


Convergence of Evangelism and Interfaith Dialogue: A Missional Reflection



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ABSTRACT

The promotion of religious freedom and the general pervasion of pluralism across the globe necessitate the need for Christians to review how they evangelize among people of other faiths and those of no faith. One of the mechanisms that has gained prominence in this regard is the promotion of the concept of interfaith dialogue. This article examines areas of convergence between this concept and evangelism through literature study. Following an interpretive approach, the study determined that both concepts have a distinctive but complementary relationship, both promote mutual respect and consider intercultural communication and contextualization. Written from the Christian faith perspective, the article argues that both evangelism and interfaith dialogue could be used by Christians to further God's mission in contemporary society. As interfaith dialogue promotes neighborliness, the article recommends that it should be embraced by adherents of all faiths. As it has been written from the perspective of the Christian faith, it further recommends that while evangelical witness should be done with respect for other faiths, evangelizers should not neglect the worth of the commission received from Jesus Christ. These recommendations and those from empirical studies conducted on this topic should be tested through further studies in various contexts. This paper seeks to contribute to existing knowledge in interfaith dialogue and evangelism in the sub-discipline of missiology.

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INTRODUCTION

Christianity has co-existed with other faiths since its genesis and the growth in the number of its adherents can be attributed to missional work dating back to the day of Pentecost in Acts 2. The day of the Pentecost was a significant milestone for evangelism as the apostles received power to be Christ's witness on this day as promised by Jesus Christ in Acts 1:8. From this day the apostle's confidence in evangelism grew as they became deliberate in their evangelical witness such as proclamation, caring for the needy and healing the sick in the name of Jesus Christ. The signs and wonders contributed to the rapid increase in the conversion rate to Christianity. For instance, just on the Day of the Pentecost three thousand people believed and were baptized (Acts 2:41). This outcome illustrates the relationship between mission and conversion. Literature also alludes that these two concepts are regarded as legitimate terms and are acknowledged in all religions.¹

¹ Stanley J. Samartha, *One Christ many religions: toward a revised Christology* (Oregon: Orbis Books, 1991), 148.

In recognition of the importance of conversion and the pervasion of religious pluralism, many theologians and member denominations of the World Council of Churches have been debating the relevance of evangelical witnessing among people of other faiths and the importance of interfaith dialogue for a while, of which the WCC came to support interfaith dialogue.² On this background, this article attempts to harmonize evangelism and interfaith dialogue from the perspective of God's mission. It discusses mission as evangelism, mission as dialogue and mission as prophetic dialogue. It then draws common themes from and features of both evangelism and interfaith dialogue. Based on this synopsis, the paper provides recommendations on how the church could use both evangelism and interfaith dialogue to further God's mission in contemporary society.

METHODOLOGY

The content of this article is based on findings derived from a literature study. Literature study is a valuable part of any study as it conveys to the reader what knowledge and ideas have been established in the topic.³ It could be done either as a study itself or as a first phase of the inquiry.⁴ In this instance, the paper reviews literature from the World Council of Churches' Edinburg 2010 Report⁵ and their 2013 publication⁶ as base documents.

OVERVIEW OF EVANGELISM

Definition of Evangelism

As with many academic terms, there is no universally adopted definition of the term evangelism. But it is generally known that the word evangelism is derived from the Greek verb *euangelizomai* which means to bring or announce good news.⁷ It is worth noting that within the ecumenical movement, it is used interchangeably with the term evangelization. Shorter observes that Roman Catholics commonly use evangelization while many Protestants often use evangelism to refer to proclaiming the gospel.⁸ For him whatever term is used is not an issue, but the underlying fact is that the spreading and deepening of Christian faith is dependent on this act of active apostolate.

Bosch defines evangelism as the activities involved in spreading the gospel and/or theological reflection on these activities.⁹ He uses the term evangelization to mean the process of spreading the gospel and/or the extent to which it has been spread.¹⁰ This research has adopted these descriptions by Bosch for simplicity and consistency.

From these definitions, it is apparent that spreading the gospel requires the participation of converts to share the good news with others. This implies that people are not converted to the Christian faith by spontaneous personal reflection or introspection but by hearing the gospel from an evangelizer engaging in interpersonal, and even an intercultural communication process.¹¹

There are various emphases to evangelism or ways in which it is perceived. These include proclamation, prayer and praxis.¹² In this regard, verbal proclamation is generally perceived as the first duty of evangelism.¹³ Shorter emphasizes that in addition to proclamation, evangelism should include celebrating and living the word to maximize its effect. He adds that proclamation through evangelistic rallies and mission gatherings,

² Daryl Balia & Kirsteen Kim (eds.), *Witnessing to Christ* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2010), 34–55.

