

## The Politics of Religious Education in South Africa, past and present.

by

Manila Soni-Amin

### Introduction

Education has been used as a tool by successive governments throughout the world to produce a particular kind of adult who believes a particular philosophy or world view and does that which is required of her. This has been done with varying degrees of success. Education ministries and departments of education decide what people in a specific society should learn in a given context. As Paulo Freire one of the greatest educationists of our times has said, "education is not neutral" and schools are factories of "cultural reproduction" and produce for a particular market. This means that ministries and departments of education control what people should learn, should know, and what they should believe. In democratic societies we tend to assume that we do not allow anyone to brainwash us, only "communists" do that!

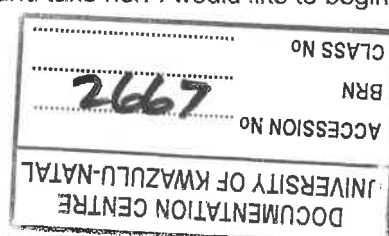
Thus, whenever there is a change of government, the first change it would make, is to the system of education, and South African governments past and present are no exception to the rule.

A brief journey through early Education in South Africa indicates that the only form of education available to Blacks in this country was Religious Education. This journey will enable us to determine the politics and philosophies that informed succeeding education systems. Thus my topic is:

## The Politics of Religious Education in South Africa Past and Present.

### i. Education in indigenous communities in the Cape

History books imply that when foreign settlers arrived in the Cape there were no people on the southern tip of Africa and that Africa was beckoning the settler to come in and take her! I would like to begin my journey with the early indigenous inhabitants of the area.



Education and Religious Education and practise was an important aspect of the life of the local people. Education, customs, traditions, beliefs and practices were passed on orally. Stories, songs and poetry were used to teach the new generation.

Pam Christie states

"In pre-colonial societies education was part of daily life. Children learned about their society and their work from the older members of the community. They learned by experience from doing tasks. And this informal education didn't stop, like schools do when children reached a certain age."

My context in this presentation is Formal Religious "education". I begin at this point not because it was the beginnings of education in the area but because it was the beginning of an encounter that would change the lives of the indigenous inhabitants drastically. It would deny a people their history, their language, their religion, their culture, their land, their economy, their families and freedom and finally their humanity.

## ii. Cape Education under Colonial Rule

To understand education and the effects of education in the South African context, the words of Rev. John Phillip of the London missionary society are apt:

"Man in his individual and collective capacity, is so constituted, that no improvement can take place in any part of the one or the other without diffusing its influence over the whole man, and over the whole frame of society."

With these prophetic words Rev. Phillip claims that any influence on a person has to affect that person's entire being and not just one part of that person's life. He continues:

"They were deprived of their country; from a state of independence, they were reduced to the miseries of slavery; their herds of cattle followed their lands and passed into the hands of their intrusive neighbours; and all they had gained in return for these sacrifices were a few beads, tobacco and spirits and a number

vices unknown to them in their former ignorance." If beads, spirits and tobacco constitute knowledge then I pray give me ignorance.

He continues:

"Wherever the missionary places his standard among a savage tribe their prejudices against colonial government give way; their dependence upon the colony is increased by the creation of artificial wants; confidence is restored and every genuine convert among them made to the Christian religion becomes the ally and friend of the colonial government.

During the early days, the missions were the only providers of education in the colony, but soon government took control of education for whites. Mission schools were the only means by which the African child in South Africa was able to receive an education until 1955.

Barely six years after the arrival of Jan Van Riebeeck, slave schools began and entries were made in his diary:

17 April 1658 "Began holding school for the young slaves . . . to induce them to learn the Christian prayers, they were promised each a glass of brandy and two inches of tobacco, when they finish their task."

(Christie :32)

George states:"The school was important for instruction in reading and writing since the people had to be able to read the **scriptures** and since the "Hottentots" often left the institution for considerable periods, "in the absence of books" instruction might have to be committed to writing".(George :58)

This is a clear indication that reading and writing was only taught in relation to the need for Biblical Instruction. By 1861, government schools were increasingly reserved for whites with emphasis on secular education, while Coloured children continued to attend mission schools with an emphasis on Religious Education. In 1863 a government commission to look into Coloured education reported that there was too much emphasis on Bible history and knowledge of scripture while secular subjects were seriously

neglected.

