



Interfaith Relations: Inclusive and Transforming Christian Mission in a Religious Pluralistic Africa

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<p>Chief Editor Web: www.ijsd.org Email: info@ijsd.org</p> <p>Editing Oversight Impericals Consultants International Limited</p>	<p>Abstract: <i>In the ongoing theological conversations, the relationship between the Christian mission and interfaith relations is central. This paper notes the contention between the two variables, where some scholars argue that building relationships with people from other religions is not part of the Christian mission. The essay uses a descriptive survey design with a qualitative desk review approach. Three research questions guide the study: Understand the challenges posed by religious plurality to the church in Africa, Establish the relationship between the church's mission and Christian-Muslim relations in Africa and Propose a biblical principle of fairness to religious experience as a critical element of the African Christian Mission. The essay underpins its argument on Hick's Pluralism Theory and Allport's Intergroup Contact Theory, which emphasises the need for constructive dialogue and contact between people of different backgrounds and orientations, including religion. The essay discusses the challenges of religious diversity and the relationship between the church's mission and interfaith relations while advocating for a biblical principle of fairness to guide the Christian approach to interfaith engagement. The essay argues that interfaith relation is an integral part of the Christian mission in today's world. The church will be engaged in a holistic and transforming mission if it listens and reacts to God's actions in all people and all places without discrimination. A comprehensive understanding of interfaith relations within the environment or landscape of Mission is needed to disentangle any implications these entities may have on theology if they are not well understood, enunciated, and accomplished. The paper culminates in a series of recommendations to enhance an inclusive and transforming Christian mission, such as the church's involvement in interfaith dialogue, incorporating interfaith studies into theological education, and fostering collaborative community initiatives. Ultimately, it posits that a holistic approach to Christian mission can enrich faith communities and contribute to enduring peace and development in African societies.</i></p> <p>Keywords: <i>interfaith relations, Christian mission, religious plurality</i></p>
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1.1 Background of the study

In the ongoing theological discourse, the pivotal role of Christian Mission and Dialogue in a religiously pluralistic world has been a significant focus. The discussion has primarily revolved around the relationship between Christianity and the Christian message of other religions. However, it is essential

to recognise that some Christian theologies have yet to fully comprehend the theological imperative of building interfaith relations, particularly Christian-Muslim relations. This paper will delve into this theological imperative, underlining its urgency in the face of increasing religious diversity, its significance, and its implications on the Christian mission. It offers a comprehensive understanding of the importance of interfaith relations and its impact on Christianity and Islam. Christianity and Islam, the two main and significant religions embraced by most of the world's population, significantly represent the global population and environment (Effungani & Mavole, 2018). Their values influence and shape the worldview and lived experiences of the majority, including those in Africa. Relations between Christians and Muslims have the potential not just to impact but significantly transform the global state of affairs, fostering peace and sustainable development. Despite the challenges of inherited prejudice, misunderstandings, and assumptions, this relationship holds a promising potential for peace and development, inspiring us to work towards these goals.

Christian-Muslim relations, part of the broader academic understanding of interfaith relations or inter-religious dialogue, require Christians and Muslims to relate across religious frontiers. This relationship entails mutual understanding, tolerance, and peaceful co-existence between Christians and Muslims. This interaction exceeds the conventional meaning of dialogue and is a comprehensive engagement of adherents of the two religions. The relationship requires that Christians and Muslims should work together for the common good of humanity despite the different theological languages and doctrines between the two faith traditions. This relationship requires an honest engagement, which begins with understanding and accepting the existing differences. Christian-Muslim relations are against theological relativism that seeks to say that all religions are the same. It continues beyond the academic study of religion and is a practical relationship between religious people. This practical relationship is not to convert one another, nor does it encourage syncretism. However, it respects the missionary element of both religions to propagate the Gospel (Christians) and for Muslims to carry out "Dawah" without polemics (PROCMURA, 2014).

