

**TEACHING ABOUT RELIGIONS:  
“Playing for Change”**

*Sandra Gift, Hart Edwards, Merle Hodge,  
Grace Sirju-Charran, and Susan Shurland*

This paper advocates for the introduction of teaching about religions in schools in Trinidad and Tobago, and presents a preliminary strategy to this end. The background to the paper is a National Commission for UNESCO project, for which one of the major goals was to determine the status and feasibility of Teaching About World Religions (TAWR) in schools. The initiative involved: (a) a survey conducted in a sample of schools in 2008; (b) a symposium (January 2010); (c) a workshop (October 2010); and (d) a presentation at the Ministry of Education consultation on the primary school curriculum in 2011. Some of the consultation feedback revealed societal fears arising from a misunderstanding of the purpose of educating young people about religions other than their own. The paper argues that greater knowledge and understanding of the tenets of our various religions are critical for promoting harmony in diversity. Historically, interfaith relations have been marked by disrespect and persecution of some faiths. While there has been decided improvement at official levels in the 52 years of independence, there exists a legacy of mutual intolerance, prejudice, and mistrust, based largely on lack of information. The formal education system does not adequately address this legacy. The authors considered the nomenclature for such a programme, and propose a preliminary framework and implementation strategy for teacher training and curriculum materials development for interreligious studies.

**Introduction**

This paper has its genesis in the work of the Trinidad and Tobago National Commission for UNESCO over the period 2007 to 2011 when, with increasing levels of social anxiety, the Commission became concerned about the need for increased levels of peace and tolerance in the national community. The Commission was of the view that the introduction and effective teaching of Comparative Religion could be a key intervention to support and foster increased peace, tolerance, and harmony in the national community. Mindful of the multicultural context of Trinidad and Tobago,

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the National Commission for UNESCO initiated a project for introducing the teaching of Comparative Religion in the nation's school system.

The objectives identified for introducing Comparative Religion in the school curriculum were to: (i) develop respect for other religions, while remaining strong in one's own belief system, and to include atheism and agnosticism even though these belief systems are not religions; (ii) expose students to different religious teachings in order to foster tolerance and peaceful coexistence; (iii) promote a better appreciation of the tenets of other religions and facilitate an understanding of the similarities and differences among them, with a view to affirming and managing diversity; and (iv) gather data and build consensus (focus on issues to be overcome to implement Comparative Religion). Following consultation with religious leaders a fifth objective was added: (v) explore the mis-education implicit in the "languaging" of religion, with a view to addressing prejudices and stereotypes. The authors use the expression *languaging of religion* to capture the ways in which negative connotations are conveyed via various styles of speech about particular religions (e.g., *pagan, obeah, idol worship*) (Trinidad and Tobago National Commission for UNESCO, 2011).

This intervention on the part of the National Commission for UNESCO is consistent with the pillar of learning No 3: "Learning to Live Together," presented in the "Delors Report," *Learning: The Treasure Within* (International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century, Delors, & UNESCO, 1996), which states, inter alia, that:

by teaching young people to adopt the point of view of other ethnic or religious groups, the lack of understanding that leads to hatred and violence among adults can be avoided. The teaching of the history of religions and customs can thus serve as a useful benchmark for future behaviour. (p. 93)

### **Concept of Religion**

Defining the word *religion* was found to be problematic. The term is sometimes used interchangeably with *faith*, and is commonly defined as belief about the supernatural, sacred, or divine; and the moral codes, practices, ways of life, and institutions associated with such belief. In its broadest sense some have defined it as the sum total of answers given to explain the relationship of human beings with the universe. The authors accept these concepts of religion. For the purpose of this initiative, however, the authors extend the concept of religion to include agnosticism, atheism, and humanism in the teaching about religions, in order to include

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the beliefs and practices of these communities. *Agnosticism* refers to the belief that “we don’t have knowledge of God and that it is impossible to prove that God exists or does not exist...”; that we should suspend judgement about “some types of knowledge, such as the soul, immortality, heaven, hell and extraterrestrial life” (Shouler, 2010, p. 277). *Atheism* refers to the belief that “gods do not or God does not exist...” It is “the disbelief in any kind of supernatural existence that is supposed to affect the universe” (Shouler, 2010, p. 277).

The authors also refer to UNESCO’s concept of humanism, which is the recognition that “beyond our diversity we all share one common human culture” (Bokova, 2010, p. 4), which could only be achieved through “mutual understanding and intercultural dialogue” (Bokova, 2010, p. 5) brought about by the “intellectual and moral cooperation of [ALL] humanity” (Bokova, 2010, p. 4) through a “recognition of common values in the diversity of cultures” (Bokova, 2010, pp. 5-6).

