

Secular Education for Muslim Students at Government-Assisted Christian Schools: Joining the Debate on Students' Rights at Religious Schools in Ghana

David Owusu-Ansah¹

Abstract

*Should Muslim students attending Christian schools be required to attend Church services and, if so, does such an expectation infringe on the constitutional right to religious freedom? During the 10 years of research in the process of compiling field interviews for the book, *Islamic Learning, the State and the Challenges of Education in Ghana* (2013), our research team recorded several statements about a historically perceived Christian-based education environment as impeding the spread of secular learning among Muslims. The re-articulation of this same concern in Ghanaian newspapers during the first quarter of 2015 and the intensity with which the topic was debated call for a revisit of the conversation on secular and liberal education in a pluralistic society such as Ghana. The objective here is to frame the conversation in the context of access to education and the constitutional right of citizens to free basic education.*

Key words & phrases: Islam, secular education, Ghana's 1992 Constitution, religious education, and education about religion.

Introduction

On 1 April 2015, The Ghana New Agency reported on the National Peace Council and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) two-day forum on religious tolerance at which such leading national personalities as the chair of the Council of State, representatives of the major Christian churches in the country as well as the National Chief Imam were in attendance. The Deputy Director of the Ghana Education Service (GES) addressed the forum on behalf of the Minister of Education in a speech that called for religious tolerance at the country's educational institutions.² In his 26 February 2015 State of the Nation address to Parliament, President John Mahama reminded his listeners that Ghana remained a secular state and that Chapter 5: 21:1 of the 1992 Constitution bestowed on citizens freedoms of religious affiliation and practices. The barrage of official statements about religious freedoms and the several that were presented as newspaper articles and opinions were precipitated by the series of strike actions carried by Muslim students in the Western Region of the country to protest what they described as the practice of heads of publicly-funded and government-assisted educational institutions, in a *de facto* manner, made it obligatory for Muslim students to attend Church services, perform Christian prayers, and even condemned the wearing of the *hijab* or head scarf by female Muslim students as a dress code violation.

In fact, earlier in January, a similar but brief tension was raised when officials of the West African Examination Council (WAEC) announced that it would not accept as valid required identification the photos in which students wore "spectacles or sunglasses."

¹ James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA.

² Ghana News Agency, "Forum on Religious Tolerance Starts off in Accra," 1 April 2015. *The Daily Graphic* reproduced the forum communiqué in its 14 April 2015 issue. For information about the Peace Council forum and other comments, see *Ghanaweb*, "Peace Council Moves to Resolve 'Discrimination' against Muslim Students," 20 February 2015; "Peace Council Initiates Dialogue to Address Religious Concerns," 12 March 2015; 31 March 2015; "Peace Council Holds Forum on Religious Tolerance," 31 March 2015. The engagement of the National Peace Council (NPC) in redressing the conflict is consistent with its mission. Established by the 818 Act of Parliament in 2011, the 11-member Council were selected from stakeholders that represent Trade Unions, Legal Practitioners, Youth Organizations, Higher Education, Traditional Leaders (chiefs), Christian Churches, and leaders of the nation's Islamic religious sects. The Council has as its charge to work with national, international, and civil societies to promote and apply cooperative problem solving strategies to resolve conflicts.

For female Muslims who wore the *hijab*, the requirement was that the identification picture must capture exposed “top hair, the eye, nose, the mouth and chin.”³Such clear instructions regarding what to look for in the photo identification of students notwithstanding, *Joy News* reported on 31 March that, indeed, some female Muslim students wearing the *hijab* to attend the Basic Education Certification Examination (BECE) at a Madina Examination Center were made to remove the head scarf prior to being allowed to take the test. These cases would be pointed to as evidence of continued harassment of Muslim students.

The 2015 Peace Council forum was called to redress religious concerns of the protestors who argued that the imposed requirements on Muslim students was evidence of disrespect for Islam and Muslim religious freedoms, it subjugated and perceived Muslims as second-class citizens just on the basis of ethnicity and/or religious affinity, and abridged Muslim human rights. The secular nature of the State in Ghana is articulated in Chapters of the Constitution where the roles of the nation are defined as under common law (informed by the doctrine of equity) but practically giving credence to customary practices that do not infringe harmfully on individuals and their communities. On issues relevant to individual rights and education, Articles of the Constitution, as expressed under Chapter 5: Fundamental Human Rights and Freedoms, and Chapter 6: The Directives Principles of State Policy, inform the discussion effectively. Rights of citizens to free speech and expression, of thought, conscience, belief, religion and academic freedom, as well as to manifest such religious practices and to stage public protests are all stated in Article 21.1 of the 1992 Constitution. In Article 25.1, the right to equal educational opportunities and facilities “with a view of achieving the full realization of that right” was also stated.

