

THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN SHAPING EDUCATIONAL VALUES AND CURRICULUM: HISTORICAL LEGACIES, CONTEMPORARY REALITIES, AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

Dr. Chioma Maureen Udemba

Department of Religion and Human Relations,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Abstract

Religion has long influenced formal education, shaping moral values, identity formation, and curricular priorities. By tracing colonial and postcolonial trajectories with a focus on Nigeria, this article examines the tensions and potentials at the intersection of faith and education. Drawing on existing scholarships and key contributions by C. M. Udemba (Udemba) in women's empowerment and religious literacy, and using primary and second sources of data collection, the article argues for inclusive, pluralistic curricula that support critical engagement and social justice.

Key Words: Religion; Educational Values; Curriculum: Historical Legacies, Contemporary Realities

Introduction

Education, as a transformative social institution, does not exist in a vacuum. It reflects and reinforces the values, ideologies, and worldviews embedded in the society it serves. Among the most powerful influences on educational systems globally is religion—an institution that shapes individual behavior, moral values, and collective identity. Religion has long played a foundational role in the development of educational structures, from the Islamic centers of learning in medieval Africa and the Qur'anic schools of West Africa, to the missionary schools established during colonial rule and the continued existence of faith-based institutions today. This article explores the complex and often contested role of religion in shaping educational values and curriculum. It examines how religious ideologies have historically influenced the development of formal education, molded moral and ethical frameworks, and guided curricular content. It also critically interrogates the tensions that arise in pluralistic societies where multiple faiths—and the absence thereof—coexist within a shared educational system. Focusing particularly on the Nigerian context, this paper analyzes the dual legacy of Christian and Islamic education, the structure of contemporary curricula, and the implications for equity, gender justice, and critical pedagogy. Ultimately, this study seeks to offer pathways for a more inclusive and value-driven educational practice that respects religious diversity while upholding academic freedom and social justice.

Historical Context

In pre-colonial Africa, systems of education were deeply intertwined with religion and communal life. In the northern regions of Nigeria, Qur'anic schools (Makarantar Allo) flourished, emphasizing memorization of the Qur'an, Arabic literacy, Islamic law (*sharia*), and spiritual discipline. These schools were integral to Islamic society, producing judges, scholars (*ulama*), and administrators in emirates like Kano, Katsina, and Sokoto (Hiskett, 1980).

In contrast, indigenous systems of education in other parts of the continent—including southern Nigeria—were informal but highly effective, embedding knowledge within cultural practices, oral traditions, and religious rites. Education here focused on social norms, survival skills, communal values, and spiritual duties. Religious leaders, elders, and traditional priests served as educators (Fafunwa, 1974).

The arrival of Christian missionaries—beginning with the Church Missionary Society in Badagry in 1842—introduced Western-style formal education, primarily in the southern regions. These mission schools aimed not just to promote literacy but to convert Africans to Christianity, which led to the systematic erosion of indigenous religious and cultural knowledge systems. Education became a tool of spiritual and cultural colonization, where western epistemologies were privileged and African belief systems demonized or excluded from the curriculum (Ajayi, 1965; Udemba & Chiegboka, 2021).

The 1970s Takeover of Mission Schools in Nigeria

In the aftermath of the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), the federal and regional governments pursued a policy of educational unification and secularization to foster national integration. This culminated in the takeover of mission-owned schools in the 1970s. The government argued that education was too important to be left in the hands of religious groups, especially as Nigeria became increasingly multi-religious and multiethnic (Taiwo, 1980).

While the intention behind this takeover was to standardize education, ensure universal access, and reduce religious domination, it had mixed consequences:

- **Loss of Moral and Spiritual Formation:** Faith-based schools were known for their strict discipline and emphasis on moral education grounded in religion. After the takeover, many critics observed a decline in moral standards, partly due to the removal of religious-centered pedagogy and weak governmental oversight (Obi & Mbanefo, 2011).
- **Decline in Quality and Infrastructure:** Under government control, funding challenges, bureaucratic inefficiency, and over-centralization led to the deterioration of school infrastructure, teacher morale, and educational outcomes, especially in previously well-managed mission schools (Adesina, 1977).
- **Curricular Homogenization:** The state introduced standardized curricula that often excluded indigenous knowledge and watered-down religious education to avoid sectarian bias. While this promoted neutrality, it also diluted the value-driven ethos once embedded in religious schooling (Uroko, 2023).
- **Religious Tensions:** The takeover sparked long-term tensions between the state and religious institutions, especially Christian missions that felt robbed of their educational legacy and capacity to form values-based leaders (Bolu-Steve et al., 2020).