#### **Clarification of Terms**

Terms that require clarification in Teaching about Religions (TaR) include *Religious Instruction* (RI) and *Religious Education* (RE). TaR is distinct from RI, which focuses on the teaching of one particular religion with a view to religious induction/persuasion or reinforcement, in that its goal is to educate on all religions. Some persons use RE interchangeably with TaR, as in the case of the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) presentation in this paper. However, RE and RI are used synonymously by others. The preferred of these three terms is TaR since it is less likely to be confused with RI.

In the course of the preliminary phases of the project, the title of the subject was changed from Comparative Religion (CR) to Teaching About World Religions (TAWR) because it was felt by both experts and participants that the word *Comparative* was value-laden, and could imply that some religions were superior to others. On further reflection, the authors opted to use the term *Teaching about Religions* (TaR) since the focus will be on the religions of Trinidad and Tobago.

#### **Interreligious Studies (IS)**

The change to TaR was not the final change, however, since the authors’ review of an article by Rietveld-van Wingerden, ter Avest, and Westerman (2012) showed that the concept *Interreligious Studies* (IS) more accurately reflected the aims and objectives of the UNESCO-funded project. Therefore the authors, at the end of that project, decided to establish a Working Group on Interreligious Studies (WGIS) for development and

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implementation of a project on introducing IS in the schools of Trinidad and Tobago and the anglophone Caribbean. This notwithstanding, the term TaR is used in the rest of this paper since the terminology IS was adopted at the conclusion of stage four of the project.

In Europe, “support of interreligious education goes back four hundred years” (Rietveld-van Wingerden et al., 2012, p. 70) to when John Amos Comenius, a Christian theologian, educationalist, and school reformer, who was victim of several religious clashes, adopted an open inclusive stance to interreligious education. This support continues today as evident in the European Union’s research project on religion and education (REDCo), initiated in 2006 to “explore pupils’ perception and reception of religion.” A key finding of REDCo was the emphasis placed by the young people on the importance of “knowledge as a means to more mutual understanding and tolerance” (Rietveld-van Wingerden et al., 2012, p. 57). The finding reported by Rietveld-van Wingerden et al. about the value of interreligious education was influential in the eventual decision made about nomenclature for the initiative that is the subject of this paper. Specifically, Rietveld-van Wingerden et al. reported that:

The REDCo project and earlier research clearly indicate that interreligious education is the most promising concept for schools in terms of enhancing reciprocal comprehension between people affiliated to different secular or religious life orientations and stimulating mutual respect and tolerance. (p. 58)

### **Trinidad and Tobago as a Multi-Religious Society**

Trinidad and Tobago, with its history of indigenous peoples, colonization, slavery, indentureship, and migration entered the 20<sup>th</sup> century already a multi-religious society. Beginning in the pre-independence era, certain steps have been taken at the level of the State to affirm and embrace the reality of a multi-religious society. In 1951, the Legislative Council repealed the Shouter Baptist Prohibition Ordinance of 1917.

An Inter-Religious Organization (IRO), comprised of representatives of the different faiths, was incorporated by Act of Parliament in 1973. The IRO enjoys the status of a consultative and resource group to government and other bodies. The State has granted one public holiday each to the Hindu, Muslim, and Spiritual Baptist faiths. Originally, all religious public holidays were holy days of the Catholic Church. Hindu, Muslim, and Orisha marriages have been given legal recognition. Interfaith prayers are held at official events. After a spate of incidents in which some schools

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sought to exclude children wearing clothing or hairdressing emblematic of some faiths, the State ruled in favour of tolerance.

In keeping with efforts being made in the post-independence era to remove stigma accrued in the colonial era by religions other than the approved Christian church, a 19<sup>th</sup> century ordinance banning “obeah” was repealed in 2000.

However, while officialdom moves towards inclusiveness, among the general population there remain some deep-seated attitudes of disrespect and prejudice against religions other than the dominant Christian church. There is a tendency to paint them with the brush of “superstition” (another example of “languaging”) because their theology, like the belief systems of all religions, includes articles of faith that cannot be proven scientifically.

Orisha and the Spiritual Baptist faith continue to be associated, by some, with negative forces, including devil worship. Some people have a fear of being contaminated by religious practices and phenomena that they misunderstand, such as spirit manifestation or “catching power,” a feature of these two faiths. Some fear spiritual contamination from food consecrated in any non-Christian rite, for example, the “parsad” that Hindus share with neighbours as part of prayer services. Hindus, loosely referred to as Indians, are said to worship idols and some to engage with evil forces. Religious prejudice feeds into racist stereotyping; in propagating the stereotype of the “dishonest” Indian, some people assert that Hinduism imposes on its devotees the obligation to acquire riches by any means available, honest or not.

