

MANY PATHS TO ONE GOD: REVISITING ECUMENISM IN THE ERA OF PLURALISM IN BOTSWANA

E. P. Motswapong & M. D. Kebaneilwe

ABSTRACT

In this paper we seek to re-examine ecumenism in the phase of religious pluralism in Botswana. We acknowledge that religious diversity, whether it is within one religion or many, is often characterized by conflict borne from intolerance of some kind or other. It is not surprising therefore, that ecumenism is often an uphill task in any religious pluralistic society. In this paper we wish to acknowledge that Botswana has not experienced any violence in the name of religion. Although there are many religions existing in the country including African Traditional Religions (ATR), Christianity, Islam and Hinduism just to mention a few, these have co-existed peacefully up to date. Therefore as our title suggests, it is not a farfetched idea to conclude that there are many paths to one God.

Keywords: Ecumenism, Pluralism, Religions, Christianity, Islam, Halaal and Religious Education Syllabus

Introduction

Before delving into issues of ecumenism and pluralism in Botswana, we find it fit to define key terms, namely, ecumenism and religious pluralism. **Ecumenism**, can summarily be defined as any inter denominational initiative aimed at greater cooperation among Christian churches while religious pluralism is a situation in which people of different religious backgrounds coexist peacefully within a given society (McLennan 2011; Cobb, Jr 2004). In order for the above to be realistic there has to be true and genuine interfaith dialogue (Huang 1995). It is worth noting that issues of ecumenism and religious pluralism are not new to Botswana context (see Haron 2007). However, previous studies (Nkomazana and Amanze 1994) were only confined within Christianity. Our study, seeks to broaden the parameters by exploring ecumenism and religious pluralism amongst the different religious traditions in Botswana. Consequently we acknowledge that there is coexistence of many religions in the country thus contributing to our study's legitimacy in exploring this untapped dimension, that of ecumenism in the face of pluralism.

In Botswana there is hardly any predicament in so far as religious pluralism is concerned. The paper, therefore, suggest that Botswana religious landscape enlivens the scripture in 1 Corinthians 12:12 which asserts that –just as a body, though one has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ! (NIV). That is, while the text above refers to the church as the body of Christ, it is analogous to the overall religious plurality in Botswana as the different religious traditions of Christianity, Islam, and African Indigenous religions have co-existed peacefully in the country. As the title of our paper suggests, there are many paths to God and hence religious diversity and

pluralism need not cause a predicament. In Botswana the statement is at least true especially regarding the relationship between Christianity and other religious traditions.

The point has been expressed by Christopher Zigira (2001), who says peaceful co-existence of different religions is based on the understanding that at the end of the day there is one Ultimate Reality. In fact, the idea is further scripturally supported by Jesus, though indirectly, when he asserts that –there is neither Jew nor Gentile...! (Gal. 3:28). Although there are many religious traditions in Botswana, we will limit our study to the two most dominant, in terms of numbers, that is Christianity and Islam (see Haron 2007).

Our paper will proceed as follows: We begin by providing a summarized literature review of the history of the Christianity and Islam in Botswana, and then proceed to discuss the implications of the intersection and interaction between Christianity and Islam and conclude.

A Brief History of Christianity in Botswana

Surveys have been done by various researchers regarding the religious context of Botswana. For instance, James Amanze (1994) asserts that a third of Botswana’s population is Christian, a situation which as explained by Mooring, is complicated by the fact that many Batswana who have converted to Christianity, still practice their African Traditional Religion (Mooring: 2011). Amanze (2007) maintains that Christianity was introduced by missionaries during the first half of the 19th Century. According to The Minister of Home Affairs Mr Edwin Batshu there are 1500 registered churches in Botswana and that there are many seeking registration (Botswana Guardian, 2015). The figures show an overwhelmingly high number of different churches given the slow growing population of Botswana which is only 2.2 million as of the last population census.¹⁸⁰ Furthermore, the mushrooming of churches has seen the government ministry concerned seeking measures to curb the growth of churches (Sunday Standard 2013). Amanze (1994) differentiates between three types of churches which are Mainline (e.g. Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodists, United Congregational Church of Southern Africa-UCCSA formerly London Missionary Society- LMS), Pentecostals (e.g. Assemblies of God, Apostolic Faith Mission, Bible Life Ministries) and African Independent Churches (e.g. Saint John, Saint Paul, Zion Christian Church- ZCC, Head Mountain). However, there are further divisions and differences among those categories as well. While they may be characterized by certain similarities, they are also dissimilar at different levels.

