

## **Chapter 19**

### **Religious Minorities at School South of the Sahara**

Yonah Hisbon Matemba (University of the West of Scotland, UK)  
Richardson Addai-Mununkum (University of Education, Wenneba, Ghana)  
Maitumeleng Nthonto (University of Pretoria, South Africa)  
Godfrey Museka (University of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe)

#### **Abstract**

In this chapter, we draw on perspectives from five countries south of the Sahara (Malawi, Ghana, Zimbabwe, South Africa and Lesotho) as ‘representative’ contexts to understand the situation, treatment and challenges encountered by religious minority learners and their experiences of school life. We explore how religion inherent in the discourse, and the socio-cultural imperatives imbricated by school culture, global forces, policy (or its absence), curriculum and classroom discourse have the potential to impact on school life of learners from diverse religious orientations. Insights from these five supra-national contexts provide an understanding of the (unenviable) experience of religious minorities in school contexts dominated by a hegemonic *deflection* of the majoritised normative religion such as Christianity, and by contrast the suppression of minority religious identities. We reveal the tokenistic nature of some school practices to make it appear like religious minority presence is recognised. Left with no choice, how religious minorities seek redress through the courts is explored. In the final section, we highlight the consequences of religiously minoritising learners at school.

#### **Introduction**

The chapter draws on material content from five countries (Malawi, Ghana, Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Lesotho) as contexts that highlight the situation and treatment of religious minority learners at school south of the Sahara. Since missionary times (and until the postcolonial present), Christianity has remained a majoritised religion South of the Sahara<sup>1</sup>, accounting for 62.9 per cent of the region’s population. Religious minorities such as Muslims (30.2 per cent), followers of African Traditional Religions (3.3 per cent) and pockets of much smaller religious communities such as Hindus (0.2 per cent), Buddhists (<0.1 per cent) and Jews (<0.1 per cent), including the ‘unaffiliated’ (3.3 per cent) also exist (Pew Research Centre, 2021). While these statistical data are useful, they do not give a trustworthy reflection of the majority’s existential reality in that most indigenous Africans in Malawi, Ghana, Zimbabwe, South Africa and Lesotho are dual (and even triple) faith bearers (Kleinhempel, 2017). Many indigenous Africans, south of the Sahara are Christians or Muslims by day and traditionalists by night.

South of the Sahara, religious hegemony (as indeed elsewhere where religion has a strong foothold) and its impact on socio-cultural life is well known. In his book, *Living in the Shadow of the Cross*, Paul Kivel (2013) articulates the power and privilege of Christian hegemony which he describes as being “the everyday, systematic set of Christian values, individuals and institutions in all aspects ... of society” (3). According to Kivel, this hegemony manifests in society in several ways. First, subtle internalisation of Christian beliefs by

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<sup>1</sup> We prefer using the decolonised nomenclature ‘South of the Sahara’ in reference to what historically is known as sub-Saharan Africa, a term that is limited and outdated in the postcolonial present.

individuals. Secondly, social, spiritual, political, and economic power churches and clergy exert on people's lives. Next, influence of a network of parachurch organisations and institutions such as schools, hospitals, media networks (print, online and broadcasting) and charitable organisations on to Christian power elites (eminent religious leaders, politicians, and wealthy individuals) who exert particular influence on society based on their religious orientation. Finally, epistemological hegemony based on Christian ideals, values and practices that shape culture and inform the making of public policies.

Besides Christianity being in majority, south of the Sahara is a multi-religious complex society energised (others might say conflicted) by a democratic dispensation that promises good governance and the enjoyment of freedoms for all, including religious freedom (Matemba, 2021b; De Jager and De Jager, 2019). While countries in this region pledge to protect religious minorities through their constitutions and democratic institutions (also in line with UN's conventions such as Declaration of Humans Rights, (see Durham et al., 2013), marginalisation and demonisation of religious minorities remain prevalent in society. This is reflected in school culture and practices in which religiously minoritised learners are not necessarily guaranteed their freedoms due to explicit, hidden, and absent curricula inherent in the public-school system that treats them as the religious 'other' and the bullying that comes along it (see James et al., 2014; Museka and Machingura, 2018; Chan, 2021). Evidently, the situation for religious minorities in schools remains worrisome. Given the scholarly neglect in this area, particularly south of the Sahara, we argue for greater recognition (and protection) of religious minorities. We further advocate that schools south of the Sahara must create a supportive environment to ensure that learners from minoritised religions flourish in it, if schools are to maintain the claim as nurturing spaces for all learners (see Kelly, Watt and Giddens, 2020).

### **Understanding religious minorities in schooling contexts**

Minority is a contested concept and has been used in several fields such as culture, language and politics resulting in the mushrooming of respective sub-concepts that include religious minority, linguistic minority and political minority. Generally, a population is designated minority when it has a numeric inferiority and when it has a unique identity. This description resonates with the United Nations Minority Rights Report that describes minorities as:

A group numerically inferior to the rest of the population State, in a non-dominant position, whose members - being nationals of the state - possess ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics differing from those of the rest of the population and show, if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity, directed towards preserving their culture, traditions, religion and language (United Nations, 2010, 2).

