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Matemba, Yonah; Dlamini, Boyie

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# Religious Education in Eswatini (formerly Swaziland) – From Confessional to Multi-faith, and Back to Confessional: A Policy Reversal Analysis

## Abstract

This paper examines the trajectory of Religious Education (RE) in the Kingdom of Eswatini (hereinafter, KoE), from confessional to multi-faith and to confessional once again, an issue that has not received attention in the discourse. In particular, it highlights the recent (2017) controversy concerning the discontinuation of multi-faith RE, banning other religions and reintroduction of a ‘missionary’ type confessional Christian RE, in a policy reversal not seen anywhere in sub-Saharan Africa. What has drawn attention to this sudden policy change (through government directive) is not only the concern expressed by critics but also how this development seems out of step with general trends in RE elsewhere on the continent, particularly in neighbouring countries. The paper analyses this development through the prism of ‘policy reversal’ as analytical framework. Broadly, the paper provides an initial full-length survey of RE in KoE, following the three stages in its pedagogical development, from confessionalism, to multi-faith pluralism and returning to confessionalism. In describing these developments, we also highlight key contextual factors such as religious demography and Christian dominance in social-cultural life and what the Constitution says about religion and education.

*Keywords:* Kingdom of Eswatini, Multi-faith RE, Policy Reversal, Return to Confessional RE

## Introduction

The trajectory of RE in KoE has been relatively unremarkable from the time of the missionaries through to independence when a Bible based confessional programme was offered in schools, and even after 2000 when multi-faith RE was introduced. As such, RE in KoE followed a *common* trend from confessional to multi-faith RE similar to developments in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa (and elsewhere) as the subject attempted to attune itself to contemporary social cultural changes and the aims of education (Matemba, 2005; Boudreau, 2011). In South Africa (influential neighbour), an inclusive multi-faith RE is offered across the school system (Chidester and Settler, 2010).<sup>1</sup> What has brought attention to RE in KoE recently (2017) is the unprecedented policy reversal cancelling multi-faith RE and returning to confessional RE, at a time when the pedagogical trend elsewhere seems to move in the direction of inclusive RE, however contentious the paradigm shift (Moulin-Stožek and Metcalfe, 2020; Freathy and Davis, 2019; Matemba, 2005).

Multi-faith RE has been the subject of intense debate in the discourse covering arguments levelled against the (un)suitability of such a programme in country contexts where one religion is dominant (even historically) and the argument for RE to attend to the needs of the majority faith (Nthontho, 2020; Museka, 2019; Ndlovu, 2014). Other issues one picks up in the literature relate to initial stakeholder resistance (‘gate-keeping’), low levels of teacher confidence to offer multi-faith RE, lack or ineffective in-service professional teacher support and poor resources (see Museka, 2019; Matemba and Addai-Mununkum, 2019; Lombard, 2011). Notwithstanding these challenges, countries have designed different versions of inclusion/multi-faith RE to suit their particular needs, and no case of policy reversal regarding multi-faith RE in favour of confessional RE offered previously can be found, except the recent case of KoE.

In the absence of a specific theory to conceptualise recent developments in RE in KoE, ‘policy reversal’ as an analytical framework provide interesting ideas. As a concept, policy

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<sup>1</sup> Mozambique—another of KoE’s closest neighbours—does not offer RE as a curriculum area of study in schools (instead offers a Civic and Moral Education curriculum with no religious input), and therefore we were unable to compare with RE developments in KoE.

reversal is not a distinct theory as such but a set of interrelated explanations why certain policies take U-turn. Policy reversal is the act of completely reversing or undoing previous policy commitments, whether unilaterally or through deregulation (Lopez and Sutter, 2004). Policy reversals are actions related to reforms in social, political, economic and educational planning. Such actions are "... so dramatic that when they do occur they are national news... [and an issue of political debate]" (Lowry, 2005), 401).

At times, policy reversal involves re-reversal, that is reverting to a policy abandoned previously (Goll, 2012). Apparently, policy reversal occurs in the interest of the majority in the population. In some situations, a policy reversal occurs when it is realised that the public may view this as unsustainable or undesirable a particular policy introduced at the risk of policy abandonment (Lowry, 2005). Despite this, others point out how policy inertia by those with vested interests and power to influence the agenda, can mobilise to frustrate or resist policy reversal (Dastidar, Fisman and Khanna, 2006). In some instances, it has been shown that "... the greater the change being advocated, the more likely opposition groups will be to mobilize and obstruct alterations to current policy" (Lowry, 2005, 400).

