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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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## **Interfaith Dialogue and Christian Witness: Exploring the Challenges and Tensions Involved From a Ghanaian Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

The Church has over the years interacted in diverse ways with other faiths. Some have been brutal, confrontational and even lethal. Within the ecumenical movement, at a general level, there has been consensus that dialogue should be the approach with which the Church interacts with other faiths. At the same time, she has had to keep the charge of proclaiming the gospel of the redemptive work of God through the person and work of Jesus Christ. The combination of these two aspects of the Church has been very challenging and tension endowed. In this essay, the author explores these tensions and challenges; and some propositions to effectively combine the two tasks are also assessed.

**Keywords:** Ecumenical Movement; Church; Witness; Interfaith Dialogue; Religions; Ghanaian.

### **Introduction**

Right from its formative days, the Church begun to interact with Judaism from which it emerged. This interaction took confrontational dimensions and even more when Christianity moved beyond its heartland in Jerusalem, Judea into the “gentile” world where it encountered pagan religions. This encounter with other faiths has through the church age produced different ways of meeting the challenge it presents to the Church. Within the ecumenical movement, at a general level, there has been consensus that dialogue should be the approach with which the Church interacts with these other faiths as a way to meet this challenge. Especially with more organized faith bodies such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.

Dialogue with other faiths has meant, among other things, seeking cooperation with these other faiths for the pursuit of common goals\* or peaceful coexistence in a community.† It has also been viewed by others as a way to better appreciate other faiths. With these aims of interfaith dialogue, and the need for the Church to proclaim and invite all people to the reconciling love of God decisively revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ (which he commanded of his Church‡), the question naturally comes up how the Church can reconcile the two.

In other words, how can Christianity enter into dialogue with other faiths, and the same time position herself to fulfil this task? In this essay, I seek to explore the attendant challenges and

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\* Mvumbi (n.d)

† Küster (2014)

‡ Matthew 28:19-20

tensions that this issue brings to Church. I will present a brief background to interfaith dialogue and its presence in the ecumenical movement, look at its main forms, bases and goals, and also take a cursory gaze through the Bible on Jesus' charge of witness to the unsaved and even possible conversion. I will round it up looking at some propositions that have been put forward on how to reconcile gospel proclamation/witness with dialogue. These propositions will be assessed in the light of my background of growing up in Northern Ghana (a Muslim dominated north)

### **Background to interfaith dialogue, its forms and its presence in the ecumenical movement**

For better understanding in this section, it is imperative to define interreligious or interfaith dialogue. It has been variously defined in the literature: first, it is considered as a "(...) conversation between two (or more) believers of different religions or living faiths."<sup>\*</sup> Second, it is also defined as "(...) a happening that takes place between adherents of different religions."<sup>†</sup> Further, the New World Encyclopaedia views it as a "positive interaction between people of different faith communities."<sup>‡</sup> Therefore, based on these definitions inter alia, interreligious dialogue has to do with a relational disposition between and among different religions or faiths. Before proceeding, it is worth noting that interreligious and interfaith dialogue will be used interchangeably to mean the same thing in this essay.

Historically, even though the Church from her early stages interacted with other faiths as aforementioned, formal or organized interfaith dialogue is often traced to the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions: a coming together of representatives of different world religions from the East and West in Chicago in the year 1893.<sup>§</sup> Notwithstanding its setbacks of not representing all faiths and the representatives not being elected persons of the faiths they represented, the 1893 World Parliament of Religions is seen as a beginning point of a rather "positive assessments of other religions" than before.<sup>\*\*</sup> It is of use to also state that individuals like Martin Luther King Jr. have involved people of other faiths in the civil right movement in the US just as in South Africa, Christians, Muslims, Jews and people of other faiths protested together against the apartheid government.<sup>††</sup>