In fact, further in the Articles on Human Rights, the obligation of the state (on the basis of its capacity) to provide and make available compulsory and free education to all was indicated. To this end, Chapter 6, Article 35.4 called on the state to “cultivate among all Ghanaians respect for the fundamental human rights and freedoms and the dignity of the human person. In Article 35.5, the state is further instructed to actively “promote the integration of peoples of Ghana and to prohibit discrimination and prejudice on the grounds of place of origin, circumstances of birth, ethnic origin, gender or religion, creed or other beliefs.” Where such responsibilities of the state are not protected as charged under the Constitution and where Parliament has not passed laws to protect such rights against discriminated persons, Chapter 5, Article 17:1 calls on the Courts as avenue to seek redress for “such social, economic or educational imbalance in Ghanaian society.” Thus, it was not out of place for some to suggest that the claim of discrimination against Muslim students attending public-supported church-affiliated schools be taken to the nation’s highest court for redress. In fact, similar cases in the Nigeria states of Lagos and Osun regarding banning the wearing of *hijab* by female Muslim students at school premises were reversed in Appeal’s Courts’ decisions when student-plaintiffs challenged the injunction.⁴

In Ghana, expectation that students attending Christian Mission School would also receive the necessary skills to operate within the modern secular environment is well documented. Starting in 1882 when the British colonial administration became active in the supervision of education via the establishment of school boards, the state provided assistance to those that met acceptable curriculum contents and standards of school management. These Christian places of learning became the bearers of the modern mode of life and, incidentally, Muslim children who attended the Church-affiliated schools were expected to participate fully in program activities that included saying prayers and singing hymns, and attending church services. Some were even given Christian first names.⁵ Though full government funding for second circle education in the country only began when Governor Gordon Guggisberg made public funding available for the establishment of Achimota School in the 1920s, it would not be until the 1950s that state investment in educating the majority of children would be initiated.⁶ In 1951, when the All African Legislative Assembly presented its Development Plan for Education that would later guide the GoldCoast government’s Accelerated Education policy that commenced the following year, the national government intended in Article 6 of the draft policy on education to suspend public funding to mission schools.

³ *Daily Graphic*, “WAEC, Muslims un Standoff over Veil,” 22 January 2015.

⁴ Eugenia Tenkorang, “Muslim Leaders Advised to Seek ‘Religious Freedom’ in Court,” *citifmonline.com*, 20 February 2015; fora reported court case in Nigeria, see: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-36865257>.

⁵ David Owusu-Ansah, *Conversations with Dr. Mark Sey*. See also Louis Brenner, *Controlling Knowledge: Religion, Power and Schooling in a West African Muslim Society*, London: C. Hurst & Co., 2000; also Louis Brenner, “Transformation of Muslim Schooling in Mali: The Madrasa as an Institution of Social and Religious Mediation,” in Robert Hefner and Muhammad Qasim Zaman, eds., *Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007, pp. 199-223.

⁶ Ronald Wraith, *Guggisberg*, London: Oxford University Press, 1967.

Archbishop William T. Porter of the Catholic Archdiocese of Cape Coast made a passionate argument in the *Gold Coast Observer* against the proposed initiatives.⁷ The Church understood the government's intention to "freeze further assistance to religious institutions for the establishment of denominational schools" to be equal to shutting out churches from being dominant future partners in relation to the state for the provision of education.

Archbishop Porter was vehement in his argument that the government policy, if implemented without revision, would not only undermine the historic modernizing influence of the Church through the provision of Western education, but most importantly, he saw the policy to be unjust. To this end, he wrote: "We fully realize that Government will be faced with real difficulties in drafting legislation suitable for the reconciliation of the just demands of parents with different religious convictions. But we contend that these difficulties are no justification for brushing aside elementary parental rights. Examples of a just solution are not lacking and Catholics are fully prepared to make a positive contribution to a just solution in the Gold Coast."⁸ He went on further to remind the All-African Assembly that:

[The provision of] education is a public service of a unique character, because it is concerned with the highly delicate task of forming human beings into responsible members of the community. The children to be educated belong to the family, not to the State. It is for the parents to decide what kind of education their children are to receive... The Church exists to supplement the deficiencies of the individual and the family. The function of the State therefore, is essentially to protect the rights of the family and to promote its interests by *a just and equitable distribution of resources placed at its disposal for that very purpose* (emphasis mine).⁹

His Grace Archbishop Porter further argued that the centralization of financial resources for mass education to train teacher for all schools and for the development of national curriculum was "tantamount to educating human beings in a mass-production process, as if assembly-line methods would necessarily and inevitably produce intelligent and responsible citizens." In this statement, the Rev Porter supported the right of parents "who give a religious interpretation to their life to send their children to religious schools" where they will also receive secular subject training; but of course, with continued state financial support.¹⁰ It is noteworthy to indicate that members of the All African Assembly, including its leader Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, received basic education at mission-affiliated schools. Thus, though Nkrumah received his second circle teacher training at the public funded Achimota College, he attended Catholic school for his basic learning at Half-Assini. He also taught as such a school prior to his formal teacher training at Achimota.¹¹ The decision of the Assembly initially to direct all national funding for education to state-supported schools must have been influenced by thoughts that the hitherto existing system that was viewed to be closely allied with the colonial system reached few students and therefore such impact was not sufficient for the total development and transformation of the country. In other words, through the provision of an inclusive mass education demonstrated by the eagerness to create a Ghana that was religiously plural.

The secular state intended to provide an education for students whose core values would be directed toward the acquisition of skills that were national development centered.¹² Archbishop Porter's impassioned defense for continued state funding for church-affiliated schools is notable. In the above, even in the 1950s, the idea of school choice was presented, and of course the new nation invested heavily in public schools at the same time as it modified Article 6 of the Development Plan for Education to continue government funding assistance to denominational schools. Thus, Churches continued to establish schools to provide Christian education, and with state support modified their curriculum to meet standard board examinations and opened up those schools to more non-denominational students. Yet they retain their denominational constituency, and many have built enviable academic reputations that are attractive to other denominations and faiths. The results are the interesting tensions relating to maintaining the tradition of Christian education, attaining accreditation and achieving excellent academic reputation of schools but continue to need state funding.