Ordinance 50 of 1828 gave equal rights to all "free persons of colour". In 1833- All slaves in the British Empire were freed. This meant that in line with Ordinance 50 all South Africans had equal rights. In the absence of slavery and strict control with regard to the rights of Black people, schooling came to occupy an important role to **maintain discipline**.

Langham Dale, the SGE (1859-1892) was the architect of segregated apartheid education which was later to become the official policy of the National Party. He proposed that education could be used to maintain the social and political supremacy of whites. Their education should be in line with the education of their peers in Europe. Coloureds and Africans by contrast, should be trained for a subordinate role in society. (Willis:6)

In 1893, by Proclamation No. 388, for the first time real discriminatory legislation regarding education was possible. It was now possible to establish separate mission schools among poorer white communities.

### iii) Education - 1948 - 1983

The dark days for South African Black education arrived as the government decided to go ahead with its policy of apartheid which left no aspect of life untouched by its long tentacles. The implementation of Christian National Education was an important step for the concept of white supremacy.

Implementation of Christian National Education (CNE) CNE was the name given to the Nationalist Party Government's intention to control all education institutions for blacks by implementing Christian National Education principles formulated in 1939 of white supremacy. This policy it was felt could give concrete meaning to Afrikaaner ideology of white supremacy.

### iv. Post - Apartheid and Religious Education

Since 1991 when negotiations with the liberation movements began, many academics accepted that a post-apartheid system of education should be more inclusive of the cultures of all South Africans. Religious

Instruction had played an ambiguous role in South African education and there was fear that the new government would dispense with Religious Instruction altogether.

The future of Religious Education was debated at conferences. In 1994, the National Education and Training Forum (NETF) provided for eight- person committees for each subject, including Religious Education. The members formulated an interim policy.

According to this policy Parent bodies had the right to select the type of Religious Education a school may offer. However, some level of multi-faith education had to be taught. This proved to be problematic and teachers in the Western Cape felt intimidated when the WCED asked to be informed of new practices.

However, in practice it was clear that at that stage they had no intention of moving forward to multi-faith education. Yet, the Bellville College of Education had introduced multi-faith education for all teachers. The Institute of Comparative Religion of South Africa (ICRSA) conducted pilot studies around Cape Town, which worked well. Today UCT offers Religious Studies but the department is shrinking due to restructuring of all tertiary institutions in the country.

In 1995, The University of the Western Cape set up a Religious Studies department with two non-Christian lecturers for the first time. Restructuring has meant losing the two non-Christian lecturers in the faculty which is now a department and has an all-Christian staff.

Former Model C schools and so called "white schools" have opened their doors to learners of colour. But no mechanism has been put in place for the cultures of these children to be admitted into these schools. They are saying, "you come in and learn our language, our religion, play our sport, read our books written by our authors and speak like us. But leave your language your culture and religion at the portals of our fenced in schools."

One way in which one could study various cultures or a plurality of cultures is by studying the religion and culture of all South Africans.

#### v. The Voices of Educationists

David Chidester states "This failure to recognise the existence of indigenous forms of religious life in Southern Africa was not merely a mistake. . . Instead, the denial of African religion was itself the method, a method for entering contested frontiers and representing them as if they were empty spaces for conquest and colonization. If it is going to embrace South Africa, therefore, the academic study of religion must come to terms with this history of denial" (Chidester: 7).

Dr Cornelia Roux of Stellenbosch University's Education Department, has found that 95% of her students first received information about "other" religions at the university (Roux 1996: 9).

Chrissie Steyn of UNISA states, "The shock of encountering something so basic for the first time at this age, means that there is much to unlearn before new learning can take place.

In the past, parents tried to shield their children from the knowledge of other faiths and viewpoints, but now this is not likely to succeed as children will sooner or later come into contact with other views through the media, films, friends and magazines. Through the schools we can help our children to become better informed and to live harmoniously in a pluralistic society if we can equip them with the appropriate skills." ( Steyn Chrissie: 1997)

Manila Soni-Amin, formerly of UWC, claims similar experiences to that of Dr Roux of Stellenbosch and Chrissie Steyn of UNISA. Amin notes that even students from Theology departments who have majored in Biblical Studies have very little or no knowledge of the religions/worldviews practised in South Africa. She notes that students know little even of Judaism, Orthodoxy and Catholicism which are Biblical faiths!

