

Thoughts on the compulsory teaching of history – Tendai Chitsike



A monthly column that reflects on living in the Kingdom of God.

With the announcement by South Africa's Education Minister that the teaching of history will become a compulsory subject up to and including Matriculants, history is in the news again.

This move has been on the cards for some time. In a 2014 article in the *Saturday Star*, the paper records that the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) intensified the call for history to be made a compulsory subject in the school curriculum, "the goal of which is to produce patriotic young South Africans, who can appreciate the 'road we've travelled as a nation' and who are willing to contribute to building the 'developmental state we envisage'."

Informed by Biblical worldview, we should ask: should such teaching history be made compulsory and Afro-centric? What could the motive behind this initiative be, and why should history matter at all in the first place?

Before we delve into the content issue, we should ask: What is our primary identity? The way we answer this will have radical implications on what follows. If we are primarily defined by

our ethnicity and nationality, then we will ultimately be seen as a tool of a particular state, ethnicity or continent.

From this standpoint, it is not difficult to see how the teaching of history will be used to promote these narrow interests, showing a particular group in a good light and those not from that group in a bad light.

This is my first red flag, before any content is even debated. It is a red light because I have seen how history has been manipulated by governments to dehumanise individuals into tools of the state.

This has sadly occurred regardless of whether the governments were Communist, Fascist or simply nationalist. It all began with devaluing the individual and exchanging their primary identity from being a unique creation made in the image of God, to a tool for the state.

The Biblical truth concerning identity is radically different and radically freeing for the learning of history and learning as a whole. Being made in the image of God, and given the world in which to bring the Kingdom of God, we are not limited by, or tools, of any ethnicity, nation or even continent.

Now onto content. I am all for being relevant to South Africa and Africa. Nevertheless, to be centred on any ethnicity or continent will be impoverishing at best, and disastrous at worst.

Why? Because to study history we must embark on a study of truth and human flourishing wherever it leads us. If a particular product exists exclusively in a remote corner of Canada, and it could be used here in South Africa to save lives, would we reject it because it is not African in origin? Of course not!

Why? Because the use of the product will result in greater human flourishing, regardless of its origin. The life-saving

lessons of history should be no different. As the saying goes: those who forget the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them.

Our quest, therefore, should be to discover truths from history that are of cardinal importance for human flourishing, regardless of where they come from. If they come from South Africa and Africa, great, but what if they don't?

If we sacrifice precious truths at the altar of ethnic or nationalistic insecurity, current and future generations will suffer. By all means, let's contextualise. But let us never abandon timeless lessons because they did not happen on our battlefields or in our parliaments.

Which lens should we use?

It seems clear from the comments of government sources that the new proposed direction of the curriculum is an attempt to depose Eurocentrism with Afrocentrism. Such an attempt is reminiscent of *Animal Farm's* revolution that maintained domination of the animals while simply exchanging one form of authoritarian leader with another.

As Claire Lehmann, editor of *Quillette* magazine recently tweeted: When people talk about "neo-Marxist post-modernism" they mean this: the inability to see anything except through the lens of one group oppressing another. Marxist superstructures applied to gender/race/sexuality/etc.

This is the current zeitgeist form of seeing the world, and it may well be the lens used in reshaping the curriculum. But what if we used a different lens – that of pursuing truth and ideas that lead to human flourishing?

What if human nature is not defined on the basis of class, ethnicity or gender? In Jesus' day, the established norm was that Jews were the good guys and everyone else were the bad guys. Yet Jesus taught us something radically different.

Notice how He often gave the most inconvenient heroes the lead role despite them not being Jewish, from the good Samaritan to the Roman centurion who had more faith than everyone else in Israel.

Jesus was teaching us through these examples that the lens of truth transcends class, ethnicity and gender. This is so messy, yet so necessary.

Messy because it messed with the good guys/ bad guys narrative of His day, and necessary because it points everyone to a new world: a world that is not what we thought, a world where some bad guys look like us and some good guys don't: pointing us to another underlying rationale for how to determine who is good or bad, and what is good or bad, that transcends the human constructs we have built our lives on.

This lens is so desperately needed in our day because these constructs are defining society, and therefore the study of history. Yet Jesus teaches us that they are at best incomplete, and at worst deceptive and destructive.

Applying a different lens to the slave trade

Let's look at the slave trade. I spoke more about this in a previous article that [you can read here](#). On my last search, the Trans-Atlantic slave trade was an important feature on the South African school curriculum. Good, and there are many lessons that can be learned from this.