### **The Evolution of Religious Education in Schools**

Religious bodies played a very important part in the provision of schooling in both Trinidad and Tobago in the 19<sup>th</sup> century at both primary and secondary level. This role continued in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and was modified and formalized in the Concordat of 1960, a pre-independence agreement between the government and denominational boards. It assured these boards their ownership and right of direct control and management of all denominational primary and secondary schools, inter alia (Quamina-Aiyejina et al., 2001, p. 7).

After the abolition of slavery, “the British government directed that compulsory Christian education be given to the children of the ex-slaves, under a scheme financed by a grant of 25,000 pounds from the British treasury called the Negro Education Grant” (Quamina-Aiyejina et al., 2001, p. 9) and a system of ward schools began to evolve in Trinidad and

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Tobago. The first sustained efforts at teacher education in Trinidad and Tobago took place in relation to this initiative.

Anglican, Baptist, Canadian Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Moravian, and Wesleyan missionaries, serving the dual roles of evangelist and educator, established the first schools in Trinidad. In 1863, the first denominational secondary school in Trinidad was established as part of the colonial school system.

### **The Keenan Report, 1869**

In 1851, Lord Harris, then Governor of Trinidad, outlined a system of free secular education at the primary level. This met with opposition from the Roman Catholics and in 1869, as opposition to Harris' system became more widespread, Patrick J. Keenan, who was Inspector of Schools in Ireland, was appointed to make a full inquiry into the state of education in Trinidad and to make recommendations. Keenan severely criticized the system and made numerous recommendations, many of which were diametrically opposed to the system developed from Harris' proposals. Among Keenan's recommendations was that: management of each ward school be vested in the clergymen of the same religion as the majority of the pupils (Quamina-Aiyejina et al., 2001, p. 10).

### **The Concordat of 1960**

Before Independence in 1962, primary and secondary education was provided by the State as well as by the Christians (e.g., Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Presbyterians), Hindus, and Muslims. The Methodists and the African Methodist Episcopalians (AME) were active providers of education at the primary level.

Among the provisions of the Concordat (Trinidad and Tobago. Ministry of Education, 1960) were that students would be exclusively taught the religion of the religious denomination owning the school but other religions would not be forced to participate; and at government schools, accredited representatives would provide RE classes of all faiths, separately, during the designated period. RE here more than likely would have related to instruction in a particular faith or RI.

The Concordat also formalized arrangements for the provision of teachers and the operation of teacher training colleges, which eventually came to be exclusively owned and operated by the State. Accelerated expansion of school provision at both primary and secondary levels, by both the State and the denominations, took place.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed further considerable expansion of the school system. In addition to the Christian religions that were part of the

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Concordat, Moravians, Seventh-day Adventists, the Open Bible, London Baptists, and, more recently, the Pentecostals and the Shouter Baptists also established schools and school boards. Similarly, Muslims (Anjuman Sunnat-ul-Jamaat Association (ASJA), Tackveeyatul Islamic Association (TIA), and Trinidad Muslim League (TML)) and Hindus (Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha, Kabir Panth Association (KPA), and the Vedics) established schools and school boards ([www.moe.edu.tt](http://www.moe.edu.tt)).

#### **The Training College Curriculum**

In 1956, there were three denominational training colleges (two Catholic and one Presbyterian) and one government training college. The curriculum of denominational colleges included religious instruction. Under the regulations of the dual system, the assisted schools retained ownership and overall control of their institutions while receiving government aid. It therefore meant that the Presbyterian Church was the governing agency for Naparima Training College, with the responsibility for appointing a principal and the teaching staff. The same arrangement applied to the Roman Catholic training colleges.

With the establishment of government teacher training colleges, the Christian churches did not resist closure of Naparima Training College or the Roman Catholic Women's College, since both the Presbyterian Church and the Roman Catholic Church conceded that they represented a financial burden. In terms of denominational teacher education, only the Caribbean Union College, run by the Seventh-day Adventists and not normally assisted by the government, retained a small teacher training unit, set up in 1960. From the 1970s, the Caribbean Union College began to expand its teacher training activities to offer a B.A. in Education in association with Andrews University, USA (Quamina-Aiyejina et al., 2001, p. 17). Currently, neither the Valsayn Teacher's Training College, The University of Trinidad and Tobago (UTT), nor the School of Education, Faculty of Humanities and Education, The University of the West Indies (UWI) includes RE or TaR as part of their curriculum.