The relationship between Christianity and Islam has been marked mainly by misunderstandings and conflicts rather than by understanding and peaceful co-existence despite a common Abrahamic heritage (Effungani & Mavole, 2018). Some Christians and Muslims are sceptical about Christian-Muslim relations and their implications on Christianity. Filimon (2015) notes that the ambiguity and tension between mission work and interfaith dialogue or relations with people of other faiths are familiar issues. The concern has been around questions such as: Can mission and interfaith relations go together? Are interfaith ties with people of other faiths replacing the mission of the church? Of what importance are these different religions to Christian theology? Does the Christian mission still target those of other religions to bring them into the faith? How can this be done when interfaith relations have taken pride of place? This fear arises as people find it challenging to respond to pertinent questions regarding the relationship between the church's mission and building relationships with people of other faith traditions. This paper seeks to answer the above questions by examining religious plurality, its attendant challenges, Christian mission, and interfaith relations while proposing the biblical principle of fairness as a strategic underpinning for a comprehensive and convincing response to the above question.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The contemporary landscape presents a significant challenge for religious traditions, including Christianity, as they navigate an increasingly pluralistic world. Many Christians reside in societies

marked by diverse religious beliefs and practices, which necessitates evaluating how they engage with individuals from different faith backgrounds while living their Christian faith. As globalisation intertwines political, economic, and spiritual dimensions, communities face the pressure of geographical and social isolation, compelling a rethinking of their interconnectedness. Thus, there is an emerging awareness that humanity's survival relies on collaboration and dialogue across religious divides to effectively address pressing global issues such as injustice, conflict, healing in a fractured world and spirituality. The persistent presence of religious extremism and militancy exacerbates the urgent need for constructive inter-religious relations, underscoring the reality that religious identities and loyalties can often fuel international and inter-ethnic conflicts. There is, therefore, pressure on people to collaborate in resolving the world's challenges, which is what Christianity has to help Christians do adequately. The greatest challenge facing our religious traditions is the mission of bringing healing and wholeness to the fractured human community. In other words, we are challenged to develop a spiritual climate and a theological approach that contributes to creative and positive relationships among the world's religious traditions. As Christians, we seek a Christianity that meets the needs of its people in a growing pluralistic world.

1.3 Study objectives

The main goal of this paper is to provide a holistic approach to the Christian mission, which will meet the needs of the people in a religiously pluralistic Africa. The following objectives will help achieve this goal.

1.3.1 Specific Objectives

- i. Understand the challenges posed by religious plurality to the church in Africa
- ii. Establish the relationship between the mission of the church and Christian-Muslim relations in Africa
- iii. Propose a biblical principle of fairness to religious experience as a critical element of the African Christian Mission.

1.4 Literature review

In this section, the theoretical framework and related empirical reviews are presented.

1.4.1 Theoretical framework

Conversations on the theology of Missions have significantly contributed to the theology of religions. Theories on possible Christian relationships with people from other religious traditions have been discussed substantively, one of which is Hicks's Pluralism theory.

Hick's Pluralism Theory: Hick circulated his pluralism theory in 1995. According to Hick (1995), all major world religions can lead one to salvation. Pluralism interprets a global religious reality where people worship the same God. With this reality, it would be faulty for any religion to claim an absolute right to the salvific truth; such a religion will be faulty. Hicks's theory became prominent among other scholars such as Knitter, Samartha, and Smith. The theory moves away from the earlier proposed theory that centred more on the Church and Jesus Christ for the salvation of humanity to a God-centred perspective. Hick argues that the cosmos of faith is centred upon God and not upon Christianity or any religion. Hick was in search of a Christian attitude that acknowledges the presence of other faiths, and this became the premise of his Pluralism theory (Carey, 2010). The theory is much-admired for underscoring divinity across various religions. However, it comes under scrutiny for suggesting that all religious paths offer

equally valid routes to salvation, which invites accusations of theological relativism (D'costa, 1986). John Hick's theory has drawn criticism for its perceived reductionism, as it tends to downplay the significance of religious disparities (Carey, 2010). This reductionist approach presents a challenge, as authentic interfaith dialogue and relationships hinge not on overlooking differences but on embracing and comprehending them. At the crux of the matter lies the thorny epistemological question concerning the legitimacy of religions and, more pertinently, the quest to identify which religion lays claim to absolute truth. This predicament looms large for scholars entrenched in interfaith relations as they grapple with the unavoidable task of discerning ultimate truth within the myriad beliefs espoused across traditions. While pursuing absolute truth remains an inescapable quandary, it invariably raises a profound conundrum: What precisely constitutes this elusive absolute truth?