This definition is, however, problematic in the sense that minoritisation is not only about numerical representativeness but also about power, othering and disempowerment. In Malawi, the issue of 'numerical representativeness' has come under criticism by the Muslim minority who feel (although unsubstantiated) that the national census is politically skewed to make it appear like the Christian majority (78.5 per cent) is ever growing while the Muslim minority (13.8 per cent) as numerically stagnant (Matemba, 2013; Matemba and Addai-Mununkum, 2021). In school contexts, the term 'minority' describes learners belonging to minoritised religious groups that are numerically small, generally sidelined and subordinated to the religious majority at the micro school level. Our definition here also includes 'minorities within minorities' - that is some learners being members of a minority religious group within another and more dominant religious minority (see Agbaria and Shehadeh, 2022). What distinguishes these minorities is their *religious* aspect and not simply their minority status (Ghanea, 2012). While numeric minority depicts religious groups, whose members are statistically fewer than

the rest of the school population, subordinate majority implies any religious group whose members are majority in numbers but because of limited socio-economic and political power they are subordinate to the powerful minority. This definition takes cognisance of cases where the numeric religious minority experience subordination to the religious majority who exercise power to dominate, a situation which in schools pose social and logistical challenges to religiously minoritised learners (Abo-Zena, 2011, 15).

Cases of majority Christian and Hindu learners in Islamic schools or Muslim and Hindu learners in Christian schools and followers of Indigenous African religion in Christian schools who are treated as minorities abound in Malawi, Ghana, Zimbabwe, South Africa and Lesotho. In Zimbabwe, for example, Jewish and Islamic schools' Christian learners (and teachers) have the numeric advantage, but the institutions are organised in ways that promote Jewish or Islamic beliefs and practices. Similarly, a Seventh-day Adventist school is reported to have more Muslims than Christians, forcing some compromises to school timetable in Ghana (see Addai-Mununkum, 2017). Considering these realities, questions must be asked as to the motives for minoritising and subordinating learners with different religious orientations. Worth noting is that even within the Christian fraternity itself, further marginalisation can be detected because of differences in denominational affiliations (e.g., marginalisation of the Christian 'other' as a religious minority) has been a common feature in Lesotho. In a country where Christian dominance is praised, there has developed a mind-set that the role of Religious Education (RE), for example, is to help even learners of other religions to become Christians. A Malawian study found an entrenched position from a church official who stated:

We do not accept Islam being taught in our schools essentially because we Christians desire to convert Muslims to our religion and thus it defeats logic on our part to teach a religion we want children to convert out of (Matemba, 2011, 135).

As in Malawi noted above, so strong is such mind-set as also evidenced in Lesotho that people support Christian RE on the misguided belief that it, too, promotes inclusion. In the two countries noted here, there is an argument based on faulty logic that Christian RE is suitable because it develops values and virtues that are good for all learners (see Mokotso, 2017; Matemba, 2011). However, failing to see the absurdity of that reasoning is the very fact religious minority learners have a raw deal from the education system.

One issue scarcely explored in extant scholarship is how religious minorities are represented in inclusive RE south of the Sahara. A recent study of Malawi and Ghana (Matemba and Addai-Mununkum, 2021) reveals the extent of religious misrepresentation and misclusion in classroom discourse that adversely affect curriculum outcomes for religious minority learners in RE in ways that "... connotes the inferiorisation, marginalisation and suppression of minoritised religions ... by a hegemonic and majoritised religion in socio-cultural life and school curriculum... (2). It reiterates how some teachers justify that teaching only Bible-based RE to Muslim learners, for example, is acceptable because teachers deliver the content 'fairly' to all learners (because they only emphasise the historical aspects of religion). In that study, some teachers were observed blatantly biased asserting that God brought only Christianity to the world as the 'true' religion while Muslims follow a religion created by man (Prophet Muhammed). In addition, it highlights the erroneous view that Rastafarianism has bad principles and that in African religion people worship objects of no value. In one extreme Malawian case, the study captured an incident where a RE teacher went to the police station for protection when Muslim parents came to the school baying for his blood because of "... what learners had told them the teacher had allegedly said about Islam and Prophet Muhammed in class, which had upset the learners" (135).

All the five countries examined in this chapter are signatory to international conventions, including Minority Rights, which the country respects and protects. In addition, in all these countries, the UN principle “Education For All” is adhered to on the promise that no learner should be summarily denied an education because of their faith. What is at issue here is how such lofty policies, guidelines and pronouncements are implemented (or not) in practice and the extent to which, if at all, religious minority learners benefit from these conventions and protections. From relevant literature, we know that religious minority learners suffer the worst form of macroaggression and bullying at school (see Dupper, Forrest-Bank and Lowry-Carusillo, 2015). Another key factor to consider is that religious pressures in Malawi, South Africa, Ghana, Lesotho and Zimbabwe sometimes stand in the way of inclusion because with or without parental consent, learners are forced in one way or another to observe religious orientations administered by church schools. In Christian schools, for instance, school days open with a prayer, singing of hymns, and the reading of scriptures from the Bible and this has become a norm or the culture of the school.

