1 Introduction

This article focuses on religious literacy and how it relates to religious education as a key element and foundation. The first section engages the scope and focus of religious education, arguing mainly for the interrelatedness of cognitive and relational aspects. The following section delves into the complexity of context and the dynamic nature of religion as represented in religious plurality. Approaches, mainly from the work of Jackson (2005), are proposed as viable options to engage with plurality as key component of both religious education and religious literacy. I would like to address religious literacy and the connection with religious education within a specific context to illustrate some of these complexities, limitations, and opportunities around both. I choose to focus on South Africa because it is an interesting case in point for several reasons, one being the context I am familiar with. Moreover, it presents an interesting case regarding the complexities of religious pluralism, as religion was used to dehumanise during apartheid, but now, with a multi-religious approach, it is viewed as an important role player in building a united South Africa (Du Plessis 2016, 237). Ntho-Ntho and Nieuwenhuis (2016, 236) confirm that the aim with the religious policy, especially of the governing party, the African National Congress (ANC), was to cherish and celebrate diversity in South Africa. Although I choose to focus on religious literacy within the South African context, I also engage with other conversation partners from the UK and USA to broaden the discussion.

2 Religious Literacy

Richardson (2017, 373) refers to the definition offered by Prothero (2007, 15) that postulates that religious literacy is: “The ability to understand and use in one’s day to day life, the basic building blocks of religious traditions – their key terms, symbols, doctrines, practices, sayings, characters, metaphors and narratives”. I would like to argue that an understanding of religious education is central in understanding religious literacy. The outcomes of religious education to a certain extent represent religious literacy, as will become clear in the following discussion. Religious literacy is more than knowledge that only values individuals’ religious views and experiences; an encounter (relationship) with the religious other is essential. Therefore, knowledge about religions and interaction with different religions seems to be vital. Religious literacy has an individual character as well as a community focus. It implies that knowledge gained through religious education leads to the expectation that individuals will be empowered to express certain attitudes such as tolerance towards
other religions and people from other religions and, in doing so, to appreciate diversity. Religious education is, therefore, value-laden and geared towards instilling certain values in learners, like respect for others, their religion, and opinions, in order to live in harmony in a diverse, pluralistic society. Considering such an understanding of religious literacy, Kumar (2006, 273) argues that “religious education in South Africa is not only a human rights issue but also a moral issue”.

3 Assets and Limitations of Religious Literacy as an Essential Part of Religious Education

Gallagher (2009, 208) from the USA also refers to the work of Prothero (2007) because he believes the book “makes a strong case for minimal religious literacy as essential requirement for effective citizenship”. However, he contends that Prothero focuses too much on the what (content) and too little on the how. The how and why of religion refers to the dynamic nature of religion. Gallagher (2009, 208) states that “To be literate about religion one needs to know something about religious dynamics, mechanics and processes – the how of religion”. This implies an understanding is needed of why religion persists after all these years, defying predictions about the decline of religion known as secularisation, which proposes that religion will not have a prominent place in society and people’s lives.

Motivation for religious education to promote and enhance religious literacy in several public spaces like schools, rests on certain prerequisites like mutual respect to understand each other’s ethical frameworks, which, in turn, are informed by religion. For ethical dialogue to be possible, an understanding of diverse religious perspectives is needed. Religious literacy is often limited to being merely information about religion, resulting in this aspect being over-emphasised at the cost of other important aspects (Richardson 2017, 364). Considering this challenge, Richardson (2017, 365 – 366) argues that the limited cognitive focus of religious literacy could be countered by including a focus on communicative encounters with others. He explains the focus on relationality by making a distinction between weak and strong relationality. According to this understanding, knowledge only about religion represents a weak relationality. He continues to clarify weak relationality versus strong relationality by considering three positions, namely:

- **Atomism vs. relational recognition**: This perspective assumes that individual entities (individuals or organisations) are self-contained, while relational recognition suggests that there is no person until there are at least two persons. This means that the individual is only recognised in relation to the other.
- **Abstractionism vs. situated activity**: This perspective warns against the abstract understanding of entities which implies some form of decontextualisation. In terms of religious literacy, it entails discarding or even denying the contextual
nature of religion by assuming it universal applicability. A strong relational perspective would emphasise the relational and contextual nature of religion.

- **Objectivism vs. value-ladenness:** According to objectivism, it is possible to have neutrality and objectivity, a perspective which is value or bias free. A strong relational approach acknowledges that such objectivity and neutrality is not possible, as the very act of communication brings us into a thickly value-laden context.