⁷ His Grace Archbishop W. T. Porter, "Catholics and the Revised Education Plan: An Authoritative Statement," *The Gold Coast Observer*, 7 September 1951, No. 18, Vol. XII.

⁸ His Grace Archbishop Porter, His Grace Archbishop Porter, *The Gold Coast Observer*, 7 September 1951, No. 18, Vol. XII,

⁹ His Grace Archbishop Porter, *The Gold Coast Observer*, 7 September 1951, No. 18, Vol. XII, see the subsection to the *Observer* essay titled "Family, Church, and State."

¹⁰ "Family Church, and State."

¹¹ C. E. Dankoh, *Nkrumah, Busia and Ghana*, n.d. (published in Ghana, c 1973).

¹² Marika Sherwood, *Kwame Nkrumah: The Years Abroad, 1935-1947*, Legon-Ghana: Freedom Publications, 1996; H. O. A. McWilliam and M. A. Kwamena-Poh, *The Development of Education in Ghana*, London: Longman, 1975; David Owusu-Ansah, "History of Education in Ghana," *Encyclopedia of Education*, Gale Group, Fall, 2001).

Interestingly, all subsequent reviews of education in the history of Ghana—the 1961 Education Act that focused on achieving free and universal primary education, the Dzobo Commission Report on Education of 1974 that influenced the PNDC 1987 Education Reforms as well as the 2002 NPP Education Reform Review that addressed the need to restructure the education system to make it more meaningful—concentrated only on improving the content of secular education for national development. With the introduction of the Moral Education content, which embraced instructions about the pluralistic religious traditions of the country, there was the appearance that concerns regarding education about Ghanaian religious traditions in public schools have been addressed satisfactorily.¹³ What was not resolved effectively, because it was never ever on the table for discussion, was the view that the content of confessional prayers at religious-affiliated public-assisted schools might infringe on certain freedoms and expressions guaranteed under the Constitution. In the view of the Muslim protesters, the claim of being discriminated against at government-assisted Christian schools was affirmed when church leaders such as the Methodist Bishop of the Obuasi Diocese, Rt. Rev. Stephen Richard Bosomtwe-Ayensu, among others, argued that calls from the Head of State, The Minister of Education, and the Ghana Education Service, to not impinge on students' religious freedoms would only promote "insubordination and indiscipline in various schools which would invariably make them unmanageable and render heads of institutions timid."¹⁴

The Catholic Bishops' Conference saw the strict enforcement of the presidential directives as infringing on the rights of denominational schools. Heads of Catholic-affiliated schools were therefore instructed to "remain resolute and continue with all religious practices and training associated with their faith."¹⁵ The initial adoption of what appeared to be an intractable commitment to enforcing Christian religious obligations on all pupils attending Church-affiliated government-assisted schools raises a number of critical questions. For example, in the context of freedom of religious rights for all pupils attending government-assisted schools, what position would church leaders, such as Archbishop Porter, argue for the wording of the amended Article 6 of the 1951 Education Development Plan? Furthermore, what were and continue to be the state's expectations of denominational schools in the provision of education to all children of school-going age when it defines them as stakeholders? In other words, what is the role of the secular state in the provision of liberal education for students in a pluralistic society with regard to the religious affiliations of non-denominational students who attend state-assisted religious schools?

The National Peace Council's March 2015 Decision: A Discussion

Research on the history of secular education at Islamic schools under the Islamic Education Unit (IEU) system of the Ghana Education Service is in its infancy. The more comprehensive research of Owusu-Ansah, Iddrisu Abdullai and Mark Seyon the contributions of and the challenge to the provision of secular education at IEU schools was the result of 10 years of field interviews, yet there is more that is missed.¹⁶ There are issues raised in the research to which others scholars must contribute in order to bring greater depth to the analysis.¹⁷ For example, while the public attention is often drawn to the limitations of street corner Islamic recitation schools or *makaranta*, the value of such religious programs to Muslims in the context of a national accelerated secular education plan of the early 1950s is still not appreciated by non-Muslims. Parental fears about the content and intentions of Christian-biased secular education that characterized the colonial era and is perceived to continue into the modern national educational system elicited varying responses to secular education.

¹³ Ministry of Education, Science and Sports, "Teaching Syllabus for religious and Moral Education (Primary School 1-6), September 2008; K. K. Anti, B. A. Ntneh, and M. Sey, *Ghana Religious and Moral Education, Junior Secondary: Student's Book 2*, Macmillan Education, 2002; Anti, Ntneh, and Sey, *Ghana Primary Religious and Moral Education: Pupil's Book 2*, Macmillan Education, 2005; George J. Sefa Dei, "The Challenge of Inclusive Schooling in Africa: A Ghanaian Case Study," *Comparative Education*, 41, 3 (August 2005), pp. 267-289.

¹⁴ *Daily Guide*, "Methodist Bishop Berates Mahama," 5 March 2015; See also Association of Catholic Teachers' Press Statement on Religious Freedom in Schools, presented as a Column, *Ghanaweb*, 27 March 2015.

¹⁵ Inusah, Mohammed, "The Arrogance of the Catholic Bishops and the Freedom of Muslim Students," *Ghanaweb*, 11 March 2015.