The epistemological exploration necessitates transcending the mere identification of the religion perceived to hold the key to ultimate truth; it must delve into how Christian doctrine can effectively address the theological dimensions of human existence within an increasingly diverse religious milieu. This weighty consideration demands forthright discussions and the development of a comprehensive theoretical framework within the theological sphere. Engaging in candid dialogues and crafting an overarching theoretical construct is imperative for Christianity to navigate its divine mandate within a landscape characterised by religious pluralism. These imperatives underscore the need for a nuanced and deliberate approach that acknowledges the intricacies inherent in interfaith engagement and endeavours to uphold the integrity of Christian tenets and mission amidst the rich tapestry of diverse religious beliefs.

Allport's Contact or Intergroup Contact Theory: The intergroup contact hypothesis proposed by Allport (1954) suggests the positive effects of contact between people and groups from diverse backgrounds. The theory argues that bringing people together and having contacts will reduce stereotypes and prejudices that breed conflicts and violence (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). He highlights four key points where contact between people can occur: intergroup cooperation, equal status, common goals, and support by social and institutional authorities. According to Allport, the contact situation must exhibit these factors to some degree to bring about the cross-group interactions necessary for reducing prejudices. Pettigrew and Tropp (2008) employed the theory and confirmed that the theory has been able to reduce prejudice by reducing anxiety and fear among groups. Evaluating the theory further, Aspi A (1984) notes that applying this theory in a high school with various groups reduced segregation and enhanced intergroup relations.

Intergroup Contact Theory fill the gaps and shortfalls of Hick's Pluralism theory, which suggests that all religious paths offer equally valid routes to salvation, leading to its accusation of theological relativism and reductionism. The Intergroup Contact Theory Complements Hick's theory in this paper in that Hicks presents a God centre focus where all religions should focus and work for the good of all. Allport stresses that, regardless of which group or religion people belong to, working together will lead to better results in reducing stereotypes. This theory informs the present paper on how the Christian mission needs to be in contact with people from different religions to build relationships and collaborate for peace. In doing so, Christians will witness the gospel without being polemical, and the gospel will bring life to all.

1.4.2 Empirical review

Discussing religious plurality and its attendance challenges, some scholars have used religious plurality and pluralism interchangeably, like Banchoff (2007), who states that religious pluralism is the interaction between religious groups in societies and politics. He uses both words, religious plurality and religious pluralism, to refer to religious diversity. Scholars such as Idrisu and Farid (2022) differentiate between

the concepts. They argue that the two words hold different meanings. Pluralism is a philosophy or an ideology, while plurality is a variety of concepts. Since pluralism is a philosophy, it denotes a doctrine that promotes multiple religious realities instead of monism. Religious plurality, on its part, is more of religious diversity, which is the presence of many or plural religions in a society. The above position finds credence in Hick's (2004) submission. According to him, religious pluralism claims that all religions aim for the same truth but employ different paths to get to it. Mohd (2013) agrees with Hick's submission as he analyses religious pluralism from his Muslim perspective. He intimates that religious pluralism refers to the equality of religions. This implies that there is truth and salvation in all world religions. Therefore, followers of different religions can be considered Muslims and enter heaven.

Mohd (2013) and Hick's (2004) submission, explained above, does not align with the central belief system of Islam and, therefore, risks the sin of shirk in Islam. This understanding of religious pluralism argues that the fact that religious pluralism is revered for meaning equality of religions where every religion is the same and heading in the same direction is problematic to Islamic teachings since Islam holds on to Tawhīd, affirming the oneness of Allah, rejecting any associations. Their understanding of pluralism, in my opinion, also undermines the uniqueness of the Christian experience, expressed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Based on this exposition, I will prefer to work with the world's religious plurality in this paper, referring to religious diversity and the presence of multiple religions. I do not undermine the possibility of equality in terms of religious experience and salvation. However, I hold firmly that each religion is unique and different, and this uniqueness brings multiple advantages that should be harnessed.