Considering these views concerning weak or strong relationality in the process of religious education to obtain religious literacy, it becomes evident that the act of education is not neutral or objective. This implies that one cannot teach about religion (facts and content) without an encounter with the religious other. This encountering refers to an experience where involvement of more faculties than just the cognitive function is needed (Richardson 2017, 373).

Gallagher (2009, 209) attempts to respond to a similar question on what religious education for religious literacy could look like, considering the context in which it occurs and how that context will shape (enhance or inhibit) our efforts. These could include different contexts like schools, congregations/churches, theological training, and within the family. Gallagher (2009, 209 – 210) presents a few factors that may impact on religious literacy, namely:

- Religion education courses, especially in higher education, often have a narrow scope and therefore depth is forfeited.
- Despite the narrowness of the scope, it is often the only religion education course (module) students will ever take and should therefore have more depth as it cannot be assumed that students will continue with the subject.
- Although students may have religious experience, they are often ill-informed or uninformed about religion and therefore do not have the capacity to think about religion critically.

## 4 Religious Literacy and Plurality

Plurality is an important aspect when exploring religious education and religious literacy. Jackson (2005) gives an important and helpful overview in his book *Rethinking Religious Education and Plurality: Issues in Religious Diversity and Pedagogy* (2004), focusing primarily on religious education amidst plurality. His understanding of plurality is informed by the Norwegian scholar Geir Skeie (1995, 2002), who distinguishes between traditional and modern plurality. He also identifies plurality as a descriptive concept versus plurality as a normative concept. Plurality as a descriptive concept entails how we describe and interpret plurality and the stance we take when making that judgment (Jackson 2005, 3). The traditional understanding of plurality refers to empirical, observable cultural diversity like the movement of migrants between different countries and the emergence of new religious movements. Modern
or postmodern plurality relates to the intellectual climate, characterised by fragmentation, individualisation, and the privatisation of religion. It is important to take note of the intertwined relationship between traditional and modern plurality (Jackson 2005, 2–3).

The question is how we can respond to plurality, to shape religious literacy. This is the key focus of the overview presented by Jackson (2004, 2005), who identifies six responses followed by critique and suggestions on how to enhance these approaches to serve religious literacy better. The different responses could be summarised as follows:

- **A nostalgic response** attempts to return to the good old days by denying the existence and impact of plurality, for example offering religious education only from a Christian perspective, accepting Christian indoctrination. However, such an approach is not sustainable considering the changes and diversity brought about by globalisation.

- **Privatisation of religious education** takes place when schools take on a specific religious character. This places religious education in the private or semi-private sphere, and the religious character of the school and the underlying values permeate all the education offered at the institution. Learners in such schools are isolated from other voices and opinions; core values in a globalised world – like social justice, which includes religious tolerance – might not be addressed.

- **Normative postmodern pluralism** opposes the study of religions because it is viewed as an oppressive construction. It rejects textbooks, preferring children’s personal stories of faith. This view is, however, not realistic and withholds from children the opportunity to scrutinise and question the religious views presented to them.

- **Religion as discrete system** promotes religious literacy by identifying and arguing for a specific religious or non-religious position. Although this approach assists learners in justifying their own positions, it portrays religion as a discrete system, disregarding the diversity of experiences of learners.

- **The interpretive approach** acknowledges plurality and allows learners to find their own positions through debate about religious plurality. In this process learners’ own religious beliefs and values serve as sources in reflexivity where learners are encouraged to reflect on their own way of life and how they encounter difference.

- **Religious education in relation to multicultural (intercultural relationships)** advocates for the removal of religious education from the school curriculum because society is deeply secular. However, this position is rejected, and it is argued that it could be mutually beneficial to bring together religious diversity and specialisation in the field of religion and education for democratic citizenship, and intercultural and values-led education.
5 Religious Literacy in South Africa

During 2003, the democratic government started to implement the *National Policy on Religion and Education*, which provides a framework to work towards unity in diversity, specifically around religion as a core focus. Moreover, the policy aims to prevent discrimination on the grounds of religion and this focus was integrated as part of a school subject called Life Orientation. The government opted for a non-confessional multi-religious approach for presenting religious education in schools. This secular approach is the opposite of the confessional approach that was followed under the apartheid government, in which Christianity was viewed and nurtured as the dominant religion in society, including in schools (Nogueira-Godsey 2016, 229). This policy was well-intended as part of a bigger dream/aspiration of making a new start in South Africa with the constitution as the cornerstone of the newly founded democracy. Despite the good intentions of this policy, it has proven to have serious limitations in terms of implementation. The policy was intended to prevent religious discrimination, but several cases were reported where religious discrimination was experienced, be it wearing a nose ring with religious undertones or having dreadlocks that are associated with Rastafarians (Nogueira-Godsey 2016, 230–231).