The intention of the democratic government may be interpreted through the words of Father Smangaliso Mkhahatshwa, the former Deputy Minister of Education, at the launch of the publication "Festivals and Celebration," at the University of Cape Town, 5/9/1996

"In the past, under Christian National Education, an effort was indeed made to adopt one religion

(Christianity of a certain variety) as the virtual state religion. That was a mistake, never to be repeated. Totally insensitive to the fact of religious pluralism in South Africa, that policy was institutionalised religious domination, contrary to the spirit of true religion.

"Indeed, the empowerment of teachers to deal adequately with the religious pluralism of our nation must rank as a very high priority in training programmes at universities and teacher training colleges. While facilities at our tertiary institutions to provide for that multi-religious service needs urgent attention, a timely publication such as this provides a most important in-service training of our teachers."

It is critical of past practices and encourages training colleges and universities to empower teachers "to deal adequately with the religious pluralism of our nation." This statement was made in September 1996.

Today at the dawn of 2001, more than four years later, no finality has been reached regarding implementation of Religion Education by the government, nor have the institutions of learning taken courageous steps. Universities wait for education ministries to tell them what to do, and describe words of politicians as "mere rhetoric" while ministries are too busy with important subjects like mathematics, science and technology.

Minister Kader Asmal alluded to the injustice of having one religion and culture taught in schools during his talk to parents in Claremont in November 1999. Minister, you now need to take decisive steps to implement multi-faith education. The country is more open to the subject today than it was in the early days of our democracy.

In 1994, Minister Bhengu requested a public response to implementing multi-faith religion education. A parent wrote that he was against multi-faith education because "I do not believe that Muhammed or the Buddha are divine"! I thought but neither did they? The Prophet Muhammed would turn in his grave if he was called divine! I can't say the same for the Buddha for he was cremated!

Pluralism is recognition and acceptance of the plurality of religions in our country. It goes beyond mere acceptance, for even the apartheid government recognised pluralism by relegating each community to its own little suburb, township and ghetto.

Pluralism values these differences and encourages interaction and dialogue with one another. This variety or diversity not only enriches our religious landscape but allows for true multi-cultural education.

Educators need to embrace the multicultural nature of Africa. Already they encounter mixed audiences and teach learners from diverse backgrounds. For instance educators are exasperated when some students do not look them in the eye. In most black cultures it is disrespectful to do so. Thus, educators need to understand the worldviews and cultures of all South Africans so that they will empathise with learners and encourage and contribute to nation building.

I had conducted case studies at Uthongathi, South Africa's first truly multicultural school, established in 1987. I found that the learners (having been exposed to multi-faith and multicultural education), had learnt to respect the faith and culture of their peers. If anyone said anything derogatory about another faith, then it was the non-practitioners of that faith who stood up to defend it. They were able to do this because they knew the "other" faith.

It is easy for people to speak for their own traditions but when they are able to speak with "an empathy and humaneness" about "other faiths", then we are truly winning in our endeavour to build a nation, "a rainbow nation" in which the culture of every person has a place and equal value.

#### vii. Social Re-constructionist Movement

In Africa, we have to "decolonize our mind" as Ngugi wa Tiogo, the famous West African writer has said. N'Gugi adds that colonization has done immense harm to us but the greatest harm has been "through the blackboard". It is quite clear then that N'gugi suggests a radical shift and change in schooling and learning.

Thus, Religion Education in South African schools should be seen as a social reconstructionist movement to heal and to unite us. It is the task of post- apartheid teachers to facilitate the empowering of students by helping them appreciate their own culture as a culture among world cultures and not as one that is a "primitive culture" and at the bottom of the hierarchy of cultures. Non-western cultures deserve a place on the same shelf as do the western cultures, not above nor below them.



## vi. The Challenges of Religion Education

1. The question of teaching in a non-prosele-tyzing way is the most important challenge facing our teachers. The task of the school is education and the teacher of R.E. has to refrain from being the preacher and make way for the "teacher" to blossom.

2. Teacher training is most important and should be in the hands of Education departments and not Religious Studies or theology departments and should have clear educational aims and outcomes.

3. The thematic approach avoids teaching the best of my tradition and the worst of yours. Suppose one is teaching scripture in the religions, then one can teach about the stories in Africa. It avoids what people have done in the past. When teaching about Hinduism they would emphasise the caste system, in Islam the four wives, and in African Traditional Religion superstition and witchcraft.

