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# A critical view of family and religious studies in the context of religious abuse and extremism in Zimbabwe

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In this theoretical article, I problematise the nature and structure of family and religious studies (FRS), and its failure to respond to the ever-expanding religious trajectories in Zimbabwe, in particular the religious abuse and religious extremism. Currently, FRS is lacking in some of the aspects needed to ignite a religion-responsive curriculum. The article suggests a need for curriculum reconstruction that addresses the lived realities and challenges students are facing in the 21st century. I ground my argument in critical emancipatory research, one of whose agendas is evoking a democratic, emancipatory and just curriculum that is geared to transforming the social *status quo*. The article answers two questions: What are the limitations of the present FRS curriculum and the space requiring decolonisation of the curriculum? and How can FRS be enhanced to achieve curriculum relevance and address the lived realities of 21st-century students? The argument of the article is that when curriculum changes are necessary to reflect the multiple perspectives offered by major religions, FRS falls short of addressing the emerging and problematic religious movements that threaten to undermine the beauty of religion in society, as these movements are guilty of criminal practices and abuse of religion. I conclude the article by calling for a curriculum shift, from mere recitation of major religious ideologies to emancipating students by encouraging them to confront and evoke epistemic disobedience in order that they might challenge religious abuse and religious extremism.

**Keywords:** religious abuse; religious extremism; FAREME; curriculum reconstructionism; critical emancipatory research.

## Introduction

In 2017, Zimbabwe rolled out a new school curriculum, which made changes to the study of religion. The subject is now called family and religious studies (FRS) and is taught from Form 1 to 4. The discussion in this article is focussed on the aspects of the Form 4 curriculum. This new curriculum includes religions such as Islam, Hinduism, Judaism and indigenous religions and critiques them from a family dimension. The new curriculum's multiple-faith approach replaced the old subject, religious studies, which had been purely Christocentric (Dube & Tsotetsi 2019; Ndlovu 2014), and moved towards a more equal representation of the world's major religions. The decision to include religions other than Christianity in the curriculum was necessitated by complaints from representatives of these religions, who believed that the Christian faith enjoyed many privileges in the former education arrangement and deprived students with other religions of curriculum space (Dube & Tsotetsi 2019; Mutangi 2008; Ndlovu 2014). As a way to address the exclusivist curriculum, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (2015) introduced a new curriculum, which focusses on the historical backgrounds, beliefs, practices, practitioners, rites and rituals of major religions in Zimbabwe, and which were to be studied in relation to their impact on individual, family, local, national and global communities. It was assumed that the new syllabus would evoke respect for human dignity and diversity, with an emphasis on Unhu or Ubuntu or Vumunhu, social responsibility and a sense of the sound ethical norms of all religions (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education 2015).

The new thrust and perceived strengths of the FRS curriculum are its attempt to respond to the post-9/11 era, in which new thinking about teaching religion in public schools emerged, represented by an appreciation of and emphasis on religious pluralism (Moulin 2012:158). The new thinking embodied the understanding that religion is no longer a private engagement or matter because the consequences of its praxis and discourses have public impact. Thus, I disagree with Fitzgerald (2015), who argues that religion is inner faith of a purely voluntary kind, the private conscience of the individual, at which only a stretch is relevant to family morality. I believe 9/11 triggered a need to rethink religious life in terms of people's safety, to interrogate religious praxis and to develop a pluralistic curriculum, to avert the risks posed by religious exclusion,

such as killings and other violence related to religion. The philosophical underpinning of FRS, as a pluralistic curriculum, is the development of moral responsibility and behaviour, a capacity for discipline, and a sense of sound ethical norms, values and goals, which are to be derived from the perspectives of multiple religions (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education 2015). In the spirit of pluralism, the FRS also, to a lesser extent, accommodates indigenous religions, as a way to provide redress for and reconceptualise African religions, by giving them the same status level as Western and Eastern religions. This important aim relates to the argument by Amoah and Bennett (2008:8): 'since colonial times, there have been perceptions that African religions are reduced to animism and ancestor worship'. This attitude has, according to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2003:182), led to 'contestation and compliance, fascination and repulsion' of indigenous religions.

