



## CONFERENCE PAPER

# ***Siyakholwa – We Believe: A Case Study on the Mediatisation of Religion Education and Religious Pluralism***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Siyakholwa* is the first children's multi-faith programme series to be screened on South African television. The programme foregrounds teaching about "religion, religions, and religious diversity" (Chidester, 2008, p. 278). This paper conceptualises *Siyakholwa* as a product of the 2003 Religion in Education policy, and consequently examines the extent to which the constitutional ideal of religious pluralism is mediated through the content of the programme. This paper argues that the example of *Siyakholwa* presents an opportunity to understand the ways in which religion in public education has been defined and redefined through the constitutional, cultural, and transformational aspirations of the post-apartheid state.

### **KEYWORDS**

religion education, diversity, pluralism, mediatisation, television

## **Introduction**

*Siyakholwa – We Believe* offers children between the ages of five and twelve years old an introduction to the religions of South Africa, their institutions, myths, festivals, observances, practices, and people. For the past eleven years the programme has been screened once a week on the public broadcast television in South Africa. A programme such as *Siyakholwa* finds a space on public broadcast television in large part as a result of the democratic reformation of public broadcasting in post 1994 South Africa,

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and reflects a series of wide scale national efforts to include religion in education in schools and other public and commercial spaces (Chidester, 2008; Scharnick-Udemans, 2017).

It is widely accepted that education is not limited to curriculum and assessment criteria that are based on purely intellectual outcomes. On the contrary education in general, in this case Religion Education in particular, whether it takes place in the formal classroom setting or not, is required to respond to national priorities especially with regard to the dissemination of values. According to the Religion and Education Policy of 2003, these values include a constitutional commitment to “citizenship, human rights, equality, freedom from discrimination, and freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief, and opinion” (Department of Education, 2003, p. 6). Furthermore, there are constitutional values in education that are highlighted as national priorities and this includes, “equity, tolerance, diversity/multilingualism, openness, accountability, and social honour” (Department of Education, 2003, p. 7). Social development has been earmarked as an outcome of Religion Education. The prospect that Religion Education could result in socially beneficial consequences such as the reduction of prejudice, an increase in toleration, expanded understanding, and an appreciation and respect for difference, although noted as an immense demand from education, form a part of the goals of the national policy (Department of Education, 2003, p. 28; Chidester, 2006, p. 68).

It is self-evident that education is not limited to the school, the classroom, or the interaction between teacher and learner. Education, the act, and process of teaching and learning, both formally and informally, takes place at a number of various sites. The South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) is one such site of “public pedagogy”, a site for education that is located outside of the institutionalised structures of the school and situated in the institutionalised structures of public broadcasting policy and practice (Giroux, 2004; Chidester, 2008). Mandated, through national policy derived from the 1996 Constitution, the public broadcaster has an obligation to provide educational programming about religion. Viewed in light of a constitutional commitment to religious pluralism and a national recognition of the educational and social value of Religion Education, the SABC through programmes such as *Siyakholwa* has been at the forefront of the mediatization of religious pluralism in the post 1994 state.

Firstly, this paper will offer a short description of *Siyakholwa*'s content and format. Secondly, a brief description of the mediatization of religion and religious plurality will be provided. Finally, the ways in which *Siyakholwa* mediates and affirms the constitutional commitment to religious pluralism that is promulgated as a core constituent of Religion Education will be discussed.

### ***Siyakholwa – We Believe: Religion Education on Television***

When the SABC commissioned for the production of a children's multi-faith programme it envisioned a programme that would focus on:

- 1) teaching about different religions;

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- 2) religious diversity and appreciation for this;
  - 3) multi-religion rights;
  - 4) building positive religious and national pride;
  - 5) creating an attitude of tolerance and understanding between children of different religious backgrounds;
  - 6) facilitating communication between children and peers, parents, and friends regarding topics related to religion. (SABC Call for Proposals, 2006)

*Siyakholwa* is a studio and live action-based programme, which consists of four segments that together address a different topic every week. The series is filmed both inside a studio environment and outside of the studio in various public places. Each episode consists of three studio-based segments that include interactions between the presenter Thandi and a group of children in studio, a puppet skit where two puppets engage in a discussion about a topic based on religion or a related theme, and story time. The show is anchored by one female presenter, Thandi, and two puppets, Musa and Dudu. Thandi is a young woman who although a church-going Christian has many friends from different religions, she is always interested in learning more about her friends' faiths on *Siyakholwa*. Musa is a librarian and a wise old sage who has a wealth of knowledge on world religions and culture. Dudu is a seven year old girl who spends a great deal of time in the library that Musa runs. She is scripted as having an exceptionally enquiring mind and with her incessant questioning seems to ask all the questions that the child at home might have.

The producers of *Siyakholwa* use both the religious and secular South African calendar in order to determine the content and transmission date of each episode. At the time that my research was conducted, 140 episodes of *Siyakholwa* had been produced and screened by the SABC. Based on the content of each episode and informed by policy provisions, I was able to develop three categories for analysis. The categories are the following: multi-faith, faith-specific, and life orientation episodes. Multi-faith episodes are categorised as episodes that deal with more than one religious tradition. In faith-specific episodes, one religious tradition is explored in detail. However, it is important to emphasise that even in the faith-specific episodes the content is meant to be presented in an educational manner. Drawn directly from the 2003 Policy I found the category of life orientation useful for identifying the episodes that did not have a specific religious orientation.

