CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM DIALOGUE IN GHANA: COMPETITION OR CO-OPERATION?

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ABSTRACT

There is no doubt that the contemporary Ghanaian society is religiously pluralistic just like most societies of the world today. This religious plurality poses a major challenge to the general society. It has led to the emergence of various religious communities such as Christian and Muslim communities, which though distinct by virtue of their beliefs, practices, and spirituality, also constitute components of the larger human society. Between hostility and co-operation there is the issue of competition between these communities which could easily degenerate into social tension and eventual conflict. In the spirit of competition, each community endeavours to advance its own course, promoting its agenda without due regard for the needs and interest of the larger human society. The Christian and Muslim communities end up becoming parallel

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components or ghettoes which do not engage adequately with each other. The paper posits that the challenges of religious diversity in Ghanaian societies as a result of distinct religious communities competing excessively among themselves could be met by the engagement of these communities in fruitful co-operation based on indigenous Ghanaian communal values.

Introduction

Of vital importance to religious traditions, particularly Islam and Christianity, is a sense of a community in which members live in harmony with one another. This explains why we frequently hear of Islamic (*ummah*) community (sūrah 2:143; sūrah 3:104; sūrah 5:48) and Christian community (*Redemptoris Missio*, 51) especially in parts of the world where there exists a large following of each of the traditions.[2] Each of the communities is different and has the right to be different. The fundamental differences do not only exist in the theologies underpinning their creeds in the Ultimate Reality and scriptures but also in their spirituality and worship. The Christian community holds on to the belief in the Trinity (three persons in one God), the Incarnation, and the Bible (Old and New Testaments) as scripture. It is centred in and characterised by belief in Jesus Christ who died and rose to redeem them and whose mystical body they are (1 Cor 12:27). This, notwithstanding, the Christian community is not one homogenous body of members. It is made up of several denominations such as the Mission churches - Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians etc. Others are the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches. Though these denominations also have their differences in terms of doctrines,

[2] Glory Dharmaraj, & Jacob Dharmaraj, *Christianity and Islam: A Missiological Encounter* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1999), 34.

spirituality, rituals and symbols they are united by the person of Christ Jesus and a common scripture-the Bible.

The Muslim community adheres to the *tawhīd* (the concept of the one God), the Qur'ān (the word of God as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad) and the *hadīth* (records of the sayings and deeds of Muhammad) as the bases of guidance that lead to the moral and religious transformation of society. Like the Christian community, the Muslim community constitutes a collective body with branches which include mainstream Muslims of the various moderate sufī traditions, the western-styled Ahmadiyya Movement, and the strict, legalistic, *Ahlus Sunna*. Despite the differences based on doctrine and administrative system, the community manages to present a high level of solidarity with an attractive community life which hinges on common worship and law.

Competition between the Christian and Muslim communities, though not easily or openly admitted by adherents of the religious traditions and often ignored or disregarded in academic discourses, is alive and well in interreligious relations. Competition takes place between the religious individuals in their quest to outdo the other in numbers, education, personal pride, economic, and even social status. In that case, religious competitors see themselves as potential rivals competing for the soul of the society in which they live. Competition between religious communities as such is not bad but in excess its severity becomes a menace in the society as a whole and a formidable challenge to a nation that strives to be a community, a human family, and a unity in diversity. At stake in competition are the great values of peace and harmony, particularly in areas of armed conflict, solidarity in the struggle for social change, unity in healing social ills, integrity, and social justice in the nation. Despite this high stake any attempt to promote the interest of the larger community is met with serious challenges of small religious communities unduly engaged in competition. The society needs to find a way of dealing with this menace of competition if it is to promote peaceful co-existence among religious communities.

Dialogue of Christian-Muslim Competition

Christians and Muslims in Competition

According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, human competition is a contest in which there are two or more people. In a contest, typically, only one or a few participants will win and others will not. A competition actually exists when there is a scarcity of a desired outcome. Individuals and/or groups are then in a position that they must vie for the attainment of that outcome. For example, in sports, two individuals or two teams engage in competition for the purpose of winning usually a prize which could be a medal, a trophy or a belt. But one may ask: what at all has competition got to do with religions? Or what, at all, is at stake in religious competition? What do religious traditions strive to win? These questions could be adequately answered with another question: what is the ultimate goal of religious traditions? Or what are religious communities meant to achieve?