Asadu1 et al. (2020) discuss religious pluralism and its challenges to the church. According to them, religious pluralism is the existence of multiple religions, where each religion is accepted as a legitimate way of worship and provided with equal opportunity to grow without prejudice or discrimination. The scholars noted the importance of recognising the religiously pluralistic society and the importance of the peaceful coexistence of religious people. However, they argue that religious pluralism/plurality negatively impacts the church because of its flexibility, which has the propensity to encourage syncretism. They argue that religious pluralism must be checked to avoid religious ambivalence, which may threaten Christian theology, which teaches salvation only in Jesus Christ. Uzoma (2004) is of the same view and argues that religious plurality is more of a curse than a blessing and requires further investigation. According to her argument, religion can substantively build cohesion only when a single religion monopolises truth in society.

Baum (1995) has a differing position from that of Asadu1 et al. (2020) and Uzoma (2004). He uses the words interchangeably and notes that religious pluralism is the presence of many religions. He positively affirms religious pluralism and argues that religious pluralism is not a hindrance but a helper of the Christian church. It can only be a helper if the church, from a sociological point of view, is willing to respect and cooperate with others for a holistic service to humanity. While one cannot deny the many conflicts generated between religions and members of their communities, the argument that religious plurality weakens religion's influence, power, and position in acting as a cohesive force in society is not substantively convincing. Scholars have differing positions when it comes to understanding and accepting religious plurality. Some see it as a blessing, and others see it as a curse. Vusimuzi (2021) explains this tension and notes that evangelism and interfaith relations have a distinctive but complementary relationship. Both promote mutual respect and consider intercultural communication and

contextualisation. Christians could use evangelism and interfaith dialogue to further God's mission in contemporary society.

1.4 Research methods and design

This paper employs a descriptive survey design and a qualitative desk review methodology, where secondary data is reviewed, analysed, and consolidated to contribute to the study's objectives.

1.5 Discussion

Religious plurality and its attendance challenges

The African continent is a religious continent. I want to describe it as a religious orphanage continent, where a majority, if not all, of foreign religions are peacefully hosted. In addition, the growing metamorphoses of religions, through new groups and sects, find the African continent a fertile ground for their growth or development. The quest for newness or that from distant lands remains a big dream for many Africans. It is obvious that when one establishes a church today in Africa, the church will be filled with worshipers in just two weeks, either thirsty for the word of God or searching for miracles or many more. Islam in Africa is open to the wave of religious growth and transformation, as is the case of Christianity. The emergence of Salafist and Wahhabi groups and many more continue to change the religious atmosphere in diverse ways. This scenario presents the image of the spiritual fertility of the African continent now than it was before. Let me, at this point, say that Christianity and Islam were foreign religions that were introduced in Africa to a people born with and into an Indigenous religion. Despite their provenance, Christianity and Islam have imbibed themselves into the African soil, making the African continent a triple religious heritage. It has grown to be a multi-religious African continent. Today, we find families subscribing to different religions, the father being a Muslim, the mother a Christian or vice versa and the siblings sharing both religions than it was before. In Cameroon, Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, and others, it is no longer tenable to say that Muslims are only in the northern parts of the countries. At present, we have scenarios of mosques and church buildings facing each other in different parts of various African countries. Religious plurality is here to say that it is a reality we must face and live with.

A Sunday school teacher taught the children and said that Muslims do not believe in God, so they will not make heaven. One of the kids lifted her hand and asked the Sunday school teacher if she said Mama Lulu would go to hell. Mama Lulu is our neighbour. She always gives me food when I am hungry and my mother is absent from work. Hell is for bad people; Mama Lulu cannot go to hell. Looking at this conversation between the Sunday school kid and the teacher, we must face the existential reality and not live in a dream world that does not exist. Diana Eck agrees with my above submission. In her own words, she explains:

We cannot live in a world in which our economics and markets are global, our Political awareness is global, our business relationships take us to every continent, and the internet connects us with colleagues half a world away and yet live on Friday, Saturday or, Sunday with ideas of God that are essentially provincial, imagining that somehow the one we call God has been primarily concerned with us and our tribe (Eck, 2001. P.10),

