

ENHANCING CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS STUDIES CURRICULUM IN NIGERIA
COLLEGES OF EDUCATION FOR NATIONAL UNITY

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¹Ajibola Ilesanmi G., PhD; ²Hassan Musa

¹ Department of Christian Religious Studies,
Federal College of Education
Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria
ORCID: 0000-0002-2062-9282
igajibola@fcez.edu.ng, gabajibola@gmail.com

² Department of Christian Religious Studies,
Federal College of Education
Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria
08060943947, hassanmusacrs@gmail.com

Abstract

Agitation for secession and resource control in Nigeria revolve around a clamour for recognition of basic needs of people as it affects their cooperate existence. A unified people would ordinarily come together to negotiate their problems and find a way to forge ahead. The need for unity of all citizens irrespective of religious affiliation, and an eye on the acceptance of people despite their religious belief are matters of concern to the government and well-meaning Nigerians. Thus, one of the goals for which tertiary education is instituted in Nigeria, among which are the Colleges of Education, is to “forge and cement national unity; and promote national and international understanding and interaction” (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). The goal is further reiterated in the philosophy of Nigeria’s education, which envisioned the citizens “living in unity and harmony as one indivisible, indissoluble, democratic, and sovereign nation founded on the principles of freedom, equality, and justice” (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013:1). However, the envisaged unity enshrined in the National Policy on Education is flouted by the ideals upheld by the catechetical and pastoral orientation of the religious education curricula in Nigeria Colleges of Education. The current Christian Religious Studies curriculum in Nigerian Colleges of Education is confessional centric. The curriculum is essentially exclusive in nature and contents with little attention to the promotion of interreligious dialogue and peaceful co-existence of citizens in the country. This paper adopts an analytical approach to examine the contents of the curriculum with the aim of proffering suggestions towards enhancing the curriculum for a more pluralistic content. The paper proposes a model of CRS curriculum that is inclusively pluralistic in nature and contents for a robust interreligious dialogue and unity of citizens in the country.

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Introduction

The need for unity of all citizens irrespective of religious affiliation and an eye on the acceptance of people despite their religious belief are matters of concern to the government and well-meaning Nigerians. Hence, one of the radical ways the government set out to address

the problem was through education. The National Policy on Education (NPE) unambiguously states that everything possible be done to foster a sense of national belonging in all Nigerian schools (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013:26). The Policy provides a detailed roadmap on how that objective would be achieved. It allows accredited universities and specialized Colleges in the

country to provide training for would-be teachers before or during their educational services.

The colleges of education are mandated to play a pivotal role in producing quality teachers in the service of education, especially in the country's primary and secondary stages of education. The aim of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2013:26) is for teacher education to help “forge and cement national unity and promote national and international understanding and interaction.”

This philosophy of the National Policy is founded on the belief that “education is an instrument for national development and social change; and for the promotion of a progressive and united Nigeria” (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). In summary, the national education objectives aim to inculcate national consciousness and unity alongside inculcating the right values and attitudes for the survival of the individual and Nigerian society. Therefore, the training of the mind in the understanding of the world around, as well as the acquisition of appropriate skills, abilities and competencies, both mentally and physically, as tools for the individual to live in and contribute to the development of the society are paramount. These human and social ideals are essential to the teaching profession. This study examines the compliance of the current CRS curriculum in

Nigeria’s Colleges of Education to national unity and integration.

The Nature of CRS curriculum for NCE program

The curriculum of the CRS program in Nigeria Colleges of Education (COEs) is approved by the National Commission for Colleges of Education as the minimum standard for the award of NCE nationwide. In 2021, the Commission approved a revised Minimum Standard for the Colleges. Nevertheless, the duration of the program is still expected to last for a period of three years and may be studied in combination with Social Studies, Yorùbá language, Hausa language, Igbo language, French, Theater Arts, Music, Fine Arts, or with Cultural and Creative Arts. Both the old and the new curricula were designed to expose the students to the theory and practice of education methods and administration. The student is also expected to take courses in General Studies and course credits in the art of Teaching (Teaching Practice). Overall, at the end of the three-year program, the student is expected to have acquired a minimum of 118 credits required for graduation in the old curriculum and 121 credits in the new. The old is as follows, with only a difference of 35 Credits as different from the 32 Credits in the old:

Table 1. *Distribution of minimum credits required for NCE graduation*

A	Education courses	30 Credits
B	General Studies courses	18 Credits
C	Teaching Practice	6 Credits
D	C.R.S. courses	35 Credits
e	Second teaching subject	32 Credits