The ultimate goal of religious bodies or institutions to us is: to help individuals and societies or communities to attain perfection, to improve and become better people. When human perfection and communal development are at stake, competition between religions loses its significance. Religious communities come to realise not only that there is no need for competition between them but also that there is no competition at all; they collaborate with one another. However, competition comes in the field of religions when religious practitioners and leaders of the various traditions create a more or less competitive field by the way they encourage their followers to think and treat one another as competitors. And so competition comes in when what is at stake is reduced unfortunately and sadly to: which of the religious traditions are best placed to assist individuals and communities to achieve the ultimate objective of human perfection and continual survival? Or which community has the best beliefs and doctrines, history and scriptures, practices, and rites? Or which religion is the best and the most excellent, and which community is the most dignified? In all these cases each

religious community conceives of itself as the best means to the desired end and so develops highly exclusivist doctrines meant eventually to outdo and to crash the other.

Thus, the competitive field is usually generated firstly on beliefs, doctrines, scriptures, and its interpretation. All religions have their accepted dogma, or articles of faith meant to be accepted without question. Rigid acceptance of doctrines and dogmas often leads to inflexibility and intolerance in the face of other beliefs since the word of God cannot be compromised. Furthermore, scriptures of religions are often vague and open to interpretation. Thus, in a competitive setting, conflict can arise over whose scripture and its interpretation is the correct or the best or most authentic one; a conflict or competition that ultimately cannot be resolved because there is no arbiter. Competition on the issue of dogma and scriptures are frequently compounded when believers are called upon to spread the word of God and increase the numbers of the flock in Christian evangelization and Muslim *da'wah*. In an extreme case, a competitive religious group may seek to deny other religions the opportunity to practise let alone to propagate their faith.

In a religiously pluralistic situation, this competition can be so fierce that the ultimate goal of attainment of human betterment and communal security often is relegated to the background, if not completely hampered. Consequently, religious groups lose focus, ignoring their core goals of ensuring individual and collective perfection and concentrate all their efforts, resources and time on the peripheral goals of competing on authenticity of deposits of faith. In other words, religions focus on core goals when they put advancing human and societal growth and perfection at the fore front of their activities. They focus on peripheral goals when all their activities as well as programmes centre ultimately on numbers, physical expansion, and competition. Marshalling all effort, resources, and activities on the peripheral goals actually means that these peripheral goals are sadly made to take the place of the core goals. Competition on authenticity deposits of faith between and even within religious communities often translates further into contestation

for such peripheral goals like members, financial contributions, legitimacy, and even political influence. Whether at the level of prestige building of ever-grander churches and mosques within spitting distance of each other, at the level of duplicating educational, economic and health facilities to ensure that each community can be self-sufficient religious competition is loudly displayed.[3]

Though Ghanaian Muslims and Christians would not openly admit the competition seriously existing between them, certain occasional outbursts, suspicion and fear of the other betray them. There are occasions when Muslims and Christians have been acutely and extremely worried about the rising numbers and influence of the other. As such serious activities and programmes are put in place by each group to ultimately offset or avert the situation. In his book, *The Muslim Resurgence in Ghana since 1950*, Nathan Samwini discusses the factors that contributed to the Muslim resurgence in Ghana. Samwini contends that the development of Muslim groups and revival movements in Ghana, like their Christian counterparts, has not only been a constant struggle between the "more authentic" or the "orthodox against "heterodox" tendencies, often associated with allegedly "non-Islamic" influences,[4] but also most importantly it raises the competitive spirit of Muslims in view of non-Muslims. For instance, the arrival of the Tijāniyya and Qādiriyya tarīga, the*mahdī* revivalists, and the Ahmadiyya Muslim Mission in Ghana from 1900 to 1950 brought a new spirit of devotion to Islam which has persisted till date. The new Muslim zeal and impetus, largely devotional at first, also translated into opportunity to deal with the growing Christian dominance in social and political arena, ultimately confronting

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[3] John B. Taylor, "Community Relationship between Christians and Muslims", in *Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, Papers presented at the Broumana, 12-18 July, 1972 (World Council of Churches: Geneva, 1973), 90.