Under the category of faith-specific episodes, *Siyakholwa* has featured *Judaism, Christianity, The Baha'i Faith, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Pagan Religions, African Religions, Rastafarianism, and Chinese Religions* through basic introductory episodes and more topic specific episodes such as *Prayer in African Traditional Religion, Water in Islam, Women in Christianity, and Companions in Hinduism*. Under the multi-faith category topics such as *Holy Books, Sacred Space, and Rites of Passage* have been presented. Life orientation episodes much like the school subject, showcase an eclectic assortment of topics such as *Justice and Fairness, Managing Money, Pets, Hello Winter, My Body, and Role Models*.

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## Mediatised Religious Pluralism

The mediatiation of religion as a concept and theory that is concerned with the multiple ways in which the relationships between religion and media have resulted in an arrangement wherein religion has to some extent become dependent on the logic of the media to ensure its continued presence and relevance in society, has been explored in great detail by a number of scholars working particularly in North American and Northern European contexts (Hjarvard, 2011; Lovhiem & Lynch, 2011; Morgan, 2011; Lynch, Mitchell & Strhan, 2012; Lovheim, 2013; Morgan, 2013). Due to time constraints I am unable to provide an in-depth discussion however, I propose that one of the main weaknesses of the mediatiation of religion theory, which diminishes much of its relevance to the South African context is an over-emphasis on the socio-cultural processes that place media in a position of power over religion, and an implicit dismissal of the politics that play a critical role in regulating the ways both religion and media, interact and operate within the public milieu.

I propose that the particularities of the South African context determine a definition of the mediatiation of religion that is cognisant of the manner in which religion and media have both been reconfigured by the post 1994 nation building efforts. This includes, but is not limited to, the adoption of the 1996 Constitution with its progressive Bill of Rights, the democratic overhaul of the SABC, the establishment of a number of auxiliary state bodies in support of freedom of religion and freedom of expression, and the implementation of regulatory policies. In this view, the mediatiation of religion in South Africa at least as it relates to the most accessible and pervasive form of media, public broadcasting is a profoundly political concept, process, and project.

Consequently, religion's presence in public broadcasting is secured not only through its dependence of media and technological "logic" but also through an extensive network of regulatory policies and practices. Given the close ties between broadcast media and nation building endeavours, the mediatiation of religious pluralism on SABC programming is a constitutional and educational imperative.

While religious diversity is a social fact with which, religious pluralism on the other hand is contested in terms of policy and practices, in both politics and the broader public sphere. According to Beckford (2003, p. 81):

...Religious Pluralism is best considered as a term denoting a normative or ideological view holding that the diversity of religious outlooks and collectivities is, within limits, beneficial and that peaceful co-existence between religious collectivities is desirable. But even as a positive value, pluralism is complex and variable. It can be politically contentious, especially is the focus on diversity for its own sake distracts attention from the reality of gross imbalances between faith communities in power and access to justice.

*Siyakholwa* adopts and affirms the state's commitment to both Religion Education and religious pluralism. In order to shed some light on the ways in which *Siyakholwa*

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mediatises religious pluralism, the following section discusses how the notion of equity and tolerance as conditions of religious plurality is enacted through the programme material.

From a cursory glance of a list of the 140 episodes that were screened over four years, it is clear that much effort has been made firstly, to ensure that religious diversity is depicted, and secondly that it is depicted in an almost entirely positive light. While the programme has certainly covered the breadth of religions in South Africa, it has also done much work on exploring various topics within religious groups as standalone issues. For instance, while the programme has produced a generic, introductory episode about Islam, it has also produced a number of other episodes about Islam. Including *Water in Islam*, *Ramadan*, and *Identity in Islam* as well as incorporating Islam specific content into multi-faith episodes. Of course, the extent to which the programme effectively meets the educational outcomes set out in the 2003 Policy warrants extensive testing; however, it appears that attempts at providing representational equity in terms of content about, among and within religions have been made. Furthermore, it should be noted that this approach shows great potential for advancing the socially beneficial consequences, such as the reduction of prejudice, an increase in toleration, expanded understanding, and an appreciation and respect for difference that the 2003 Policy and broadcasting policy envision.

Multi-faith and life orientation episodes, in particular, tend to offer a platform for harnessing the social benefits of Religion Education effectively. Similar to the position of the 2003 Religion in Education Policy, tolerance is highlighted as an important outcome of programming according to religious broadcasting policy. In both policies, tolerance is not considered in a superficial manner. Instead, it is seen as a state of acceptance based on the understanding and appreciation of the differences of other people. South Africans are not asked to be tolerant because the constitution mandates them to be, but because they have come to understand and appreciate religions, values and cultures of the “others”. The multi-faith episodes deliberately place religions in conversation with each other, usually about an uncontroversial topic, that there may be divergent opinions on, but that eventually through dialoguing and exploration are found to share more commonalities than differences. This raises concerns about the manufacturing of uniformity in the pursuit of building national unity and the fulfilment of broadcasting and educational policy.

## Conclusion

It has been suggested that public broadcasting constitutes a site for public pedagogy for Religion Education and that the mediatisation of Religion Education and religious pluralism as illustrated by the example of *Siyakholwa*, is related to the same project of religion in public education in which the 2003 Policy is involved. In doing so, this paper has hoped to raise questions about the potential and limitations of projects in mediatised religious pluralism when thinking about the state and future of Religion Education.

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