In response, many religious denominations began re-establishing private schools in the 1990s and 2000s, especially as Nigeria liberalized its education sector. These new-generation faith-based schools aim to combine academic excellence with religious values, though they also raise questions around equity, access, and indoctrination.

Religion and Educational Values

Religion plays a pivotal role in shaping moral and ethical frameworks within education systems. In Nigeria, Christian Religious Studies (CRS) and Islamic Religious Studies (IRS) are integral to inculcating character formation, civic virtue, and ethical behavior among learners (Idowu, 2020; Oyekunle & Akinola, 2021). These subjects aim not only to transmit religious knowledge but also to build socially responsible citizens grounded in faith-based moral values.

Building on this, Udemba (2024) underscores the critical importance of religious literacy that moves beyond dogmatic instruction towards fostering tolerance and pluralism. In her analysis of faith-based education in Nigeria, she argues that curricula should empower learners to critically engage with diverse religious traditions and embrace interfaith dialogue as a tool for national cohesion (Udemba, 2024). This approach is particularly important in Nigeria's multi-religious context, where sectarian tensions remain a challenge.

Further, Udemba's (2023) work on feminist religious pedagogy highlights how incorporating gender-sensitive perspectives in religious education curricula can challenge patriarchal norms embedded within traditional teachings. Her scholarship advocates for educational reforms that uplift the voices of marginalized groups, especially women, thereby promoting equity and social justice within faith-informed educational settings (Udemba, 2023). Moreover, in collaboration with Ojukwu (2021), Udemba explores the role of faith-based institutions and women religious educators in advancing the rights and dignity of women in Nigeria through educational interventions. This body of work emphasizes the intersection of religion, education, and gender empowerment, demonstrating how religious values, when critically interpreted, can serve as a foundation for transformative social change (Udemba & Ojukwu, 2021).

Religion and Curriculum Content

Religious Studies—primarily Christian Religious Studies (CRS) and Islamic Religious Studies (IRS)—continue to be core subjects in Nigerian educational curricula, reflecting the country's religious demographics and cultural heritage. These subjects are intended to provide learners with religious knowledge, moral instruction, and cultural identity reinforcement (Idoko, 2023). However, many scholars critique how school textbooks and curricula often present religion from a predominantly confessional or faith-centric standpoint. This approach tends to emphasize one religious truth claim at the expense of pluralistic understanding and critical inquiry, which limits learners' capacity to engage thoughtfully with competing religious perspectives (Idoko, 2023; Udemba, 2024). For example, a 2023 study published by *MDPI* highlights that many CRS and IRS textbooks prioritize sectarian narratives and do not adequately incorporate interfaith perspectives or encourage students to critically examine different beliefs. This confessional bias restricts the educational potential of religious studies as a means for promoting tolerance and social cohesion in Nigeria's religiously plural society.

Faith-Based Schools and Curriculum Choices

Faith-based schools—whether Christian mission schools, Muslim schools (madrasahs), or Indigenous faith institutions—typically embed doctrinal values and religious worldview assumptions deeply within their curricula; these institutions often serve as crucial sites of both religious education and community identity formation. However, this close alignment between faith and curriculum poses several challenges:

- **Gender-role Bias:** Many faith-based curricula reinforce traditional gender roles grounded in religious texts and interpretations. Scholars like Udemba (2023) highlight how patriarchal narratives embedded in curricular content can limit the empowerment of girls and women in faith-based educational settings. These curricular choices often reproduce gendered expectations, shaping girls' educational and social trajectories in ways that may restrict agency.
- **Exclusion of Minority Religions and Worldviews:** Because faith-based schools are typically affiliated with a single religion, they often exclude or marginalize the beliefs and cultural practices of religious minorities. This exclusion can deepen social divisions and reduce opportunities for interreligious understanding among students.
- **Tensions with Secular Academic Content:** Faith-based curricula sometimes conflict with secular or scientific content taught in other subjects. For instance, religious perspectives on evolution, sexuality, or gender may contradict scientific or human rights frameworks, creating challenges for educators and students navigating these divergent discourses (Okeke, 2020).