Although it is appreciated that FRS now includes the study of various religions and, significantly, indigenous religions, it is my contention that FRS is failing to equip students and educators to deal with religious abuse and other types of religious extremism that are evident in some emerging religious movements. I do not claim that it is not important for students to acquire knowledge of various major religions; however, any knowledge that is acquired must assist students to address their lived realities. Students should not merely memorise facts about these religions; instead, they should be encouraged to apply this knowledge to critique current religious practices. To this end, religious education must not be static, but should allow students to use acquired knowledge to address pressing issues of the day. In essence, one of the problems of FRS is its failure to include contemporary religious practice and religious extremism in the curriculum.

The research gap that is addressed by this article relates to the background that various research studies have been conducted on religious education, but a focus on reconstruction of the curriculum to include religious abuse and extremism has been lacking. Among these studies is the one by Machingura and Hwaire (2018). In their article, they do a comparative analysis of the syllabus aims, objectives, content and teaching methods of the erstwhile exclusively Christian subject, Divinity, and compare it with the updated multiple-faith FRS. In doing so, they argue that stakeholders with a Christian background opposed the new multiple-faith curriculum, particularly its inclusion of Islam and African indigenous religions. Dube and Tsotetsi (2019) wrote an article on FRS and observe that the teaching and learning of religion in most postcolonial states takes place on an ambivalent and contested terrain, which has resulted in the amputation of religion from some mission schools. They argue, furthermore, that the teaching and learning of religion cannot be left to the state to control. Instead, there is need for a policy network among religious players, who should decide on the best religious curriculum. A study by Chirume and Ngara (2018) analysed the new Zimbabwe primary school junior certificate mathematics and FRS curricula to evaluate teachers' readiness to implement the new curricula. They conclude that teachers were displeased about a lack of resource materials, inadequate infrastructure and lack of induction to enable them to implement the new curriculum effectively. Although they raise valid concerns, I question the rationale of jointly critiquing mathematics and FRS, considering that these two subjects have different epistemic and philosophical underpinnings.

In the light of these studies, although limited, I believe this article is unique in its bringing of a new dimension to the teaching and learning of FRS by critiquing it with the lens of critical emancipatory research (CER). More importantly, I evoke a need for curriculum reform to incorporate the study of emerging religious movements, especially those that exhibit abuse-like tendencies. This article is also unique because it probes the content of FRS in the light of contextual problems that have risen as a product of a less than vigorous study of religion with a social justice lens that refers to emancipation and epistemic disobedience. The next section will define religious abuse and extremism.

## The 'religious abuse and extremism' in Zimbabwe: What is it?

'Religious abuse' is a term that I use to refer to the criminality that is sugar-coated by religious (mal)practices and corruption. The abuse of religion is described by Ramabulana (2018), who uses the term such as church mafia and associates it with underworld spiritual movements with cultic tendencies, which are characterised by a love of power, money, corruption and popularism.

Religious extremism is generally applied to the phenomenon of groups engaged in violent activities in the pursuit of a political or religious ideology that is outside the mainstream, often because extremism excludes certain groups, cultures or identities (Frazer & Jambers 2018). The term is used here to refer to the strict observation of religious practices, which ignores the feelings or safety of others, and which upholds ideology as the alpha and omega of life – nothing else is true or matters. The following section will discuss CER.

## Theoretical framing: Critical emancipatory research

This article is earthed in CER theory. It is generally agreed that CER is an offshoot of the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, which arose in Germany in 1923, and which was later developed by Jürgen Habermas. Other scholars, such as McKernan (2013), trace CER through the works of German philosopher Emmanuel Kant. Despite the various explanations and assumptions of the origins of CER, there is an underlying theme, outlined by Nkoane (2013:99), who argues that CER represents a left-wing group that had 'philosophical roots in several traditions such as Marx's analysis of socio-economic conditions and class structure,

Habermas's notion of emancipatory knowledge and Freire's transformative and emancipatory pedagogy'.