Inadequate institutional support (e.g. lack of expertise, resources and poor leadership) in the early stages of a reform can lead to policy abandonment (Lopez and Sutter, 2004). Policy reversal may occur out of legitimate fear that a particular reform has taken a country into uncharted territory such that success cannot be guaranteed (Lowry, 2005). As Asongu has demonstrated, policy reversal or abandonment can occur when new ideas challenge existing policy conventions (Asongu, 2016). Others have argued that policy reversal is actually a consequence of bad policy choices complicated by the failure of policymakers and governments to respond adequately to outcomes engendered by the dynamics of policymaking (Yago and Morgan, 2008; Asongu, 2016). It is a situation desired by private agents because they "... benefit from policy reversal rather than in terms of rational response to a credible and sustainable policy change" (Yago and Morgan, 2008, 93). Ideological shifts among leaders (i.e. changes in political or organisational leadership) with agenda control powers provide another possible explanation for policy reversal (Lopez and Sutter, 2004). The issue with policy reversal is that often the relative advantage of such action is not immediately evident because it constitutes a radical departure from tradition in ways that creates uncertainty in terms of outcomes, and implementation processes (Lowry, 2005).

Policy reversal and indeed policy re-reversal provide important lenses in theorising the trajectory of RE in KoE in the three phases we have identified, from confessional, to multi-faith and back to confessional RE. We find the analytical framework useful in understanding this dynamic in four areas. First, dramatic announcement of the policy and the interest generated. Secondly, inadequate institutional support for multi-faith RE. Secondly, lack of capacity and professional teacher confidence to deal with multi-faith RE. Next, KoE governments' rationale for introducing Christian in the interest of the majority population. Finally, related to the issue of policy reversal due to bad policy choice, we argue in the affirmative regarding the suitability of multi-faith RE and call for a reversal of the exclusivist policy reform (supporting only Christianity RE) in favour of a pluralist and inclusivist type of RE.

The paper is organised into four main sections. The first section provides the background and context of KoE, covering three sub-issues, namely, historical and general context, religious demography and inter-community relations and religion, education and the Constitution. The second section describes RE at school and in teacher education in KoE. This is followed by an examination of reintroduction of Christian RE, including debates and controversies engendered by this unexpected development. The final section provides a critical discussion on the issues covered in the paper through the analytical lens of policy reversal on the four areas identified above.

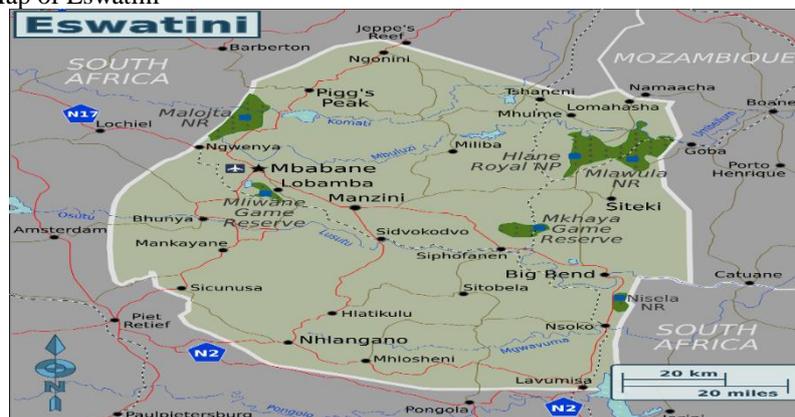
## Background and context

### *Historical and general context*

In April 2018, the country known as the Kingdom of Swaziland was renamed the Kingdom of Eswatini, ending a 1906 British colonial legacy that described the country by the nomenclature ‘Swaziland’ and remained unchallenged even after the country gained its independence in 1968 (Magagula, 1988; Chan, 2018). Ngwane III (1745-1780) was first modern monarch of KoE although the consolidation of the kingdom took place in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> Century during the reign of King Sobhuza I (also known as Somhlolo) (ca. 1795-1839) and continued by his son Mswati II (c.1825–1868). KoE is a country ruled jointly by a king and the queen mother, although the day-to-day administrative matters of state are solely in the hands of the government but working closely with the king (Froise, 1996; Magagula, 1988). The current monarch is Mswati III who ascended to the throne in 1986 at the age of 18.

KoE is a land-locked country bordered by Mozambique and largely South Africa (Fig 1), and one of the smallest countries in Africa (17,364 km<sup>2</sup>) with a population slightly over 1.1 million (2018 estimate), amidst continued concerns of having the highest HIV/AIDS adult prevalence rate (27.2%) in the world (Golomski and Nyawo, 2017; US State Department, 2018). Despite the challenges of underdevelopment common to many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, KoE has a surprisingly high literacy rate (94.75%), particularly among the 15-24 age group (UNESCO, 2018). This success is more impressive taking into account that 14 of the 22 countries in the world with literacy rates below 60% are in sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO, 2018). While problems of equity and quality persist, the KoE is able to generate positive educational outcomes partly because it invests substantially to the sector, for example, committing nearly 8% of GDP (24.95% of total government expenditure) to education (UNESCO, 2018). Notwithstanding some yearly fluctuations, such a level of investment surpasses UNESCO’s desirable target for developing countries at 6% (see Marope, 2010).