³ David Coldwell & Frikkie J. Herbst, *Business research* (Cape Town: Juta, 2004), 31.

⁴ Johann Mouton, *How to succeed in your Master's and Doctoral studies: A South African guide and resource book* (Pretoria: Van Schaik Publishers, 2001), 86.

⁵ Balia & Kim. (eds.), *Witnessing to Christ*.

⁶ Jooseop Keum, *Together towards Life: mission and evangelism in changing landscapes* (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 2013).

⁷ William J. Abraham, *The logic of evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 41.

⁸ Aylward Shorter, *Evangelization and culture* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), 4.

⁹ David Bosch, *Transforming mission: paradigm shifts in theology of mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 409.

¹⁰ Bosch, *Transforming mission*, 409.

¹¹ Shorter, *Evangelization and culture*, 4.

¹² Shorter, *Evangelization and culture*, 12–21.

¹³ Shorter, *Evangelization and culture*, 6.

for instance, has little effect in sharing the gospel and bringing people to the Christian faith because he views this method as superficial and transcendent.¹⁴

In addition to communicating the gospel through verbal proclamation, evangelism also uses other forms of communication such as print media, advertising visual and performing arts.¹⁵ If this communication occurs across a cultural frontier, it has to be in the language of the receptor culture, otherwise, it will simply be a meaningless sound that cannot change anything.¹⁶ By implication, in order to communicate the gospel effectively evangelism requires the evangelizer to understand the culture and context of the evangelized, in addition to the knowledge of the receptor language. In so doing the evangelizers have to render the message as much as possible drawing from the tradition of the people to whom they are communicating the gospel.¹⁷ In addition to proclamation, evangelism takes the form of praxis which could also be valuable in some contexts which require tangible results as actions speak louder than words. In this regard, praxis may entail actions in the line of giving hope such as the fight for peace, justice, and liberation to the people.¹⁸ Shorter also views evangelism as community building because it brings into existence a community of faith and salvation that is itself evangelized and in turn becomes evangelizing.¹⁹ He further alludes that, in all these efforts, the Christian treats all fellow human beings as neighbors who deserve respect, not as tools to be used or objects to be exploited. It is also worth noting that evangelism is carried out with God's love as portrayed by the Christian community.

Scholarly Perspectives on Evangelism

For a while, the researcher has observed that many ordinary Christians maintain that witnessing among people of other faiths is to win them to Christianity. Those who support this notion, especially evangelicals, maintain that conversion is an end goal of witnessing and is achieved through acknowledgement of sinfulness and acceptance of the forgiveness that God offers in Christ.²⁰ Therefore, evangelical witnessing emphasizes the proclamation of God's offer of freedom concluded by an invitation to join the Christian faith.²¹ Proponents of this theology attribute it to the coming kingdom of God through the proclamation of the gospel of the resurrection of the crucified Messiah and his inauguration of a new social, spiritual, and cosmic reality while encouraging loving service, struggle for social justice, peace and the preservation of God's creation.²²

Contrary to the above-stated theology which emphasizes proclamation, is the perspective that underscores that witnessing should be treated as a dialogue. Unlike the single-minded approach summarized above, dialogue recognizes that other faiths are not mere sets of speculative ideas about the eternal destiny of people but are inclusive systems and theories of life.²³ Therefore, people of other faiths should be regarded as dialogue partners with a caution that emphasis on conversion could be easily equated to sales in a marketplace.²⁴ These two perspectives on Christian witnessing among non-Christians pose a challenge regarding evangelism and the furtherance of the gospel, especially because it is spiraling within the ecumenical movement. It raises the question that should Christians engage in casual conversation for knowledge sharing with people of other faith, or should they be purposeful like the apostles did in their proclamation?

Some authors have made significant strides in answering these questions in a way through debates with peers, extensive engagement with relevant literature, research and reflection on personal experience, of which all of these still require further unraveling. One of the renowned contributors is David Bosch

¹⁴ Shorter, *Evangelization and culture*, 7.

¹⁵ Shorter, *Evangelization and culture*, 13–14.

¹⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: the gospel and the western culture* (Michigan: Grand Rapids, 1986), 5–6.

¹⁷ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 7.

¹⁸ Shorter, *Evangelization and culture*, 16..

¹⁹ Shorter, *Evangelization and culture*, 18.