Scholars caution that when religious indoctrination overshadows critical thinking, education risks becoming a tool for conformity rather than empowerment. As noted by Ejiogu (2022) and

supported by Udemba (2024), curricula must be designed to balance respect for religious beliefs with the promotion of analytical skills, open inquiry, and ethical reasoning.

In this vein, Udemba's feminist and pluralistic scholarship advocates for curricular reforms that introduce interfaith perspectives, feminist theology, and social justice frameworks into religious education. Such reforms can foster a more inclusive curriculum that encourages learners to critically engage in religion's role in society and develop as morally responsible, socially conscious citizens (Udemba, 2024).

Case Study: Nigeria

Dual Religious Legacy

Nigeria's formal educational system reflects its complex dual religious heritage. The southern regions of Nigeria predominantly adopted Christian missionary schooling starting from the mid-19th century. Mission schools established by European Christian denominations became the primary institutions for Western-style education, literacy, and Christian moral instruction (Ajayi, 1965). These schools shaped much of the early Nigerian elite and laid the foundation for national education. Conversely, in northern Nigeria, Islamic education flourished through indigenous Qur'anic schools and later formal Islamic institutions, which preserved and transmitted religious knowledge and Arabic literacy for centuries (Hiskett, 1980). Islamic education has historically emphasized memorization of the Qur'an, jurisprudence, and spiritual development, sustaining northern socio-political structures. This dual religious legacy has left a lasting imprint on Nigeria's educational landscape, characterized by parallel schooling systems with differing curricular emphases and pedagogical approaches. According to Udemba (2024), balancing this legacy remains a national imperative. Religious education must transcend sectarian divides and instead be reframed as a liberatory tool—one that empowers learners across faiths and supports national integration rather than reinforcing divisions or oppression.

Curriculum Policy and National Education

After Nigeria's independence in 1960, policymakers inherited missionary-founded curricula steeped in Christian religious content in the South and religiously infused Islamic curricula in the North. However, in the 1970s, the government's takeover of mission schools transformed religious education into a politically negotiated and contested terrain. The state centralized curriculum development, which aimed to create a more uniform education system and reduce overt religious sectarianism. This political shift led to significant changes in enrollment patterns, curriculum content, and quality perceptions across Nigeria's diverse regions. While state control increased educational access, it often diluted the moral and spiritual components formerly emphasized in mission schools, especially in the South (Obi & Mbanefo, 2011). Meanwhile, in the North, government policies had to carefully navigate Islamic education's place within secular national frameworks. Udemba (2023) notes that this secularization and politicization of religious education have produced tensions, including debates over curriculum content and language of instruction. These challenges affect not only the quality of education but also its role in nation-building and interreligious harmony.

Gender and Faith

Faith-based education in Nigeria carries profound implications for girls' access, empowerment, and dignity. Drawing on her research, Udemba (2021, 2023) explores how religious women educators—particularly nuns and female missionaries—have historically championed girls' education within faith contexts. For instance, the legacy of Mother Mary Charles Walker, a pioneering Catholic nun and educator, exemplifies how religious women have advanced educational opportunities and dignity for Nigerian girls through scholarship programs and advocacy (Udemba & Ojukwu, 2021). However, faith-based schooling also presents challenges

regarding gender-role expectations. Many religious curricula reflect traditional norms that can limit girls' agency by reinforcing domestic roles or restricting their participation in leadership. Udemba argues that transformative religious pedagogy is necessary to dismantle these constraints and promote gender equity within religious education, empowering girls as leaders and change agents within their communities (Udemba, 2024). This work resonates with broader feminist scholarship emphasizing the need for gender-sensitive religious curricula that challenge patriarchal structures while respecting faith traditions (Haddad, 2019).

Challenges and Debates

The dynamic relationship between religion and curriculum in education raises several persistent and complex dilemmas:

Indoctrination vs. Liberation

While religion is central to shaping values and ethical behavior, there is an ongoing tension between religious instructions as indoctrination versus as a liberatory force. Curricula that rigidly enforce one set of beliefs may suppress critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, and alternative worldviews. This risk is particularly acute in pluralistic societies where diverse religious and secular perspectives coexist. Scholars like Smith (2017) warn that educational systems must avoid becoming vehicles for dogmatic conformity that hinder learners' autonomy and agency.