The period since 1962 has seen no significant change in the fundamental arrangements rooted in the Concordat. Rather, it has seen the education system expand, especially the State sector, and, latterly, an increase in the number of denominational schools, especially at secondary level.

## **Stages of the Project**

The project's journey consisted of four stages.

### **Stage 1**

A **preliminary survey** was carried out in 2008 to determine to what extent CR/(TaR) was being taught in the schools. Of the questionnaires sent out to approximately 125 secondary schools in Trinidad and Tobago, 43 (or approximately 34%) were completed and returned. The survey was not administered to the denominational schools since, apart from a 20% intake specific to the particular faith, their intake constitutes students of all faiths and they have no option but to follow the particular faith of the denominational school. The sample showed a weak profile of TaR in the schools but a high level of readiness to accept its possible introduction among educators who, convinced of its benefits, recorded challenges that would have to be addressed if this subject were to be introduced.

At those secondary schools that purported to teach TaR, it was subsumed under other subjects—Social Studies, Sociology, History, Moral Education, and Caribbean Studies. At the primary school it was included in Health and Family Life Education, and Reading and Comprehension. There was no dedicated slot in the curriculum for TaR. The religious education that is institutionalized in the schools is worship and instruction in the tenets of specific religions. In government schools a weekly period is timetabled for Religious Instruction, provided by visiting resource persons to students belonging to their particular faith.

An overwhelming majority of respondents gave very positive and enthusiastic responses to the question: "What, in your view, could be the value of teaching Comparative Religion in the schools of Trinidad and Tobago?" Many referred with pride to "*our rich diversity*"; "*our multi-religious society*"; "*our multicultural society*"; "*our cultural diversity*"; "*our pluralistic society*"; "*our cosmopolitan society*." On the other hand, there were some concerns raised by a minority of respondents. These included, for example, the appropriateness of the subject for the primary school level, the need for trained teachers, and the possibility of proselytization.

### **Stage 2**

A **symposium** was held on January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2010, at which the findings of the survey were shared with representatives of major stakeholder groups: CXC; the IRO; representatives of various religions; Ministry of Education Curriculum Officers, school principals, and teachers. One of the key presentations dealt with the CXC curriculum for RE.

***The CXC Perspective***

Ms. Cheryl Stephens, Assistant Registrar of Syllabus and Curriculum Development, CXC, presented a paper on the CXC RE curriculum. CXC is a regional examining body that provides examinations for secondary and post-secondary candidates in Caribbean countries in a wide range of subjects (CXC, 2015). Ms. Stephens argued that while the content of the RE curriculum had relevance for pursuing a career in Religion, Medicine, Social Work, and Law Enforcement, it also contributed to a good general education and supported the vision of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Education Strategy to create the *ideal Caribbean person* who is “emotionally secure and has a high level of self-confidence and self-esteem; sees ethnic, religious and other diversity as a source of potential strength and richness and has an informed respect for our cultural heritage” (CARICOM Secretariat, 2011).

The syllabus was completed in 1990 with Christianity as the only available option. Further options in Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism were completed in 2010. The majority of candidates writing the exam were from Jamaica, with about 3% coming from Barbados, Grenada, St. Lucia, and Belize. Trinidad and Tobago entered candidates (mainly from the prisons) in 2004; but since 2007, candidates are also being entered from Bishop Anstey High School East and Trinity College East.

Among the challenges identified for this subject were the shortage of trained teachers and the fact that it was not being introduced at the lower secondary level, which means that it competes with better-known subjects for which there is already a base. In addition, it is probably seen as a subject that is important for those interested in pursuing a career in Religion but not relevant for other careers. It is also perceived as an option for “weaker/less academic” students.

The CXC RE curriculum goals are to:

- develop understanding of the meaning and purpose of life as advanced by different religions practised in the Caribbean;
- encourage informed dialogue among various cultural and religious organisations and groups to foster harmony and peace among people of diverse customs and beliefs within the Caribbean;
- encourage a critical and reflective approach to religious beliefs and practices;
- encourage appreciation and respect for various beliefs systems;
- create an awareness of the diversity and commonality that exist in religion;

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- create an awareness of our religious heritage as a Caribbean people. (CXC, 2010, p. 1)

Among the criteria for content selection are that it should be:

- useful in developing knowledge, awareness of and respect for the value placed by others on their religious beliefs and practices; and
- helpful to students in clarifying their own belief systems, dealing with issues and resolving conflicts. (CXC, 2010, p. 2)

### ***Perspectives of Representatives from Different Faiths***

A panel of leaders from five different faiths (Muslim, Orisha; Spiritual Baptist, Hindu, and Christianity) identified challenges and benefits of introducing CR/TaR, and noted that it:

- addresses “a profound need to consider seriously ... those aspects of religion that proclaim unity, peace and love”; to find “convergence”; and to teach “our children to make these contacts joyful, creative and positive...”;
- should be seen as a “model of co-existence” to promote harmony in diversity which would bring about a quantum leap in the way we see others, and in restoring our own humanity”;
- would address the need to focus on “preparation for life, and on critical and analytical thinking in the education system”;
- would serve to dispel fear and refute myths about different religions, leading to respect, while allowing for exposure to moral, ethical, and spiritual values.