²⁰ Rupen Das, "Becoming a follower of Christ: exploring conversion through historical and missiological lenses." *Perichoresis* 16, no.1 (2018), 21.

²¹ Balia & Kim (eds.), *Witnessing to Christ*, 26.

²² Balia & Kim (eds.), *Witnessing to Christ*, 26.

²³ Balia & Kim (eds.), *Witnessing to Christ*, 26.

²⁴ Terry Muck & Frances S. Adeney, *Christianity encountering world religions: the practice of mission in the twenty-first century* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2009), 29.

who acknowledges that there is no universally accepted definition of evangelism as well as its scope and range thereof, and further alludes that the difference between evangelism and mission is difficult to tell.²⁵ In recognition of the prevalent exploitation of this controversy within the ecumenical movement, Bosch cautions that evangelism should not degrade the gospel to a status of a consumer product whereby its goal is church extension, a mentality which had been predominant among Catholicism and Protestantism.²⁶ This is supported by Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder who counsel that mission today should not be about conquering the world for Christ, but Christians should be gentle among those to whom they are sent.²⁷ Besides, these two authors further suggest that mission should be done in vulnerability and humility with a sense of being evangelized by those being evangelized to.²⁸ The suggestions by the two sources raise the question of how Christians in their witness should share the gospel in a humble manner without the chance of losing their faith.

Mission as Evangelism

The description of the term evangelism has demonstrated that it is about spreading the good news by adherents of the Christian faith in fulfilment of God's mission. As God is interested in the whole of creation, the good news should encompass every part of creation and every aspect of life and society.²⁹ Therefore, evangelism should not be limited to proclamation but should be viewed from a cosmic perspective where the focus is on affirming life in totality. The cosmic perspective of evangelism reveals the breadth of the practice of evangelism which could be confusing to some people in terms of its distinction from mission. However, Bosch clarifies this dilemma by acknowledging that mission is broader than evangelism.³⁰ For him, mission is the total task that God has established for the church, and evangelism is an integral element. This element entails witnessing "what God has done, is doing and will do through announcing that God has personally intervened in human history and has done so through the person and ministry of Jesus Christ of Nazareth".³¹ Mission as evangelism aims at a response and does this in the form of invitation. God particularly uses the evangelizer to proclaim a message that requires the hearer to be transformed in respect of a specific attitude and lifestyle.³² The invitation is done in a humble and honest manner and leaves the hearers entirely free to make up their own minds about it. Any form of compulsion to convert the hearers to what the evangelizer wants them to become, join or accept amounts to proselytizing.³³

While mission is interested in the wholeness of life, it uses evangelism to effect this through people. Bosch argues that authentic evangelism has a personal dimension as nations, governments and institutions cannot come to faith except individual persons.³⁴ In his view, a call to repentance and conversion involves a personal decision and personal responsibility, not a group subscription.

The discussion of mission as evangelism has emphasized certain practices which have now become distinctive features of evangelism, namely, proclamation, invitation, conversion as well as verbal and non-verbal witnesses. A brief discussion of these features is covered in the next section.

Distinctive Features of Evangelism

Proclamation

Proclamation is generally perceived as foundational in evangelism and this emphasis is derived from the meaning of the gospel which is viewed as a unique narrative of what God has done to inaugurate his kingdom

²⁵ Bosch, *Transforming missions*, 409.

²⁶ Bosch *Transforming mission*, 414–415.

²⁷ Stephen B. Bevans & Roger P. Schroeder, *Prophetic dialogue: reflections on Christian meeting today* (New York: Orbit Books, 2011), 22.

²⁸ Bevans & Schroeder, *Prophetic dialogue*, 22.

²⁹ Keum, *Together towards Life*, 5.

³⁰ Bosch, *Transforming mission*, 411–412.

³¹ Bosch, *Transforming mission*, 412.

³² Bosch, *Transforming mission*, 413.

³³ The Lausanne Movement, *The Cape Town Commitment: a confession of faith and a call to action* (The Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelism: Cape Town, 2010), 35.

