

# Challenges and Opportunities of Teaching Religious Studies and Theology Through Open and Distance Learning: The Case of the Zimbabwe Open University

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**Abstract:** *The teaching of religious studies in the higher education sector is a dynamic subject area marked by both expansion and diversification. Its vigor and sumptuousness reflects its significance in the context of a world coming to terms with its cultural and religious diversity. However, the teaching of religious and theological courses in academic institutions has sometimes been marred with controversy especially in cases where some religions are treated as normative and prejudices towards some religions are exhibited. In conventional institutions of higher learning, such problems may be dealt with on the spot as students are always on site and interaction with academic staff is readily available. This paper seeks to find out the challenges and opportunities that exist in teaching Religious Studies and Theology through the open and distance learning mode with a special focus on the Zimbabwe Open University. The focus of the paper is to bring out the complexities as well as the significance of the interface between academic study and practicing religious communities. Data relevant for this paper was collected through interviews and general observations.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Religious Studies and Theology programme was introduced at the Zimbabwe Open University as a response to requests that were made by stakeholders, the majority of whom were church organizations and teachers. A needs assessment was then carried out in 2007 and conclusions were drawn that the programme was popular and would have stakeholder support. It was envisaged then that the programme would be launched in 2008 after modules had been produced. However, the economic meltdown in the country during this period slowed down the module production process. After the introduction of the multi-currency system in 2009, the process was to a large extent expedited as more and more writers became interested and committed themselves to writing the modules. In August 2010, the university joined a family of other universities offering a programme in Religious Studies or Theology, namely: University of Zimbabwe, Great Zimbabwe University, Africa University, Catholic University, Solusi University and Midlands State University. The first intake with a total number of 112 students was enrolled for the Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies and Theology. However, only 50 candidates managed to sit for the first semester examinations while the rest failed to raise the requisite fees.

What needs to be noted is that of all the universities offering Religious Studies or Theology or both, the Zimbabwe Open University is the only one doing so through the open and distance learning mode in the country, thus making it unique. This programme falls under the department of Religious Studies and Philosophy. What the department has done is to balance religious studies with theological courses. Religious studies comprises courses in biblical studies, world religions (among them are religions like Islam, African traditional religion, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Taoism, Buddhism etc) and courses that look at religion as

a phenomenon, that is, the sociology, psychology and philosophy of religion. Apart from these courses, there are courses which are concerned with religion and contemporary issues such as gender, women, HIV and AIDS. Such courses are intended to enlighten students on the role that religion plays in their day to day lives especially in issues that are currently affecting their societies. Theological courses in this programme include courses such as African Theology, Systematic Theology, Missiology and Homiletics among others. The incorporation of theological and religious studies courses was done in cognizance of the diverse religious groups in the country. Gill (2011) cited in [jstor.org/](http://jstor.org/) argues that:

the academic study of religion must be sensitive to multiculturalism: the awareness that there are many peoples, cultures, and religions, none of which has any exclusive claims to be made with regard to religion as an academic subject.

This paper discusses the challenges and opportunities of teaching religious studies and theology through the open and distance learning mode. Data for the study was gathered through interviews of three full-time lecturers in the Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy at the Zimbabwe Open University as well as five students undertaking the programme through the institution's Harare Region. Information gathered was then qualitatively analysed to produce results presented in this paper.

## **DEFINITIONS**

For one to understand the issue under discussion in this paper there is need to define the terms; religious studies and theology. According to the Wikipedia Online dictionary, religious studies is defined as the “academic field of multi-disciplinary, secular study of religious beliefs, behaviours and institutions. It describes, compares, interprets, and explains religion, emphasizing systematic, historically based, and cross-cultural perspectives. This academic study of religion started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when scholarly and historical analysis of the Bible had flourished. Sometimes religious studies, history of religions and comparative religions are used synonymously to refer to the academic non-theological study of religion (Flood, 1999). Any scholar of religion tries to understand a religion from outside not as a religious believer but by looking at religion as a historian, sociologist, anthropologist or psychologist. It is, however, important to note that in a broader sense religious studies include all approaches to religions including the theological approach. The general aims of religious studies are to:

- Tackle the deepest and most intractable problems of human existence
- Bring people into touch with some of the most brilliant and sensitive minds in human history.
- Examine the practical influence of religion in world affairs

What justifies the academic study of religion is that throughout history, religion has expressed the deepest questions human beings can ask, and it has taken a central place in the lives of virtually all civilizations and cultures ([studyreligion.org](http://studyreligion.org)). Religion can also be discovered at the centre of global issues and cultural conflict. According to ([colorado.edu](http://colorado.edu))

Religion is powerful and persistent, and it shows no signs of disappearing. It provokes heartfelt commitment, eloquent expression, forthright action, and intense debate.