Pluralism vs. Dominance

A legacy of colonial-era missionary education is the favoring of particular religious worldviews—primarily Christian—within curricula, often to the exclusion or marginalization of other religions such as Islam, Indigenous beliefs, or secular ethics (Nigerian Journals Online, 2022). This dominance can foster sectarian divides and undermine efforts toward social cohesion. Taylor & Francis Online (2023) note that many national curricula struggle to balance religious pluralism with national identity, often resulting in the privileging of dominant religions in teaching materials and pedagogical approaches.

Minority Exclusion

Students belonging to minority faiths or secular backgrounds frequently experience marginalization in faith-based educational settings and even in ostensibly secular public curricula that reflect dominant religious norms. This exclusion manifests in curricular content, school rituals, and teacher attitudes, which can alienate minority learners and limit their full participation in educational life (Wikipedia, 2024). Inclusion remains a major challenge in contexts like Nigeria, where religious identity is tightly intertwined with politics and community belonging.

Towards Inclusive Models: Interfaith Dialogue and Feminist Theology

Addressing these challenges, Udemba and colleagues (2023) propose an inclusive educational model that embraces interfaith dialogue and feminist theology as vehicles for transformative curriculum reform. This model encourages curricula that not only recognize and respect religious diversity but actively engage students in critical reflection on power, gender, and justice within religious traditions. Such an approach can promote social harmony, gender equity, and democratic citizenship by deconstructing hierarchical narratives and elevating marginalized voices (Udemba, 2023; dailytimesng.com, 2024).

The Way Forward

Considering these challenges, several strategic pathways emerge to harness religion's positive role in education while mitigating its divisive potential:

Interfaith and Pluralistic Curriculum

Educational frameworks should integrate multiple religious worldviews and secular perspectives, fostering respect, empathy, and critical reflection. This requires comprehensive revision of textbooks and learning materials to include diverse theological narratives and ethical claims presented in an academically rigorous and respectful manner. For example, reforming Islamic Religious Studies (IRS) curricula to embrace pluralistic hermeneutics and interfaith engagement could model this approach (Idoko, 2023). A pluralistic curriculum prepares learners to navigate complex religious landscapes and contribute to peaceful coexistence.

Feminist Religious Pedagogy

Drawing on feminist theory, Udemba (2024) foregrounds the transformational capacity of women's leadership within religious education. She advocates for curricula that highlight the contributions of female religious educators, such as nuns and female Islamic scholars, and reinterpret sacred texts through justice- and empowerment-oriented lenses. Feminist religious pedagogy challenges patriarchal norms embedded in traditional curricula and fosters critical consciousness, gender equity, and social justice in faith-informed educational settings.

Policy Recommendations

To realize these educational reforms, governments and religious institutions must collaborate to craft inclusive policies that:

- Respect spiritual diversity and prevent any single religion's hegemony within public education.
- Support professional development programs for educators focused on pluralistic and critical pedagogies in religious education.
- Encourage community participation, including minority faiths and women's groups, in curriculum design and policy-making processes.
- Promote dialogue between secular and religious education authorities to harmonize curricular goals with societal needs.

Such policies can institutionalize the shift toward inclusive, critical, and socially responsive religious education that aligns with democratic values and human rights standards.

Conclusion

Religion has played a foundational role in shaping the educational landscape of Nigeria, influencing curriculum content, pedagogical values, and access to learning across regions and faith traditions. The dual legacy of Christian missionary and Islamic education presents both opportunities and challenges, as Nigeria seeks to forge a cohesive national identity amid its rich religious diversity. While religious education has historically supported moral development, civic virtue, and community cohesion, it also poses risks of indoctrination, exclusion, and gender bias. The predominance of faith narratives in curricula often sidelines minority religions and secular perspectives, limiting critical engagement and fostering social divisions. Drawing on feminist religious pedagogy and the advocacy of pioneering women educators such as Mother Mary Charles Walker, this study underscores the transformative potential of faith-informed education that centers inclusion, gender equity, and pluralism. By embracing interfaith dialogue and revising curricula to incorporate diverse religious worldviews with critical and respectful pedagogy, Nigeria can harness religion's empowering role while mitigating sectarian tensions. Policy reforms that prioritize spiritual diversity, professional development for educators, and participatory curriculum design are essential for cultivating an educational environment where learners of all backgrounds thrive. Ultimately, religion and education in Nigeria must be reimagined not as opposing forces but as complementary pathways toward justice, unity, and empowerment for all Nigerians.