The questions that came to the fore are, how should a secular approach to teaching religion be implemented, what does it entail, and are people trained for this? Does this assume that people can be objective when teaching religion? Meaning, can they distance themselves from their own religious experience, views and practices when presenting religious education? The response to these questions will depend largely on the understanding of religion. Moulin (2011, 313) engages with similar questions and argues that responses are often informed by different epistemological conceptions.

Nogueira-Godsey (2016, 231–232) has undertaken research in South Africa regarding teachers’ views on their preparedness and experiences as religious educators. Some important findings are that teachers have poor knowledge and skills of the subject in general, and specifically about religions other than their own and consequently a superficial understanding of the purpose of the subject. Related to this is the lack of engaged textbooks and relevant training on how to utilise appropriate approaches to teach from a multi-religious viewpoint. Moreover, they feel that there are unreasonable expectations of them to promote diversity and pluralism. Ntho-Ntho and Nieuwenhuis (2016, 239) describe these expectations very well, stating that it is expected of schools “to mediate between old and new systems, creating a social, intellectual, emotional, behavioral, organizational and structural environment that reflects a sense of acceptance, security and respect for people with different values, cultural backgrounds and religious traditions”.

Some of the feedback also confirms that teachers are not aware of their own subjectivity which causes them to rely on the presumably dominant religion in their specific contexts/cultures. Considering these findings, Nogueira-Godsey (2016, 232) con-
cludes: “The educational curricula in South Africa have not sufficiently addressed the subjectivities that have been created in these spheres nor have they acknowledged the assimilations between the Christian confessionalism and democratic values under the banner of a multi-religious approach.” Another important aspect of the implementation of the National Policy on Religion and Education is an expectation that principals implement the policy and fulfill a mediating role when conflicts arise because of different religious interests. This implies that principals implement the policy according to their interpretation of it, which could potentially cause conflict with parents and other stakeholders, which they are responsible for resolving (Ntho-Ntho and Nieuwenhuis 2016, 237).

Moulin (2011) has carried out similar and relevant research on religious students’ experience of religious education in the contemporary non-confessional religious education approach in the United Kingdom. Moulin (2011, 316 – 319) reports that one of the significant findings was that respondents believed their tradition was stereotyped by the way the lessons were presented. This stereotyping of their tradition is counterproductive in terms of the outcomes of religious education, which are to enhance knowledge and respect for (all) religious traditions, as lack of this leads to ignorance and disrespect. More examples were presented where Christian students reported for instance how communion was treated as an outdated practice. Likewise, being a believer was introduced as following a set of rules instead of as a relationship. Jewish students perceived that the complexity of their religious tradition, including the diversity of identities, was not considered in how it was portrayed. Interestingly, students also felt that due to the unscientific nature of religion, not everything can be explained and understood in a logical way, for example the miracles of Jesus. Others explained that during Religious Philosophy classes it is necessary to step back as a believer, as you don’t necessarily believe what is said about your religious tradition. These findings confirm the central role that teachers play in the experience of students during religious education. Teachers’ lack of knowledge of other religions together with their own religious beliefs interfere with how they present religious traditions other than theirs.

Research on religious education in two other African countries, namely Malawi and Ghana, correlate with the conclusions in the foregoing discussion. Matemba and Addai-Manunkum (2019, 155) are of the opinion that religious misrepresentation in a context of religious pluralism in sub-Saharan African is a topic that is not receiving the attention it should. They use the theory of selective tradition from the work of Michael Apple ([1993] 2000, [1979] 2004) as a framework to interpret the empirical data gathered to address the challenge of misrepresentation of religions. The theory of selective tradition postulates that education is not neutral but rather that it is embedded within the messy politics of culture and as such cannot always be regarded as serving the common good. Central to their arguments and findings are the ideas concerning choices on what to include, exclude and ‘misclude’ (included but misrepresented) (Matemba and Addai-Manunkum 2019, 156). In both Malawi and Ghana, Christianity, Islam, and African Indigenous Religions (AIR) are presented as part
of a multi-faith curriculum in religious education. Christianity is still the most common religion that seems to dominate the views of both educators and students, creating a fertile ground for discrimination towards and misrepresentation of other religions (Matemba and Addai-Manunkum 2019, 162).