Fig 1: Map of Eswatini



Source: Wikimedia Commons (2020)

In analysing the provision of education in KoE, it is necessary not to overlook the role of mission churches in the establishment of a “very successful” educational foundation upon which the post-independence state KoE has continued to reap rewards (Froise, 1996, 51). Historically, at the heart of its education system has been the provision of a Christian oriented RE curriculum in a country with an overwhelmingly Christian majority.

In KoE religious matters, including school RE have always been associated with political objectives of the state. Since the introduction of formal education by missionaries from the 1840s, Christian moral values have dictated how Emaswati live their everyday lives. Even

on occasions when people resort to traditional Swazi practices, the dominance of Swazi Zionism whose followers include powerful members of the royal family, ensures that people’s actions are ‘kept’ in check within a Christian socio-cultural framework (Cummergen, 2000).

RE is a compulsory school subject in KoE—alongside subjects such as SiSwati, English, Mathematics and Science—at both primary and secondary/high school level (ECESWA, nd). In terms of educational structure, KoE operates a 7+3+2 school system: foundation, middle and upper primary (Grades 1-7), junior secondary (Forms 1-3) and senior secondary (Form 4-5). KoE offers a *prescribed* curriculum that divides into subject syllabi. Syllabi lists exactly what teachers and learners must study. In the senior secondary phase, much emphasis in the curriculum is to prepare students to sit the national examination in year 5. In fact, the Examination Council of Eswatini (ECE) rather the National Curriculum Centre (NCC) under the Ministry of Education and Training produces the syllabi for secondary curriculum.

*Religious demography and inter-community relations*

Although KoE is predominantly Christian, there are pockets of other religious communities (Table 1). To date there is no record of people who are religiously unaffiliated in the country (US State Department, 2018). In a postmodern world complicated by competing forces of secularisation, religious diversity and indigenisation, having a 90% adherence rate to a particular religion, is exceptional. The religious demography of KoE, a country with an overwhelmingly large Christian population, presents this picture.

Table 1: Religious demography in the Kingdom of Eswatini (2018)

Religion		
Christianity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Zionism: mixture of Christianity and Swazi traditional beliefs and practices (40%)</li> <li>• Anglican, Methodist, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon), Jehovah’s Witnesses, Baptist, Lutheran and Seventh-day Adventist (30%)</li> <li>• Roman Catholic (20%)</li> </ul>	90%
Islam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• N/A</li> </ul>	2%
Other Religions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Baha’ism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism and Swazi Traditional Religion</li> </ul>	8%
Total		100%

In KoE, Christian dominance has a long history dating back to the arrival of Christian missionaries from the mid-1840s onwards. In quick succession, between 1844 and 1913 the country received not less than 11 different European and South African missionary groups, namely: Wesleyan Methodist, Berlin Missionary Society, Anglican, Lutheran, Church of the Province of South Africa, Norwegian Mission Union, Norway Free Evangelical Mission, Swedish Alliance Mission, Scandinavian Alliance Mission, Church of the Nazarene and Roman Catholic (Van Wyngaard, 2018). These missionary groups embarked upon a very successful evangelical campaign mainly through education and provision of medical services such that by 1844 Christianity had already become a central feature of people’s socio-cultural life (Matsebula, 1980). In schools established by the different missionary groups, a Bible Knowledge curriculum—as a tool for proselytisation—was the mainstay of education offered based on the principle of ‘conversion before education’, a popular strategy in sub-Saharan Africa during the missionary era (see Pawliková-Vilhanová, 2007). As such, confessionalism was the pedagogical approach used for Bible Knowledge (as RE) offered in mission schools, which involved singing church hymns, reading Bible passages, memorising and recounting Bible verses/stories (see Froise, 1996). This approach to RE continued throughout the missionary period and for much of the independence period (from 1968) as well until multi-faith RE was introduced in 2000.

Why Christianity in KoE was successful from the start is an issue that has received some attention in the discourse. According to a popular story,

Missionaries were tolerated mainly because of a vision King Somhlolo (Sobhuza I) had about a strange man with long hair who would bring two things: *umculu* (Bible) in the one hand and *indilinga* (money) in the other. A voice directed the King to choose the *umculu*, that is, the Bible. This vision paved the way for Christian missionaries to settle in Swaziland and they began with their labours to proselytise the entire Swazi population during the 1880s (Rautenbach, 2008, 435).