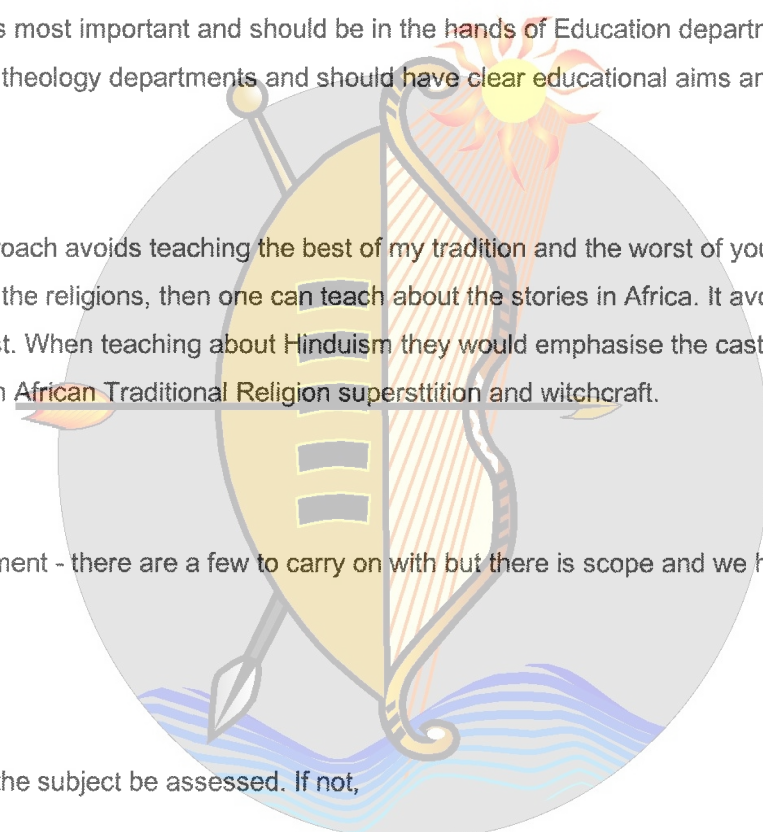
4. Materials Development - there are a few to carry on with but there is scope and we have the capacity to prepare these.

5. It is important that the subject be assessed. If not,

it will become a free period.

6. All teachers, even science teachers, must take an introductory course in multi-cultural education and another in multi-faith.

7. As South Africans, we have to learn to embrace African Religion and culture and stop using negative terms such as "witchcraft" and "superstition."



8. We have to stop thinking that if a person does not believe in God or subscribes to an established religion, that person is immoral.

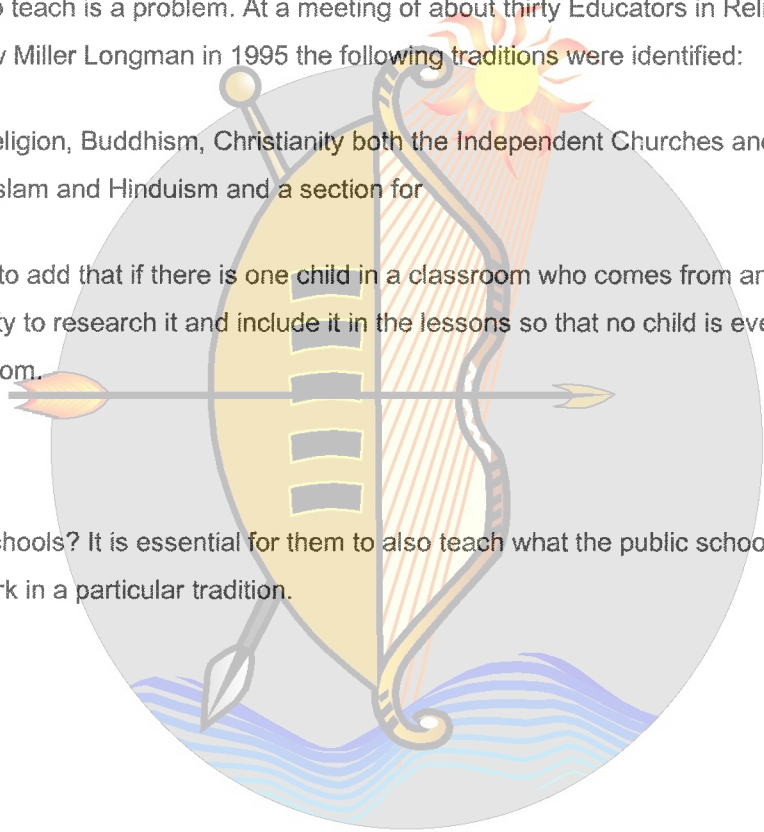
9. We have to learn to respect our diverse community and promote the concept of "Unity in Diversity" as expressed in our new Coat of Arms.