Recently, Botswana has experienced a rapid growth and influx of new churches which come aggressively claiming to have answers to existential problems plaguing our nation (Kebaneilwe 2016). The said churches claim to come in the name of Christ proclaiming –fire! to burn and destroy demons and all evil spirits that are accused of causing ills that our society is experiencing (Kebaneilwe 2016). Issues of HIV and AIDS, poverty, lack of employment, escalating divorce rates and many other ills that have unsettled Batswana in this era are blamed on spiritual beings which are then exorcised by calling on –fire! over them in the name of Jesus Christ.

While there is nothing wrong with the above, it is important to mention that as a result of emphasis

¹⁸⁰ <http://www.mmegi.bw/index.php?aid=49410/feb>

on miracles, deliverance from evil powers and prosperity, –fire churches have attracted and are continuing to attract multitudes. Our concern is that other churches are not very happy with the new movements as they see them as rivals, taking away their followers. This is evidenced by the recent complaint from one pastor belonging to a Pentecostal church Reverend Matlhaope who expressed discomfort with the way these churches operate.¹⁸¹ The observable issue at stake here is ecumenism and not religious pluralism. Before we shift our discussion to the interaction between Christianity and Islam in Botswana, a brief history of how Islam was planted in Botswana will be highlighted.

The Planting of Islam in Botswana

According to James Amanze (1998) the planting of Islam was in the year 1882 when a first Indian Muslim by the name of Bhana arrived and settled in Moshupa. He started trading in Moshupa and Molepolole where he purchased shops from European traders. Two years later, another Muslim trader arrived but it is not clear when whether his country of origin was India or Mauritius. However, after establishing himself –he eventually invited members of his extended family to come to Botswana from India to assist him in his business as shop assistants (1988:69).

It is worth noting that Muslims, who came to Botswana, though devout, made no attempt to proselytise Batswana (see Amanze 2000, Parratt 1989). Thus whatever religious impact they had was indirect. The way in which Islam began to spread among the Batswana was through intermarriage with them (Parratt 1989). Therefore, the encounter with Christianity was smooth from the beginning. Motswapong (2007:286) maintains that it was a –process of accommodation, assimilation and adoption resulting in a paradigm shift in which Botswana ceased to be a Christian country to a pluralistic society. Batswana were converting en masse to the religion for various reasons other than religious. Motswapong further concludes that disillusionment was one reason for Batswana to convert to Islam (2007:286). Amanze (2008) identifies a number of reasons why Batswana adopted and converted to Islam: material gain, testing the waters, compatibility and accommodative nature.

Christianity Encountering Islam

Despite that Christianity in Botswana has always had internal instabilities to address, until the arrival of Islam; it was a dominant force (see Amanze 2000 Haron 2011). Worth noting too is that African Traditional religion or what could be equated with the belief in ancestral spirits (badimo) has remained an integral part of the religious life of Batswana, though mainly existing in the margins. This point has been captured by Haron (2007) in his argument that even though many Batswana subscribe to African Traditional Religions (henceforth ATR) they do not openly confess for fear of intimidation. That is, ATR is practised not so much in public as in private. The public space it used to occupy before the advent of other religions has been lost to particularly Christianity or the religion of the missionaries. However, with the new arrival, that is Islam, Hinduism etc., Christianity was going to lose its monopoly. For the limited purposes of this essay, we shall not explore in depth how other religions coming into the country affected Christianity. Instead, our discussion will focus on the relationship between Islam and Christianity.

¹⁸¹ <http://www.botswanaguardian.co.bw/news>

In Botswana Christianity has not had any major challenges with regard to living side by side with other religions especially Islam and its adherents. However, there are two issues that are worth exploring in that regard and these are 1) the resistance of the introduction of a multi-faith Junior Certificate Religious Education (henceforth RE) curriculum (Dinama 2010; Seretse 2003 & Mmolai 1988) and 2) The issue of halaal products in Botswana which became thorny when Botswana felt the Muslims were imposing their products on them.