A more plausible explanation for early Christian success in KoE was that the royal household was amenable to the Christian message, and as such welcomed missionary work to take root in the country (Magagula, 1988). The conversion of the Eswati monarchy had an immediate impact on the people who converted *en masse* to Christianity because as is the case elsewhere in Africa, “.... commoners were unquestioningly loyal ... [and] simply joined the ‘new’ religion of their leaders” (see Matemba, 2010, 333).

Another reason is that missionaries were tactful in their evangelical approach by allowing Emaswati (people), steeped into their cultural practices hold on to some of their core traditional beliefs. For this reason, Emaswati did not perceive Christianity as a threat to their traditional way of life and as such, allowed both religions to exist side by side without anyone of them claiming theological superiority over the other (Government of Swaziland, 1973). Given this context, when examining the religious demography of KoE care should be exercised in understanding the Christian figures because 40% of those counted as ‘Christians’ are actually adherents of Swazi Zionism, a syncretistic religious group that has successfully weaved together Christian and African traditional beliefs/practices, and is popular especially in rural areas (see Cummergen, 2000).

Regarding community relations, Christian groups in KoE seem to receive preferential treatment from the government compared to non-Christian groups. The collective leadership of the government, including the monarchy, aligns itself with Christian faith groups. National programmes often start with Christian prayers. Government-owned TV and radio stations broadcast Christian programmes, a privilege not extended to other religious groups. While the government protects the basic freedoms of non-Christian groups, other groups like the Muslim community are viewed with suspicion by the government, and its activities in Mosques closely monitored by security agents (see US State Department, 2018).

### *Religion, education and the Constitution*

In KoE, the current Constitution (2005)—as the supreme law of the land—ensures equality for all citizens and embeds ethos of religious diversity and inclusivity. This Constitution was founded on the spirit of *Ubuntu* (humanness), which is anchored on Swazi tradition and philosophy that the sustainability and progress of its society depends on a caring society where an individual thrives because of the connections he/she has with others (*umuntfu ngumuntfu ngebantfu*). This philosophy inculcates aspects of both the Swazi traditions and Christianity. The constitution believes both worldviews contribute to a successful and thriving society.<sup>2</sup> The Constitution states that a person shall not be hindered in the enjoyment of certain freedoms such as conscience, thought and religion, and emphasises the freedom of individuals to change ones religion or belief, and freedom of worship alone or in community with others.

Notably, there is no specific reference in the Constitution regarding RE as a school subject in public education, and as such can be argued that the provision of religion in public schools is not a legal or constitutional matter. By implication, the government can make unilateral changes to the RE curriculum without fear of legal challenge. Equally, parents who utilise public schools for their children have no legal recourse on such matters as evident in

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<sup>2</sup> In 1996, the King rejected a petition by Christian leaders to force the government to elevate the status of Christianity as a state religion.

2017 when unexpectedly the government issued a policy reversal (Circular No.1 of 2017), which cancelled multi-faith RE, proscribed the teaching of other religions and reintroduced a Christian-oriented curriculum (see also Bhebhe, Moletsane and Shabangu, 2020b). In this case, parents were unable to challenge the government's decision legally because the issue of public school RE has no Constitutional basis in KoE – although in the controversy that ensued as a reaction to this development, there has been reference to this as a violation of the Constitution pertaining to freedom of religion, worship and so on.

The Constitution in KoE makes an exception regarding the treatment of religious communities and the education they offer. On this matter, the Constitution states:

A religious community is entitled to establish and maintain places of education and to manage any place of education which that community wholly maintains, and that community may not be prevented from providing religious instruction for persons of that community in the course of any education provided at any place of education which that community wholly maintains or in the course of any education which that community otherwise provides (Government of Swaziland, 2005, 22).

Implicit in this is the fact that religious communities have legal entitlement to establish schools that meet their religious needs, including offering religious instruction of their choice. Under this protection, non-members who attend school run by a particular religious community, say Christianity, cannot "... challenge the constitutionality of the Christian faith teachings based on discrimination or the infringement of his freedom of religion" ( Rautenbach, 2008, 453). However, in practice when such communities do have schools, they usually follow the state sanctioned RE programme, which all schools are mandated to offer (see Dlamini, 2018).

In KoE, all matters related to education (public and private) belong to and are dictated by the state. The absence of legal provision for RE in the Constitution of 2005 mean that in practice, the government has decision making powers on any issue of national importance, including the design of the school curriculum. This is to ensure that what schools teach is of interest towards political stability and sustainability of governance. In this context, curriculum reforms are guided by political culture and the perceptive analysis of change that pays limited attention to the sociological analysis of the context in which the government implements the curriculum. The inability of educators, educational officials, parents, religious leaders, and other stakeholders to engage effectively with policy enactments in the process of curriculum making in RE is a matter of concern (see Dlamini, 2018). The ability to deconstruct the Constitution and related educational policies has the potential to help stakeholders to 'read' the significance of educational policy on RE alongside the critical understanding of the Constitutional provision in terms of guaranteeing freedom of religion and belief for all.