Critical emancipatory research seeks to address and challenge the 'historical and social conditions of crisis, oppression and replace them with emancipatory ones' (Sinnerbrink 2012:370). To do so, CER evokes the need to champion social justice. Thus, cognisant of this aim, CER, in a quest to achieve social justice, seeks to promote human good, provide basic human needs, guarantee the protection of human rights and promote the integral development of people of the globe (Ogbonnaya 2012). Informed by the foregoing definition, CER is a relevant theory for questioning and evoking epistemic disobedience against abusive religions that have caused various social pathologies and trajectories that undermine the beauty of religion in society. I chose this theory because it emancipates people, to 'name reality, articulate how social reality functions and decide how issues are organised and defined' (McLaren 1995:272), thereby making society a better place through religious narratives, as opposed to the abuse-like tendencies portrayed by some new and emerging religious movements. Critical emancipatory research is relevant to couch this study because it is a theory that 'exposes and questions hegemony, traditional power assumptions held about relationships, groups, communities, societies, and organisations to promote social change' (ed. Given 2008:140).

## Curriculum limitations of teaching and learning family and religious studies today

In this section, I will respond to the first question: What are the limitations of the present FRS curriculum? I will do so by discussing various limitations of the FRS curriculum in Zimbabwe today, in a quest to address the growing need in many postcolonial states to decolonise the curriculum. I was guided by the research questions and the focus of the paper in suggesting these challenges, although I do not imply the curriculum has no positive aspects.

### Overcrowded by non-contextual religions

One of the limitations of the current curriculum in relation to decolonising the curriculum is that the syllabus is overcrowded with concepts of major religions of the world, such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam and, arguably, African religions, of which some have little or no relevance to the majority of the students in Zimbabwe (Curriculum Development Unit 1999; Gwaravanda, Masitera & Muzambi 2013; Museka 2012:64). Understandably, various major religions were included in the spirit of ensuring that there is equal representation of major religions in the curriculum, which was a direct departure from the purely Christocentric curriculum that had been in use since precolonial times. While including these religions may, to a certain extent, be a noble idea, I pose the following critical questions here: Is it necessary to study only major religions, which students might never have access to and contact with, such as Hinduism, in Zimbabwe's case? This does not imply that Hinduism should be downplayed, but I question the rationale for including Hinduism and excluding the emerging or new religious movements that have influenced the religious space for the past few years. What is the purpose of a curriculum if it cannot respond to the lived realities of the students? The study of major religions is noble and promotes an inclusive curriculum, as championed by various scholars in the field of religious curriculum (Gwaravanda et al. 2013; Ndlovu 2014); however, students are not being equipped with strategies to relate to religious abuse, which is problematic in modern society. Critical emancipatory research informs my view of what a worthwhile curriculum should address, including the lived realities of the students. Today, many students are confronted by a variety of religious abuse-like tendencies, through the media, in church gatherings and in their praxis of faith, where criminal elements take advantage of religion to commit crimes. It follows that a worthwhile curriculum must start by equipping students to confront criminality or abuse-like behaviour when students are exposed to it.

### Lack of investment in training of family and religious studies teachers

One of the challenges facing FRS in Zimbabwe is a lack of trained teachers. This lack is mainly the result of availability of only one secondary teacher education college, offering training in FRS for secondary and high school, despite the subject being offered by almost every school in Zimbabwe. Consequently, the subject is taught by teachers who are trained to teach other subjects, and who are committed believers of a certain religion (Matemba 2011). When the new curriculum was introduced, there were no attempts to address the shortage of trained teachers, and induction workshops were not enough to bridge the knowledge gap of teachers in relation to the new curriculum. The issue of lack of training for teaching religious education has been a concern in Zimbabwe, and various authors lament this curriculum shortcoming (Dube 2019; Matemba 2011). The lack of qualified teachers is problematic because curriculum can only be as good as its teachers; thus, compromising on initial teacher education has the potential to undermine the positive prospects of a curriculum. In most secondary schools in Zimbabwe, teachers who teach FRS have not been trained in FRS, but in other subjects. I agree with Matemba (2011:85) that the trajectory of our time is that African governments by 'law [say] religion must be taught but the very same law does not give any provision for the training of teachers in the subject'. No doubt, the inconsistency between law in theory and praxis compromises the effectiveness of teachers and students to address the religious abuse tendencies currently manifest in society, by impeding the relevance and viability of the curriculum. In the light of the ongoing argument, Schwartz (2006) states that:

> [C]urriculum writers, with all good intentions, have compiled volumes of well-conceived educational action plans, choosing specific materials and activities for their pre-conceived target, curriculum receivers, students, only to find that the curriculum users, teachers, are not prepared for the innovations. (p. 450)

Unfortunately, inadequately prepared teacher candidates are often inept or unmotivated to teach about religion and to navigate religious issues that invariably enter their classrooms (Dinama et al. 2016; Raditoaneng 2011). Intolerance and estrangement are fuelled by religious ignorance (Allgood 2016), thus igniting the need to rethink FRS as a counter-strategy against intolerance and estrangement. I argue this way on the basis of CER, which argues, and as proposed by Argyris and Schon (1974:44), that a relevant curriculum should provide a theoretical basis that emphasises widespread public participation, sharing of information with the public and reaching consensus through public dialogue to improve relations, as opposed to pedagogy that fosters the exercise of power and privileges experts and bureaucrats, as portrayed and buttressed by the religious abuse.

## Overloaded curriculum and weak framing

The current FRS syllabus is overloaded with a variety of topics that should be interrogated within the religious space. These topics, according to Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (2015), are gender, health, environmental management, enterprise, children's rights and responsibilities, human rights, sexuality, heritage, good citizenship, social responsibility and governance, conflict, transformation, tolerance and peace-building. The syllabus guide makes it clear that these themes cut across religious traditions and strive to enact an interdisciplinary curriculum and, in the process, assist students and educators to see the inter-relatedness of religious concepts in their daily lives. The argument for this approach may be Bernstein's curriculum projects, which states that a (Sandovnik 2001):

> [*S*]hift from collection to integrated curriculum codes represents the evolution from mechanical to organic solidarity (or from traditional to modern society), with curricular change marking the movement from the sacred to the profane. (p. 689)

Although this sentiment may be admirable and may promote diversity, it becomes difficult for students and teachers to draw a line where these topics or contents should end, and at what point. Subjects like FRS suffer from weak framing. Framing refers to the degree of control that the teacher and pupil possess over the 'selection, organization, pacing and timing of the knowledge transmitted and received in the pedagogical relationship' (Bernstein 1973:88). Thus, a weak frame allows students and teachers to move in and out of the content without limitations, which may affect organisation, pacing and timing of religious lessons, given that teachers are different (Fancourt 2016; Stern 2007). For example, when teachers and learners discuss the concept of Trinity, there is a likelihood that they would disagree because the concept has no definite answer, but it is influenced by one theological and cultural orientation; hence, it suffers weak framing. So FRS is weak in the sense that there is no definite answer when it comes to religious issues, unlike in mathematics where 1 + 1 = 2 everywhere regardless of the circumstance (strong framing). Weak framing is problematic in the sense that learners write one examination nationally regardless of how each teacher and student manoeuvred in and out of the weak frame, and hence some learners may have poor results not because they do not know but because of subjectivity that happens within the weak framing.

The other weakness of FRS is that it ignores the contemporary Zimbabwean religious dilemma, which is characterised by abusive tendencies. It is problematic in the sense that learners experience religious abuse in society, and the curriculum is adamant to address it. I see this as a problem based on the notion that a relevant curriculum must address the lived realities of the learners which in this case is the religious abuse (Moyo 2016; Ramjewan, Elena & Toukan 2016; Tilley & Taylor 2013). Thus, a religious curriculum that does not interrogate current praxis of religion becomes irrelevant and becomes part of the problems of society, rather than the solution. In this regard, Iversen (2018) is right to view some curricula, like that of FRS, as ambiguous, fraught with politicised controversy and promising more than it can deliver, thereby depriving students of rich religious traditions that can be gleaned through the classroom space. According to the lens of CER, the curriculum that cannot emancipate students and educators to interrogate their present circumstances by using what they learn and teach is irrelevant.