The Curriculum

The teaching of RE in Botswana schools had since colonial times been dominated entirely by Christian education. In 1994 the situation changed with the introduction of a multi faith RE curriculum) in junior secondary schools (Seretse 2003). The new curriculum was geared towards promoting liberal values such as autonomy, freedom and tolerance. It also encouraged the search for common cross-culture values in a pluralistic society (Wright 2004; Chidester 2003 and Dagovitz 2004).

Our intention is not to dwell too much on the multifaith RE syllabus and its inception or ramifications thereof, but rather to discuss the reception by the Christians when the curriculum was introduced. We wish to reiterate that resistance by the dominant religion is not unique to Botswana. There have been instances in North Africa where the teaching of Islam was acceptable over other religions (see Zigira 2001). Instead of welcoming the introduction of the new syllabus as a development most leaders of the church saw it as monstrous. They feared it was going to swallow and confuse their children by turning them away from Christian morals and teachings. What they failed to realise was that the teaching of RE is not about confession or indoctrination but is pedagogical in nature. However, the resistance is understandable given the strong influence that Christianity and its leaders had from the missionary education in which RE was an extension of the Sunday sermon. Therefore, it was unthinkable for many Botswana in general to have their children introduced to other religions, namely Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Sikhism and others. Interestingly however, the abovementioned religions have not attracted many converts despite being taught in schools and hence Christianity has remained dominant in the country.

Furthermore, in the year 2000, the Department of Theology and Religious Studies took world religions on board. Before then only one course called TRS 403: Some World Religions, was offered. This was a year long course where at least five religions were introduced including Islam. However, lumping five religions in one course meant that not much content could be covered and hence in the academic year 2002/2003 two courses were introduced, that is, TRS 103 Religions of Botswana and TRS 105 Asian Religions: A Survey. During that year ninety (90) students registered for the former while only 2 for the latter. As a result the course TRS 105: Asian Religions: A Survey had to be cancelled because it was considered not viable. This is a clear indication that offering particular religious traditions at university level should not be mistaken to be a way of popularising a religion. As Smart (1968:5) explains;

Religious Education, like any other subject, is characteristically a process of study; a process which while transcending the merely informative, is yet one of bringing about initiation into the understanding of meaning of and into questions about truth and worth of

religion (Smart 1968:5).

Eventually the curriculum was received and implemented without the drawing of swords. Importantly Botswana came to understand that the teaching of religion in the classroom is not tantamount to confessional approaches which they had received as the legacy of missionary education.

We will now shift our discussion to the issue of halaal which as already mentioned also attracted some resistance from some Botswana Christians. Nonetheless this was not a predicament but perhaps just a hick up much like the issue of the introduction of a multifath RE curriculum discussed above.

Halaal

The halaal vs haram has always been a contentious issue in Botswana especially between Muslims and Christians. For many years, small business owners, especially in the meat industry complained to the Botswana government, about the –halaal requirement by some bigger meat retailers in the country. Many of the small businesses, mainly owned by locals, who produce meat, were required to adhere to halaal practices if their products were to be bought by the big retailers, mainly Indian Muslims. Therefore, it was not surprising that during a parliamentary debate the former Member of Parliament for Mmadinare and former Vice President Mr. Ponatshego Kedikilwe, asked –what is halaal?! (Letsididi, 2015). This was a rhetorical question and all that Kedikilwe wanted to understand was why there was such a hue and cry about halaal in Botswana. This would threaten the peace and tranquillity Botswana is known for.¹⁸² The worry escalated to unprecedented heights when the Evangelical Church Head Pastor John Ramotshabi, aired his suspicions –that there could be a motive behind the advent of halaal sold in shops| and the mistaken allegation that in eating halaal products, the Christian population was –consuming food sacrificed to idols.||¹⁸³ This did not sit well with the Muslim community which responded that the concerned group was –making some weird interpretations that misrepresents the concept of halaal|| which they saw as –a great insult||¹⁸⁴ to Muslims. President Ian Khama intervened and commissioned that a bill be drafted to provide for meat slaughtered outside the Muslim method of halaal to be available to consumers of non-Islamic origin.¹⁸⁵ This was seen as a relief to local producers, who had earlier complained that stringent halaal requirements by large retail stores were a major stumbling block to accessing the meat market. Consequently the issue was resolved amicably and hence did not become a predicament.