### **Religious Education at school and in teacher education**

Since the arrival of Christian missionaries in KoE, Christian RE became part of the national curriculum. The main purpose of RE was proselytisation, which had great effect on the Emaswati given the high rate of Christian conversion still evident today. In postcolonial times, the first ever written Imbokodvo Manifesto (1972) influenced the making of an RE curriculum after the country gained independence from British in 1968, and as such included content drawn from Christian and Swazi traditional values, seen as inculcating pro-social values that can mediate society's concerns (e.g. decay of societal values). In part, the Imbokodvo Manifesto (national policy guiding development after independence) stated:

- Education is an inalienable right of every child and every citizen, to receive to the limit of his/her capabilities;
- Education is to produce an enlightened and participant citizenry;

- Control of education lies with the government of Swaziland whether it concerns state schools, subsidized schools or private undertakings;
- All education should be designed to inculcate love for the land, loyalty to the King and country, self-respect, self-discipline, respect for the law accompanied by the highest degree of knowledge and the building of character (Magagula, 1990, 3-4).

A confessional Christian-oriented curriculum dominated the education system until 2000 when multi-faith RE (based on a phenomenological orientation) was introduced. In that curriculum, selected religions were included for study such as Buddhism, Judaism, Baha'ism, Islam, Christianity and STR in the primary while in the secondary curriculum the multi-faith syllabus in question was based only on two strands, one covering Christianity and the other dealing with Swazi Traditional Religion (STR). The curriculum content for both strand 1 and 2 covered the following topics: (a) Beliefs and Major Figures, (b) Worship. Sacred Writings and Traditions, (c) Festivals and Fasts, Pilgrimage and Sacred Places, (d) Religion and the Family, Rites of Passage and (e) Religion and Social Action, Moral and Ethical Behaviour.

By selecting some religions for study (and leaving out others), the approach to multi-faith RE in KoE was aligned with the concept of 'limited pluralism', a practice common in other countries in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>3</sup> As Hick's theology would suggest, limited or restricted pluralism explores the idea that while commitment to religious diversity (inclusion) is celebrated, in reality only a limited quantitative pluralism can be supported in a given social or public space as a way to minimise conflicting or indeed contrasting religious views (see Barnes and Wright, 2006). By choosing Christianity and STR, for study in the secondary phase where young people are at an "impressionable stage in their [cognitive and social] development (Matemba, 2011b, 133),

Returning to the thread of our narrative, it is worth noting that for some time since the promulgation of a multi-faith RE, there had been concerns regarding teachers' professional knowledge and competence in multi-faith pedagogies. An independent review of the primary curriculum in KoE found that many Swazi teachers had scant understanding and professional competence to offer meaningful RE in a multi-faith format to the extent that some schools were not teaching RE as dictated by the multi-faith policy guiding this curriculum (Government of Swaziland, 2014). It was an issue complicated by the fact that nationally there were few teachers from religious minorities in the school system to offset the imbalance of having Christian teachers in RE and without adequate training to offer multi-faith RE (see Dlamini, 2019). The report recommended teachers to enhance their knowledge by reading about other faiths besides their own (mostly Christian) and encouraged curriculum developers to do the same to ensure the production of teachers' materials on different religions (Government of Swaziland, 2014).

In teacher education, the RE curriculum remains orientated towards a Christian theology and religious studies format, and largely unaffected by recent curriculum changes in the primary and secondary school sectors. At the University Eswatini (country's only public university) where secondary/high schoolteachers are educated (to degree level), the range of subjects offered suggests that teachers are prepared for either Christian or multi-faith RE. Subjects offered include the following: Biblical Studies, Phenomenology of religion, African Traditional Religion, Religions of the World, Christian Ethics, Old and New Testament studies, Philosophy of Religion, History of Christian Thought, The Gospel Tradition, Sociology of Religion and Religion and Ideology in Contemporary Africa. Primary school teachers, whose training include general RE, are educated at the various teaching training colleges for the award of a two-year certificate in primary teaching (see Government of Eswatini, 2020).

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<sup>3</sup> In many countries in sub-Saharan Africa like Namibia, Malawi, Ghana, Zambia and Botswana, although RE is inclusive the selection of religions for study is based on the principle of limited pluralism.