During the three-year program, the students are expected to be instructed using various methods, including lecture, inquiry, discussion, dramatization, demonstration, recitation, simulation, tutorial, and field trip. At

the end of the three-year program, every student must write a guided research/ essay in either CRS or Education. The course contents for the old CRS program across the nation are as follows:

Table 2: List of courses, course codes, and credit designation for NCE 1, First Semester

COURSE CODE	COURSE TITLE	CREDIT	STATUS
	Year I, First Semester		
CRS 111	Introduction to the study of religions	1	C
CRS 112	In the history and religion of Israel from Genesis to the Judges	2	C
CRS 113	Introduction to the Bible	1	C
CRS 114	Early church history	1	C
CRS 115	Introduction to the study of elementary Greek	1	E
CRS 116	Introduction to sociology of religion	1	E
CRS 117	African Traditional Religion	1	E
	Total	7	Units

Table 3: List of courses, course codes, and credit designation for NCE 1, Second Semester

COURSE CODE	COURSE TITLE	CREDIT	STATUS
	Year I, Second Semester		
CRS 121	The life and teachings of Christ	2	C
CRS 122	Introduction to the study of the Pentateuch	1	C
CRS 123	From the Monarchy to the fall of Judah	2	C
CRS 124	Introduction to the study of elementary Hebrew	1	E
CRS 125	Introduction to the theology of the Old Testament	1	E
CRS 126	Introduction to the study of Islam	1	E
	Total	7	Units

Table 4: List of courses, course codes, and credit designation for NCE 2, First Semester

Course Code	Course Title	Credit	Status
	Year II, First Semester		
CRS 211	Paul and his writings	1	C
CRS 212	Methodology of Christian Religious Studies	2	C
CRS 213	Research methods	1	C
CRS 214	Biblical world of the Old Testament	1	E
CRS 215	The Church from the Reformation to the Evangelical revival of the 18 th century	2	C
CRS 216	Christian doctrine	1	C
	Total	7	Units

Table 5: List of courses, course codes, and credit designation for NCE 2, Second Semester

Course Code	Course Title	Credit	Status
	Year II, Second Semester		
CRS 221	The synoptic Gospels	2	C
CRS 222	Introduction to Biblical Ethics	1	C
CRS 223	Exilic and post-exilic Judaism	1	E
CRS 224	Biblical world of the New Testament	1	E
CRS 225	The history of Christianity in West Africa to the 19 th century	1	C
CRS 226	African Independence Church Movement	1	C
	Total	7	Units

Table 6: List of courses, course code and credit designation for NCE 3, First Semester

Course Code	Course Title	Credit	Status
	Year III, First Semester		
EDUC 324	Teaching practice	6	C
EDUC 323	Project	3	C
	Total	7	Units

Table 7: List of courses, course codes, and credit designation for NCE 3, Second Semester

Course Code	Course Title	Credit	Status
	Year III, Second Semester		
CRS 321	Sent John's Gospel	1	C
CRS 322	The prophets of Israel	2	C
CRS 323	Ecumenism and religious dialogue	1	C
CRS 324	Acts of the Apostles	1	C
CRS 325	Philosophy of religion	2	C
	Total	7	Units

The new curriculum significantly differs from the old in relation to dialogue with other religions, especially Islam. During the three-year program, the students are expected to be instructed using various methods, including lecture, inquiry, discussion, dramatization, demonstration, recitation, simulation, tutorial, and field trip. At the end of the three year program, every student is required to write a

guided research/ essay in either CRS or Education.

Regarding interreligious relations, the new curriculum does not study African traditional religions or Islam; instead, the curriculum emphasizes the theology of the Synoptic Gospels, among other core Christian religious studies courses. The details are as follows:

Table 8: List of courses, course codes, and credit designation for NCE 1, Second Semester

COURSE CODE	COURSE TITLE	CREDIT	STATUS
	Year I, First Semester		
CRS 111	Introduction to the study of religions	1	C
CRS 112	In the history and religion of Israel from Genesis to the Judges	1	C
CRS 113	Introduction to the Bible	1	C
CRS 114	Early church history	1	C
CRS 115	African Traditional Religion	1	E
	TOTAL	5	Units

Table 9: List of courses, course codes, and credit designation for NCE 1, Second Semester