¹⁶ Owusu-Ansah, David, Abdulai Iddrisu, and Mark Sey, *Islamic Learning, the State and the Challenge of Education in Ghana*, Trenton, NJ, Africa World Press, 2013.

¹⁷ For a discussion of the significance of the work on the IEU system and identification of issues needing further research, see Steven J. Salm, "Review of 'Islamic Learning, the State and the Challenges of Education in Ghana'," *Africa Today*, 60, 3 (2014), pp. 143-149.

Some Muslim families embraced the opportunity for formal Western education at Christian mission schools while making the moral and religious upbringing of their wards a parental responsibility;¹⁸ others simply withdrew from the system and focused on the provision of Islamic religious education at Mosques and/or under the tutelage of private teachers. Specifically, the establishment of Arabic-English Muslim schools in Ghana and its evolution to become part of the current Islamic Education Unit program of the GES tells the story of religiosity and entrepreneurship that characterized the variety of Muslim reactions in providing alternative space for Muslim children to acquire levels of secular learning. But while the number of IEU schools continues to increase, the majority of such institutions as recorded in our 2013 publication continue to be privately owned and much confined to the K-Junior High School (JHS) level. This means that the greatest majority of the over 200,000 students within the IEU system would have to seek admission to the many publicly-funded (Local Authority) or the government-assisted Church-affiliated Senior High Schools (SHS) in order to obtain post-JHS secular training.

In the environment of Western culture-influenced public schools or the church-affiliated programs at which Muslim students would almost inevitably attend for post-secondary education, if they were to receive advanced secular education at all, Director of the Ansari al-Din Islamic School at Sukura (Accra), Al-Hajj Yahya al-Amin, saw a need for the establishment of comparable Islamic programs, at least from the K-6 schools.¹⁹ He was confident in the quality of the Islamic foundational learning provided by teachers employed at the Ansari al-Din school at Sukura to claim thus: "After the students completed this elementary primary program, they will be able to join the public education system at the various government middle schools. From this point on, the Islamic learning that has been impacted through the instruction of Arabic teachers, imams, and sheikhs can become an after-school program and we are sure that our children will retain their Islam."²⁰

For al-Hajj al-Amin and those proprietors who saw value in secular education but could not meet the financial and logistical requirements to fully address the rising demand for secular education at IEU schools, the reality that Muslim students would be imposed upon when they attended church-affiliated schools was understood as unavoidable. Such also was the view of The Most Rev. Dr. Justice Ofei Akrofi as expressed in a 19 July 2005 interview. For the Emeritus Anglican Diocesan Bishop of Accra and Archbishop of the Province of West Africa, rights and authority of denominational schools over students attending church-affiliated programs are justified by the investments and dedication of the various parishes in the schools.

"The government never built any school and gave it to a church to run.[It was rather the opposite where the denominations established their schools and the government sought partnership for the purpose of providing education to children].It was the responsibility of the parish to maintain the schools. The local church encourages parents to contribute financially or even volunteer for the rehabilitation of school facilities and this is what makes the difference between the quality of the infrastructure of church schools and those that depend on other forms of support", Rev. Akrofi observed.²¹ If the observations and justifications above were to be embraced, then, one would have to ask: why the protest by Muslim students and why the tension that the National Peace Council was called upon to redress? More importantly, why now? A contributing online columnist to *Ghanaweb* interpreted the Muslim students' protest as a sign that "Islamic fundamentalism [was] creeping into Ghana."²² Similar to the many comments on essays relating to Islam and Muslims that appeared at this online site, the negative observations almost immediately linked Ghanaian Muslims' demands and actions to the influence of political Islam and fundamentalism of the Arab world. However, a review of the literature does not justify these cursory associations because such conclusions lack an understanding and appreciation of the nature of the conversation about Islamic religion and its practice within the Ghanaian Muslim community.

Contributions to the growing research on the practice of Islam in Ghana include such works by scholars such as Ousman Kobo (2012), Abdulai Iddrisu (2013), and Yunus (2013).²³ Central to the conversation is the debate about the Muslim identity within the modern secular state.

¹⁸ *Islamic Learning*, pp. 88-89.

¹⁹ David Owusu-Ansah and Mark Sey, Conversation with Imam Yahya al-Amin, Sukura, 14 March 2002.

²⁰ Conversation with Imam Yahya al-Amin, 14 March 2002

²¹ *Islamic Learning*, pp. 124-126, esp. p. 126.

²² Kofi Ata (Cambridge, UK) to *Ghanaweb*, 7 March 2015.

²³ Ousman Kobo, *Unveiling Modernity in 20th Century West African Islamic Reforms*, Leiden: Brill: 2012; Abdulai Iddrisu, *Contested Islam in Africa: Homegrown Wahhabism and Muslim Identity in Northern Ghana, 1920-2010*, Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, (2013); Yunus Dumbé, *Islamic Revivalism in Contemporary Ghana*, Stockholm: Sodertorn University Press, (2013).

But as also observed by Terje Ostebo (2015) and again by Ousman Kobo (2015),²⁴ the historical track of the debate is one that has vacillated between perceived radicalism and conservatism but in the case of Ghana had settled on orthodoxy.²⁵ In fact, a Pew Charitable Trust and the John Templeton Foundation funded research that surveyed how sub-Saharan Africans view the role of religion in their lives and societies provides further evidence that supports high incidence of religious tolerance among Ghanaian Muslims.²⁶ For example, the survey showed that while over 61 percent of Ghanaian Christians viewed Muslims as violent and thus only 41 percent of Christians held positive views of Muslims, the reverse was the case of the Muslims of Ghana that over 75 percent of whom viewed Christians positively.