### **Policy reversal: Reintroduction of Christian Religious Education**

In January 2017, the government of KoE—through autarchic action—announced, controversially, the immediate discontinuation of multi-faith RE and replacing it with a confessional and compulsory Christian RE (with no opt-out provision). The directive mandated that Christian religious instruction was to be firmly incorporated into schools' morning assembly (see US State Department, 2018). With this unexpected policy reversal (approved by Swazi cabinet handpicked by the King), the government rationalised its decision by also invoking the words of one its most famous kings, His Majesty King Somhlolo (Sobhuza 1) who reigned during the country's first encounter with missionaries and Christianity, as highlighted in the new Christian RE syllabus:

Christianity has long shaped the history and traditions of Eswatini and continues to exert an influence on national life today. His Majesty King Somhlolo's vision of the coming of Christianity to Eswatini is fulfilled through the teaching of RE in schools (Government of Eswatini, 2018, 11).

The government clarified that the teaching of any other religion beside Christianity was banned in public schools apparently concerned by the (unfounded) view that multi-faith RE was complex in nature and brings confusion in the mind of the child. The government related this confusion to issues of competing 'truth' religious claims, fear of education unwittingly promoting fundamentalist religious teachings, and even the potential of multi-faith RE fanning social disunity (Dlamini, 2018). At a gathering of headteachers on 24 January 2017, the Principal Secretary in the Ministry of Education (Patrick Muir) explained that the sudden policy change for RE would enhance:

... The ability for school children to differentiate between morality and immorality and also to ensure that children were not confused ... [and that] Christianity was the best way to achieve this... When they [students] reach university or go to college, they will then be able to make a decision on whether they want to learn about other religions because then they will be matured and will not be easily confused (Mtsetfwa, 2017, 2).

Further, the government announced the commissioning of new RE textbooks that will refer only to the Bible, although at the time if writing the only resource used in schools is the Revised Standard Version Bible. The government rationalised that the pro-Christian policy change in RE was necessary as a way to socialise students with Christian values and help them "... to see life from God's point of view" (Dlamini, 2018, 47). The government further justified that the role of the teacher (as member of the community) was to inculcate in children Christian based socio-cultural values (Bhebhe, Moletsane and Shabangu, 2020a). As such, the government saw the re-introduction of Christian RE (at the exclusion of other religions) as a way to preserve or reclaim the nation's core (historical) Christian moral values. As stated in the new syllabus:

The purpose of the Religious Education syllabus is that through the study of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ and the Acts of the Apostles; Learners will have an understanding of the Christian beliefs, teachings, practices and influences on the lives of individuals and community; and be encouraged to adopt Christian values and behaviour (ECESWA, nd, 5).

By the time of the dramatic announcement, school syllabi were already at hand and released to schools for immediate implementation. The material content ensured that an exclusivist Christian programme is offered in KoE's schools (Table 2), which includes (in the primary) recalling Bible stories, prayers and singing songs, no different as how children did

RE in missionary times from the 1840s. One other curious aspect of the new Christian RE is the increased teaching time allocation at a time when worldwide school timetables show a marked decline of average proportion time for RE on school curricula (see Rivard and Amadio, 2003). As in Table 2 below, the average teaching time given for the new Christian RE is 1.25 hours, 4 hours and 3.33 hours a week in primary, junior secondary and senior secondary timetables, respectively, over a period of 60 weeks/cycles (ECESWA, nd). This makes RE in KoE an elevated subject on the curriculum when in most countries today RE occupy a low status position in schools and as such hardly taught or taught through proxies, even when there is a legal requirement mandating schools to offer it, including time allocation provisions in educational policy (see Patrick, 2015; Matemba, 2015).

Table 2: Christian RE Syllabi (2017): Primary, Junior Secondary and Senior Secondary

Primary Phase (Foundation, Middle and Upper): Strands and Content	Junior Secondary Phase (Form 1-3): Strands and Content	Senior Secondary Phase (Form 5-5): Strands and Content
<p>Teaching Time Allocation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1.5 hours per week (Grades 1 and 2)</li> <li>• 1.5 hours per week (Grades 3 and 4)</li> <li>• 1 hour per week (Grades 5, 6 and 7)</li> </ul> <p>Same strands cover three primary stages except in level of complexity:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grades 1-2</li> <li>• Grades 3-4</li> <li>• Grades 5-7</li> </ul> <p>Strand 1: Worship in Christianity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Belief in God;</li> <li>• Christian worship;</li> <li>• Christian festivals and ceremonies</li> </ul> <p>Strand 2: The life of Jesus</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Birth and boyhood of Jesus;</li> <li>• The teachings of Jesus;</li> <li>• The death and resurrection of Jesus</li> </ul> <p>Strand 3: Christian moral values</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Christian moral values;</li> <li>• Learning from others.</li> </ul>	<p>Teaching Time Allocation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4 hours per week</li> </ul> <p>Form 1: Strands</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction to Religious Education</li> <li>• The Bible</li> <li>• Creation and Fall of Man</li> <li>• Faith and God’s Promises to Abraham</li> <li>• Sinai Covenant</li> <li>• Leadership in Israel: King Saul, King David and King Solomon</li> </ul> <p>Form 2: Strands</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Old Testament Prophecies about Messiah</li> <li>• The Infancy and Early Life of Jesus</li> <li>• The Galilean Ministry</li> <li>• The Journey and the Ministry of Jesus in Jerusalem</li> <li>• Jesus’ Passion, Death and Resurrection</li> </ul> <p>Form 3: Strand</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Christianity and Social Behaviour</li> </ul>	<p>Teaching Time Allocation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3.33 hours per week</li> </ul> <p>Strand 1: The portrayal of the life and teaching of Jesus in the Gospel of St. Luke</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An introduction to the Gospel of St. Luke and its historical context</li> <li>• Themes in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ according to the Gospel of St. Luke</li> <li>• Conflict and opposition to Jesus</li> <li>• The Passion Narratives</li> <li>• The Acts of the Apostles</li> </ul> <p>Strand 2: An introduction and brief background to the Acts of the Apostles.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The birth of the Church and the spread of the church in Jerusalem</li> <li>• The movement into Judaea and Samaria.</li> <li>• The Damascus experience.</li> <li>• The life of the Early Church.</li> <li>• The spread of the church to other parts of the world.</li> </ul>