Within Christianity worldwide, especially in the ecumenical movement, issues of interfaith dialogue came up following the International Missionary Council (IMC) world conference in 1938; but it was at this stage considered as a preparatory means for evangelism.<sup>‡‡</sup> But two decades before that, the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, had set the stage for discussions on dealings with people of other faiths as its Commission 4 was given the title "The Missionary Message in Relation to Non-Christian Religions."<sup>§§</sup> Moreover, interreligious dialogue issues came up at the World Council of Churches (WCC) New Delhi assembly in 1961; the first assembly to discuss dialogue as a means of dealing with people of other faiths.<sup>\*\*\*</sup> That aside, the Vatican II "Declaration of the Relations of the Church with Non-Christian Religions" is considered as a seminal ecumenical document on the issue of interreligious dialogue in the ecumenical movement.<sup>†††</sup> In this document, Pope Paul VI declared a dialogical approach to people of other religions which the Catholic Church was to follow. Another important step in the ecumenical movement on interfaith dialogue was the creation of the sub-unit on Dialogue with People of Living Faith and Ideologies in 1971 by the WCC.<sup>††††</sup>

Also, the WCC has organized a number of interfaith dialogue consultations since the 1960s till date. Some of these consultations include: Kandy, Sri Lanka 1967 which affirmed a single

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\* Mvumbi (n.d), p.2

† Küster (2014)

‡ New World Encyclopedia (n.d)

§ New World Encyclopedia (n.d)

\*\* New World Encyclopedia (n.d)

†† New World Encyclopedia (n.d)

‡‡ Kinnamon (2004)

§§ Selvanayagam (2004), p.150

\*\*\* Kinnamon (2004)

††† Kinnamon (2004)

†††† Kinnamon (2004)

humanity as a basis of dialogue and considered dialogue as genuine lifestyle within a “multifaith context;”<sup>\*</sup> Colombo 1974 also iterated dialogue and saw the “interdependence of communities” and the need for cooperation to achieve “immediate goals” as the basis for dialogue;<sup>†</sup> in 1977 another consultation was held in Chiang Mai, Thailand which was to clarify the relation between dialogue and witness of the Church. Among other things, this consultation reaffirmed the positions of the Colombo 1974 and avoided the usage of “mission” and “evangelism” but rather emphasized the use of “Christian witness” which according to the consultation included the “sharing of the gospel in a dialogical encounter.”<sup>‡</sup>

Having given this background, by no means exhaustive, it is worthwhile indicating the forms of dialogue that have been enumerated in the field of interreligious dialogue. On this, Volker Küster<sup>§</sup> has given three forms of dialogue: 1) dialogue of life which he describes as taking place among people of different faiths living in a place for the purpose of peaceful coexistence; 2) he further mentions dialogue of minds which takes place among intellectual representatives of different religions; 3) and finally dialogue of the heart where the religious mystics of different faiths meet in the form of sharing interfaith prayers, songs, meditation etc. To these we add a fourth form of dialogue mentioned by Mvumbi:<sup>\*\*</sup> social dialogue where people of different faiths living in the same community come together to engage in a project or action for their common good (e.g. build a community hospital, market, school; fight for a common cause as happened in the civil right movement in the US and South Africa as aforementioned).

### **The aims and bases of interreligious dialogue**

It is equally important to not only give this background and forms of dialogue but to also tease out some goals that dialogue as an approach to other faiths is to achieve and on what bases it should take place. From the literature, one gets the sense that dialogue with other religions is to ensure peaceful coexistence among people of different faiths as indicated in Küster’s dialogue of life. What this essentially means is that dialogue is viewed as also achieving a religious conflict resolution goal as found in Mvumbi’s definition given in the preceding pages. In the early years of the ecumenical movement, especially after the 1938 World Conference of the International Missionary Council (IMC), dialogue with other faiths was to be regarded “as an element of, or preparation for, evangelism”<sup>††</sup> as said earlier.

Moreover, the WCC 7<sup>th</sup> assembly in Canberra 1991 did not only call for a “culture of dialogue” but also saw “dialogue as means of reconciliation.”<sup>‡‡</sup> The next assembly which was held in Harare in 1998 saw education and conflict resolution as basis for Christian dialogue with other faiths.<sup>§§</sup> Furthermore, the WCC consultation on living faiths in Kandy 1967 saw a single common humanity, as initially mentioned, as a basis for dialogue. Similarly, Group 3 of a WCC colloquium held in 1977 saw dialogue in the light of cooperating with other faiths for human development but said the basis of this cooperation should be secular since human development issues like peace and justice are variously defined by different faiths. However, in the same colloquium, Group 4 which also dealt with dialogue, even though acknowledged the need for cooperation for human development, said the basis should be that everyone belongs to “one humanity.”<sup>\*\*\*</sup>