Yet, Ghanaian Muslims (about 28 percent) expressed awareness of Christian hostility toward Islam.²⁷ Though local, such discourse is often informed by the larger global context of religious understanding, tensions and developments. To be sure, in this same manner, churches in Ghana have been prone to influences from overseas.

On the basis of the evidence, it would be prejudicial for any columnist to claim that “because Ghana is a Christian nation,” the attempts of the government and the Ghana Education Service (GES) to redress the tensions generated “by Muslim agitation risked pandering to Islamic fundamentalism and thus would open the door to many more undemocratic requests that could create further confusion.”²⁸

Education about Religion and Religious Education at Secular Schools: A Debate

The challenge of redressing the debate about religious education in secular societies is one that confronts not only Ghana but all pluralistic secular states where the state contributes to the funding of public schools. In a recent publication titled *Islamic Religious Education in Secular Societies*,²⁹ co-editors Ednan Aslan and Margaret Rausch tackled several of the questions that are relevant to the conversation pertaining to Ghana. In this discourse on secularism, Aslan’s chapter to the project was informative.³⁰ First, the author examined the problematic nature of the two Arabic nouns that are commonly used and have historically defined the secular and therefore Muslim reactions to secularism. The nouns *‘alim* (the world and therefore *‘almaniya*—making worldly or secularized) and *‘ilm* (knowledge, but is used here to be equal to the rise of scientific knowledge, hence *‘ilmaniya* or scientification) are important characteristics of the West. For political Islamists, the rise of the scientific revolution in the West is the cause of the decline of religion. Thus the West is perceived as anti-religion or atheistic, separating religion and state and thus contributing to the decline of morality in the Muslim world through its colonial impact.³¹ The discourse within Muslim communities about secularization began with the modernization of those societies, especially in the nineteenth century.³² Contributors to this dialogue on the relationship between the West and the weakening of morality attributed the root causes not only to the efficiency of Western technology but more so to the impact of Western thoughts and the education model and schooling through which secular ideas were spread to the Muslim world.³³

²⁴ Ousman Kobo, “Shifting Trajectories of Salafi/Ahl-Sunna Reformism in Ghana,” *Islamic Africa*, 6, 1-2(2015), pp. 60-81; Terje Ostebo, “African Salafism: Religious Purity and the Politicization of Purity,” *Islamic Africa*, 6, 1-2(2015), pp. 1-29. For comparison to the case of Ghana, see Alex Thurston, “Nigeria’s Mainstream Salafis Between Boko Haram and the State,” *Islamic Africa*, 6, 1-2 (2015), pp. 109-134.

²⁵ For comparison to the case of Ghana, see Alex Thurston, “Nigeria’s Mainstream Salafis Between Boko Haram and the State,” *Islamic Africa*, 6, 1-2 (2015), pp. 109-134.

²⁶ Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa,” www.pewforum.org, April 2010.

²⁷ “Tolerance and Tension,” pp. 3-18 and pp. 37-43.

²⁸ Kofi Ata, “Is Islamic Fundamentalism Creeping into Ghana?” Column dated 7 March reproduced at *Ghanaweb*, 9 March 2015. Compare to Mohammed Inusah, “The Arrogance of the Catholic Bishops and the Freedom of Muslim Students,” *Ghanaweb*, 11 March 2015.

²⁹ Ednan Aslan and Margaret Rausch, *Islamic Education in Secular Societies* (Frankfurt, Peter Lang, 2013).

³⁰ Ednan Aslan, “Approaches to the Concept of Secularism from the Perspective of Muslims,” *Islamic Religious Education in Secular Societies*, pp. 29-69.

³¹ *Islamic Religious Education*, p. 31.

³² See Mansoor Moaddel, *Islamic Modernism, Nationalism, and Fundamentalism: Episode and Discourse*, University of Chicago Press, 2005.

³³ For example, see Louis Brenner, *Controlling Knowledge: Religion, Power, and Schooling in a West African Muslim Society*, Indiana University Press, 2001.

The often-cited sources in support of this argument allude to positions expressed by Jamal al-Afghani (d. 1897), Muhammad Abduh (d.1905), Rashid Rida (d. 1935) and Hassan al-Banna (d. 1949).³⁴It is important, even if briefly, to note that Islam is not new to the acquisition of scientific knowledge. In fact, the Islamic world flourished in the medieval era when it provided space for scientific research and discourse. But, in the past four centuries, the West emerged to lead in the acquisition of knowledge while the Muslim world continued to be embroiled in debates about the appropriate place of religion in the interpretation for scientific information.³⁵Aslan notes that because of this prolonged debate, the Muslim world has yet to find successful alternatives that guarantee pedagogical outcomes in science, technology, and critical thinking that can replace the Western education system.³⁶

Using the condition of Muslims in Austria as an illustration of the challenge, Aslan observed that even though the state recognized Muslims as one of the nation's thirteen religious communities and thus allowed and funded some form of religious education at state schools, Muslim parents still expressed concern that secular education impacted children negatively. From a brochure of a private Islamic School in Vienna, Aslan illustrated the Muslim parental point of view: "Unfortunately, many [Muslim children] subsequently (after kindergarten) attend public schools, which are devoid of an Islamic environment and education due to the lack of Islamic alternative. Particularly large and dangerous is the gap for 10-to-15 year-old children, since no demanding [in terms of quality] Islamic primary or secondary school is available in Vienna."