We will now move onto show that Christianity and Islam have worked towards a common goal. This is with regard to the fight against HIV and AIDS in Botswana. Each of them however, has fought on their own right using their religious teachings and beliefs as tools to attack this common enemy named HIV and AIDS. The Discussion will briefly explore how each religion has tackled the battle.

Islam

Islamic teachings are very clear on sexual relations before marriage, according to the Quran

¹⁸² <http://www.facebook.com/meanwhileInBotswana/posts>

¹⁸³ <http://www.gabzfm.com/christians-not-happy-halaal-products-retail-shops>

¹⁸⁴ <http://www.sundaystandard.info/article.php>

fornication/adultery is considered as haram. Sura 17 (Al- Isra) Ayat 32 says: And come not near unto adultery. Lo! it is an abomination and an evil way. (Trnls. Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall). It goes further to specify that any man or woman guilty of fornication should be given hundred lashes each. The recommendation is that couples should get married before engaging in sex. Consequently, with the problem of HIV and AIDS in Botswana, Muslims have resorted to teach about HIV and AIDS through workshops, funding of different bodies and even printing of books and pamphlets about the epidemic. This is a way of enriching people's knowledge and contributing to individual positive living regardless of status. They have also come up with their own slogan for fighting the scourge: EAB which simply translates as Education, Attitude Change and Behaviour transformation.

During an interview with Bashi Letsididi of Mmegi Newspaper Sheikh Hategeaikimana Hussan, a Muslim Imam based in Gaborone, felt the Botswana government's ABC slogan, Abstain, Be faithful, Condomise model is not compatible with teachings of Islam. He sees the C as problematic because as Muslims they encourage and emphasize abstinence until marriage. Abstinence, the primary prevention message for Muslims is viewed as an act of faith and compliance. Although there are no statistics on AIDS to ascertain the number of those infected by the disease in the Muslim community in Botswana it is generally believed that HIV infections are relatively low within the community. The low prevalence has been attributed to the fact that Islam forbids intoxicants for all its adherents. As a result compliance is helpful in avoiding the consequences of loss of inhibition that drugs like alcohol would otherwise provoke. From some common sense perspective, it would seem realistic to encourage those who find it difficult to abstain to be faithful. If Muslims use condoms, that would be tantamount to encouraging unlawful desires. Botswana Muslim Association has come up with an HIV and AIDS programme on how individuals should conduct themselves. This has been summarised as follows:

- Fear of God is the best way to protect yourself and others from HIV and AIDS
- Staying away from committing adultery is the way forward to prevent the spread of HIV and AIDS.
- Self-control is the powerful weapon to fight against HIV and AIDS
- HIV and AIDS makes no racial discrimination between people of the world, children, youth and the elderly, male or female, black or white; all are the same as far as the pandemic is concerned.
- Do not let yourself become a slave of destructive substances' of alcohol, drugs and others
- You cannot get HIV and AIDS if you are not involved in the high risk behaviours.
- Change of attitude towards sexual behaviour is the only way to safeguard ourselves against the pandemic of HIV and AIDS.

All these are consolidated in pamphlets and are distributed not just to Muslims but to everybody else who wants the Islamic approach to fighting HIV and AIDS.