The situation for religious minority learners is exacerbated by the attitude of church-dominated schools towards learners of different faiths. Despite the presence of other religions in Malawi, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Lesotho and South Africa, the epistemic dominance of Christianity remains as the norm in schools. In Lesotho where over 90 percent of public primary schools belong to churches, education has continued to project an uncompromising stance on the centrality of Christian confessionalism in schools. This includes, as we have seen, teaching of Bible RE, a situation that places religious minority learners in a coercive environment (unsafe space) that forces them to comply with Christian ethos to receive an education (Mokotso, 2017). Complicating matters for religious minority learners, is that in Lesotho school admission policies have traditionally been based on denominational criterion in which Christian denominations actually minoritises each other in the church-controlled schools to the extent that historically “children were forced to find a place in their denomination or face rejection from other denominations... [that] learners from other denominations or faiths were often told that the school was full even when there was space” (Mokotso, 2017, 116, 120).

In Zimbabwe, a good number of Mission (Church) schools continue to use the denominational model in admitting learners. Parents or guardians are often asked to produce baptism and confirmation certificates of prospective learners despite constitutional provisions, which outlaw such practices. Thus, chances of admission at a mission school are high if a prospective learner belongs to the denomination that runs the school, average if a prospective learner belongs to a different denomination and low if he/she is unaffiliated. Even with the introduction of form one e-learning selection platform, which disregards learner’s denomination, mission schools have maintained the quarter system. The quarter system entails a situation where mission schools indiscriminately admit, in hypothetical sense, 60% of prospective learners and clandestinely reserve 40% of places to church members.

In South Africa, the issue of school admissions has improved due to educational policy shifts after the end of Apartheid in the mid-1990s (RSA, 1996a, 1996b). Based on these changes, religiously oriented schools (schools with a religious ethos) appointed educators and admitted learners despite their faiths (Zilliacus, 2013). Schools that have a Christian character orient parents of new learners and new appointees about the ethos of the schools. Most schools governing bodies are religiously represented with diverse religious representatives in leadership portfolios of the school governing bodies (Xaba, 2011).

In Malawi and Ghana, the challenge of school admission as an obstacle to religious minority learners seemed to have been addressed. By policy, all public schools (e.g., grant-aided) in the two countries although may be faith-affiliated, must adopt a faith-blind admission process where religion is not a variable of consideration on the scorecard (Matemba and Addai-

Mununkum, 2021). Learners are made to pledge to abide by school rules, some of which have religious implications. In Ghana, practices such as wearing hijab by girls in Islamic schools, avoidance of earrings in Adventist schools, observance of religious routines in Catholic schools have been reported. Any attempts at violating any of such rules come with sharp consequences such as reprimands and in worse cases, suspension.

Finally, in this section, the motives schools in Malawi, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, South Africa and Ghana subordinate learners from minority religions coalesce on several factors. First, a Christian epistemological hegemony in education has remained to such an extent that despite policies saying that public schools must be neutral spaces, the cultures of education remain embedded in a *colonised* Christian framework (Matemba, 2021b). Related to the first point, is the fact that public schools are keen to maintain a Christian identity and character of the schools as a reflection of the country's Christian tradition (Matemba, 2021a). Then there is also the issue related to school leaders and teachers' ontological positions that favour Christianity as the majoritised religion in society (Nthontho, 2020). The inadequacy of professional training, particularly for RE teachers means that teaching continues to be approached from an exclusively Christian standpoint despite the curriculum having changed to multi-faith RE (Masengwe, 2022).

### **Tokenism and proxies of recognition in the curriculum and school life**

As noted earlier, the new socio-political dispensation of democracy has necessitated educational policy south of the Sahara to respond to issues of inclusion in the curriculum and school life. As part of the need for school culture change, attempts (albeit tokenistic) have been made to democratise school life as well as the curriculum, including RE so that different religious voices can be heard in the classroom. In Ghana, Malawi, South Africa, and Zimbabwe this development manifests within multi-faith RE whose introduction has had different outcomes of success and failure.

Among the five countries in our study, only Lesotho has tried but failed to introduce multi-faith RE in its schools. This highlights an extreme case where education remains exclusively Christian dominated in a historically huge Christian population (96.8%) and where Christian RE continues to be offered in schools (Mokotso, 2019, 2017, 2016; Ntompana and Mokotso, 2018). Attempts to revise the curriculum in Lesotho towards offering other religions in RE have faced stakeholder resistance. In 2006, a multi-faith syllabus called 'Religious and Moral Education' that deviated from traditional Bible RE was initiated but rejected mainly by churches which argued against its suitability on the account that such a curriculum would expose learners to other religious traditions in a 'Christian' country (Mokhatla, 2005; Molelle, 2006; Mokotso, 2017). In Zimbabwe, although finally (in 2015) the curriculum successfully changed from Bible RE to multi-faith RE, the development was not without contestation against multi-faith RE by a society conditioned to a *colonised* curriculum and therefore unprepared to hear the voices of the religious other in schools (see Dube, 2021). The rugged story of RE attempting to transition from Bible to multi-faith teaching in Malawi and Ghana is not dissimilar. In Ghana and Malawi, multi-faith RE was introduced in 1987 and 2000, respectively, after overcoming protests, counter-protests and unnecessary delays (see Matemba and Addai-Mununkum, 2021).