Religious plurality, which is the reality of the presence of various religious traditions, calls for an attitude that articulates the peaceful co-existence of various religious belief systems in society. Multi-religious context, or religious plurality, is not a recent global reality. Multiple religions have existed globally for

ages, and Africa, as mentioned above, is no exception. “The reality of religious plurality has received considerable attention and more recognition globally in the twenty-first century than before. Globalisation and its commensurate have accentuated this reality and have brought humanity and their cultures and religions into the “living rooms” of each other, regardless of the different religious persuasions.” (Effungani & Mavole, 2018). There is no Africa for Christians alone or Muslims alone. Religious people must learn to share the religious global space with the religious other. These existential realities of societal interdependence and the rise of radicalisation and violent extremism, which entangle religion, have heightened the quest for peaceful co-existence among members of different religious traditions.

Religious plurality has an intra-religious component where members of the same religion, such as Christianity, are diverse in their theological, hermeneutical, and doctrinal interpretations based on their denominations and influenced by the church's traditional heritage. Such pluralism has been perceived negatively as a source of intra-Christian conflicts. In some cases, violence has erupted among Christians from various denominations simply because they differ in their interpretation of some theological thoughts. The challenge of intra-religious pluralism is not limited to Christianity but is also strongly articulated and practised in Islam because of the different groups and divisions within Islam. The challenges posed by religious plurality have made some scholars and practitioners of religion consider religious plurality as a huge problem, which they would like to “help God to solve”.

I want to offer differing interpretations of Uzoma’s (2004) position, and I hold that religious plurality is a blessing, not a curse. Religious plurality becomes a problem when people practically refuse to accept the reality of its existence and employ violent means of rejecting this physical, spiritual and emotional veracity. Religious claims about God portray the divine being as the all-knowing creator who also controls the created order. This makes me think and also strongly assert that God is very much aware of the presence of various religions. I do not believe that the appearance of these religions on the global stage surprises God, who is omnipotent and omniscient. It makes sense to assume that religious plurality is within the knowledge of God. This is a position one continually advances with humility because one cannot authoritatively define the exact position of God in all this. Still, given what religious communities teach about knowledge, power, and goodwill of God, it is fair to assume that God has the power and could have made one religion the world’s religion if s/he so desired. I am convinced that there is a theology of choice at work among God’s children, which makes one believe that God allows and gives God’s creation the ability to choose and the good judgment to choose wisely and correctly. Most of the time, we do not choose, but we are born into those religious traditions.

The theological question imminent around this discussion is, did God create a particular religion? A monopoly of religion does not communicate in a real sense the absolute truth of that religion or does not provide legitimacy for that religion to build social cohesion. Instead, with a monopoly of religion, people are exposed to few religious perspectives and communities. Their choices of faith are limited or contrived, as some would want us to believe that people can and should be forced to practice a particular religion against their wishes and convictions; this will violate freedom of religion and belief.

Christian mission and interfaith relations

Generally, scholars have incompatible and controversial opinions on several issues. The divergent opinions are more evident in religious thought, especially in the nexus between the church's mission and

building relationships with people from other religions. The concept and definition of the church's mission have left missiologists and other theologians reflecting and having various and effective conversations and functional discussions on the theology of Missions. However, the missiological debate is not an emergent issue. The conversations and engagements have been ongoing in Christianity and Christendom, beginning with the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of June 1910. I will look at the definition of the church's mission before I continue with the analysis and nexus of the Mission of God and a relationship with the religious other. The mission requires that the one involved in the mission of God should be able to serve and work towards restoring, healing, and reconciling a broken world. Bosch's definition and analysis of Mission where underscores the fact that the Christian faith in itself is intrinsically missionary, and if the missionary element of Christianity is ignored, then Christianity is denied its reasons for existence. This is the premise of my understanding of Mission. According to Bosch, the mission is dynamic and not static; as a result, approximations are considered in the ongoing *missio Dei*. He underscores that Mission involves the dynamic relationship between God and the world (López-Gay, 1992).