10. Which religions to teach is a problem. At a meeting of about thirty Educators in Religion Education, convened by Maskew Miller Longman in 1995 the following traditions were identified:

African Traditional Religion, Buddhism, Christianity both the Independent Churches and the mainline churches, Judaism, Islam and Hinduism and a section for

Atheism. I would like to add that if there is one child in a classroom who comes from another faith, it is the teacher's responsibility to research it and include it in the lessons so that no child is ever alienated in a South African classroom.

11. Independent schools? It is essential for them to also teach what the public schools teach. They can do additional work in a particular tradition.



## Conclusion

I stated earlier that there was education in Africa before colonialism came in, this was replaced by the blackboard education of colonialism.

The famous American theologian, Ninian Smart during his visit to South Africa, has stated: "In a plural society the need for a cultural contract is very vital. Moreover to imagine that religious education should be biblical is presumptuous and insensitive..... But the new South Africa has a marvelous opportunity to reform education and to promote a plural society. Pluralism and openness are the heart of academic life."

## Bibliography

\* Ajam, Mogamed, The Raison D'Etre of the Muslim Mission primary School in Cape Town and environs from 186- to 1980 with special reference to the role of Dr Abdurahaman in the modernisation of Islam - oriented schools. Thesis for the degree of Doctor Of Philosophy, Education at UWC March 1986.

\* Amin, Manila Soni, Rainbow Religions : Multi-faith Religious Education: A Resource Book for Teachers and Learners; Maskew Miller Longman, Pty Ltd, Howard Drive Cape Town, 1998.

\* Amin, Manila Soni, unpublished paper presented at W.C.C.E. at UCT July, 1998)

\* Chidester, David et al editors : Diversity as Ethos : Challenges for Interreligious and Intercultural Education, ICRSA UCT, Private Bag, Rondebosch 7707, South Africa, The Rustic Press, Ndabeni, Western Cape 1999.

\* Christie, Pam: The Right To learn : The Struggle for Education in South Africa (Raven Press Pty Ltd, First printed 1985, 1986).

George, A. C : The London Missionary Society and Education : A Study of the eastern cape to 1852.

\* Do Toit, C,W, and Kruger, J.S. editors, Multireligious Education In South Africa : Problems and Prospects in South Africa. Published by Research Institute for Theology and Religion, Univ. Of South Africa,P.O. Box 392, Pretoria, 1998.

\* George, A.C.- The London Missionary Society and Education A story of the Eastren Cape to 1852.

\* Kallaway, Peter et al (editors) Education After Apartheid: South African Education in Transition, UCT

Press Pty Ltd Private Bag Rondebosch 7701 South Africa, 1997.

\* Mphahlele, C.J. The Methodist Venture at Kilnerton 1886- 1962- Ahistorical Critical Survey. A Dissertation for the degree of Master of Education, university of the North, Pietersburg, Dec 1972.

\* Molteno, D.F. The Schooling of Black South Africans and the 1980 Cape Town Students Boycott: A Sociological Interpretation. A thesis for Master of Social Science, UWC April 1983.

\* Pedro, Enrico Graham : Equality and Education in South Africa : A Policy Analysis. Unpublished: A Dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Univ. of Virginia, May 1997.

\* Phillip, Rev John,D.D.: Researches in South Africa: Illustrating the Civil Moral, and Religious Condition of Native Tribes: Including Journals of the Author's Travels in the Interior

vol.1. (originally published in 1828 by James Duncan, London) reprinted Negro Universities Press, New York , 1969.

\* Soni-Amin, M. et al: Rainbow Religions,A handbook for Teachers and Learners (1998), Maskew Miller Longman,Cape Town.

\* Willis, Arthur Roderick : A Critical Analysis of the Development and Administration of Coloured Education with Specific Reference to the Coloured Education commission ( 1953-1956). Unpublished dissertation for M.A. in History, November 1994.

et al (editors) Education After Apartheid: South African Education in Transition, UCT Press Pty Ltd Private Bag Rondebosch