## Ubuntu or Unhu and the religiosity dilemma

Firstly, FRS is accredited for centring the curriculum within the Ubuntu philosophy because the theory resonates well with the Africanness and identities of the Zimbabwean learners. Ubuntu or Unhu is one of the most discussed African philosophies, and scholars call for a return to Ubuntu (Kaunda 2016; Shutte 2001; Tutu 1999), which I also support. The support is premised on its emphasis on humanness, which is conferred on other people through solidarity with one another and care for each other's quality of life within the contexts of communal relationships and human dignity (Metz 2011:559). Ubuntu or Unhu, as outlined by Matolino and Kwindingwi (2013), is rooted in the search for identity and human dignity, in an attempt to restore the identity and dignity of the African person. I agree with the sentiments by Romose (2005) that reengaging Ubuntu or Unhu is that academia emancipate the African people to speak for and about themselves and in that way construct an authentic and truly African discourse about Africa. Waghid and Smeyers (2012:6) see Ubuntu or Unhu as a 'valuable in attending to schooling and classroom challenges'. Cognisant of the foregoing, there is an appreciation of Ubuntu or Unhu as valid and relevant to African people, hence its inclusion in the FRS curriculum.

However, and arguable so, Ubuntu or Unhu has become academic jargon, and as an excuse for longing for an ideal African past. Although curriculum reformists and scholars call for the return of Ubuntu, and curriculum is premised within that philosophy, people often forget that Ubuntu is not static, but is a dynamic concept that also experienced colonisation, and can also be a colonising tool. To buttress this, Mkwesha (2016) notes that the current conversation

around the Ubuntu or Unhu philosophy indicates that it is one of the strongest tools for reproducing and perpetuating colonialism or apartheid or patriarchy. This is because within Ubuntu thinking there is emphasis of authority of the elders and most of the times the authority is not questionable but should be embraced and respected (Seleke 2016). Thus, a blunt approach to including Ubuntu without being subjected to scrutiny like any other academic theory can cause African students' thinking to revolve around oppression and docility (because of its authoritarian aspects) and negate social justice, equity, gender and equality, which the new syllabus seeks to promote. I argue this way. In addition, Murove (2013) argues that the ethics of Ubuntu has undergone vehement attack on the grounds that it is a recipe for retarding modernisation and the benefits that are associated with it. When I suggest limitations on Ubuntu, it should not be interpreted that I am against Ubuntu or Unhu. Instead, I call on people to rethink it and subject the philosophy to current trends, and the need to create democratic spaces in which all humankind can participate without being subject to prejudice on the basis of gender, age or geographical location. In addition, Ubuntu or Unhu should also be subjected to critique, to eliminate negative aspects associated with the term, such as patriarchal approach, dominance and submission, especially of women. The curriculum is right when it engages Ubuntu or Unhu on conditions that expose, discuss, challenge and eliminate – through praxis and theory – its exploitative elements such patriarchy and emphasise values such as harmony, equality for both men and women regardless of social standing and age.

### Silence on religious extremism

The world is experiencing serious challenges related to religious extremism, which threatens peace in many parts of the African continent (Mandaville & Nozell 2017; Prinsloo & Simons 2017). For instance, in Nigeria, extremism by groups such as Boko Haram, Isis and al Qaeda, among others, have contributed to toxic environments in the North-Eastern State of Borno. Religious extremism is the product of historical, political, economic and social circumstances, including the impact of regional and global power politics. Growing horizontal inequality is one of the consistently cited drivers of violent extremism, unemployment and poverty, perceptions of injustice, human rights violations, social–political exclusion, widespread corruption and sustained mistreatment of certain groups (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] 2016). In addition, religious extremism affects the security, well-being and dignity of many individuals living in both developed and developing countries, as well as their peaceful and sustainable ways of life. It also poses grave challenges to human rights (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] 2017).