Perhaps not unexpected in a country where freedom of religion is enshrined in the Constitution, the decision to re-introduce Christian RE after some years of teaching multi-faith RE, *inter alia*, engendered debate and controversy. Local and international newspapers picked up the story. The following headlines were captured: “Schools crisis over Christian teaching”, “Christianity only please, we’re Swazis”, “Swaziland orders schools to teach only Christianity”, “Swaziland runs out of Bibles as gov’t orders schools to teach Christianity”, “Religious groups slam Swazi policy to teach only Christianity”, “EU challenges Swazi order to teach only Christianity” and “Swaziland criticised for new education religion ban.”

Although surprised by the announcement, some sections of the society, including Christian leaders, parents and some teachers welcomed the decision surmising that after all in KoE Christianity is a dominant religion and thus the need to ensure that education was aligned firmly with a Christian framework as a way of attending to the needs of the majority faith. Others who wished to see Christianity as the state religion (a demand rejected by the King in 1996 and again when drafting the Constitution in 2005), exalted the development’s efforts because Christian RE could enhance the value of learning key Christian moral values needed to deal with the country’s declining moral values among the youth. Such views expressed the

unchallenged notion of Christian based moral values as the default mechanism in inculcating pro-social moral values towards citizenship in the promotion of a peaceful society (Dlamini, 2019). Some teachers felt reassured that the new Bible based curriculum will improve pass rates in RE because Christian materials are familiar to many teachers and Bibles (as teaching resource) are abundantly available in the country (Government of Swaziland, 2014; Moletsane, Bhebhe and Dlamini, 2020).

Conversely, others (e.g. religious groups, civil society representatives and educators) expressed shock by the action of the government, not least for the absence of consultation on such a sensitive matter. There were those at pains to argue how this move was a flagrant attempt to trample upon the religions freedoms granted in the constitution. In its 2018 report on religious freedom in KoE, the United States government inferred that the 2017 policy requiring public schools to teach only Christianity and excluding others was in contradiction of the Constitution, which prohibits religious discrimination of any kind (US Department of State, 2018). Others felt that by making such unilateral change to RE, the collective leadership of the government was denying other children the Right to express their beliefs through education in schools (Dlamini, 2018).

Another view was that the government's directive failed to take into account the reality of the country's religious pluralism, not least that although Christianity is the dominant religion, STR has been tolerated since missionary times and taught formally in schools when multi-faith RE was introduced (Bhebhe, Moletsane and Shabangu, 2020b). Some Muslim parents expressed concern that the religious needs of non-Christian children were ignored by such a move and also feared for the worsening of religious friction in the country if the Christian policy in RE was not reconsidered. There were also those who worried that teachers will be made to 'preach' Christian moral values at the exclusion of moral values that can be drawn from other worldviews (Dlamini, 2019). In a recent survey, some teachers were openly critical of the new Christian RE programme, with one stating that the "old syllabus was so much better because it touched on all regions and was quite inclusive which is lacking in the current one" and another saying that "... I am not pleased because pupils need the information about all other religions as opposed to Christianity alone" (Bhebhe, Moletsane and Shabangu, 2020b, 1365).

In an attempt to broker an interfaith dialogue to address the banning of multi-faith RE and re-introduction of Christian RE, the US government through its ambassador in KoE engaged with relevant stakeholders (e.g. government officials, religious leaders, head of the Human Rights Commission Secretariat, head of the Millennium Challenge Corporation task force and others). Intense discussions were held and despite various points raised extolling the wisdom of widening the RE curriculum (rather than restricting it), the government stood firm in its resolute to Christianise RE. To date, the government's new policy requiring schools to teach only Christianity in RE remains in force in KoE (US State Department, 2018).