[4] Nathan Samwini, *The Muslim Resurgence in Ghana since 1950: Its Effects upon Muslims and Muslim-Christian Relations* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2006), 66.

both Islam and Christianity with theological, ideological, and social disputation.[5]

The confrontation takes place in two broad fronts: the media level and the communal level. Regarding the media, Christian and Muslim bodies use television, radio, audio cassettes, books and pamphlets as means for evangelization and *da'wah* and other discussions. *'Aqīda*, a weekly magazine for Muslims was introduced on the national television in 1985 as an education as well as *da'wah* programme. The fact that Christians did not only see increased Muslim usage of the media as an opportunity to learn about Islam but also as a threat points to the existence of certain level of competitiveness.[6] The reaction of Christians to the Muslim zeal and influence on the media as well as the social and political front is summed up by Abdul al-Haqq. In his booklet "The Fast Takeover of Ghana by Hausa Yankasa Group" al-Haqq describes the rising dominance of Islam, portraying the Yankasa group as the one leading a Muslim desire "to takeover Ghana" and for which reason he calls on all true Ghanaians to rise up and fight to redeem Ghana from the shackles of Islam.[7] The Ghana Evangelism Committee also has consistently organized series of "Islamic Awareness Seminars" for church leaders from the 1990s to the present. This committee has also produced a 22 page "Outreach to Muslim Guidelines" for Christian outreach programmes to Muslims; all obviously meant to thwart the Muslim threat.

The other social disputation is amply demonstrated in Ghana, especially where Muslims and Christians virtually live in separate communities in particular towns and villages, making meaningful integration of Christians and Muslims a very difficult venture. In southern Ghana, for instance, most Muslim communities are largely found in the *zongos* at the outskirts of the villages and towns. These Muslims are mainly the descendents of immigrants of Wangara, Kotokoli, Hausa,

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[5] Samwini, *The Muslim Resurgence in Ghana since 1950*, 87.

[6] Samwini, *The Muslim Resurgence in Ghana since 1950*, 298.

[7] Samwini, *The Muslim Resurgence in Ghana since 1950*, 202-203.

Yoruba and Fulani. [42] Upon arrival, the Muslims set up their quarters in the trading and mining towns and villages, which later came to be called 'Zongos'. Unlike their counterparts in the northern parts of the country, the Muslims in the south lived in their quarters and did not get involved in the local politics and socio-religious affairs of chiefs and people.[8] The indigenous southerners, mainly Christians and adherents of indigenous religions live in the villages and towns. A clear boundary between the Muslim and Christian communities and the competition, constant mistrust and tension that ensued and has existed till today, have been a challenge to intra and interreligious relations.

Such competitive situations often spill over, resulting in some Christians and Muslims, particularly those with fundamentalist orientation, engaging each other in rather confrontational and polemical ways, sometimes burning churches, Bible, or Qur'ān. As a result, we have experienced violent eruptions between Christians and Muslims, and between Muslims, in towns such as Agona Nyakrom, Takoradi, Kumasi, Oda and Wenchi.[9] According to James Anquandah, between 1987 and 1989, there were twenty reported cases of intra and inter-religious clashes in Ghana, which resulted in the loss of human lives and property. Some examples included riots between Christians and Muslims at Walewale, Sekondi, Kumasi, Tamale and Mampong-Asante. There were other cases of riots between Christians and Traditionalists at Half Assini, Labadi and Korle Gonno. Strangely, there have been reports of intra-Muslim clashes among Muslims in 1995-1998 at Akim

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[42] Hans W. Debrunner, *A History of Christianity in Ghana* (Accra: Waterville Publishing House, 1967), 240.

[8] Enid Schildkrout, *The People of the Zongo: The transformation of ethnic identities in Ghana*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 69-265.

[9] Elizabeth Amoah, "African Indigenous Religions and Interreligious Relationship," paper presented at Westminster College, Oxford, autumnal IIC2 lecture, held on October 22, 1998, 4.

Oda, Atebubu and Kwesimintsim.[10]

Critique of the Various Stances for Competition

Two widely acceptable legitimate positions on competition could be identified: (1) enthusiastic support and (2) qualified support. The advocates of enthusiastic support for competition hold that the more societal members immerse themselves in rivalry the better. This line of thinking would hold that the more religious communities engage in competition and rivalry, the more religion is enriched, proclaimed, and promoted. Competition then builds and helps improve not only religious beliefs, practices and rites but also character and produce excellence. On the other hand, proponents of the second stance admit that our society has gotten carried away with the need to be Number One that we push ourselves too hard and too fast to become winners. They insist that competition can be healthy and fun if we keep it in perspective. Such school of thought would contend that healthy competitions between Christians and Muslims are necessary.[11]

In his book *No Contest: The Case Against Competition* Alfie Kohn offers a critique of the two positions in favour of competition and argues that our struggle to defeat each other in contestation turns all of us into losers. Competition, according Kohn, ought not to be considered as an inevitable part of human nature and structures which motivates us to come out with our best or to succeed. Yes, competition can bring out the best in us

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[10]James Anquandah, *Agenda Extraordinaire: 80 Years of the Christian Council of Ghana* (Accra: Asempa, 2009), 70.