Course Code	Course Title	Credit	Status
	Year I, Second Semester		
CRS 121	The life and teachings of Christ	1	C
CRS 122	Introduction to the study of the Pentateuch	1	C
CRS 123	From the Monarchy to the fall of Judah	1	C
CRS 124	Introduction to the theology of the Old Testament	1	E
	TOTAL	5	Units

Table 10: List of courses, course codes, and credit designation for NCE 2, First Semester

Course Code	Course Title	Credit	Status
	Year II, First Semester		
CRS 211	Paul and his writings	1	C
CRS 215	Methodology of Christian Religious Studies	1	C
CRS 212	The Church from the Reformation to the Evangelical revival of the 18 th century	1	C
CRS 213	Christian doctrine	1	C
CRS 214	Exilic and post-exilic Judaism	1	E
	Total	5	Units

Table 11: List of courses, course codes, and credit designation for NCE 2, Second Semester

Course Code	Course Title	Credit	Status
	Year II, Second Semester		
CRS 221	The synoptic Gospels	2	C
CRS 222	Introduction to Biblical Ethics	1	C
CRS 224	Biblical world of the New Testament	1	E
CRS 223	The history of Christianity in West Africa to the 19 th century	1	C
CRS 226	African Independence Church Movement	1	C
	Total	6	Units

Table 12: List of courses, course codes, and credit designation for NCE 3, First Semester

Course Code	Course Title	Credit	Status
	Year III, First Semester		
EDUC 324	Teaching practice	6	C
EDUC 323	Project	3	C
	Total	7	Units

Table 13: List of courses, course code and credit designation for NCE 3, Second Semester

Course Code	Course Title	Credit	Status
	Year III, Second Semester		
CRS 321	Sent John's Gospel	1	C
CRS 322	The prophets of Israel	1	C
CRS 325	Ecumenism and religious dialogue	1	C
CRS 323	Acts of the Apostles	1	C
CRS 324	Philosophy of religion	1	C
	Total	5	Units

From the Revised Curriculum displayed in tables 8 – 13, a CRS student is expected to take ten compulsory credits in the first year comprising the first and second semesters and eleven credits in the second year. In the third year, NCE 3, the student is expected to undertake five compulsory credits in the final year, excluding the writing of research

work combined with a semester-long teaching practice.

The confessional-centric nature of the NCE /CRS curriculum

The distinctive constitution of the NCE CRS old and new curricula is the fact that the courses are naturally streamlined to reflect the confessional

objectives of the program. Of the twenty-five available courses for the program, technically, there are only four courses in the old curriculum that may be taken as having the potential to introduce the students to the existence of other religions. However, two courses that involve an exclusive introduction to the content of the religions are made optional for the students: African Traditional Religion and Introduction to the Study of Islam. Unfortunately, the introduction to Islam has ceased to exist in the revised curriculum of CRS, leaving only ATR.

In the first year, students are expected to take a one-hour per week credit that introduces them to other world religions. In the same semester, they are expected to study African Traditional Religion as an introductory part of their teacher education. Another possible instance of exposure to other religions is in the final year. In the second semester of the third year, the students are expected to take a compulsory course: Ecumenism and Religious Dialogue. The curriculum design in this manner is to sustain the basic boundaries of distinctive Christian principles that the students are expected to bear.

The NCE CRS philosophy provides a viewpoint of a CRS curriculum that is oriented on Christian moral and spiritual values (National Commission for Colleges of Education, 2021). Since the curriculum is essentially conditioned by the program's philosophic beliefs, the contents and objectives are invariably intentionally confessional. The curriculum aims to produce teachers who are conscious of their Christian heritage and ready to make Christianity foundational in their relationship with other human beings. One of the objectives of the curriculum is to inculcate in the personal character and discipline of the would-be teacher convictions and practices that

are reflective of authentic Christian values and virtues to function effectively as a custodian of sound moral and spiritual qualities (National Commission for Colleges of Education, 2021). Thus, adaptation to the curriculum is not just a theoretical academic exercise; rather, its behavioural objectives are meant to be performative and are preparatory for the individual to navigate the vicissitudes of life. According to Ajibola (2018), the study of CRS is intended to produce lifelong ethical and moral guidelines, and the teacher expects the same attitude in his or her interactions with young learners in elementary schools.