Yet still, even in the four countries under study (Malawi, Ghana, Zimbabwe and South Africa) despite the veneer of offering multi-faith RE the reality is that such a school programme follows the principle of 'limited pluralism' (i.e. ideally not 'full' pluralism) by preselecting a small number of religions for study in multi-faith RE. In Malawi and Ghana, for example, material content of multi-faith RE is based on three religions (Christianity, African Traditional Religions or ATR and Islam). A similar situation can be found in Zimbabwe where four religions (ATR, Judaism, Christianity and Islam) make up multi-faith RE.

By its very nature, multi-faith RE that follows the principle of ‘limited pluralism’ further marginalises religious minorities that are present in the countries but excluded from study. Evidently, this format of RE defeats the very idea of inclusivity because religious minority children from outside the three designated religions are excluded from the process of knowledge making in RE. Even in the four countries where multi-faith RE has been implemented, problems remain that affect its efficacy in schools. In South Africa, head teachers and teachers struggle “to accommodate other religions [fearing] that they are compromising their own [Christianity]” (Nthonto 2017, 47). Similarly, in Zimbabwe, multi-faith RE is failing to achieve its intentions as it only assimilates superficial trappings of diversified curriculum workloads (Masengwe, 2022). In Malawi, a curriculum arrangement that offers both Bible RE and multi-faith RE with schools given the mandate to choose which programme to offer has resulted with Bible RE being overwhelmingly favoured by school (Matemba, 2013). In a country where 37 per cent of public schools is ‘grant-aided’ (i.e., church owned but with government financial support to run them and pay teachers), the reality is that almost all schools teach only Bible RE. If the pedagogical changes in Malawian RE were meant to level learning insuring that the religious ‘other’ is acknowledged in education, then it is concerning to observe that this promise is fading fast as more and more schools are ignoring multi-faith RE and instead continue offering Bible RE (Matemba, 2013; Matemba and Addai-Mununkum, 2021). In Ghana and South Africa, classroom discourse in multi-faith RE is bedevilled with teacher bias and neglect of lessons on other religions. RE classes are also shaped by tensions arising out of school religious culture, teacher religious identity and the dominant learner religious identity. This has resulted in situations where learners who do not identify as Christian or Muslim are scorned, ridiculed and bullied into hiding their religious identities (Addai-Mununkum, 2017).

More broadly, the multi-faith formulation of RE in Malawi, Zimbabwe, South Africa and Ghana is tokenistic because it gives the appearance of pedagogical change when in fact a Christian hegemonic structure ensures that RE is “... still functionally Christocentric” (Marashe, Ndamba and Chireshe 2009, 48). In South Africa and Zimbabwe, Nthonto’s (2020) and Chademana’s (2019) studies, respectively, reveal how head teachers’ Christian orientation has ensured the continued support for Christian moral values and ethos for their schools even though they were aware of government inclusive policies. In South Africa, Tayob’s (2018) study also emphasises that despite policy rhetoric “... representation of minority religions has been monitored or curtailed in schools [and that] ... the representation of Christianity has not been replaced by a representation of diversity” (9). In line with constitutional laws, educational policies in countries south of the Sahara mandate schools to align their practices within the principles of fairness and rights. As such, one finds occasions, like in South Africa, where learners from other religions can excuse themselves from morning assemblies or permit them to leave school early to attend religious services, for example, allowing Muslim learners to attend Friday prayers at the mosque (Van der Walt, 2011). In some instances, schools south of the Sahara pay attention to the policy of “rotation of opportunities for observance, in proportion to the representation of different religions in the school” (Tayob, 2018, 8). However, despite these instances of ‘recognition’, the brute reality is that most countries south of the Sahara only manage a tokenistic display of inclusivity for religious minorities in school life. Worth noting that besides some recognition of Islam in school life, learners from ATR and Rastafarianism have never been given recognition. In fact, in Lesotho, learners belonging to ATR have been routinely deregistered once their schools learn that they have undergone traditional initiation ceremonies - a practice they consider to be incompatible with the schools’ Christian ethos (Mokotso, 2017).