### **Gospel proclamation/witness as recorded in the Bible**

At this point, it will help set the stage for discussion by turning to gospel proclamation/witness which invites people to attain salvation in Christ Jesus and leave their ‘old life’ and become ‘new beings’ in Christ. I cannot here attempt to expound on everything about Christian mission which encapsulates both service to the world (social service) and gospel

\* Selvanayagam (2004), p.154

† Selvanayagam (2004), p.154

‡ Selvanayagam (2004), p.155

§ Küster (2014)

\*\* Mvumbi (n.d)

†† Kinnamon (2004), p.62

‡‡ Selvanayagam (2004), p.159

§§ Selvanayagam (2004)

\*\*\* Mbiti (1977), p.186

proclamation/witness. However, it suffice to say that one of the essentials of Christian faith is that as much as God has in sundry ways revealed Himself to the world, He has also decisively revealed Himself in the person and ministry of Jesus Christ through whom He has reconciled and is reconciling all creation to Himself.\* The early disciples and by extension the Church today was given this charge to proclaim this decisive and self-revelation of God to the rest of humanity and invite them to become reconciled to God through Jesus Christ by becoming disciples (cf Matthew 28:18-20).

Becoming disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ has a corresponding effect where persons abandon their previous state of confession and confess Jesus Christ, as not only the Son of God, but as their Lord and Saviour; by which also they attain eternal life<sup>†</sup>. In Acts 1:8, the Bible makes it known that Jesus Christ explained the coming of the Holy Spirit who will empower the disciples to bear witness of him beyond Jerusalem and Judea. This witness as can be seen in the rest of the book of Acts of the Apostles is one that resulted in the conversion of the persons who received the invitation of the gospel.<sup>‡</sup>

The missionary endeavours of the apostle Paul, is replete with accounts of persons coming to faith in Jesus Christ through the gospel proclamation including those who had to leave their erstwhile confessions. For instance, in Athens, he proclaimed his message of the true God whom the Athenians, who were polytheistic, labelled as “AN UNKNOWN GOD,” as stated in Acts 17:23, and even though “(...) some sneered... A few men... believed.”<sup>§</sup> His witness of Jesus Christ through his missionary journeys were one of bringing people to salvation in Christ Jesus which indubitably meant that they changed from their previous beliefs to believing in God through Christ.

The witness of Philip the evangelist in the city of Samaria in Acts 8 saw the conversion of people whom the apostles in Jerusalem sent Peter and John to lay hands on for the receiving of the Holy Spirit as a seal of their salvation. In 2 Corinthians 5:18-20, Paul states clearly the invitation of God to the Church to participate in the ministry of reconciling others to Himself through Christ:

*All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.*

That aside, it is important to mention that, the witness of God's love through Christ to the world cannot be done successfully without joining the apostle Peter to say that, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”<sup>\*\*</sup> saved.”<sup>\*\*</sup> This is where the challenge arises for the Church when she has to engage in dialogue with with other religions which do not consider Jesus Christ as the “only name” given by which people can attain salvation and be reconciled to God.

### **Reconciling dialogue and gospel proclamation/witness**

This challenge the Church experiences as it engages in dialogue is not a recent matter. For within the ecumenical movement it has been one of the hotly discussed issues. In Nairobi 1975, the WCC assembly experienced a heated discussion on interfaith dialogue and the working document for this section was rejected and referred for revision because it did not include the missionary identity of the Church in the dialogue process.<sup>††</sup>

This immediately highlights, again, the challenge that comes with combining dialogue with witness as part of the Church's existence. Already, when the WCC sub-unit on dialogue was created, it was emphasized that it operates independently of the Council lest other religions consider dialogue as a disguised form of evangelizing them<sup>\*\*</sup> which was exactly how the IMC world

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\* Cf. Migliore 2014)

† 1 John 5:11

‡ Cf Acts 2

§ Acts 17:34

\*\* Acts 4:12

†† Selvanayagam (2004)

‡‡ Selvanayagam (2004)

missionary conference in 1938 conceived of interfaith dialogue.\* This points further to the challenge the Church experiences in going into dialogue while maintaining its missionary identity (i.e. to invite others to Christ through the gospel).