The challenges included:

- use of the title CR, which could be interpreted to mean “affirmation of self while comparing one’s own religion with other religions or “World Religion,” which as used by Americans was restricted to northern, western European religions. Suggestions for a title included: “Belief Systems” or “Introduction to the Study of Religion”;
- prejudices against certain religions that have become embedded in language and popular culture;
- the limitations imposed by the use of English language for communicating certain fundamental concepts in different religions (e.g., Hinduism and Orisha);
- possible prejudices/biases of teachers;

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- resistance by some religious leaders based on the fear of losing membership.

Some of the perspectives of participants, as reported through working groups, related to the place of CR in the curriculum; the level at which it should be introduced; the approach to teacher training, and a variety of issues pertinent to the introduction of CR/TaR. Some of the recommendations have been incorporated in the proposed Framework for TaR. Participants agreed, *inter alia*, that the rationale for inclusion of CR/TaR in the curriculum would be the study of diverse belief systems to promote respect, harmony, understanding, self-esteem, and self-realization, leading to peaceful coexistence. Standards and benchmarks cannot be determined in isolation, but must take into account the national curriculum and policy. The informal approach should be used at the primary school level, and even at the lower secondary level, as a good way to introduce it; and then it should be made examinable at the CXC level.

### **Stage 3**

A **2-day workshop** with the theme “Harmony in Diversity: Towards Best Practice in Teaching World Religions” was held on October 5 and 6, 2010. Participants and presenters included educators, representatives from religious bodies and non-governmental organizations, experts in the field of CR, and subject specialists. The focus was on international and regional best practices, content, and methodology for teaching CR.

The first keynote speaker, Professor Anantanand Rambachan, Chair and Professor of Religion, Philosophy and Asian Studies at Saint Olaf College, Minnesota, USA, spoke on “International Trends/Current Practices in Teaching Comparative Religion: Impact and Effectiveness of This Teaching.” He insisted that:

*The first and perhaps most important principle and practice to be honoured is that religious education must be a teaching about religion and not religious indoctrination or the teaching of religion. This is the critical principle on which religious education in schools may succeed or fail.*

He commented on the term *Comparative Religion*, suggesting that it carries the baggage of assessing the relative merits of different religions and the implication of superiority of one over the other. He proposed the alternative *Teaching about Religions*.

He noted that the proposal to introduce TaR into the schools of Trinidad and Tobago does not include any suggestion to interfere with the delivery of RI. TaR and RI are simply different undertakings, and they can coexist

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in the schools of our nation. He cited Modesto City Schools, California as an example of the successful introduction of TaR, where it resulted in increased student support for the rights of others, facilitated a fuller appreciation of the core moral values shared across traditions, and did not encourage students to change their own religious convictions.

Citing the guidelines originally published by the Public Education Religion Studies Center at Wright University, Professor Rambachan presented the following principles relevant to TaR:

- It is *academic*, not *devotional*. Its purpose is not to create religious experience.
- It strives for student *awareness* of religions, but not *acceptance* of any one religion.
- Its focus is *study* about religion not the *practice* of religion.
- It *exposes* students to a diversity of religious views without *imposing* any.
- It *educates* about all religions, but does not *promote* or *denigrate* any.
- It *informs* the student about various beliefs, but does not seek to *conform* him/her to any particular belief.

The second keynote speaker was Ms. Grace Peart, Curriculum Officer, Ministry of Education, Jamaica, who shared the Jamaican experience in an address entitled “Curriculum Development and Implementation for Comparative Religion: A Case Study.” She, too, cited the dangers of using the term *Comparative Religion*, in that it encourages the drawing of conclusions from comparison of the various religions and judgement about individual religions, thus making impartiality and lack of bias more difficult. She also cited nine good reasons for teaching RE and gave an overview of the topics taught at the various levels in the school system in Jamaica. The establishment of a Religious Education Teacher Association, comprising resource persons from the major religions, was helpful in the designing of the curriculum. Major challenges have been lack of trained personnel and fundamentalist Curriculum Officers. In describing the Jamaican experience of introducing CR, she highlighted the importance of long and thorough preparation and consultation preceding the change, and of involvement especially of curriculum staff, both to secure buy-in and to ensure proper implementation.