Theology on the other hand is the study of God or of gods. The term is derived from ‘theos’ meaning God and ‘logia’ meaning utterances or sayings. In this case, theological studies is the systematic and rational study of religion and its influences and the nature of religious truths ([wikipedia.org](http://wikipedia.org)). A theologian studies religion from within a specific religious

community. In theology the authority of sacred writings and traditions is sought as a way to defend religious views. In other words, the point of departure for a theologian is scripture. In academic circles, there is debate as to whether theology refers to Christian theology leaving out other theologies such as Islamic, Buddhist etc. Such weaknesses are exhibited in Religious studies and theology departments (ZOU included) whose courses in theology are mainly christian centred.

### **Opportunities of Studying Religion through Open and Distance Learning**

One of the most notable opportunities provided by the introduction of the Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies and Theology at ZOU is that the study of religion was opened to a majority of students who would otherwise have failed to acquire this qualification. Most students enrolling for this programme are already employed in various religious institutions. The introduction of the programme at ZOU was welcomed by religious institutions especially church organizations. The reason being that their pastors could further their studies in religion without necessarily removing them from their stations.

One church leader from the Salvation Army said:

We are ecstatic about the introduction of the religious studies and theology through distance education because we know our pastors can learn while at the same time benefiting the church. We understand very well that ZOU's motto is 'Learn while you earn' but ever since the introduction of this programme in our pastoral circles we are saying 'learn while you serve'. So we don't even hesitate to sponsor our pastors who want to join the ZOU programme.

Thus, taking out the study of religion and theology from the traditional classroom opened avenues for many to realize their academic dreams. With ODL, Gilliat-Ray (2011) says "religion is being relocated out of 'traditional' spheres to new contexts where it then takes new shape and appears in different guises" (hacademy.ac.uk, 2011). As such open and distance learning is an important means of breaking down the classroom walls by enabling students to study in their own time and offering them access to a wide variety of resources (ibid).

The study of religion through the open and distance learning mode has been commended by students as giving them the hands-on experience. For example, they are able to apply knowledge as they acquire it rather than wait until they finish their course as is the case in a conventional set-up. One student who is a pastor in the United Methodist Church testified that he had always used the pulpit to castigate those infected by HIV and AIDS. However, after attending a tutorial on the phenomenology of religion course and taught how to apply the principles of phenomenology, he was able to empathize with both the affected and infected. Prior to this he had received anonymous messages from his parishioners asking him whether he had a heart for the infected people. After he had shown this empathy, the same parishioners thanked him for being considerate. As a result, the HIV infected people in his church are feeling free to disclose their status because they are now assured that the pastor will not condemn them. This is just one incident that proves that the Zimbabwe Open University through its Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies and Theology Programme has managed to engage religious institutions to be proactive in HIV and AIDS mitigation.

In a country like Zimbabwe where there is religious and cultural diversity, the teaching of religious studies and theology has never been more relevant than it is now. With ZOU present nationwide through its regional centres, it has become possible to influence religious

tolerance among citizens. As a female lecturer at ZOU's National Centre the author of this paper had the following experience:

One day she invited a Muslim Sheik to come to her office for an interview.

When the man came in the company of a friend, he was shocked that she did not extend her hand as she greeted them. As a matter of interest he asked her why and she told him that though a Christian, she knew that according to Muslim tradition it is forbidden for a woman to have a hand shake with a man who is not her husband and vice versa. She had to reiterate that in the academic study of religion we encourage respect and tolerance for other religions. You will not believe it but they were impressed and from then on her interview with them went on very well.

This in a way helped to dispel negative perceptions on the teaching of religion through the open and distance learning mode where some people think it is not very effective.