The school assembly is one area where blatant disregard of religious minority needs is evident. In Malawi, Lesotho, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Ghana school morning assemblies

pay scant attention to religious minorities because schools strategically plan assemblies to ensure the perpetuation of Christian hegemony, complete with singing Christian hymns and reading of Bible verses as routine school tradition. In Malawi, Christian paternalism is evident in the way morning assemblies are organised in public schools. Matemba found that even on days when Muslim learners conduct morning assembly—where they can sing Muslim songs and say Muslim prayers—ultimately, at the end of the assembly reading of Bible verses remains mandatory (Matemba, 2011). In South Africa, the issue also has to do with how school principals fail to implement policy and only re-state that every learner has the right to his/her religious beliefs when confronted by education officials and yet in everyday practice they are interested only to see learners at assemblies sing, pray and read the Bible (Nthonto, 2017).

In Zimbabwe, most public schools do not have clear policy on religious practice, instead tradition inherited from the colonial past act as the standard operating procedure. While there is no policy regarding Christian prayers and sermons at assembly, this is an everyday practice (Nyakatawa, 2013). Learners irrespective of their religious background are compelled to repeat the ‘Lord’s Prayer’ during assembly. Even school meetings and functions such as the prize-giving day, are usually preceded with a Christian prayer. No one seems to empathise with the religious ‘other’ learner in the school. There are also other practices in Zimbabwean schools as indeed in the other four countries, for example, teachers asking learners to pray for their break-time, before they eat lunch and for journey mercies when they travel back home at the of classes.

We argue that despite rhetoric of policy inclusivity, in south of the Sahara the curriculum (i.e., multi-faith RE) and practices in school life such as morning assemblies are tokenistic and in the long term, unhelpful towards religious minority recognition. While it may appear that religious minorities are *all* included because inclusive policies and multi-faith RE exist, the reality could not be more different because the school community has more religious minorities than those currently recognised for study or those allowed to sing their religions songs at assembly (i.e., Muslim learners). By this very fact, the curriculum and indeed schools are selective and as such unhelpful as spaces of inclusivity they purport to be. We see here a worrying trend where controversially schools have become zone of religious exclusion (instead of inclusion), in which the voice and identity of the religious minority learner are marginalised and at times demonised.

### **Recognition of religious minorities through legal course**

In previous sections we have demonstrated, how religious minorities are treated in the curriculum and school life south of the Sahara. Placed in this predicament and unable to get meaningful support from schools and official channels, parents of religious minorities have taken recourse from the courts to demand recognition and fair treatment of their children in schools. In Lesotho, parents initiated legal action challenging decisions of schools for refusing to enrol their children based on their denominational affiliation. In 1999, an intriguing case of ‘minority’ within a ‘majority’ (i.e., a minority Christian group within the country’s Christian majority) was reported. In the case of ‘Matumane and Others v Makhalong Lesotho Evangelical Church Primary School’, parents petitioned the courts to challenge the school’s admissions policy. In this case, the school had refused to admit 16 learners on the basis that their parents had deserted the Lesotho Evangelical Church (LEC) and joined the minority Jehovahs Witnesses sect (Mokotso, 2017, 116). In a related case of school admission, in South Africa the Organisation for Religious Education and Democracy (OGOD) filed an application in the Gauteng High Court in 2014 to forbid six public schools from marketing themselves as exclusively ‘Christian’ or as having a “Christian ethos” (Thamm, 2014). The High Court in Johannesburg, South Africa condemned such practices stating that no public school may promote a single religion to the exclusion of other.

In Zimbabwe, despite constitutional provisions and national policies stressing the sanctity of freedom of religion, realities in school demonstrate a general micro-level absence of legal statutes regarding the rights, recognition or treatment of religious minorities. This policy absence probably explains why nearly all public schools that have expelled learners for displaying and expressing their minoritised religious identity within the school setting have been at the thick end of the legal stick. As opposed to public schools, most church-run and private schools have strict policies on religious practice and upon enrolling each parent or guardian is supposed to sign a contractual agreement. The policies are generally silent on the practice of minority religions. Instead, they stress the compulsoriness of religious activities and rituals (Christian or Islamic) for all learners who enrol at the school. Private schools that are not church-related are generally western in outlook, hence Christian ethos prevail, and all learners are expected to abide. This probably explains why parents who have sued church-run and private schools for violating their children's right to freedom of religion have had their appeals turned down. The 2018 High Court and Supreme Court ruling that exonerated an elite Harare (Zimbabwe) private school for sacking an 'A' level learner who had refused to cut his beard in line with his Islamic beliefs, is a good example. The High Court judge ruled that,

The code of Conduct applied to all the pupils alike and did not discriminate on any grounds. The school in effect expected every pupil to maintain the [school's] educational and ethical standards as espoused in the Code of Conduct (Zenda, 2019).

The judge added:

It is for the pupil to conform to school regulations and not the school regulations to conform to individual pupil's beliefs and standards no matter how dearly one hold to such beliefs (Zenda, 2019).

These contradictory court rulings point to ambiguities and dissonances between school policies on one hand and the National Constitution, the Education Amendment Act and the National Culture Policy on the other hand. One wonders whether the courts are biased towards private schools and against public schools. Are private schools' codes of conduct superior to the Constitutional provisions, the Education Amendment Act and the National Culture Policy? As religion remains deeply immersed in the everyday life of schools in Zimbabwe and several countries world over, the plight of minority learners must be brought to the fore.