**Stage 4**

**Ministry of Education (MOE) Primary School Curriculum Consultation, 5<sup>th</sup> April 2011**

***Presentation on Teaching about Religion***

The Trinidad and Tobago National Commission for UNESCO presented a proposal for the introduction of CR/TaR in schools at the MOE's Primary Schools Curriculum Consultation. The Commission indicated its support for the training of Curriculum Officers in TaR. Some religious groups stated that TaR should be conducted at home and not at school. Some participants misinterpreted TaR to mean RI. There was also concern about the overcrowded curriculum, and some argued that TaR was already included in the social studies curriculum.

Benefits to be derived from TaR were recognized, but participants reiterated the need for careful curriculum planning and teacher training. They supported it as a "stand alone" subject, which might be better handled at the secondary level rather than the primary level.

**Summary of Public Response to the Introduction of TaR in Schools After the April 2011 Ministry of Education Consultation on the Primary School Curriculum**

The announcement at the MOE Consultation on the Primary School Curriculum by Dr. the Honourable Tim Gopeesingh, Minister of Education, that TaR would be introduced in schools elicited a response on the part of newspaper columnists, persons affiliated with different faiths, and some members of the general citizenry, communicated via articles and comments appearing in the *Daily Express*, *Trinidad Guardian*, and *Trinidad and Tobago Newsday* newspapers during the month of April 2011. A partial list of titles of articles and their authors is provided in the Appendix.

**Misunderstandings About Teaching Religious Education and Rebuttals Thereto**

These comments revealed a misunderstanding of the purpose of TaR as well as conflicting concepts of RE, with some commentators, for example, equating it with religious formation or shaping of children's religious identity. TaR was understood, for example, as an intent to make students "more religious"; as bringing into schools religious leaders from different denominations to cater to the students of particular faiths; as providing students who did not belong to the denomination of the schools they attend

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with information about the customs and practices of the various religions; and with a focus on moral and spiritual values.

One commentator argued that RE would disrupt the true purpose of schools, which is to educate and advance the nation. He argued further that RE would open wounds of the past when only one religion dominated the island, and would result in many children feeling vulnerable and unaccepted. Another commentator expressed the view that religion is man-made not God-made; that it should be left out of the nation's public schools as religion has caused more division than unification among people.

On the contrary, however, TaR, as delineated in this project, is intended to foster greater respect and harmony in society. TaR is intended precisely to avoid young people knowing principally about the predominant religions in Trinidad and Tobago society, but rather to have them become knowledgeable about other religions, that is, the beliefs and practices of other religions. For too long, persons belonging to non-western traditions have been ridiculed and ostracized, even feared. Those wounds are in need of healing, so as not to recur in future generations.

### **A Question of Choice**

Other commentators were of the view that no government or group of persons ought to make it mandatory that students be exposed to religious education; that this should be a question of freedom and right to choose, with parents or guardians giving their consent. There was a word of caution against "confusing our children at this tender age with choices"; that religion should remain a personal matter never to be interfered with by the State; that it should be left to the home and to the society that must demonstrate the values they preach. Accordingly, there were commentators who proposed alternatives to TaR aimed at fostering a sense of citizenship and social responsibility, and promoting the value of good moral behaviour. These alternatives, however, would not achieve the objectives of TaR presented earlier in this paper.

### **Questions Posed**

Some of the questions posed by commentators implicitly convey the fears of some in society that TaR could do more harm than good. For example, questions posed in the *Newsday* Editorial of 6<sup>th</sup> April, 2011 (Teaching ethics, 2011) queried whether TaR would be an imposition of beliefs on vulnerable young people who should be allowed to pursue their own search for truth in the years to come, or whether it would help to open up such avenues; whether it would be taught simply as a dry academic humanities subject like history, or could only truly be taught with a faith

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expert, and, if so, how would one regulate/monitor/measure the impact of “faith”; whether parents would have the right to opt out of their child receiving such mandatory teachings, some of which the family might find offensive; whether the rights of atheist/agnostic parents, or those who simply wish their children to have a secular education, would be respected and whether the faith aspect and the legends of various religions would be taught or just their basic ethics; and should the subject be taught by academicians or by practitioners of the faith?

These are important questions and must be taken into account in the design of curricula for TaR. They indicate a need for a public education programme clarifying the nature and goals of a TaR programme for our nation’s schools. Against the background of the CXC RE curriculum, in the public discussion commentators used the terminology RE to discuss TaR.