The brochure continued to describe public schools negatively: "State schools with non-Muslim monolingual teachers are slaughterhouses for the Muslim children. Non-Muslim teachers are not role models for the Muslim children during their developmental periods. Muslim children have been leaving state schools for the last 50 years with identity crisis. They do not know where they belong. They find themselves cut off from their cultural heritage and are unable to enjoy the beauty of their literature and poetry."³⁷But, despite the above concern, it is also known that the secular state of Austria does not bar education about religions at its publicly funded schools and does not impose any particular religion. This is similar to the United Kingdom, where education about religions is obligatory (but, with a provision for students to opt out). In the U.K., no public school allows the imposition of religious education, as this is the prerogative of parents and religious institutions. France has a stricter law (1905) that stipulates absolute religious neutrality of the state. In recent years, the ban on *hijab*-wearing at public schools has generated much controversy and debate about the strict enforcement of the "principle of secularism" in France.³⁸

Author Eileen M. Daily, in a contribution to the Ednan Aslan and Margaret Rauch co-edited *Islamic Religious Education in Secular Societies*, discusses the broader implications of the American constitutional separation of religion and state.³⁹ It is well known that the First Amendment of the United States Constitution prohibits Congress from making any law with respect to establishing any religion, and, for that matter, infringing on the rights of citizens to the free exercise of religion. The author further linked her discussion of the free exercise and free speech clauses to the Fourteenth Amendment as a way to emphasizing citizens' rights. Thus, though individuals as citizens of the United States are able to speak freely and exercise their religious rights, constitutionally the state prohibits organized prayers and religious service in public spaces such as schools and courthouses.⁴⁰Equally, private institutions receiving no government funding for their schools have the right to use this same law as defense against government incursion into religious matters.

³⁴ Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism, and Political Change in Egypt*, Columbia University Press, 2002.

³⁵ Eshan Masood, *Science and Islam, A History*, London: Icon Books, 2010; Ahmad Dallal, *Islam, Science and the Challenge of History*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010; Jon McGinnis and David C. Reisman, *Interpreting Avicenna: Science and Philosophy in Medieval Islam*, Boston: Brill 2004; Jim Al-Khalili, *The House of Wisdom: How Arabic Sciences Saved Ancient Knowledge and Gave Us the Renaissance*, New York, Penguin Press, 2011.

³⁶ *Islamic Religious Education*, pp. 54-61.

³⁷ *Islamic Religious Education*, pp. 60-61. For a comparative discussion of educating children to acquire the appropriate Islamic identity, see Zachary Valentine Wright, *Living Knowledge in West African Islam: The Sufi Community f Ibrahim Niasse*, Leiden: Brill, 2015; Rudolph T. Ware III, *The walking Qur'an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014.

³⁸ Jenny Berglund, "Publicly Funded Islamic Education in Europe and the United States," The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World Analysis Paper, Number 21, April 2013.

³⁹ "Catholic Religious Education in the Secular Society of the United States," in Ednan Aslan and Margaret Rauch co-edited *Islamic Religious Education in Secular Societies*, pp. 83-94.

⁴⁰ *Islamic Religious Education*, p. 84-87.

What is most interesting about this chapter and therefore relevant to the general conversation on Ghana, was the view expressed about the challenges faced by religious schools, in this case of the Catholic non-seminary schools, to adequately combine secular liberal education curriculum with the full contents of religious instructions by which Catholic lives might be properly guided in the secular society.⁴¹ Among the challenges was the lack of adequate religious education training for Catholic teachers. Yet even if such preparation were possible to train enough religious education teachers, there was still the reality that time allotted for religious education must be limited in order to make room for the many non-religious subjects, skills, and knowledge that students require to survive the modern secular society.

In the case of Ghana, as noted in the 1951 Archbishop William Porter's criticism of Article 6 of the Development Plan on Education, the government continues to support church-affiliated schools which non-denominational students attend for secular learning. The National Peace Council observed this reality in its 2015 communiqué, but it did not resolve the issues underpinning the students' protest. In the interim, it made a number of recommendations that were intended to underpin future dialogue. For example, while enjoining students to practice their religious beliefs without fear of discrimination or victimization, the Council recommended that the GES should (a) introduce dress code policy at the first and second cycle institutions that would be acceptable as framework to all stakeholders in the national education system; and (b) establish "interreligious Chaplaincy Boards" at schools to create platforms for exercising freedom of religion and freedom of worship.