Their most important findings are that although both educators and students are aware of religious diversity both in the classroom and in wider society, they still fail to recognise and respect religious others. Instead, they express feelings of superiority over other religions and therefore demonise religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Rastafarianism (Matemba and Addai-Manunkum 2019, 164). One of the main contributing factors to this misrepresentation and mistreatment of religious others is the limited scope of religions presented that creates a culture where other minor religions are judged and viewed as undesirable.

Kumar (2006, 274) points out that religious pluralism raises the question of representation, in other words which religions are included, which are excluded, and how those included are approached and presented. These are important questions, especially if religious literacy implies an appreciation of diversity that reaches beyond mere knowledge but, importantly, includes certain values and attitudes such as respect. Another important issue Kumar (2006, 282–283) raises pertaining to South Africa, is the interrelatedness of religion and race. Religious education in South Africa must deal with another layer of complexity as both religion and race on their own are complex, but when combined even more so. Although the South African constitution separates religious and racial discrimination, the ideal in terms of religious education is finding a balance between national unity and religious and personal laws.

6 Religion as the Subject of Religious Literacy

A multi-religious approach instead of a confessional approach seems to the obvious choice, not only in South Africa but also in other parts of the world, as became evident in the discussion above. In my view a central question is: What understanding of religion is worked with in religious education, as this relates directly to how religion is presented in the educational process. The previous paragraph alluded to the complexity of religion and race in South Africa. Should religion be viewed/approached as a phenomenon amongst many histories and daily lives of people? Kumar (2006, 280) notes that the method of phenomenology is attractive to universities in South Africa but also warns that this approach has serious limitations. Citing the work of Kay (1997) on Piaget (1972) about the phenomenological approach to religion, Kumar (2006, 288) summarises the critique of this approach as requiring a removal of prejudice and the self, upon entering the experience of the other.

Herder’s understanding of religion is of importance to make a constructive contribution, especially regarding religious literacy. This understanding of religion rests on an anti-dualist account of religion that emphasises the continuity between religion and reason. Furthermore, such a conceptualisation of the relationship of continuity between religion and reason is embedded in a certain conception of culture, including language and imagination. To see religion as not opposing reason opens the possibility for religion to act as an emancipatory agent, instead of being viewed as irrational and a source of violence. Herder’s work is in response to and as critique of the Enlightenment when a narrow and abstract understanding of religion developed. He views the basis of religion not as divine revelation but rather as human witnessing. Therefore, human experience, feelings, and language are important aspects of religion (Czobor-Lupp 2017, 242). Subsequently, the affective and the cognitive operate in tandem in this understanding of religion. Czobor-Lupp (2017, 253) reaches a helpful conclusion regarding this understanding of religion in relation to religious education when she states: “Individuals that thus developed their humanity, as an expression of both their freedom and their love, of both reason and faith, are aware that, when engaged with dialogue across cultures, a moment might arrive when the firm ground provided by their certainties and truths are shaken and start dissolving: when their reason reaches its limits.” This means that engaging with religion in an educational setting is not only a cognitive exercise, but the affective side makes provision for vulnerability instead of dogmatism and despotism. Being vulnerable implies having the ability to not only accept the unknown and uncertainty, but also being prepared to live with this. In this process faith and love may have the power to keep the dialogue ongoing. A question related to the understanding/view of religion is whether religion could have a secular appeal? Or is the better question not whether we should still work with these differentiations of secular and sacred?

Another important factor is the proliferation of new religious movements today, which makes being inclusive a daunting and almost impossible task. Although New Religious Movements (NRM) is not a new concept, the study thereof is (Introvigne 2016, 1). Despite a lack of agreement on the definition, it has become an accepted concept of which the broad definition is viewed as strengthening the research field instead of weakening it. The term is quite broad, including groups with both explicit and not overtly supernatural ideologies, while religion is defined by two approaches, namely groups that explicitly refer to themselves as religious and groups that look like other religious movements (Introvigne 2016, 13–14). A related term is Invented Religions (IR), which are primarily defined in terms of their characteristics, of which the most important one is their rejection of established religious movements and existing historical tradition and having a fictional basis (Cusack 2016, 291). Moreover, “[i]nvented religions fit newer models of religion that emphasize story, play, creativity, and the importance of meaning-making, both individual and collective” (Cusack 2016, 295). Whilst invented religions do not want to have any connection with established religion movements, new religious movements do. In the words
of Adogame (2016, 236), “The interface of religious culture of sub-Saharan Africa with globalization needs to be located against the backdrop of the interlocking relationship and mutual enhancement of the various old and new religions rather than in any unilateral perspective.” African New Religious Movements (ANRM) are therefore closely linked to the specific cultures from which they emerge, for example the African Initiated/Independent Churches (AIC’s) and the African Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches.