[11] Alfie Kohn, *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993), 67-75.

but it also has a damaging effect on our relationships; contestation ruins relationship.[12]

Competition: A Disincentive to Christian-Muslim Dialogue

Though Kohn's research is on education of children in schools, his findings and conclusions are equally true of or applicable to religious relations. Competition between religious traditions, though many will not admit, exists in our world of religions. Throughout history, competition, whether open or hidden, has been bad news for interreligious dialogue and relations, particularly Christian-Muslim dialogue. As a result, there is no need for competition at all between religious communities and the phrase "healthy competition" is actually a contradiction in terms. Competition on religious grounds, which simply means that one religious group can succeed only if others fail, is inherently destructive and a disincentive to Christian-Muslim dialogue. In a competitive culture the individual or a religious group is made to understand that to win you must triumph over others. This is also to say that a particular religion is true, authentic when it triumphs over the other. In view of this, success comes to be defined as victory over the other, even though these are really two different terms. Competition is and always will be unnecessary and inappropriate in interfaith encounters because in that case religion is hardly able to be a source of unity, executing its organizing and unifying functions of bringing together and actually integrating into a whole its several parts.[13]

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[12] Alfie Kohn, *No Contest: The Case Against Competition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), 45.

[13] Robert T. Parsons, *Religion in an African Society* (Leiden: E.J. Brill,1964), 183. Also see T. Goode, *Religion among the Primitives* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1951), 54.

Thus, competition between religious communities is a recipe for religious hostility. Only a group can win a contest or competition and so both Christian and Muslim communities cannot win in contest of religions. In view of this, each religious group comes to regard others as obstacles to their own success which would not augur well for fruitful Christian- Muslim encounters. Competition in every field of endeavour including even between religious communities leads to envy and suspicion of the others. It ruins relationships, making it difficult to regard adherents of the religious other as potential friends or collaborators but easy as potential threats, rivals, and enemies. The truth is that trying to outdo someone is not conducive to trust. A competitive spirit underpinned the early period of Christian-Muslim encounters which though saw basic Christian and Islamic doctrines debated upon and developed [14] yet was also characterised largely by prolonged polemics well known for negativity and profound bitterness which hampered fruitful religious associations.[15] It is the same competitive spirit which reduced interreligious dialogue to mere debates of experts sharing more of their various irreconcilable theological positions than their reconcilable faith experiences as Christians and Muslims. At Christian-Muslim debate, each group attempts to score point by defending logically and philosophically theological positions.[16] Dialogue of debate by experts is the off-shoot of exclusivist conception of religious encounters which considered a particular religious belief system as absolutely true and all others are false. However, the experience of dialogue has proven beyond doubt that competitive understanding of religious relations is counterproductive. At the height of competition, religious encounters degenerate into a growing mistrust and hatred, where even an offer of friendship is seen as

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[14] J. M. Gaudeul, *Encounters and Clashes: Islam and Christianity in History I* (Roma: PISAI, 2000), 25.

[15] Gaudeul, *Encounters and Clashes*, 27.

[16] Kenneth Cracknell, (trans.). *Christians and Muslims Talking Together* (London: British Council of Churches, 1986), 114.

a temptation to be rejected, and culminate often into religious discrimination and incessant wars. Moreover, the never-ending desire to win in competition often leads to the adoption of crude methods and unwholesome strategy by competing parties in which negativity is hyped, stereotypes and prejudices encouraged, deepened and made to thrive. Competition between religious communities makes religion a latent source of conflict.

Furthermore, when Ghanaian Christians and Muslims compete on the basis of religious differences they become less able to consider, let alone take the perspective of each other. They are unable to see the world from each other's point of view. In view of this, it is hardly possible to consider and reflect upon questions posed by the spiritual experiences and moral values of other traditions such as Christianity, Islam and Ghanaian indigenous religions. This means that the spiritual values and moral virtues inherent in these other religions and cultures would be largely discarded. [43] [17] This also means an outright rejection of the other's beliefs and practices without any critical or due consideration.

Dialogue of Christian-Muslim Co-Operation

Christian and Muslim Co-operation

It is worth noting that the Christian and Muslim communities do not exist in separate compartments of their own. They live in a larger community as a nation, town or village. As such their activities - beliefs, worship and laws - ought not to address solely the daily challenges of one community but the general

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[17] Max Assimeng, *Religion and Social Change in West Africa* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1989), 200. See also Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa* (London: Harper Collins, 1992), 256-258; F.K. Buah. *A History of Ghana*, Revised and Updated (Malaysia: Macmillan, 1998), 139.

community as well. Consequently, solidarity cannot be limited within one community. The Christian community should not only be concerned about building a strong and/but closed community. A Muslim or Christian community that does not concern itself with the needs of non-Muslims or non-Christians respectively falls short of expectation. In other words, as already noted, a clear boundary has the tendency of engendering superiority discourses which eventually keeps the two communities further apart from each other. A clear boundary between the Muslim and Christian communities could be a potential source of tension and conflict in human relations.