Christianity

In November 2014, the government of Botswana and the Botswana Council of Churches (BCC) invited Faith Based Organisations (FBO) including the Zion Christian Church leader Bishop Barnabas Legganyane to launch a series of HIV and AIDS prevention strategies. This was held in Gaborone (Motsamai 2013). It is important to note that even though the government and the church

have worked together in the fight against HIV and AIDS, there have been instances where they have been at loggerheads. One such is the government's promotion of condom use. Christians have disagreed, arguing that the government was promoting condom use almost exclusively while neglecting behavioural change. Christianity generally opposes condom use and promotes abstinence before marriage and fidelity in marriage. Importantly, the Church has maintained that its mandate is to raise consciousness and sensitize its members and the rest of the nation about the HIV scourge. In addition it:

- Engages and mobilises church leaders who in turn motivate and inspire their congregation to be proactive in the fight against the pandemic
- Forms support and care teams to offer home - based care to those bedridden by AIDS
- Advocates for the support of people living with HIV and AIDS
- Provides counselling to those infected and affected by HIV and AIDS
- Involves the church's social groups to widen support base for those who need it

Finally the Church works closely with and listens to members who are either affected or infected by HIV and AIDS. As such the church has made itself relevant by harkening to the needs of not only its members but all those who at one level or another struggle with the effects of the pandemic. This was echoed by Moji Ruele who says, -if the HIV/AIDS sufferers are neglected and if the weakest members of our society are not listened to by the Church as they cry, and despair, then the Church would be an irrelevant institution in their struggle against HIV and AIDS| (2003:144).

Summary and Conclusions

In our paper we have attempted to re-examine the issue of ecumenism within the religious pluralistic context of Botswana. It has emerged that despite the diversities within Christianity itself and other religions like Islam, there are common threads. However, this does not undermine the challenges that may come with diversity. The coming in of other religions into the religious scene of Botswana, which initially was predominantly Christian, did not pose a predicament as already shown. Despite the 'misunderstanding' that ensued regarding the two issues discussed, namely, halaal and the RE curriculum, hatchets have been buried and dialogue continues. As already shown, the halaal issue was more of a socio-economic one than religious. Furthermore, changes that took place in the RE curriculum in Botswana schools were initially not a welcome development by Christians but ultimately it smoothed out. The paper further indicated that Christianity and Islam have been able to work together towards a common goal in the fight against HIV and AIDS. While both seem to be doing it on their own, that is, not necessarily forming a coalition, but for the benefit of the Batswana both have taken part in the struggle. Our impression regarding ecumenism and religious pluralism in Botswana is that there has always been dialogue between Christianity and other religions. This is witnessed by the peace and stability that continues to reign in the country despite its religiously diverse landscape.

References

- Amanze, J. 2007. -From Denominational Pluralism to Church Unity|. In (eds) Fidelis Nkomazana and Laurel Lanner, Aspects of the History of the Church in Botswana. Pietermaritzburg:

Cluster Publications, pp.15-49.

- Amanze, J. 1988. African Christianity in Botswana, Gweru: Mambo Press.
- _____. 1994. Handbook of Churches, Gaborone: Pula Press
- Botswana Government 1994. Revised National Policy in Education. Gaborone: Government Printers.
- Chidester, D.J 2003. Global Citizenship, Cultural Citizenship and World Religion Education. In: R. Jackson (ed.). International Perspectives on Citizenship, Education and Religious diversity. London: Routledge.
- Cobb, Jr. J.B. -Beyond Pluralism@ <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3347>
Date accessed 12. April 2016.
- Dagovitz,A. 2004. When Choice Does not Matter: Political Liberalism, Religion and Faith Debate. Journal of Philosophy of Education, 38:165-180;
- Dinama, B. 2010. Implementing Multi-Faith Religious Education Curricula in Botswana Junior Secondary Schools. Perspectives in Education, Vol 28 (1) March. pp.16-23.
- Dlamini, B.M. Pro-Vice Chancellor of the University of Swaziland Welcome Speech to the 14th Annual Conference of the BOLESWA held at the University of Swaziland from 23rd-24th February 1998.
- Haron, M. 2007. -The Demographics of Botswana's Christian Population and BC 200@, In (eds) Fidelis Nkomazana and Laurel Lanner, Aspects of the History of the Church in Botswana Pietermaritzburg: Cluster publications, pp. 322-329.
- Huang, Y. 1995. Religious Pluralism and Interfaith Dialogue beyond Universalism and Particularism International. Journal for Philosophy of Religion. 37 pp. 127-144
- Kebaneilwe MD, 2016: -The Mushrooming of Churches and Freedom of Religion in Botswana@. An Unpublished Paper presented at the African Consortium for Law and Religious Studies (ACLARS) Conference held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia from May 22-24, 2016.
- Kebaneilwe, MD, 2016 -Neo-Christianity/Christianities in Botswana: A Meeting Place for Culture, Custom and Religion(s)@. An Unpublished paper presented at ATISA Conference held in Zambia from April 6-9 at Justo Mwale University in Zambia on the Theme Religion and Society in the Contemporary Context of Zambia and Southern Africa .
- Mmolai, S. 1988. Religious Education in Botswana Secondary Schools: Beginning, Development and Future prospects. Unpublished Master Thesis, Lancaster University. UK.
- Motswapong, E.P. 2007. -Towards a Multi Faith Botswana circa 1966 to 2001. In (eds) Fidelis Nkomazana and Laurel Lanner, Aspects of the History of the Church in Botswana. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications pp.279-298.
- Parratt, S. 1989. Islam in Botswana. African Studies, Vol 48, pp. 71-82.
- Ruele, M. 2003. The Diaconal and Liberation Role of the Church in the Fight against HIV/AIDS in Botswana. Botswana Notes and Records. Botswana Society.Vol. 35, pp. 141-145
- Seretse, T.E. 2003. An Investigation into the Young *People*'s Beliefs and Values and the Teaching of