Lived Religion (LR) is the last description of religion I would like to focus on, as it is increasingly becoming the focus of practical theology. As the term “lived” suggests, lived religion refers to the everyday, practical, and popular. This kind of religion is informed by what people believe and how they express such beliefs in words or deeds (ways of living) in their everyday life. Therefore, people’s actions, especially choices and experiences, are the focus of lived religion, and not institutionalised forms of religion. This, however, does not mean that what people do and believe and practise in their everyday life has nothing to do with institutionalised religion. To the contrary, a realistic view of lived religion includes at least three interacting components, namely official religion, folk religion, and individual religion, which constitute what individuals believe (Bowman 2016, 254). These new movements emphasise the dynamic, contextual, and cultural nature of religion as continuously changing and transforming instead of being static. Moreover, it underscores the diversity of religion and within religions, something often underplayed or ignored in religious education.

A question I also found worth engaging with is, who should present religious education? As the previous discussion clearly indicated, the role of the educator is key to what is taught and how it is taught and experienced. In South Africa, religious education is part of a subject called Life Orientation; religion does not necessarily have a prominent focus and is presented by teachers who do not receive adequate training in this regard. Moreover, this subject is not taken into consideration to qualify for university admission, which could create the impression among learners that it is not important. Despite this, the issue of who is teaching religious education is central – should it be someone who receives professional training in religion education; should they belong to and be an active participant in a faith tradition? Any response to these questions could produce its own set of challenges. As already discussed, both teachers and learners misrepresent and even marginalise and demonise religions other than their own. Despite these challenges I suggest that we engage with them, especially considering the great expectation of religious literacy in South Africa.

A final aspect that needs to be acknowledged regarding religion and its complexity, is power as an integral part of religion. We tend to think about religion as purely positive and constructive. However, history has proven how destructive religion can be, particularly in South Africa, where apartheid was justified by religion. A fairly general description of religion is as a meaning-making process that is value laden, expressed through different practices signifying a religious identity. Religion as
power, however, is often neglected, not only in our description of religion, but also due to secularisation theories’ emphasis on the loss of the social power of religion. According to Woodhead (2011, 134) “Religion indicates where power lies (in forces of both good and evil), allows people to enter into relation with it by understanding it, revering it, worshipping it, appeasing it, drawing upon it, manipulating it, railing against it, mediating upon it, making offerings to it, and falling in love with it.” Woodhead (2011) argues for a broad understanding of religion – not only in research. But such a rich understanding of religion should also be presented as part of religious education to cultivate more balanced and informed religious literate citizens.

7 Conclusion

I would like to return to the definition of religious literacy cited earlier in the article that includes aspects like everyday living, understanding of religious language (symbols, practices etc.). Considering the elements in the definition, religious literary is more than knowledge and therefore more than being religiously educated. An attitude that is informed by certain values are some of the concrete characteristics of a religiously literate person. Moreover, such attitudes and values, such as respecting different religions could not be obtained through knowledge only, but rather through exposure to religious others. The expectation is that religious literacy will make a difference in everyday living, resulting in responsible citizenship. The aim of religious literacy therefore is not only focused on the individual but holds the broader community in mind and is about how we live together.

The relationships between religious literacy and religious education received ample attention. Challenges and limitations experienced in religious education directly impact on religious literacy. From both teachers’ and students’ responses it became evident that although religion is a much-needed subject with even greater expectations, especially in South Africa, it is certainly not without serious challenges. Respondents, students, and teachers gave valuable data concerning their experiences of religious education from their different vantage points that seem to suggest that you cannot distance yourself from your own religious views and experience while engaging in a multi-religious approach.

Objectivity in terms of religious stance from the educators and students involved in religious education therefore does not seem possible. Therefore, knowledge of, coupled with respect for, other religions is paramount, otherwise skewed/negative presentations ensue. The expectations of religious education to shape religious literate citizens is high, especially in South Africa, which could allude to a simplistic understanding of religion on the one hand, but at the same time points to the positive power religion holds. Therefore, this article argues for a broad and balanced view of religion as basis for religious education. No education is neutral; this includes religious education where choices become more complicated in a context of religious plurality. The politics of knowledge, the intrinsic power of religious positions, and
the experience of those involved in the education process are key elements that influence how religions are presented and perceived through religious education. It is not necessarily clear what approach(es) is / are used in South Africa to facilitate a multi-faith approach to religious education. Underlying a multi-faith approach is the idea of inclusiveness, but as discussed this is not easy for various reasons. As became clear from the research in South Africa, Malawi and Ghana, Christianity still seems to have a dominant position in these societies as well as in religious education.

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