Finally, taking into account the provisions of the Constitution on human rights, the Council recommended that no public school should require students who follow a different faith to participate in acts of worship, devotion or fellowship without their consent or the consent of their parents. Further, in its 10-point communiqué, the Council delineated what it identified to be the three levels of schools in Ghana: "*we have pure Government or public schools; we have mission schools that are assisted by government; and then we have purely private school*" (emphasis mine).⁴² Clearly, there should be no argument regarding dress code and prayer requirements of students in purely private schools—whether religious or not. But, there is the need for a constitutionally and legally defined guideline that will invariably apply to all the purely local authority/government schools as well as the church-affiliated-government-supported schools in the country. In fact, even though Rev. Dr. Akrofi pointed out that funding support from the various parishes to government-assisted denominational schools was considerable, a former Provisional National Defense Council Secretary of Education and Culture Dr. Ben Abdullah also observed that the level of government support to these government-assisted mission schools was equally substantial. He commented on the subject thus:

As secretary of education and culture, I saw the level of state funding for religious education units schools in the country. This has a long history. The religious bodies (Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, Presbyterian, A.M.E Zion, etc) are all represented at the Ghana Education Service. They insist that the government should continue to fund their schools; and their staff members are on the payroll of the GES and their teachers are paid by the GES. The colleges and secondary schools of the [Christian] religious bodies are paid by the state.⁴³ The above notwithstanding, the National Peace Council, in its classification of the types of schools in the country, urged parents not to complain about religious discrimination if they chose to send their wards to "schools which do not conform to the religious beliefs of the children"—a recognition or an acceptance of the argument that mission schools need not lose their founding characteristics merely to satisfy the religious liberty of students.

Such proclamation would not be out of place only if it is publically and mutually understood that these privileges are embodied in the partnership arrangements between the state and its educational stakeholders.⁴⁴ However, the National Peace Council's recommendation for choice puts on the table additional issues for reevaluation in the context of history, equity, and fair alternatives for schools from which students and parents might select. It must be noted that concern about declining moral values and discipline among students is not only the purview of government assisted-Christian denominational school administrators. At a 22 May 2010 workshop on the theme of "Promoting Quality Education in Islamic Schools: The Role of Stakeholders," the administrator of the Upper West Regional Coordinating Council, Al-Hajj Zaidu Tamimu, observed that the reduced level of Arabic language instruction and of Islamic religious subjects at IEU schools, "had the tendency of giving space for indiscipline to creep into the Islamic educational system." It is implied then that Al-Hajj Tamimu would not be opposed to requiring prayers and Arabic language instruction for all students if they attended the state-assisted Islamic Education Unit schools.

⁴¹ *Islamic Religious Education*, pp. 87-93.

⁴² *Ghanaweb*, "School Placement: Stakeholders Push for Religious Considerations," 7 April 2015.

⁴³ *Islamic Learning*, p. 122.

⁴⁴ Most Rev. Joseph Osei-Bonsu, "Religious Bodies Demand 30% Admission Quota," cited from *Ghanaweb*, 4 June 2015.

The preoccupation to ensure that religious education for students at religious-affiliated schools is sustained is consistent in all the cases mentioned above, whether for Muslims in public schools in Austria or for Catholic school educators in the United States.

But school choice, whether at government-assisted Ghanaian Christian or Islamic schools, is often based on institutional reputation—a status that is shaped by the history of academic accomplishments, the quality of language instruction, school discipline, high levels of teacher reputations, effective management of school by administrators, and the quality of school infrastructure. This being the case, the research that was published as *Islamic Learning, the State and the Challenges of Education in Ghana* demonstrated that for the Islamic Education Unit schools to be presented as fair and equal choices for parents and students seeking alternative sites to pursue secular education, the challenges facing the majority of IEU schools must be addressed aggressively through special government assistance.

While such a recommendation is contrary to the statement that “the government built no school and gave it to a religious denomination to run,” there is also the justification that the number of students attending the IEU schools nationwide is significant and thus deserving of government attention. The need to do so is particularly justifiable at the heavily populated urban Muslim communities (*Zongos*) where youth unemployment is usually high. Research on national youth unemployment figures for the decade of the 2000s was recorded to average about 200,000, which was incidentally equal to about the number of pupils attending IEU primary and JHS programs nationwide.⁴⁵ This amounted to about 7 percent of the total number of students in all schools in the country at the basic education level. If the figure was held constant, but compared to the 2010 census that registered the total national Muslim population at 18 percent (even though the census did not record the percentage of Muslim students attending local authority basic schools and those at government-assisted schools across the country), this same 7 percent of student attendance at the purely IEU schools can still be valued as significant.

Another important characteristic of the distribution of the IUE student population indicated that the Northern Region reported the largest IEU student population of above 70,000; the Greater Accra Region followed with some 37,000 students; then the Ashanti Region with almost 34,000 students, and the Central Region (23,800).⁴⁶ Interestingly, these are the regions with the largest urban Muslim population densities.

But while it is observed with satisfaction a drastic improvement in the number of girls attending school, it was equally noted in a 2015 research that the urban environment held stronger determinants for school dropout, which tended to be high among Islamic public school girls.⁴⁷ This notwithstanding, the percentage of girls and boys at IEU schools was almost balanced at the K-6 level nationwide. It was also learned from field interviews in the Ashanti Region that several students bypassed well-established Christian denominational and non-Muslim local Authority school to travel some 30 miles each day to attend private IEU schools. This is evident that if well-resourced and made available as community-based schools, Muslims students from a certain radius would patronize such IEU programs in the manner the National Peace Council recommended. Until then, the NPC recommendations cannot be viewed as fair and equitable.

⁴⁵ On information on youth unemployment in Ghana during the decade of the 2000s, see Nsowah-Nuamah, N.N.N., and J. Y. Amankrah, *Report on Registration of Unemployed and Underemployed Persons*, Ministry of Manpower Development and Employment, Ghana, 2003; J. Y. Amankrah, “Assessing the Effects of recent Labour Market Interventions on Poverty in Ghana,” in *Labour and Growth: Better Jobs under Globalisation*, IDRC/NSPIA, Ottawa, Canada, 2006. Compare youth unemployment figures to enumerated number of students at IEU schools, see *Islamic Learning, the State and the Challenge of Education in Ghana*.

