious education should offer a framework for understanding the context of moral living and develop students’ abilities to improve on their moral lives.
- ii. **Continuous deepening of values.** The Constitution of Uganda articulates and mentions a number of basic human rights which have to evolve as Uganda develops into a modern and democratic nation. Future generations must be prepared to interpret and apply these basic human rights in new situations in a godly manner. Since Christianity teaches transcendent values, the students of Christian religious education will be helped to meet those challenges.

5 Jessica Alupo, “Religious Education Learning Area Lower Secondary Syllabus,” Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Sports (2016): Foreword.

6 I am aware of the fact that the 1992 Government White Paper does not specifically talk about one particular religion in Uganda. However, in this book Religious education consciously refers to Christian religious education.

- iii. Integrated and holistic approach to education. An integrated and holistic approach to education requires that students be developed emotionally, intellectually, physically, psychologically, culturally and spiritually. Alongside emotional and intellectual development, the nation has also to invest in the spiritual growth and development of her citizens.
- iv. Responsible citizenship. In their study, the students of religious education will cover Conflict Resolution, Peace and Justice. This Strand will therefore equip the students with the knowledge, values and skills needed to choose alternatives to self-destructive and violent behavior when confronted with interpersonal and inter-group conflict. The expectation is that when he/she learns constructive and just ways to address issues which may lead to violence, the incidence and intensity of that conflict will disappear. A good education system is that whose products recognize their responsibilities in the nation. Christian religious education does exactly that.
- v. Transformation. Christian religious education by nature has both a conserving and transforming impact. It puts the students in touch with the traditional African values of the past generations while giving the individual students a vision of a better way of life that leads to a transformed society.
- vi. Cultivate a culture of tolerance. While all students in Uganda should know and understand Christianity as one of the key factors that have shaped Uganda's vibrant cultural heritage they should be sensitive to the beliefs of other people so as to cultivate a culture of religious tolerance. Knowing about religions other than one's own discourages the attitude of rigid fundamentalism that often provokes conflict. Christian religious education encourages students to value and respect other people and their religious views.
- vii. Religion as a center of the students' emotional life. Christian religious education helps the students to understand their own religion and its values. This is why Christian religious education as the center of the students' emotional life should be taught in a responsible way by a qualified teacher of Christian religious education.

Christian religious education of all subjects at secondary school level is the least straight forward subject because it is concerned with the vast ultimate of meaning and significance. Since Christian religious education forms part of the curriculum at the lower secondary school level, the student should be helped to appreciate the across-curricular links in all the eight Learning Areas. For instance, there is a relationship between Christian religious education and Life education learning area. Religious education emphasizes the development of values which enable the student to make the right

decisions in life; this links to Life education where the student is expected to acquire similar values. Christian religious education as a discipline therefore resists narrow specialization and this means that a teacher of Christian religious education has to be knowledgeable in many Learning Areas such as Creative Arts, Languages, Life Education, Science, Social Studies, Technology and Enterprise. Since Christian religious education is an interdisciplinary subject, it demands more of the teachers who handle it than is required of those involved in the teaching of either religion or education alone.

In a modern Ugandan society, Christian religious education should be dealt within a sound educational manner where the teacher is able to relate Christian beliefs to the experiences and needs of the students. This must in the end mean dealing with the questions and doubts which students bring to Christian religious education class from their immediate environment.⁷

The teaching of Christian religious education in secondary schools cannot be effectively done unless those teachers involved in handling the subject, are able to see Christianity in its contemporary setting without losing sight of its historical origins. The increasing number of highly qualified people teaching Christian religious education at all levels in Uganda is a positive tribute to the seriousness with which society in Uganda has taken the intellectual dimension of the subject. However, one of the major obstacles to the effective teaching of Christian religious education as an academic subject at secondary school level today is lack of proper techniques and enlightenment in the subject which this book addresses.⁸

Limitation of this study

This is a study based on the actual classroom practice of Christian religious education as well as an analysis of various written sources such as textbooks, academic articles in journals and official documents that I came across during my research. I took this approach in order not to uncritically reproduce the debates on issues which had long been settled in the field of Christian education by other scholars. The framework of Christian religious education contained in this book is particularly designed for the Ugandan situation, but may also be transferred, without changing its general character, to other countries especially in the Great Lakes Region of East Africa.

7 If one is to be effective in teaching Christian religious education, he or she has to be sensitive to criticisms of Christianity. He or she has to see Christianity in relation to the social and intellectual realities of Uganda as a modern society.

8 In Uganda, Christian Religious Education is one of the academic subjects in secondary school examination syllabus for which an examination is set.