Rather, the two communities can and should work diligently at positioning themselves in such a way that they become more deeply rooted in the "human" community. This calls for co-operation and collaboration between the religious traditions. In the spirit of co-operation, religious traditions work to advance the course not only of the general society but also importantly of religion itself. When Christian-Muslim relations are based on co-operation rather than competition, adherents of the religions feel better about themselves and religion ultimately wins. Muslims and Christians would not need to work against a common enemy. In this case, they work with each other instead of against each other. For, real co-operation does not require triumphing over another group.[18] It ensures that in the end both communities triumph. Cooperation is marvelously successful at helping religious traditions to communicate effectively, to trust in others and to accept those who are different from themselves. Competition, on the other hand, interferes with these goals and often results in outright antisocial behaviour. The choice is ours: We can blame the religious individual who cheats, turns extremist and violent or withdraws, or we can face the fact that competition itself is responsible for such ugliness.

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[18]David W. Johnson, and Roger T. Johnson. *Cooperation and Competition: Theory and Research*. (Edina, Minn.: Interaction Book Co., 1989), 67.

Theological Basis for Co-operation

Despite belonging to various religious communities, Ghanaian Christians and Muslims have to acknowledge the common humanity of all human beings as they engage in dialogue.[19] An Akan proverb goes: *nyinpa nyinara yɛ Nyame mba; obiara nnyɛasaase ba-*("All human beings are children of God; no one is a child of the earth"). An Akan epigram teaches that "all belong to one family, though they are separate stalks." To this effect, Kwesi Wiredu notes that human value among the Akan is "...intrinsically linked with recognition of the unity of all people, whether or not they are biologically related"[20] and so whether or not they are of diverse religious backgrounds or kinship groups. In view of this common humanity, Muslims and Christians, in fact adherents of all religions constitute one universal human family, the most important source of communal unity and a valuable model for peaceful Christian-Muslim co-existence. Despite the differences in their beliefs, worship and spirituality, Muslims and Christians need not only acknowledge their belongingness to universal human family but also work hard to promote its essential values.

This perspective of common humanity is shared by Muslim intellectual Al-Faruqi in his rendition of "humane universalism". AlFaruqi argues that "humane universalism"and so common humanity, is a fundamental teaching of Islam, which has universal appeal and significance as the most authentic and central issue in the field of inter-religious encounters and peaceful co-existence.[21] In fact, it is an offshoot of the concept

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[19] Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction* (Accra Ghana: Sankofa Publishing Company, 1996), 24.

[20] Kwesi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 76.

[21] Al-Faruqi, Isma'il. "On the Nature of Islamic Da'wah", in Emilio Castro & Khurshid Ahmad (eds.). *Christian Mission and Islamic*

of *tawḥīd* (the absolute oneness of Allāh) which brings all human creatures under the divine authority of the Supreme Deity.[22] Likewise, the Second Vatican Council, in its document *Nostra Aetate*, draws humanity's attention to this human connectivity: "One is the community of all peoples, one their origin, for God made the whole human race to live over the face of the earth"(*Nostra Aetate*, 1). In Pope Paul VI's document on the Church, *Ecclessiam Suam*, the Pope notes that the Church shares "...with the whole of human race a common nature, common life"(*Ecclessiam Suam, 97*). Also, in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, the council fathers note that:

> "God, who has fatherly concern for everyone, has willed that all men should constitute one family and treat one another in a spirit of brotherhood. For having been created in the image of God, who "...from one man has created the whole human race and made them live all over the face of the earth" (Acts 17:26), all men are called to one and the same goal, namely, God Himself" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 24).

In these documents the Catholic Church acknowledges the common humanity of all people, touting it as the unique theological foundation for inter-religious dialogue, communal harmony and peaceful co-existence. Common humanity for communal survival is also the framework on which the British Council of Churches set out its guidelines in 1981, *Relations with People of Other Faith* which among other things say: "What makes dialogue between us possible is our common humanity, created in the image of God.

Da'wah: Preceedings of the Chambesy Dialogue Consultation (Leicester (UK): The Islamic Foundation, 1982), 39-40

[22]Al-Faruqi, "On the Nature of Islamic Da'wah", 33-34.