⁴⁶ *Islamic Learning* (2013), pp. 160-180; Steven Salm, “Review of Islamic: the State and the Challenges of Education in Ghana,” *Africa Today*, pp. 143-149.

⁴⁷ For a detailed discussion of the factors indicating female dropout rate at Islamic schools in Ghana, see Asonaba Kofi Addison and Daniel Djoto, “Determinants of Drop-out among Public Islamic School Girls in the Techiman Municipality,” *American Journal of Educational Research*, 3, 4 (2015), pp. 514-526.

Reflections

Accomplishments made by the Islamic Education Unit schools are noteworthy to demand the attention of a government that sees education of all citizens as an important requirement for democratic development. Yet, it is problematic to note that the majority of Islamic schools that are better endowed are almost all privately owned—the Anbariyya, Wataniyya, Ahl-Sunna al-Jamaat, or the Ansari schools. The Ahmadiyya schools are not listed in this category since they are not administrated as IEU Unit schools.

Thus, even though Muslim students, by choice, may select to attend Ahmadiyya Islamic schools as the National Peace Council suggested, the overall availability of IEU Senior High Schools (SHS) is extremely limited and therefore undercuts the fairness of the recommendation that proposes school choice. In the perspective of those who protested compulsion for school prayers, religious services for all attending government-assisted denominations schools, and banning Muslim girls at such schools from wearing the *hijab*, the core dissatisfaction and their sense of being discriminated against remain unresolved.

And, as the Office of the National Chief Imam reminder the National Peace Council one year later in a 25 June 2016 published statement, the delay to initiate dialogue and conversation among education stakeholders to ensure that “no public school shall require students who are followers of a different religion to participate in acts of worship, devotion or fellowship without their consent or that of their parents” is a worrisome exhibition of the continued subjugation of Muslim concerns to other issues.⁴⁸ If and when the proposed dialogue takes place to redress these immediate concerns, the conversation should not focus merely at redressing only the original issues of prayer and *hijab* wearing over which students protested, but the NPC should make additional recommendations to the secular state to enhancing Islamic Education Unit schools for the purpose of providing fair school choice for their students. The need to extend secular education among Muslim youth at programs where students and parents feel comfortable is one of the fundamental ingredients for student retention and stemming the dropout rate. For example, in the decade of the 2000s, the independent advocacy non-governmental organization, Basic Education Coalition, released data and recommendations that illustrated the wisdom for governments to provide targeted funding in support of schooling of school age Muslim children.

The information pointed to the fact that one in every five persons in the world is a Muslim, the literacy rate and training in mathematics and the sciences among this population is considerably below global standards, and over two-thirds of the illiterate Muslims are women.⁴⁹ Characteristically, the illiterate population is youthful who continue to observe with frustration the widening gap between their desperate conditions and that of the rich. Focusing on Middle Eastern and North African countries and sub-Saharan countries with large Muslim populations such as Senegal and Nigeria, the G8 countries Broader Middle East and North African (BMENA) initiatives as well as the USAID and other United States agencies sponsored the Education for All (EFA) initiatives.

Information from the BMENA and Education for All initiative evaluated national and global contributions to improving literacy through education to be critical efforts to securing political stability in the Muslim world.⁵⁰ It is pertinent to observe that though not predominately a Muslim country, the Basic Education Coalition characteristics of the global population of 1 to 5 being Muslims, the high level of Muslim female illiteracy, the youthful nature of the illiterate and the high levels of unemployed are consistent with Muslims urban population of Ghana.

While it is essential that the immediate debate about *hijab* wearing and requirements that non-denominational students participate in school prayers and attend religious service at the established government-assisted school need to be resolved, it is equally pressing that in the long term the need to provide students fair choices in the selection of first and second circle school be addressed.

⁴⁸ Ghanaweb, “Chief Imam Questions Peace Council on Religious Tolerance,” *thefinderonline.com*, 25 June 2016.

⁴⁹ www.BasicEd.org, “Education in the Islamic World,” June 2011.

⁵⁰ See also The Brookings Institution, “Economic Outreach Initiative,” Project on U.S. Policy Towards the Islamic World, October 2002; UNDP, *Arab Human Development Report*, 2002; Basic Education Coalition, *Each Child Learning, Every Student a Graduate: A Bold Vision for Lifelong Learning Beyond 2015*, January 2013.

The opportunity for Muslim students to select to acquire secular education at Islamic schools, though now possible, still needs to be enhanced with government facility assistance. It is only through direct government investment in the infrastructural development for these institutions at the various Muslim communities (especially in the urban Muslim communities) that the Islamic neighborhood schools would become attractive and provide incentives for educators to device innovative ways to retain and train students to become engaged citizen of a pluralistic and secular democratic society.⁵¹

⁵¹ For a conversation on the challenges of religious pluralism and democracy in Africa, see Dov Ronen, ed., *Democracy and Pluralism in Africa*, Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 1986; Etienne Smith, "Religious and Cultural Pluralism in Senegal Accommodation through 'Proportional Equidistance'," in Mamadou Diouf, ed., *Tolerance, Democracy, and Sufis in Senegal*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.