Perhaps of all religious minorities in schools south of the Sahara, Rastafarian children have received the worse form of exclusion at school, and such have been the most seeking recourse from the courts (and understandably so). As a religious group, Rastafarianism projects a particular confidence that both irritates and challenges the status quo of a hegemonic Christian settlement. Given their unorthodoxy in dietary habits, religious use of marijuana, dress, use of particular jargon and indeed wearing of the signature dreadlocks, Rastafarians and their children in school (if they can access it), project a different kind of religiosity and associated practice, including dress code (see Chakravarty, 2015). At centre of the tension between Rastafarian learners and public schools has been the wearing of dreadlocks, with school rules mandating that these be cut, explained in the context of school dress code.

In recent years, there have been success through the courts in Rastafarian parents challenging the blatant discrimination of their children in the school system because of their religious beliefs particularly on the matter of wearing dreadlocks. In Zimbabwe, we find a 2007 Supreme Court ruling that school X in Harare had violated the learner's rights by expelling him for refusing to cut his dreadlocks in line with his Rastafarian religious beliefs (Zenda, 2019). While in Malawi after a decade of campaigning and support from lawyers, one family finally won a landmark case of discrimination (pronounced on 14 January 2020) against the school and the state. It was a judgment that has paved the way for Rastafarian learners to attend



schools with their dreadlocks intact (Ntombana and Maganga, 2020; Gunde and Chikaipa, 2021). In Ghana, in April 2021, two Rastafarian learners were prevented from enrolling at prestigious public schools because their hair were unshaved. Although the students and their parents insisted that wearing dreadlocks was their religious practice, the school was so resolute in its actions that not even an order from the Ghana Education Service would affect its decision on the matter (MyNewsGH, 2021). Parents of the two Rastafarian learners took legal action. The courts ordered that the schools in question to admit the learners so that they could continue with their education unhindered by the manifestation of their Rastafarian religion (Agbenorsi, 2021).

Similar victories have been reported in South Africa. In the well-publicised case of *Danielle Antonie v Governing Body, The Settlers High School and Head of Western Cape Education Department 2002 (4) SA 738* in 2002, the school governing body (SGB) charged a fifteen-year-old Grade 10 learner with serious misconduct for wearing Rastafarian dreadlocks. The school stipulated that she had defied the school code of conduct that “the hair must be tied up if below the collar”. Believing that her right to freedom of religion (also expression) was infringed upon, she attended school with a black cap (matching the prescribed school colours) covering her dreadlocks. She was suspended from school because she had disobeyed the code of conduct for learners and had disrupted the school. The court ruled that in her case “...adequate recognition must be given to indulge in freedom of expression ...” (Mollo, 2015, 147). Again, in South Africa in 2009, a girl in the Free State province whose parents challenged her expulsion from school because of her dreadlocks won the case. In that case, the school was also ordered to pay the family compensation and publish an unconditional written apology in the national newspaper for humiliating the family (Vena, 2010).

The cases of Rastafarian learners and the use of the courts to get justice, demonstrate that epistemological equity in the educational space has come about through the enforcement of the courts and not through normal policy mechanisms and other relevant national and international protocols.

### **Minoritisation of religious minorities and its consequences**

Minoritisation of the religious ‘other’ manifests in different ways, both overt and covert. Religious minoritisation has far-reaching short and long-term effects on the psychosocial and physical development of the victims, which in turn affects their educational progress and achievement. Historically, such Minoritisation can be verbal, non-verbal (symbolic gestures) or physical bullying and intends to mock, belittle and shame (Museka, 2013, 2019). In the five countries we have examined (as indeed elsewhere), minoritised learners often experience discrimination, social exclusion, name-calling, unpleasant identity jokes, derogatory comments, violent attacks, labelling, bullying and as in the case of Rastafarian learners, excluded from school because of wearing dreadlocks. Once subjected to these experiences the minoritised religious ‘other’ is likely to have psychosocial problems such as lowered self-esteem, phobias, suicide attempts and depression. These feelings and perceptions result in deficiency disorder, defined as behavioural disorder characterised by inability to concentrate on tasks (Meggitt and Sunderland, 2000).

In a milieu where one religion dominates and is considered ‘the religion’ (e.g., in Malawi, Ghana, Zimbabwe, South Africa and Lesotho) learners from minoritised religions which are often demonised find it difficult to acclimatise to that environment. Consequently, the learner develops feelings of worthlessness, which might push him/her out of school. This argument resonates with Morgan’s (2010) USA-based study that illustrates dropout rates of learners from minority groups as far exceeding that of learners from the dominant class. The psychosocial impact of abusing and traumatising learners, in this case the minoritised religious ‘other’, is labile, a mental health disorder characterised by rapidly fluctuating moods and

behaviours that negatively impacts the learner's ability to socialise with peers and teachers (Meggitt and Sunderland, 2000). In Malawi, Ghana, Zimbabwe, South Africa and Lesotho, one of the motives for minoritising and subordinating religious minority learners at school relates to the colonial project that imposed and perpetuated hegemonic power structures (Kivel 2013; Blumenfeld, 2020). In this instance, the colonising agents, including the missionary enterprise (both Christian and Muslim) were keen to de-Africanise learners by loading them with Western epistemological propaganda that legitimised the colonial/missionary project through schools as the tool of social control and disempowerment (see Masaka and Mukungurutse, 2017).