### **Discussion and conclusion**

As far as sources would permit, this paper has explored the trajectory of RE in KoE, particularly capturing the return of confessional RE, a surprising development not only in KoE but also elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa. What is intriguing about the contested vicissitudes of RE in KoE is that this is the first time in sub-Saharan Africa when a government unilaterally cancelled multi-faith RE, banned other religions and reintroduced the teaching of Christianity only in a forceful return of confessional RE in public education.

What draws attention to the sudden policy reversal for RE is not only the concern expressed by critics in KoE, but also how this development seems out of step with general trends in the neighbouring countries. Although elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa multi-faith RE (introduced in various countries from the 1980s) has had "... different outcomes of success

and failure...,” the countries have found a *workable* compromise and as far as we were able to ascertain, there has not been cases involving the banning of multi-faith RE (Matemba and Addai-Mununkum, 2019, 160). Instead, other countries in the region have adopted a particularist approach (offering a number of single faith RE on the curriculum), others have tried neo-confessional approaches (multi-faith RE dominated by Christianity) and some have introduced a *dual* syllabus system – that is offering both multi-faith RE and Christian RE on the curriculum to give choice (see Matemba, 2011a).

As noted earlier, policy reversal as analytical framework touch on relevant areas related to recent developments in RE in KoE. The announcement of policy reversal for multi-faith RE was surprising and dramatic attracting the attention of both local and international media essentially, because the announcement moved against the grain in terms of pedagogical trends in RE elsewhere and for the fact KoE is a member of a globalised world where inclusivity and democratic ideals are exhorted. We are also curious to observe that KoE’s new Christian RE for primary schools was developed and produced with support from the European Union, an institution that extols democratic principles (Government of Eswatini, 2018). The irony is not lost here.

The evidence analysed in this paper would suggest that although controversially, the government initiated a policy reversal against multi-faith RE on the justification that such action was in the interest of the majority population and in line with the country’s long religious links with Christianity, which now forms people’s lifeworld. Invoking the words of the country’s famous ‘Christian’ king, sought to assure Emaswati that this policy reversal was considered carefully ensuring that education remains guided by Christian ethos as endorsed by the Kingdom’s founding fathers. In fact, the new primary Christian RE syllabus has listed King Sobhuza II in the study to “appreciate the moral qualities shown in the lives of some remarkable Christians [and] retell stories of the lives of some remarkable Christians...” (Government of Eswatini, 2018, 63).

Regarding the idea of policy re-reversal (Gall (2012), the reversal of policy against multi-faith RE and re-reversal of policy to a previous Christian policy used in missionary times and for much of the independence period describe accurately the scenario for RE in KoE. In our examination of the period multi-faith RE has been practice in KoE (2000-2017), we noted various challenges the subject faced coalesced around stakeholder general resistance to accept this curriculum (Government of Swaziland, 2014). In addition, there were issues related to lack of teachers’ professional knowledge and competence in multi-faith pedagogies, issues that also relate to initial experiences elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa (see Museka, 2019; Matemba and Addai-Mununkum, 2019; Lombard, 2011). In policy reversal, the lack of expertise, capacity, resources and good leadership provide some explanation as to why reforms related to multi-faith RE struggled for general acceptability, even by the teaching profession, leading to policy reversal and abandonment (see Lopez and Sutter, 2004; Lowry, 2005). This also may help explain why when the new government reintroduced Christian RE it ensured that Bibles as a teaching resource for schools were available, leading to a shortage of Bibles in the country as widely reported in the media.

Although policy reversal touch on the consequence of bad policy choices as reason for this dynamic (Yago and Morgan, 2008; Asongu, 2016), our view is that policy reform in KoE towards multi-faith RE was a positive policy decision and not a bad one. For after, KoE is part of the global community of nations, signatory to various UN conventions (including Human Rights), and as such should celebrate inclusivity in socio-cultural life, including how religious pluralism in education should be embedded in education. If KoE is to offer a citizenship sensitive curriculum that considers children’s rights (not only in favour of the rights of parents) (Patrick, 2015), then it should reconsider seriously how minority religions and ‘others’ can also contribute in the “development of the person in relation to self-awareness and their

relationships with others... [and make]... an important contribution to the personal, moral and social development of learners” (Government of Eswatini, 2018, 11).

Finally, while RE in KoE has started to generate research interest (see Dlamini, 2018, 2019; Bhebhe, Moletsane and Shabangu, 2020a, 2020b; Moletsane et al., 2020), there remain aspects and insights to be captured and reported, to the wider international RE scholarship. Two issues are worth following up in a future research: First, how teachers and students engage with interdisciplinary learning in primary RE, and secondary, how KoE can be challenged to decolonise the RE Christian curriculum.

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