As a matter of fact, as much as the WCC assembly held in Harare 1998 upheld the need for dialogue with other religions, it also emphasized the need for “mission and evangelism” to be at the centre of the activities of the WCC which also highlighted the continuing “tension between dialogue and mission,”<sup>†</sup> within the ecumenical movement. As pointed out earlier, the WCC consultation in Chiang Mai 1977 was meant to clarify the relationship between dialogue and the witness of the Church.<sup>‡</sup>

All these point to the fact that combining dialogue with witnessing as the Bible enjoins the Church to do is rather an ambivalent and tension endowed position for the Church. Because given the basis and goals of dialogue as mentioned earlier, I can see little chance for the Church to engage in successful dialogue while still maintaining that Jesus Christ is “the only name” given for men to be saved and be reconciled to the love of God who created all humanity in His own image.

Let us consider what Stanley J. Samartha<sup>§</sup> has to say. He has tried to offer the basis for the Church to enter into dialogue with other faiths by indicating that faith in Jesus Christ is what pushes the Church to have dialogue with other people. He has further stated by quoting from the October 1970 edition of the *International Review of Mission* that, “It is because of faith in God through Jesus Christ and because of our belief in the reality of Creation, the offer of Redemption, and the love of God shown in the Incarnation that we seek a positive relationship with men of other faiths.”<sup>\*\*</sup> This Christological basis in a way attempts to give the reconciling point for dialogue and witness in the life of the Church. Yet, in my mind, it addresses the challenge in part. This is because a Christocentric approach forms a good ground to move the Church into dialogue, but on the other hand, it sets the ground of separation in that Christ has become the benchmark that God is working with in His relations with humanity. Of course, this is the core foundation in Christian belief but the point is that dialogue with say, a Muslim or a Hindu who does not consider Christ in this same way will find it difficult to engage in dialogue because it will mean s/he is already in the wrong side of confession. Therefore, there still exist grounds of tension to be experienced by the Church as she dialogically encounters other faiths while still maintaining her Christ given task of witness.

Samartha goes further to state that:

*The question of mission is probably the most obvious issue in the context of dialogue. The fact that many Christians in different parts of the world are disturbed by this question indicates how important this is in the life and work of the churches. Christians are disturbed by it, not only because organized missionary enterprise is in difficulties in the post-colonial era, but also because mission, rightly understood and practiced, is integral to the gospel itself. The question, raised from two sides, converges on the same area of concern. On the one hand, there are friends of other faiths who suspect that dialogue is simply a new tool which Christians are forging in the post-colonial era in order to convert them to another faith. (...) On the other hand, Christians are disturbed by it because they feel that dialogue looks like a betrayal of the command to proclaim the gospel to all people. The church's task in the midst of people of other faiths is, according to them, not pleasant conversation on religious matters, but a bold, uncompromising proclamation of the good news of salvation. The question then is this; how do we state the relationship between dialogue, mission, and witness in such a way as to allay the fears of Christians (...) and remove the suspicions of people of other faiths (...)?<sup>††</sup>*

This further highlights the conflict situation that the Church finds herself in entering into dialogue. In this, the centrality of the gospel in the existence of the Church is re-emphasized. The sense of duty to proclaim the gospel, which encapsulates the love of God through Jesus Christ

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\* Kinnamon (2004)

† Selvanayagam (2004), p.161

‡ Selvanayagam (2004)

§ Samartha (1981)

\*\* Samartha (1981), p.12-13

†† Samartha (1981), p.44

to *all humanity irrespective of their confessional grounds*, is felt by most Christians in the world especially in Ghana and I dare say, sub-Saharan Africa at large

But from the context of Muslim-Christian relations which I have witnessed in my Ghanaian background, it is extra challenging to engage in dialogue while still maintaining the grounds that Jesus Christ is the only way to God. The best way that dialogue can proceed with a Muslim friend in this context is when we put our confessional differences aside and tackle issues on the basis of commonalities in terms of friends or people affected by the same issues. This however begs the question that where does one put his/her duty-bound to witness to all people in such circumstance?