At social level discriminated learners, in this case religious minority learners, lack social skills to the extent that they often adopt compensatory behaviour (de Young, 1982). This behaviour manifests through wielding an unusual amount of power both at school and in the community. At school, they are likely to be hostile, violent and authoritative in their interaction with peers, hardly entertain criticism and respond to authority with resentment. As a coping mechanism, victims of discrimination often adopt escape behaviour; they mentally or physically escape from the traumatic scenes. At physical level, minoritised religious 'other' may develop generalised anxiety disorder, which can be exhibited by eating problems and altered sleeping patterns. Such experiences result in the general feelings of tiredness, which in turn result in loss of concentration during lessons (de Young, 1982; Appel et al., 2014). Negative perceptions of the minoritised religious 'other' are largely nourished by false and misleading information, prejudice, stereotypes and ignorance of different faith tradition, hence the need to promote knowledge and respect of the religious 'other'. The irony is that religion, which if used positively can become the bedrock of social cohesion, can also become a factor for social harm on religious minority learners who face religious prejudice and discrimination.

Experiences in different educational settings suggest that assimilation or convergence and subjugation are some of the key motivations for minoritising and subordinating learners who belong to different religions (Appel et al., 2014). In countries where non-normative religions have emerged largely due to migration, religious minority learners are expected to conform to the dominant religious beliefs and practices (see Abo Zena, 2011). Schools do not exist in a vacuum, and as such, the 'national' religious beliefs and practices, which resemble those of the dominant class, cascade into the education system. The school practices, values, norms and beliefs are part also of the 'hidden' curriculum (i.e., role of education in the socialisation of learners into the values and norms of society) reflect the dominant religious beliefs and practices (Apple, 1971; James et al., 2014). For instance, minority immigrant learners who subscribe to different beliefs and values are expected to assimilate, adopt and adapt to the dominant ones. This adaptation or assimilation leads to convergence; a situation where the faith of the minority religious group converges with that of the dominant religious group. Convergence orientation is often preferred because it is convenient for the school and the dominant religious group (Abo-Zena, 2011; Niens et al, 2013).

The incidents we have captured in Malawi, South Africa, Ghana, Lesotho and Zimbabwe, resonate with wider academic discourse that highlight acutely how minoritisation and subordination of the religious 'other' learner at school fuels vulnerability, discrimination, intolerance, injustice and marginalisation (Morgan, 2010; Niens et al., 2016; Giorda and Giorgi, 2019; Metso, 2019). Forrest-Bank and Dupper (2016) have highlighted how "the severity of discriminatory incidents seems to be related to the extent at which a student's religion deviates from the majority religion, and as well as the visibility (e.g., attire) of their minority religious status" (262). Warren Blumenfeld (2020) points out insidious situations in which minoritised religious 'others' become victims of 'false envy' by the dominant group. In such incidents, the dominant group pretends to manifest "a certain affection for a minoritized person or a group of people, it is an effort to deny the complexity of the social and political context ... at times [manifesting] itself in dominant groups' claiming victimhood at the hands

of minoritized groups” (2394). In other situations, as part of the social order (in a historic sense) religious minorities are victims of *deflection*, on the notion that “... majority rules and that the minority cannot expect the majority to adhere to minority standards” (Blumenfeld, 2020, 2394).

As a marginalised group, religious minorities are placed in a vulnerable situation in schools that subject them to bullying, abuse, suppression of their identity and consequently, leading to reduced opportunities to learn (Ameena and Henry, 2019). Blumenfeld (2020) has articulated several scenarios to explain why the marginalisation of religious minorities in schools has persisted. First, he notes the pretence to be inclusive “... by advocating for some tokenized additions to minoritized groups, though the true purpose is often ultimately to maintain its power and privilege” (2406). Secondly, he says that because often “... members of the dominant group fail to understand the ways dominant hegemony impacts the lives of minoritized groups” (2398). In such situations, dominant privilege and oppression is evident as expressed through denial and minimalization of the concerns of the religious ‘other’ (Dupper, Forrest-Bank and Lowry-Carusillo, 2015).