RE in Botswana Junior Secondary Schools. Unpublished Ph.D Thesis. Birmingham: University of Birmingham

The Holy Quran <https://www.alislam.org/quran/> (Date accessed 31 January 2017).

Wolf, J.J. Teach, 2004. Do not Preach: Practical Guidelines for Addressing Spiritual Concerns of Students. *Professional School Counselling*, 7, pp363-366

Wright, A 2004 The Justification of Compulsory Religious Education: A Response Professor White. *Journal of Religious Education*, 26; pp119-131.

Zigira, C. 2001. From Christian Exclusivism to Religious Pluralism in The BOLESWA Occasional Papers, Vol. 1/8 pp. 236-250.

Online References

Christians not Happy with Halaal Products in Retail Shops, Friday, 7 2014 at <http://www.gabzfm.com/christians-not-happy-halaal-products-retail-shops> (Date Accessed 13 January, 2015).

Ebrahim, I. Demystifying Halaal At <http://www.sundaystandard.info/article.php>. (Date Accessed 16 February 2014)

<http://www.facebook.com/meanwhileInBotswana/posts> (Date Accessed 07 June 2015)

<http://www.islam.com> and www.islamonline.com (Date Accessed 03 May 2015)

http://www.sundaystandard.info/print_article.php?NewsID=5482 (Date Assessed 07 July 2015)

<http://www.thuto.org/ubh/bw/society/relstat1.htm>. (Date Accessed 07 June 2015)

Kologwe, O. Church Breakaways Worry Minister, Sunday standard online edition At <http://www.sundaystandard.info/article.php> (Date Accessed 19 March 2015).

Letsididi B. *Halaal stirs controversy as SMME's are pushed to the margins*. At <http://www.sundaystandard.info/print-article.php> (Date Accessed 2015).

Letsididi B. Shiekh Points Muslim route to HIV prevention@ <http://www.mmegi.bw/index.php?sid=6&aid=1&dir=2008/May/Friday23/> (Date, Accessed 13 January 2016)

Mmualefe, D. 2015. Of Mushrooming of Churches in Botswana. At <http://www.mmegi.bw/index.php>. (Date Accessed 13 April 2015).

Sunday Standard online edition http://www.sundaystandard.info/print_article.php?NewsID=5482 (Date Accessed 15 July 2015 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2011.583520>)

Motsamai M. 2013. HIV Remains Incurable- Lekganyane @ <http://www.dailynews.gov.bw/mobile/news-details.php?nid=7281&flag> (Date Accessed 12 April 2016).

Maano, U & Haron, M (2011) Botswana's Muslims in the Towns of Ramotswa and Lobatse: Their Arrival, Settlement and Current Demographics, *Journal*

of Muslim Minority Affairs, 31:2, 259-271, DOI: 10.1080/13602004.2011.583520