A common denominator to both the old and the new NCE CRS curriculum and the missionary curriculum of 1842 and 1882 is their confessional-centric nature. It is interesting to note what one of Nigeria's foremost consultants to the Ministry of Education at both state and federal levels on CRS, Prof. Joseph Ilori, a director in several CRS departments in education institutions, considers a part of the central problems of Christian education institutions in the country. According to Ilori (2002:125), "many of the teachers are not Spirit-filled," and "though there are church services, religious classes, and a religious atmosphere, neither the curriculum content, the methodology, nor the teachers themselves are Christians." He expects the role of the CRS teacher to be tantamount to a ministerial and pastoral function. Hence, he notes that the function of Christian education is to restore the balanced image of God in students, as education is a redemptive act. According to him, it is by maintaining a ministerial and pastoral personality that the Christian teacher can lead young people into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ (Ilori, 2002:125). Ilori further finds the distinction between the conventional pastor and a CRS

teacher to be merely a difference of convenience in the division of labour; to him, the CRS teacher may be seen as one who pastors in the school context, whereas the pastor is one who teaches in the larger religious community (2002:126). He concludes, "it should consciously be realized that the function of teacher and pastor are essentially the same even though by today's definition they are in charge of different divisions of the Lord's vineyard" (Ilori, 2002).

Ilori is not a lone voice in conceiving and canvassing that the CRS curriculum and its implementation should be confessional. For example, J. B. Sambo, an emeritus head of the department of CRS in FCE Zaria and a seasoned CRS luminary in the field, argues that a CRS teacher must be "born again" (Donga, 2007). Being born again describes one who lives by the dictates of John 3:1-21. According to Sambo,

the CRS teacher must be born again. This is very important because for any CRS teacher to be effective, he must be a real Christian. He/She must be the one that is always led by the spirit, in his teaching. The secret of our success is solely based on the Holy Spirit that is the Teacher of teachers. If you are not a Christian, there is no way you can teach effectively.... The CRS teacher must also: Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ: You must accept the fact that Jesus is Lord, and God, without which you can do nothing. The content of the Bible or the theme of the Bible is the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, a CRS teacher must be the one who believes in the Lord and depends solely upon Him (Donga, 2007:8).

The views of these luminaries of CRS in Nigeria Education Institutes portend the general expectations in curricular implementation of religious education in education institutions. The provisions and structure of the CRS curriculum provide a

fertile opportunity to emphasize an exclusive religious interpretation of its contents.

Interreligious potentials of the current CRS curriculum

The current NCE CRS curriculum, that is, as spelt out in the National Commission for Colleges of Education (2021), is confessional in nature with flaccid inclusive religious dialogical theology. The curriculum is almost exclusively Christian except for the pockets of other religious presence and one course on introduction to other religions. Among its specific objectives, the program expects graduating students to imbibe Christian values and spirituality through which the younger generation in elementary and secondary schools will be guided. The curriculum does not sufficiently offer students an opportunity to learn about other religions significantly, especially in ways that could promote interreligious dialogue and peaceful coexistence in the country. Such a curriculum similarly lacks the potential for good relational knowledge to engage adherents of other religions. Thus, Byimui Umaru argues,

the curriculum for Islamic/Christian religious knowledge in both primary and secondary schools is exclusively Islamic or Christian with no interreligious knowledge...; in most cases the formation is religiously stereotyped or without reference to the other. The method of imparting knowledge in the Qur'anic schools and Christian Sunday schools excludes even the basic tenets of the other faith tradition. Hence, it can be said that the so-called religious unrest in northern Nigeria is partly due to ignorance about other faiths and the spiritual values that Christianity and Islam have in common (Umaru, 2013).

The current CRS curriculum, like those observed by Umaru, does not have the potential to effect any significant interreligious engagement that could facilitate religious

harmony in the country. This argument is further strengthened by the fact that basic curriculum requirements for religious dialogue, as outlined by Lefstein (2006) are significantly missing in the current CRS curriculum. According to Lefstein (2006), five core aspects are common to most theories of dialogue in the study of religions in schools. These core aspects include dialogue as a communicative pattern, dialogue as a means of learning, dialogue as an epistemological stance, dialogue as an orientation toward content and dialogue as a relation (Lefstein, 2006). Lefstein's core aspects resonate with Dada (2019) praxeological intervention for the advanced training of religious leaders. The NCE CRS curriculum, as discussed in previous sections of this work, does not provide an encouraging opportunity to engage other religions in ways that will advance dialogue as a communicative part or as a means of learning. This claim is justified in the work of Fabarebo et al. (2019). According to Ajibola (2019), the attainment of religious harmony through religious curriculum must consider the various stages of faith development with a deliberate introduction of an inclusive religious pluralistic curriculum in Nigerian Colleges of Education.