#### **Comments in Support of RE (TaR)**

The public discussion also revealed some strong support for RE. Comments supportive of the initiative welcomed it as an opportunity to share information for greater understanding of all religions. Benefits of RE identified included appreciation, respect, and acceptance of religions; mutual enrichment which assumes mutual exchange that could complement one another’s faith; reinforcement of one’s own religious position; recognizing the dynamism and differences found within each religious tradition; serving as a source of values education that could be translated into moral and ethical behaviour; development of a sense of identity and preparation for life in a multicultural, multi-religious society and world; increasing students’ social and political awareness (e.g., rights and responsibilities); contributing to pupils’ spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development; helping students to understand and respect people of different beliefs, races, and cultures; and helping students to reflect on the meaning and purpose of life.

#### **Preliminary Framework for Teacher Training and Curriculum and Materials Development for TaR**

Given the foregoing, the authors considered it appropriate to progress from survey, discussion, and seminars to action focused on programme design and implementation. Therefore it was decided to articulate principles towards a philosophy for teacher training and student development, and to propose goals, content, pedagogy, and implementation strategy for TaR, as set out in the preliminary framework that follows.

### **Philosophy**

The philosophy for TaR must reflect the following principles:

1. be consistent with UNESCO's pillar of learning No 3: "Learning to Be" and with UNESCO's concept of *Humanism* referenced earlier in this paper
2. contribute to formation of the ideal Caribbean citizen who, inter alia,
  - respects his/her cultural heritage
  - sees differences in religion, race, and gender as a source of strength and richness
  - is morally responsible and accountable to self and community
  - demonstrates a belief in the moral value of work, that is, has a good work ethic
  - has the capacity to create and take advantage of opportunities to improve his physical, mental, social, and spiritual well-being
  - is emotionally secure with a high level of self-confidence and self-esteem
  - is aware of the importance of living in harmony with the environment (CARICOM Secretariat, 2011)
3. be supportive of the Ministry of Education's "Vision for the Children of Trinidad and Tobago" ([www.moe.edu.tt](http://www.moe.edu.tt))
4. emphasize religious\*, social\*\*, and pedagogical\*\*\* principles of Interreligious Studies:

\**Religious* principle: promotes the idea that all religious traditions describe people's efforts to make life meaningful and aims to avoid the notion of one's own identity being inspired by "the only true religion."

\*\**Social* principle: highlights multi-culturality and multi-religiosity as basic characteristics of society, with the school being considered "a micro-community—a space for pupils to practice living together in a plural society" (Rietveld-van Wingerden et al., 2012, p. 60).

\*\*\**Pedagogical* principle: considers the primary aim of education to be the development of (future) citizens. In this regard, cognitive knowledge about "the facts of life" and knowledge (cognitive as well as experiential) about what inspires and motivates us for "the good life" are important. The school is not a "factory of knowledge." It is, in the first place, a space for personal identity formation. This includes "the development of cognitive skills and

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emotional, empathic, social, religious and moral competencies...”  
The concept of transformation of the student is important. Students’ actual knowledge, constructed in the family and peer group settings, “should be built on and transformed into new, more articulated ways of thinking and experiencing with regard to religion” (Rietveld-van Wingerden et al., 2012, p. 60)

#### **Goals of TaR**

The proposed goals of TaR are to:

1. enhance peace and harmony in the national community
2. create an awareness of our religious heritage as citizens of Trinidad and Tobago
3. foster an awareness of both the diversity and the commonalities to be found across religions in Trinidad and Tobago
4. encourage students to appreciate and respect the various belief systems present in Trinidad and Tobago, while remaining strong in their individual belief systems

#### **Proposed Content**

1. Core tenets of the faiths of the people of Trinidad and Tobago
2. Principal practices, including office holders; festivals; acts and expressions of worship; forms of dress; implements; methods of personal spiritual development; sacred spaces; role of food and water; role of sacred plants
3. History and holy texts (written and oral) of each religion
4. Issues, for example:
  - Prejudice and stereotyping in the “languaging” of religion
  - Religious intolerance
  - Religious wars and conflicts
  - Gender and hegemony
  - Ethnicity, identity, and religion

#### **Pedagogy**

- Develop learning outcomes appropriate to each level of the school system
- Integrate new technologies
- Conduct mini research projects

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- Use songs, videos, creative activities such as art; writing of reflective pieces
- Visits to sacred places; respectful observation of other forms of worship

### **Teacher Training**

The issue of teacher training has emerged as critical to any implementation of TaR in the nation's schools. There was consensus that TaR, however well designed, could be derailed if persons teaching the subject exhibited bias, or sought to proselytize, or undermined the students' perception of any religion. On the other hand, the chances of success of TaR would be greater if teachers were able to demonstrate fairness, objectivity, and neutrality in their presentation of the subject; stimulate interest; and promote sound values among their students. Teacher training programmes must be designed to address these issues.