### **CHALLENGES**

Despite the opportunities presented, the teaching of religious studies and theology has its own challenges. Interviewees cited certain courses that require face-to-face interaction with students as presenting challenges. For example, courses that deal with the Hebrew and Greek languages as well as Homiletics, require a distinctive pedagogical approach especially with regard to correct pronunciation of words and perfect reading of the scriptures. Homiletics which teaches students the art of preaching requires that they do micro-preaching in class so that the tutor is able to evaluate the students' level of understanding in the course. In this case, the use of the hard copy module alone presents problems in that students are not able pronounce Hebrew and Greek words through reading only.

The Zimbabwe Open University has ten regional centres scattered around the country. In these centres, each programme is manned by a regional programme coordinator. It is the duty of the programme coordinator to look for qualified part-time tutors. However, of the ten regional centres, only Harare has a coordinator and coordinators of other programmes are baby-sitting religious studies and theology. The implication is that students with queries may not get enough assistance since those baby-sitting are not knowledgeable in the subject. The Mashonaland East Regional Director said: "It is difficult even to market the programme because there is no one to answer questions that pertain to the programme when we go as a region for our marketing tours."

This therefore implies that there are some students who fail to enroll for the programme due to lack of sufficient information.

In addition, interviewees noted with concern the non-availability of part-time tutors in the various expertise areas. This has resulted in academic staff at the national centre going to some district centres to conduct tutorials. With only three members at the national centre who are supposed to manage the programme, it becomes difficult for them to cover all the regions. This problem is compounded by the fact that at times part-time tutors who might have promised to conduct tutorials may not turn up. In such cases, the programme Coordinator ends up taking all the courses even in areas he/she is not an expert. Given the scenario, where only one region has a programme coordinator, it therefore follows that regions where part-time tutors fail to turn up fail to salvage the situation and students end up losing the much valued tutorial time.

Some of these challenges have to do with language courses such as Hebrew and Greek which requires that students have face-face lectures with experts in the area so that they are taught correct pronunciations and translations.

The other challenge raised by interviewees is the lack of standardization when marking assignments. Assignments are marked in the regions by different markers. It is unfortunate that discrepancies are noted when full-time lecturers are marking end of term examinations. At times students from one region perform very well while those from another region perform very poorly. This raises questions as to whether all the students nationwide are being taught religious concepts correctly. For example, an analysis of the May-June 2011 examination for the second group of students showed that the majority of them failed to distinguish between studying religion and professing religion. Most of their answers especially in courses such as African Theology and Christian History and Thought turned out to be very dogmatic instead of being academic. This according to one of the interviewees is a result of students mistaking religious studies with Bible study which they do in their churches. This mistake is found even within communities. Most communities underrate the programme with the common belief that it is uncomplicated and also due to the false illusion that the programme's objectives is to perpetuate Christian values. As such the programme has failed to attract students with other religious backgrounds apart from Christianity.

Lecturers themselves face challenges as they try to develop themselves academically. Programme leaders and chairpersons; also play the role as managers. They are managers of programmes and most of the time they will be doing administrative work. No research time is set aside for them. One lecturer in the department of Religious Studies and Philosophy laments the lack of time to visit the library to do research and write modules. Due to this administrative portfolio, members in the Department feel that it is important for the university to establish departmental libraries at National Centres.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In this paper it has been noted that teaching religious studies and theology through open and distance learning has its own advantages and disadvantages. The advantages highlighted are that the Zimbabwe Open University is able to reach out to a larger student population at any one time through its regional centres, thus fostering religious tolerance in a nation with diverse religious groups. It has also been shown that leaders of religious institutions who would have failed to enter into conventional universities due to work commitments have the opportunity to obtain their degree through the Zimbabwe Open University.

Students have also commended the programme for making them relevant in their various communities as they participate in solving challenges prevalent in these communities; a case in point is the HIV and AIDS pandemic. The paper has highlighted the challenges of teaching religious studies and theology through open and distance learning. Some courses that have a practical element also pose problems in distance education. Problems of standardization in teaching and marking students' work have also been underscored.

The paper therefore recommends that the institution make a deliberate effort to centralize the marking of assignments so that regions with problems can be noted before students write examinations. It is also important to have programme coordinators for the religious studies and theology programme in all regions for effective monitoring and evaluation of the programme. This would go a long way in salvaging situations where part-time tutors do not attend tutorials. It is important to capacitate national centre staff members in areas of research and publication by establishing a departmental library.

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