Fasciano (2015) explains that extremism leaves students vulnerable to stereotyping and bullying by classmates and even teachers and has created hostile environments that can make it difficult for students to learn. Cognisant of this challenge, the United Nations believes that there is a global need for governments, religious bodies and other groups to create education programmes that build a culture of tolerance, understanding and respect among people of diverse beliefs (eds. Lindholm, Durham & Tahzib-Lie 2004; Oslo Coalition 1998); thus, FRS should be contributing to eliminating religious extremism, which, unfortunately, is not the case.

It is important that curricula address religious extremism, allow students to moderate their religious views in a contested space and enable them to realise the dangers of extremist behaviour in a pluralistic and multiple-religion context. Although Zimbabwe has, generally, not experienced the dangers of extremism, it is susceptible to it. I argue this because, as Berman and Iannaccone (2006) explain, where governments and economies function poorly, sects often become major suppliers of social services, political action and coercive force. So, because Zimbabwe is in a poor state, economically and politically, extremist tendencies can manifest at any time. I argue this way because where extremism has risen in the past, it was associated with people's disgruntlement over poor economy, unstable political environment and marginalisation (Berman & Iannaccone 2006; UNDP 2016). Although Zimbabwe has not experienced much of extremism, it does not entail its immune to it nor impossible to experience it. Thus, it is important that curriculum begins to engage with extremism, before society is engulfed by people who are religious extremists. This warning is supported by De Silva (2018), who argues that prevention approaches are necessary, both in countries that have never experienced conflict and states that are in the tenuous post-conflict recovery phase. By doing so, the curriculum addresses the problem before it becomes a crisis. The history of various nations has taught us that extremism is dangerous, and once it is permitted to spread, attempts to stop it are usually fruitless and lead to loss of lives.

The issue of religious extremism should be discussed in the contemporary space because some emerging religious groups exhibit extremist behaviours, such as withdrawing children from school and advocating strict separatist ideologies (Dube 2019). Thus, given the challenges of extremism and the abusive traits (which include financial abuse, abuse of women and children, etc.) of some contemporary religious groups, it becomes a disservice if FRS ignores the way these topics affect the teaching and the learning of the day.

## Rethinking religious education in Zimbabwe: Evoking a relevant curriculum for family and religious studies

In this section, I will offer ways in which the FRS curriculum can redress the trajectories described above within a context characterised by abusive religion. Although curriculum cannot eradicate religious abuse completely, I argue that the

curriculum, as an embodiment of social solutions to human ambivalence, such as religious abuse, has the capacity to emancipate students and educators, so that they become confident about confronting, challenging and evoking epistemic disobedience against religious abuse. Thus, with the lens of CER, I agree with Matemba and Addi-Mununkum (2017) that:

> [*U*]nless there is a radical shift in the areas identified, the subject will continue to present a distorted picture of religion and thus fail in its civic responsibility as a curriculum area that is perhaps best placed to inculcate pro-social values towards citizenship in a world of religious diversity. (p. 155)

Informed with the foregoing argument, my suggestions or recommendations are captured in the following section, which I hope can consolidate the current curriculum of FRS.

## Inclusion of sections covering contemporary religion

In the previous section, I appreciated the interdisciplinary approach of the FRS curriculum; however, I argued that it is not enough if it does not allow or emancipate students and teachers to engage and interrogate contemporary religious practices. This approach is necessary because some contemporary religious practices pose threats to social cohesion; hence, a relevant religious curriculum must engage with these religious practices as a counter-hegemonic strategy to address social ills that accompany abusive religion. With this regard, Mashau (2018) argues that the inclusion of contemporary religion should be attended to as a matter of urgency because it will have positive effects on social justice, promote respect for religious difference and encourage a move towards achieving a peaceful society. In fact, religious wars that were triggered by exclusion have, in the past, shown to be fatal, destructive and difficult to end; therefore, inclusion will mean catering for emerging religions as act of social justice. My submission is that including contemporary religion will expose the dark side of some religious elements and its constitutive underside, thereby evoking an 'epistemic disobedience, cultural, political and economic production resistance – through shifting the geography of reason' (Karkov & Robbins 2014). Epistemic disobedience involves students acquiring adequate knowledge to enable them to refuse to entertain religious malpractices that are geared to exploitation and social injustice. To this end, FRS, as postulated by Wane and Todd (2018), will flourish in schools and in society, thereby promoting a process that leads to the casting off and challenging of criminality that attempts to hijack religious projects for personal gain. This recommendation resonates well with the aim of FRS, which, according to the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (2015), is as follows:

> The Family and Religious Studies syllabus seeks to develop critical reflection of socio-economic and political issues, religious tolerance, and initiative in terms of formulating ideologies that help in transforming the students to contribute to sustainable development. (p. 1)

To this end, I argue for the need for an additional component that refers to contemporary religion and, also, religious abuse, religious injustice and religious extremism. To avert the content overload I discussed above, some topics should be removed, such as environmental management (which can be taught in science), heritage (which is actually a duplication of what is taught in heritage studies) and enterprise (which can be taught as part of commerce and business studies). Eliminating these topics and relocating them to other, more relevant subjects will create space for contemporary religion and allow students and teachers to engage effectively with more pressing issues of the day, such as religious abuse and religious extremism.

## Inclusion of topics relating to religious extremism

To achieve curriculum relevance, FRS should include the teaching of religious extremism and its dangers in multiple-religion contexts. I believe that the FRS curriculum is better placed to assist students to rethink trajectories that make people assume that everyone is wrong except themselves and their religious groups. As indicated above, the issue of religious extremism has been prioritised by the UN conversations that attempt to evoke sustainable peace and end conflict. Family and religious studies can contribute to these conversations, thereby becoming more relevant and addressing the lived realities of 21st-century students. Schools are sites where students develop or reinforce feelings of exclusion and intolerance, instead of experiencing their society's embracing ethos (UNESCO 2017). The curriculum must allow students to confront the toxicity of religious extremism and construct new ideas of how it can be mitigated in the contexts of disagreement and social pressure.

## Training of educators to teach family and religious studies

The effectiveness of FRS to address students' lived realities is centred on the training of subject teachers, so that they are able to probe social and religious conditions. Sumner (2008) explains that religious education has always been subject to external pressures that seek to subordinate its practice, and I believe curriculum can assist to minimise and undo the effects of religious abuse, as long as teachers have been trained and that the training is cognisant of social justice, human rights and protection of citizens. Thus, Schwartz (2006:449) rightly argues that, 'teachers are the filters through which the mandated curriculum passes. Their understanding of it, and their enthusiasm, or boredom, with various aspects of it, colours its nature'. Thus, unless curriculum planners in Zimbabwe transform the way they perceive religion, especially in relation to teacher capacitation, needful and doable radical interventions that could fundamentally counter abusive tendencies will be a meaningless and fruitless exercise (Hooks 1992). So teacher training colleges must begin to rethink their relevance and include FRS in their mainstream curriculum, so that the teachers they produce can contribute significantly to

conversations that can make religion to regain the trust it has lost because of abuse-like tendencies in religious shrines. Equipped teachers are an important asset to a country, and their training has the impetus to transform society for the good, which, in this case, involves emancipating students so that they can challenge religious abuse and extremism. Another recommendation is that all untrained teachers in the area of religion should undergo in-service training that exposes them to knowledge of major religions covered by the curriculum, as well as new religions and/or spritiualities.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed the challenges associated with the FRS curriculum. I appreciate the stance the new curriculum takes to include various religions; however, modifications can be made in the light of the recommendation suggested above. Herein, I argue that inclusion of major, traditional religions, such as Hinduism and Islam, is admirable; however, we should also pay attention to the contributions of religion in the 21st century. Again, the curriculum should focus on conversations around contemporary religions, of which some are characterised by abuse tendencies. By using CER theory, I argue that curriculum that addresses the lived realities of society and, at this juncture, religious abuse presents a challenge. I also went further and suggested ways the curriculum can be configured for relevance.

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The author declares that no competing interest exists.

### Author's contributions

The author declares that he is the sole author of this research article.

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The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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