The description of the church as a missionary in its very essence and the dynamic nature of the Mission are positive affirmations and relevant characteristics of the Christian mission. This calls for effective collaboration and humanity's participation in the *missio Dei*. The context in which mission is being carried out in the 21st century has not just changed but changed drastically, and this has necessitated a rethink on what it means theologically and practically for the church to be in Mission, as many more questions on the missionary character arise. The contextual shift makes it incumbent upon mission theology to employ various missiological approaches. These approaches will ensure that those active in Mission should take seriously several cross-cutting issues affecting humanity.

The new paradigm of the Christian Mission calls for a conscious realisation and consideration of practical missiology. This exceeds reflecting on theological and biblical injunctions but incorporates the experiences of the people, including the people from the margins, in a way that better articulates the modes and intentions of the Mission. Since the Edinburg 1910 conference, Christendom has grappled with how Christians can relate to and engage people from other religious traditions. Like all other World Mission Conferences, the Arusha 2018 Conference, under the theme "Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship," Continued the conversation on Mission in a rapidly changing context. My analysis of the theme and the discussions from the Arusha 2018 Mission conference shows that Missional theology in contemporary times is not just ecclesial fixed. The core of Mission theology is not anchored on the church's numerical growth or financial strength. In addition, missional theology is not confined to the theology of salvation but goes beyond this to include the needs and lived experiences of the people in society. (it is not just about going to heaven to enjoy the many mansions, but also how we bring heaven on earth so that we can enjoy the single rooms on earth, not forgetting that our neighbours from different religions may be sharing the apartments with us), This requires a disciple whom the Holy Spirit directs through the transforming grace of God to bring about peace and work to eradicate exclusions and discriminations of all kinds. This comprehensive approach to the Mission is consistent with its spiritual or evangelistic angle in the very sense of the word since the overwhelming aspect of the Mission itself is part of Christian spirituality.

Building relationships with the religious other is integral to the Christian Mission. It does not jeopardise the church's Mission but practically communicates the work of the missionary God. The assignment of

the Great Commission to make disciples allows Christians to relate with people from other religions. This necessitates an all-inclusive comprehension and practice of the *missio Dei* in a religiously pluralistic context. This understanding will consider not only the Great Commission but also the Great Commandment, which is love, as recorded in Matthew 22:37-40: We need a radical conceptualisation of the response to religious plurality at the centre of Christian mission. We need to mould theologians who can think and work dialogically and “*diapraxically*” in intellectual relationships with the religious other and can think systematically about how to articulate, dispense, and domesticate theology to meet the needs of the communities in a religiously pluralistic context.

The mission goes beyond orthodoxy to orthopraxis, building relationships and transcending boundaries. The church should rise to the occasion and be immediately and experientially aware of the religious other, Islam, in the case of Africa. The Christian church should move from selective listening to holistic listening, where they do not only listen to Christian voices but also animals, birds, plants, and humanity (God's creation) and be able to employ reasoning to connect the revelation of God to current happenings and avoid theological conservatism. The primary concern is more than considering a theological underpinning for Christian-Muslim relations, but more of a comprehensive understanding of interfaith relations within the environment or landscape of Mission to disentangle any implications that these entities may have on Mission theology, if not well understood and accomplished. My point of departure is the inclusive and transforming mission, which prides itself on what God does among all people through the church and the world. In my argument, the Christian Mission in contemporary times should always include love, collaboration, respect for differences, relationships, and critical dialogue with the religious other, alongside witnessing the gospel.

The biblical principle of fairness to religious experience

The epistemological question of the legitimacy of religions, or better still, which religion has the absolute truth, is a question that cannot be avoided. However, although this question cannot be avoided, it answers another sensitive question: what/which is the absolute truth? The epistemological question should not be limited to which religion has the absolute truth, but how can Christianity respond to theological anthropology about the Christian Mission within the growing religious pluralistic environment. This substantive and relevant concern requires honest conversations and an all-inclusive theoretical conceptualisation within the theological enterprise. I want to break a middle way between the various paradigms of the theology of religions and expound on the biblical principle of fairness to religious experience. This biblical principle is rooted in the very nature and manifestation of the Christian faith and knowledge. The Bible account in the book of Act 17:22-23 reads;

“So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: Men of Athens, I perceive that you are very religious in every way. For As I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription “to the unknown god. What therefore you worship as unknown this I proclaim to you.” (The Holy Bible, 2021, P. 1179).