### **Strategy for Implementation of TaR**

1. Seek consensus on a philosophy for TaR in Trinidad and Tobago through consultation with all relevant stakeholders. Such consultation might be led collaboratively by the School of Education, UWI, UTT, CXC, and the IRO of Trinidad and Tobago.
2. Implement a public education programme on TaR to address misconceptions
3. Establish a Unit of Religious Education in the School of Education, UWI
4. Award Government of Trinidad and Tobago and other scholarships to do the B.Ed. or the postgraduate Diploma in Education with TaR as the main focus
5. Ensure careful selection and screening of teachers for the subject as well as the establishment of proper systems and structures for supervision and evaluation of teachers and of student performance
6. Develop and test a teacher training curriculum for the subject to include exposure to basic content of religions, as well as philosophy and social and cultural anthropology
7. Ensure mentoring of teachers by experts in the field and by officials of the different religious orientations
8. Set up a national body to sensitize all stakeholders and for a clear understanding of one another's concerns

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9. Establish a broad-based working committee for curriculum development for TaR, coordinated by the Ministry of Education, and to include participants in the Comparative Religion project of the National Commission for UNESCO and other relevant stakeholders. Ensure thorough preparation and consultation preceding the change and involvement especially of curriculum staff, both to secure buy-in and for proper implementation.
10. Establish a sub-committee of the committee for curriculum development to develop and source high-quality and age-appropriate teaching materials and textbooks
11. Formulate curriculum goals reflective of the goals for TaR, which should articulate with CXC RE goals but be age appropriate
12. Develop and implement a pilot project for teacher training and for the primary and secondary schools
13. Make religious education examinable so that it would serve a purpose academically, ensuring adequate time for teaching the subject
14. Implement proper monitoring and establish feedback mechanisms such as a hotline to facilitate complaints of indoctrination by teachers

### **Conclusion**

As Trinidad and Tobago moves beyond its 50<sup>th</sup> year of independence, a deeper understanding and more positive manifestation of our multi-ethnic and multi-religious identity is a sine qua non for our maturation as a truly integrated national community.

Like the late Lloyd Best, who adopted a counter strategy by locating himself in the landscape to play for (effect) change, the authors of this paper are playing for change by presenting TaR as a counter strategy to prejudice, intolerance, and disharmony, with the aim of fostering true and lasting harmony in diversity in Trinidad and Tobago.

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**Appendix**

**A Partial List of Articles on Teaching Comparative Religion in Schools Appearing in the Daily Press in Trinidad and Tobago April 2011**

<b>Title of Article</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Newspaper</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Page #</b>
<b>The teaching of religions Part 1</b>	Prof. Emeritus John Spence	Daily Express	April 07, 2011	13
<b>The teaching of religions Part 2</b>	Prof. Emeritus John Spence			
<b>All schools will teach about all religions</b>		Express	April 04, 2011	
<b>Leave religion out</b>	R. Singh	Newsday	April, 2011	
<b>Need for teacher training: Plan to teach comparative religion at nation's school</b>	Camille Bethel	Express	April 24, 2011	
<b>Teach the gospel of perfection</b>	Dr Roopnarine Singh			
<b>Is religion education good?</b>	Kevin Baldeosingh	Sunday Express	April 17, 2011	
<b>How to value religion</b>	Kevin Baldeosingh	Express	April 08, 2011	
<b>Religious education by choice</b>	Junior Alleyne			

<b>Title of Article</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Newspaper</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Page #</b>
<b>Religious education to be mandatory</b>		Newsday	April, 2011	
<b>Educators on religion in schools: More explanation needed by Ministry</b>	Janelle De Souza and Darcel Choy			
<b>Religion in school can work</b>	David Mohammed	Guardian	April 21, 2011	
<b>Keep religion out of schools Part 1</b>	Rajiv Gopie	Express	April 15, 2011	13
<b>Keep religion out of schools Part 2</b>	Rajiv Gopie	Express	April 22 2011	13
<b>Religious Studies – not Religious Education</b>	Rt Rev Elvis Elahie	Guardian	April 12, 2011	A29
<b>Teach ethics</b>		Newsday	April 06, 2011	10
<b>Another look at curriculum</b>	Newsday Staff	Newsday	April 06, 2011	8