References

- Ajayi, J. F. A. (1965). *Christian missions in Nigeria 1841–1891*. Longmans.
- Alabi, T. (2019). Religious education and civic virtue in Nigeria. *Journal of Moral Education*, 48(3), 234–247.
- Dailymtimesng.com. (2024). Interfaith dialogue as a tool for educational reform in Nigeria. *Daily Times Nigeria*.
- Ejiogu, A. (2022). Beyond rote learning: Critical pedagogies in Nigerian religious education. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 104, 101671.
- Fafunwa, A. B. (1974). *History of education in Nigeria*. George Allen & Unwin.
- Haddad, Y. Y. (2019). *Women, religion, and feminism in Islamic contexts*. Routledge.
- Hiskett, M. (1980). *The development of Islam in West Africa*. Longman.
- Idiko, P. E. (2023). Islamic religious education textbooks in a pluralist Nigeria: Content analysis and pedagogical implications. *Religions*, 14(1), 42.
- Idowu, S. O. (2020). Teaching Christian and Islamic religious studies for moral development. *Nigerian Journal of Education*, 31(2), 112–128.
- Ihedinma, E. (2021). Reconstructing religious education for interfaith respect in Nigeria. *Religious Studies Review*, 47(1), 45–60.
- Ilesanmi Ajibola, & Musa, A. (2024). From confessionalism to pluralism: Reforming CRS curricula for national unity. *Zaria Journal of Educational Studies*, 15(1), 89–105.
- Obi, S. N., & Mbanefo, E. (2011). Impact of government takeover on mission schools in Nigeria. *African Educational Review*, 8(1), 75–90.
- Okeke, C. (2020). Reconciling religious and scientific worldviews in Nigerian secondary education. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 52(3), 312–329.
- Oyekunle, T. A., & Akinola, O. (2021). Integration of moral values in religious education. *African Journal of Education and Practice*, 9(4), 203–217.
- Nigerian Journals Online. (2022). Challenges in balancing religious pluralism in Nigerian education. *Nigerian Journal of Education and Religion*, 10(2), 123–140.
- Smith, J. (2017). Religious education and the balance between indoctrination and liberation. *Journal of Education and Ethics*, 14(3), 201–215.
- Smith, J. Z., & Patel, S. (2018). *Interreligious education: A global perspective*. Routledge.
- Taiwo, C. O. (1980). *The Nigerian education system: Past, present and future*. Thomas Nelson.

Taylor & Francis Online. (2023). Religion, curriculum, and identity: Navigating pluralism in education systems. *International Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 45(1), 67–84.

Udemba, C. M. ,(2024). Faith unveiled: Empowering women across religious landscapes. *Nigerian Journal of African Studies*, 6(1), 1–6.

Udemba, C. M., (2024). Religious education in schools: Balancing Faith and Pluralism, *interdisciplinary Journal of African and Asian Studies*, 10(1) 1-5

Udemba, C. M., & Chiegboka, A. B. C. (2023). The impact of COVID-19 on the socio-economic status of women in Ogoja: Response of Centre for Studies and Intervention. *OCHENDO - An African Journal of Innovative Studies*, 4(3).

Udemba, C. M., & Ojukwu, N. P. (2023). Promoting the rights and dignity of women in Calabar, Nigeria through educational contributions of Mother Mary Charles Magdalen Walker (RSC). *AKU: An African Journal of Contemporary Research*, 4(3).

Udemba, C. M., & Chiegboka, A. B. C. (2021). Centre for Women Studies and Intervention as a continuation of Mother Mary Walker’s advocacy for the dignity and right of women in Nigeria. *Nigerian Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 1(1).

Uroko, F. J. (2023). Religion and national values curriculum in Nigeria: A step towards national cohesion. *Journal of Religious Education*, 71(2), 112–125.

Uroko, F. J. (2023). The RNV curriculum and religious literacy in Nigeria’s tertiary education. *Journal of Religious Education*.