The Apostle Paul did not make mockery or disrespect the religious experience of the people of Athens. He somewhat acknowledges the experience after which he presented God to the people. A theology of fairness to religious experience does not seek to validate that religious experience but to understand it. In my analysis of the biblical principle of fairness to religious experience, I argue strongly that exclusivism feeds hostility, inclusivism is compromising in its very nature, and pluralism undermines Christology, which is the uniqueness of Christianity. The biblical principle of fairness to religious experience

accommodates particularity and the plurality of religions.

This position prides itself primarily on the argument that a Christian within Christianity has the truth and belief that Christianity is the best religion and Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation. This orientation and understanding do not apply to people of other religions because they do not subscribe to the biblical teachings which influence Christian perceptions and judgments. However, Christians will work and live together in peace without being judgmental of people of other religions, even if Christians do not accept the doctrinal and theological positions of other religions. This position, however, does not contradict the fact that a Christian relationship with people from other religions is a theological and Missiological imperative. This calls for Christians to be peacemakers and to love their neighbours just as the Bible in Mark 12:31 says: “The second is this: you shall love your neighbour as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these” and Matthew 5:9 says “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God”. Also, James 3:18 says, “And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.”. When Christians undermine the biblical principle of fairness to religious experience, it becomes difficult to love people from other religions and to make peace with them, as assigned by the biblical scriptures.

Different scholars have analysed the concept of fairness to various extents. Some scholars see that the word fairness is relative and unbiblical. It is dynamic and fluid. Scholars might consider my position to be relative. However, fairness as an aspect of Christian ethics meets the threshold of Christian universalism. However, the principle of fairness to religious experience is biblical because it is drawn from the example of Paul in Athens. This reality creates spaces for Christians to fulfil the call to love, to make peace, and to witness the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Current trends

The rise of radicalisation and violent extremism, which entangle religion, have heightened the quest for peaceful co-existence among members of different religious traditions. The debate on Africa becoming the frontier for Islamic terrorism, in particular, has taken precedence in the last two decades. This phenomenon has assumed not just political connotations but religious ones as well. The growing menace and challenge posed by conflicts and violent extremism in some parts of Africa have brought in its wake a disturbing situation, threatening peace and peaceful co-existence among religions as well as intra-faith and inter-faith relations. Religion and religious people play a pivotal role in the community's life, and religion can also be used as an instrument for peace-building. On this note, interfaith or Christian-Muslim relations are necessary to bring religious people closer to understand one another and ensure peace and peaceful co-existence in the communities.

Since the Edinburg 1910 conference, Christendom has grappled with how Christians can relate to and engage people from other religious traditions. Like all other World Mission Conferences, the Arusha 2018 Conference, under the theme "Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship," Continued the conversation on Mission in a rapidly changing context. My analysis of the theme and the discussions from the Arusha 2018 Mission conference shows that Missional theology in contemporary times is not just ecclesial fixed. The core of Mission theology is not anchored in the numerical growth or strength of the church. In addition, missional theology is not confined to the theology of salvation but goes beyond this to include the needs and lived experiences of the people in society. The theme, “Transforming Discipleship”, of the Arusha 2018 mission conference requires a disciple directed by the

Holy Spirit through the transforming grace of God to bring about peace and work to eradicate exclusions and discriminations of all kinds. This comprehensive approach to Mission does not contradict or compromise the Mission's spiritual or evangelistic angle in the very sense of the word since the overwhelming aspect of the Mission itself is part of Christian spirituality.

Christian relationships with the religious other are an integral part of the Christian mission and do not jeopardise the church's mission; they practically communicate the work of the missionary God. The assignment of the Great Commission to make disciples allows Christians to relate with people from other religions. Some Christians consider relating with people from other religions problematic to the Mission of the church simply because, in their understanding, they have limited the Mission of the church to the Great Commission of making disciples. We need a comprehensive, or better still, an all-inclusive comprehension of the *Missio Dei* in a religiously pluralistic context. This is an understanding that will consider not only the Great Commission but also the Great Commandment, which is love, as recorded in Matthew 22:37-40:

1.6 My thesis

We need a radical conceptualisation of the response to religious plurality at the centre of the Christian mission. We need to mould theologians who can think and work dialogically and “*diapraxically*” in intellectual relationships with the religious other and can think systematically about how to articulate, mould, dispense, and domesticate theology to meet the needs of communities in a religiously pluralistic context. The gospel is not orthodoxy but orthopraxis, building relationships and transcending boundaries. The church should rise to the occasion and be immediately and experientially aware of the religious other. The Christian church should move from selective listening to holistic listening, where they not only listen to Christian voices but also animals, birds, plants, and humanity and be able to employ reasoning to connect the revelation of God to current happenings and avoid theological conservatism. The primary concern I am raising here is more than considering a theological underpinning for Christian-Muslim relations. Still, a comprehensive understanding of interfaith relations within the environment or landscape of Mission is needed to disentangle any implications these entities may have on theology if not well understood, enunciated, and accomplished. This, however, does not in any way curtail the theologies of religions or theological convictions for interfaith relations.

The argument and fears that introducing Islam to Christians may lead to syncretism are no longer justifiable because some Christians in the communities who have never had a formal introduction to Islam are faced with the reality of Islam and are engaging in what I term “unguided extreme interfaith relations”, where they worship in the mosque on Fridays and the church on Sundays. This syncretic practice is partly a result of a lack of understanding of interfaith relations and more so because sometimes the church has refused to discuss anything related to Islam with Christians. Scholarship and comprehension of Islam are part of theological education. An honest conversation with Christians about Islam is a significant point of departure for future theologians to remain theologically and pastorally relevant in Africa and for an inclusive and transforming mission.

The inclusive and transforming Mission, which prides itself in what God is doing among all people, will not contradict or compromise the spiritual or evangelistic angle of the Mission since the overwhelming aspect of the Mission itself is the core of Christian spirituality and evangelism. The epistemological question on the legitimacy of religion should not be limited to which religion has the “absolute truth”

but also question constructive conversations and suggestions on how Christianity can adequately respond to theological anthropology in its Mission within the growing religious pluralistic environment. This paradigm calls for a conscious realisation and consideration of practical missiology, which takes into cognisance the experiences of the people, including those who are different from the ecclesial community and those who are on the “margins”, in a way that better articulates the modes, as well as the intentions of the Mission. Therefore, in contemporary times, I argue that a critical dialogue should always be included to respect differences.

1.7 Conclusion

In the face of a rapidly changing global landscape marked by increasing religious diversity and the complexities of coexisting faith traditions, the imperative for interfaith relations, particularly between Christianity and Islam, cannot be overstated. The call for Christians to engage in constructive dialogue and build meaningful relationships with individuals of other faiths resonates deeply within the core mission of Christianity itself, which is fundamentally rooted in love, compassion, and the pursuit of peace. Engaging with religious pluralism is not merely a challenge to be managed; instead, it serves as an opportunity for growth, mutual enriching exchanges, and collaborative efforts toward addressing significant social issues plaguing societies, particularly in Africa. This paper has explored the theological underpinnings and practical implications of developing inclusive and transformative Christian mission frameworks that respect and honour the diversity of religious experiences. Understanding religious plurality as a salient reality is significant because it encourages respectful engagement rather than defensiveness or isolation. This paper discusses the relationship between the mission of the church and building relationships with people from other faiths, especially Islam. The paper argues that it is vital for the church to move from a restrictive view of mission as solely about conversion to a broader understanding that includes relational integrity with people of other faith traditions. Such a transformation will necessitate theological reflection and a practical reorientation of mission strategies prioritising interfaith collaboration, community engagement, and justice-focused actions. The church can significantly counter the rising extremism and division that threaten social harmony by embracing a comprehensive approach to the Christian mission that values dialogue, collaboration, and respect for differences.

1.8 Recommendations

Based on the findings and discussions presented in this paper, the following recommendations are proposed for a transformed Christian mission in a religiously pluralistic Africa, which considers enhancing interfaith relations as an integral part of it.

- a) Teach Christians to understand their Muslim neighbours
- b) Promote Interfaith Dialogue Programs for peaceful co-existence
- c) Incorporate Interfaith Studies in Theological Education
- d) Emphasize the Biblical Principle of Fairness

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