P. R. Schroeder\* has proposed, together with Stephen Bevans, the idea of “prophetic dialogue” as a ‘synthesis’ for this conflicting position of the Church in the context of dialogue. This has the idea of dealing with persons of different faiths dialogically as well as proclaiming the gospel. For Schroeder, interreligious dialogue can be comprehended as prophetic dialogue when “The dialogical dimension is obvious in the spirit of listening, learning, respect, and empathy. At the same time, prophecy requires honesty, conviction, faith, and courage to speak the truth as one knows it.”† He further argues that for better understanding of the converging point or rather the reconciling place for interreligious dialogue and witness, the aims of the two must be clarified. There he argues that:

*However, it is absolutely essential to distinguish the different aims of interreligious dialogue and proclamation. “Dialogue is a search for mutual knowledge and enrichment, while proclamation incorporates the idea of a challenge to accept the message” (Zago, 2000: 17). Furthermore, determining which of these two components, as well as all of them, is to be practiced involves a process of discernment within each context:*

*There are persons and groups who are open to proclamation and to whom Christians have the duty and right to announce the gospel, with due respect for personal freedom, for culture, and for religious progress. There are also situations where direct proclamation in view of conversion is impossible. ...In those conditions, the only possible form of mission is dialogue and human promotion. (Zago, 2000: 16).*

*By distinguishing the aims and the appropriate contexts of these two components of God’s mission, Zago proposes that there is not opposition between proclamation and interreligious dialogue but rather complementarity. Furthermore, understanding the two components as being both “dialogical” and “prophetic” provides a very helpful way of seeing them as complementary parts of the one missio Dei, which can be understood as “prophetic dialogue.”‡*

While I acknowledge that Schroeder’s work is in the context of mission and therefore he attempts to provide a solution to the tension between dialogue and witness, I see his proposition just like Samartha’s as partly providing a way out for the Church in this case. I say partly because, what it means is that depending on the context, one needs either dialogue or witness, not the two at the same time. This in praxis is feasible; but even with that, the case exists that if the people that I dialogued with sometime back find me at another time proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord and the invitation for them to receive salvation, it will only be for them a double-standard attitude and dialogue with them at another time will be uneasy and difficult. Aside that, if one adopts ‘prophetic dialogue’ as a way out, then the fear by people of other faiths as cited earlier in Samartha’s quote that dialogue is a disguised way of evangelism will be seen confirmed.

In my estimation, not being unnecessarily pessimistic, this tension will continue to exist as long as dialogue and witness remain essentials for the Church’s existence in a multi-religious and globalized world of today. At least, this tension will continue as long as none of the two is compromised for the other. Of course, one may say that God works in many ways that we do not understand like the case of Acts 10: Cornelius and Peter; but the point is that God (as witnessed in scripture) still requires the Church, whether she knows or not, the diverse ways of God’s dealings with humanity, to proclaim the gospel. This means it cannot be compromised by the Church; at the same time, the forces of globalization and the pluralism of the world today coupled with heinous

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\* Schroeder (2013)

† Schroeder (2013), p.57

‡ Schroeder (2013), p.58-59

atrocities committed against humanity in the name of religion, in many respects, necessitate the need for interfaith dialogue with other faiths.

### Conclusion

In all this, up to this point, I have discussed interreligious dialogue in its different meanings, brief history, forms, aims, and bases. I have assessed how the issues of interfaith dialogue with other faiths and gospel proclamation/witness have played out in the ecumenical movement (mainly through the WCC); revealing the challenges and tensions. Also, light has been shed on the biblical demand for witness and the fact that it has been part of the Church's responsibility right from the apostolic era. But as can be seen through the discussions, interreligious dialogue has brought the Church into a tension endowed position over the years as she tries to keep witness and dialogue together.

Even though it is not part of the plan in this essay to suggest possible ways out for the Church in this regard, it is needful in rounding up this essay, to state that the Church has to be firm in maintaining her claim of God's reconciliation of humanity and all creation through Jesus Christ as she proceeds in dialogue with other faiths (which is very necessary in the light of contemporary realities). Even though this may be problematic and could hinder meaningful dialogue in some contexts, it is still necessary so that the Church will not lose its core essence in terms of witnessing to the rest of humanity God's love and reconciliation through Jesus Christ.

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