But what we don't see at all, is the East African and Arab-Islamic slave trade, which occurred for longer, took more slaves and was in many ways even more dehumanising. When we take this approach we miss out on many inconvenient but necessary truths: that this open sore of the world was highlighted by a white missionary by the name of David Livingstone, meaning that but for his intervention and giving it worldwide attention, this evil practice would have continued.

We miss out on the fact that this was (and in some cases still is) a practice that saw North Africans, Middle East Arabs and even southern Africans benefit at the expense of fellow Africans. Lessons like this are absolutely vital. They reveal the truth of human nature, and they point us away from the erroneous narrative that human flourishing is ethnocentrically derived.

A Moore wrote the following in a 2014 publication of the *Atlanta Black Star*: "Some historians estimate that between AD 650 and 1900, 10 to 20 million people were enslaved by Arab slave traders.

"Others believe over 20 million enslaved Africans alone had been delivered through the trans-Saharan route alone to the Islamic world...Dr John Alembellah Azumah in his 2001 book, *The Legacy of Arab-Islam in Africa* estimates that over 80 million black people died en route..."The Arab slave trade typically dealt in the sale of castrated male slaves...to prevent them from reproducing. About six of every 10 boys bled to death during the procedure, according to some sources, but the high price brought by eunuchs on the market made the practice profitable...The Arab slave trade was the longest yet least discussed of the two major slave trades. It began in seventh century as Arabs and other Asians poured into northern and eastern Africa under the banner of Islam."The Arab trade of blacks in Southeast Africa predates the European transatlantic slave trade by 700 years. Some scholars say the Arab slave trade continued in one form or another up until the 1960s, however, slavery in Mauritania was criminalised as recently as August 2007."

It doesn't end there. Black Africans also played a role. Benin's President Kerekou, who in recent years had made his own commitment to Christ, invited political and church leaders to his nation so his tribal leaders could seek reconciliation with African Americans.

Brian Johnson, an African-American organizer, said the realisation that Blacks sold other Blacks into slavery has been difficult for many African Americans to handle. "This made it difficult to hold the White man responsible," he explained as we spoke.

"This creates some problems in our own psyche. We have to deal with another angle to this... It's not merely a Black-White thing." The problem is in human hearts, Johnson believes. "All have sinned," he claims, quoting the *New Testament*. "All of us need to confess our wrong and appeal to [God] for forgiveness."

The example of colonial and post-colonial Africa

Or how about a more recent example. No doubt there will be studies on those who played a role in ending apartheid and other evils perpetrated in the colonial era. Good. But will the curriculum delve into the unsavoury aspects of Africa's post-colonial experience as well?

As historian Paul Johnson points out: "By January 1968 Africa had experienced sixty-four military coups, attempted coups and mutinies, and by 1975 twenty of the forty-one states were ruled by military or military-civil juntas. Out of forty-five African countries only four leaders were democratically chosen and only six out of 150 had ever voluntarily relinquished power, by 1991." Messy indeed.

What this lens teaches about history and life

Where would all of this lead us? Hopefully to a greater search for truth and ideas that lead to human flourishing, wherever in the world they come from.

Hopefully to a study of how Jesus Christ has been the most profound and positive influence on virtually every area of human endeavour in history.

Hopefully to the truth conveyed by CS Lewis that "All that we call human history—money, poverty, ambition, war,

prostitution, classes, empires, slavery – [is] the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy.”

Hopefully to the truth conveyed by Soviet prison camp survivor Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn that the battle line between good and evil runs through the heart of every man.

If you are thinking: who then can stand, then you are on the road to seeing the value of a Biblical view of history. Here, God affirms the value of people from every tribe and tongue.

Secondly, the Bible and therefore Christianity is unique in that it gives a record not only of the successes of its heroes and heroines, but also the failures.

It is self-critiquing and can display the failings of its adherents because its security is not in what people have done; but in God’s redemption. Without this, we are hopelessly insecure, and we will use history to justify all our actions and vilify all those of the “other”.

In doing so, we are bound to never learn from history, regardless of whether we approach the subject from Eurocentrism, Afrocentrism, or any other such lens.

As an aside, can someone please do a sociological study of the correlation between the eventual suppression of thought and countries that insist on compulsory teaching of history/and or politics? I may be wrong, but I have a hunch that it may bring up some interesting results.