Several studies have highlighted the negative experiences of religious minority learners at schools. In the US, Abo-Zena’s (2011) has captured the worrisome predicament for religious minorities who may “... feel proud, unique, marginalized, unwelcomed, ashamed, or targeted in public schools... [and] struggle with classroom issues on a regular, perhaps even on a daily, basis without ever having spoken to a teacher or parent about their concerns” (15, 19). While Forrest-Bank and Dupper (2016) reports on the daily struggles of religious minority learners in public schools ranging from bullying (bordering on hate crime), macroaggression and perhaps the worst of them all teachers as the perpetrators of such incidents, and yet an issue learners “... never or very rarely spoke to their parents about it ... (Forrest-Bank and Dupper, 2016, 265). The issue of teachers as perpetrators of bullying and marginalisation of religious minority learners is worrisome and therefore worth highlighting. Alice Chan’s (2021) recent study of classroom experience in Modesto, California, US, confirms this sad truth about some teachers. In that study, Chan found incidents where teachers were insensitive to the needs and concerns of religious minorities, in one case a teacher telling a sixth-grade Jewish learner who cried because she has been made to decorate a Christmas tree, to toughen up and deal with it (Chan, 2021). In Finland, Pekka Metso’s (2019) study identified similar concerns in highlighting how RE teachers cause minority learners’ grief not least, because of how badly they plan their teaching that further marginalises these learners.

In countries with a majoritised religion, there are practical issues to consider in dealing with religious diversity in the common school, ensuring that the needs of religious minority learners are also met. This can range from wearing head scarfs (e.g. hijab), dietary needs (with serving pork being a particularly sensitive matter), nature of school assemblies, space for multi-faith religious observations within schools, and type of RE, including material content that further marginalises minorities - as in Foucauldian sense this being evidence of technology of power (Giorda and Giorgi, 2019; Choksy, 2012; Qazi, 2021). The complex issue of tolerance vis-à-vis acceptance for religious minorities comes up often in the discourse. In this vein tolerance is also related to issues of “... unequal power relations and marks out tolerated minorities as deviant or inferior by dominant standards ... [and therefore fails]... to address structural inequalities and leaves the tolerated minority vulnerable to dominance (Cvetkovska, Verkuyten and Adelman, 2020, 162). The widely reported cross-European project REDCo (Religion in Education: A Contribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries) found, *inter alia*, that:

In most countries, pupils supported the right of adherents to a moderate expression of religious faith in school. ... They did not oppose in school the wearing of unobtrusive religious symbols

or did not object to voluntary acts of worship for pupils who were adherents of a particular religion (Jackson and McKenna, 2017, 7).

Even here, as in Jackson and McKenna's excerpts above, learners' *moderate expression* in supporting religious minorities is worrisome because schools should aim to inculcate in learners the ethos of full acceptance of religious and other minorities.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to examine the position and treatment of religious minorities at school south of the Sahara. We have demonstrated how schools only make tokenistic attempts in managing the concerns and needs of religious minorities, and in ways that still project hegemonic Christian paternalism. Educational policies do exist, but the challenge remains that schools are reluctant to implement these in ways that also benefit religious minority learners. We argue that most of the challenges religious minority learners face emanate from low levels of legal and religious literacy on the part of educators. School administrators and teachers seem to overlook the fact that their countries are constitutionally secular. Colonial and missionary vestiges, Christocentric hidden and open curricula fuel the reality that the educational space in Zimbabwe, South Africa, Malawi, Ghana, and Lesotho is exclusionary, and with little consideration for the needs of religious minority learners.

The painful situation for Rastafarian at school should also be understood with the lens of postcolonial ambivalence. People south of the Sahara are simultaneously attracted and the same time repulsed by religious freedom and pluralism. The problem is that societies in general create their own criteria by which they assess religions and make decisions about which ones to accept or reject. The existence of hegemonic culture of tri-religious pluralism in the curriculum (e.g., Christianity, Islam, ATR), has also in consequence rendered every other religion as a discord to the harmonious tune sung by the triune religions in choreographed unison. Religious pluralism appears more applicable to mainstream religions and their adherents. Minoritised learners south of the Sahara are thus framed in a milieu where they need to consistently justify their religious beliefs to earn a modicum of half-hearted acknowledgement.

In as much as there are challenges, there are also opportunities for religious minorities at school. Waves of radical curriculum reforms in RE towards multifaithism and interculturalism give hope for religious minorities. As examined earlier, the triumphal court cases on the part of discriminated learners provide some optimism for the suppressed religious other learners at school. Despite these spaces of hope, we remain concerned, however, that the region's Christian hegemony will continue to pose social and logistical challenges for religious minority learners at school. It is worth emphasising the need for public schools south of the Sahara to challenge with earnest the culture of supporting (whether overtly or covertly) one religion over another. Unless the status quo is challenged and exclusionary practices changes, chances of learners from minority religions to express their identity in school will continue to be elusive, and that religious-oriented discrimination and bullying will continue unabated.

School managers are challenged to re-evaluate their own school practices if the changes needed are ever to materialise for the benefit of these marginalised minorities. We contend that religious minority learners at school should exercise their freedom of religion aligned with their religious identity without fear and hurt of discrimination and harassment. Religious identity matters for these learners and therefore the school must create safe space to enable these learners to celebrate rather than being forced by a toxic school environment that forces them to hide or change their identity in order to access education. Evidently, there is need for the curriculum and relevant school practices to cultivate a culture and an ethos that not only

recognise the religious ‘other’ learner but importantly, one that encourages the effected learner to thrive in their own identity.

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