As it is in the current curriculum of the CRS, students' exposure to other religions is limited to the compulsory exposition to the introductory course on the study of religion. Furthermore, the course has 13 topics, including eight world religions and five topics that center on religion and its relationship with culture and politics. This thematic walk-through of religion at NCE level of study only exposes the students to the knowledge of such religions without adequate interaction to engage them further. As such, the curriculum lacks modal content through which students may be trained in practical terms to relate with other religions. The effort to ensure adequate entry of themes that emphasize Christian values,

morals, and spirituality outshines the potential that an interreligious education curriculum could provide in such a school environment. A similar clog in the wheel of peaceful co-existence of Christians and Muslims in Nigeria is evident in the Senior Secondary Schools Curriculum of Christian Religion Knowledge (Timve et al., 2021).

As demonstrated by Lefstein (2006:7-10), there is no doubt that with the right curriculum and strategies, the school can provide a dialogical ideal condition that could positively facilitate dialogue in any given community. Unfortunately, the structure and details of the NCE CRS curriculum for Nigeria COEs is overladen with themes and topics that limit the students' orientation almost exclusively to Christian ideals of virtues and morality. The CRS educator, the student-teacher, and the targeted elementary and secondary school students are expected to operate within the confines of Christian tenets. While this disposition has the advantage of establishing a clear religious identity for both the educator, the student teacher, and the end target, such a curriculum is weak in projecting other religions as equal religious partners in the human search for God and maintaining peaceful coexistence in the country. Ajibola (2024), also noted that continued romancing lip services to interreligious relations in Nigeria will not result in harmony until such efforts are concretely expressed in a substantive dialogical ethical model for multi-religious Nigeria.

The curriculum neither encourages the religious educator to be enthusiastic in learning about other religions, nor embolden the students to at least, academically engage other religions in ways that would challenge them to inquire further. Since dialogue in school environment, according to Lefstein, entails "a back-and-forth movement, between my own and the Other's horizons," any distance created by religious

curriculum from ones' prejudice as the NCE CRS curriculum seems to be doing, would only suspend the prejudice, making the individuals involved to be only "politely listening,' but not truly engaged" (Lefstein, 2006).

The teaching of CRS must be distinguished from what McCabe (2014:2) refers to as "catechesis which promotes personal adherence to Christ, and growth in Christian life," and a religious education "which is not just a neutral study of comparative religions, but which makes the school a true laboratory of culture and humanity in which the significant contribution of Christianity ... is recognized" (McCabe, 2014). McCabe's position argues for a CRS that would ventilate a Christian identity, yet it should be a CRS that is with the consciousness of equipping the students to be matured in their religious adherence while being open to learn from others and recognizing them on their own terms. The current curriculum does not have the capacity to do these.

Conclusion

This paper argues that religious education is essential to peace building and its sustenance in Nigeria. It argues that the mode and spread of Christianity and Islam in the country, coupled with the unsettled regional and religious issues at the point of the country's amalgamation, are responsible for the intermittent unrest in the country. While the intention of the government to correct and control religious suspicion and animosity among religions' followers is laudable, the chapter notes that curricular avenue to translate the policy into practical and effective tool has been hampered by the deep-rooted exclusive nature of the religious education curriculum operated in the country, especially, the Colleges of Education. Ultimately, the present CRS curriculum lacks the potential to have any meaningful effect, an inclusive religious

pluralism mindset as the basis on which peaceful coexistence of the followers of various religions may be promoted.

Recommendations

To address the problem of disunity in the country, and the agitations for secession that are based on mutual distrust, a CRS curriculum that is characterized by inclusive religious pluralistic curriculum in Nigeria Colleges of Education should be considered. It is recommended that all related stakeholders, from the students, through the Colleges, to the facilitating agencies play respective roles in facilitating an inclusive religious pluralistic curriculum of CRS in COEs.

- The federal government should constitute a commission for review of education policy on model of religious education.
- The National Commission for Colleges of Education should consider a merger of the religious studies departments in COEs, and feature Departments of African Traditional Religion in all COEs
- The Nigerian Educational Research & Development Council (NERDC) should embark on a comprehensive review of current religious studies curricular in the nation's COEs, and a sensitization workshops.

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