³⁴ Bosch, *Transforming mission*, 416.

in Jesus of Nazareth.³⁵ In proclaiming the gospel to the world, the evangelizer must pay attention to the context of the hearer, making a careful study of the social and personal circumstances of the hearer(s).³⁶ In addition, proclamation should be done in a humble manner rather than from a position of superiority.³⁷ It should also be noted that proclamation is always about Jesus Christ, God's reign of mercy and justice and reconciliation, recognition of the dignity and tragedy of the human person, and an invitation to a faith community.³⁸

Witness

Bevans and Schroeder use the combination of witness and proclamation to emphasize the necessity of evangelism as comprising of words and deeds.³⁹ Through this definition, they affirm that "the first means of evangelism is the witness of an authentically Christian life" with proclamation being its "foundation, summit and center".⁴⁰ Thus, they perceive the term witness, as lifestyle evangelism which can be depicted through individual Christians, the local Christian community and institutional church bearing witness together; and for them, this kind of evangelism involves individuals of the Christian faith living their lives in the light of their faith; a congregation of Christians who believe in Christianity and live by it; and various Christian traditions working together.⁴¹

In fulfilment of the above counsel, it is essential for Christians to depict their faith and witness as practice. For Conner, this entails practicing their faith as their way of life in the world which God uses to change his people, and this way of the Christian life involves practices that bear witness to God's mysteries in the world.⁴²

Invitation

In their definition of the term witness, Bevans and Schroeder summarized the WCC's description which perceives it as "those acts and words by which a Christian or community gives testimony to Christ and invite others to make their response to him".⁴³ This description implies that bearing witness aims at inviting others to the kingdom of God. Bevans and Schroeder posit that the church calls for conversion and invites people into the community of faith in order to join the church in its task of preaching, serving and witnessing to God's reign coming into the world.⁴⁴

This invitation is both verbal and non-verbal. The non-verbal invitation is exemplified by Christians through their lifestyle. As mentioned under witnessing, an authentic Christian lifestyle depicted in the conduct and attitude of the church and individual Christians towards the fullness of life is likely to draw non-Christians to this faith with little oral effort.

Conversion

It can be loosely described to mean turning away from something and turning to something else.⁴⁵ For Stott, conversion is the response that the gospel demands without which salvation cannot be received.⁴⁶ From an evangelical perspective, conversion is a critical part of evangelical theology and missiology.⁴⁷

³⁵ Abraham, *The logic of evangelism*, 170.

³⁶ Abraham, *The logic of evangelism*, 172.

³⁷ Stephen B. Bevans & Roger P Schroeder, *Constants in context: a theology of mission today* (New York: Orbit Books, 2004), 360.

³⁸ Bevans & Schroeder, *Constants in context*, 352.

³⁹ Bevans & Schroeder, *Constants in context*, 353.

⁴⁰ Bevans & Schroeder, *Constants in context*, 352.

⁴¹ Bevans & Schroeder, *Constants in context*, 353-356.

⁴² Benjamin T. Conner, *Practicing witness: a missional vision of Christian practices* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 99.

⁴³ Bevans & Schroeder, *Constants in context*, 353.

⁴⁴ Bevans & Schroeder, *Constants in context*, 360.

⁴⁵ Duane Miller A., *Living among the breakage: contextual theology-making and ex-Muslim Christians* (Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2017), 39.

⁴⁶ John R.W Stott, "Conversion." In *Christian mission in modern world: updated and expanded edition*, 182-200 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 182.

⁴⁷ Das, *Becoming a follower of Christ*, 21.

It is noteworthy that conversion is unavoidable in dialogue as sharing of convictions in a dialogue could lead to conversion through the exclusion of deduction and reduction but enhancing induction of own tradition.⁴⁸ In the exposition of the same theory by Peter Berger, Newbigin states that deduction results in the selection of one of the given traditions and affirms it; the reductive possibility results in the collapse of traditional religious faith; and the induction possibility becomes the presupposition of all theologies. This means that genuine dialogue suppresses the desire to reduce the plurality of religions to a meaningless common denominator but encourages authentic reinterpretation of own traditions.⁴⁹

From the aforementioned descriptions, it is evident that conversion is undoubtedly complex. Its complexity arises from a number of factors such as, but not limited to: how theologians perceive it,⁵⁰ varied conceptions held by different denominations,⁵¹ conclusions on whether it is an event, a process, or both⁵² and abuse of evangelism through proselytization.⁵³ Samartha argues that in the latter form of complexity, conversion catalyzes a horizontal movement of groups of people from one faith community to another, instead of becoming a vertical movement toward God or genuine renewal of life⁵⁴ as well as illegitimate recruitment of members of another denomination or local church to one's own local church with the ecumenical movement.⁵⁵ Based on these complexities, the original intent of conversion has been diluted to an extent of losing its meaning. Hence some scholars propose interfaith dialogue.

MISSION AS DIALOGUE AND PROPHETIC DIALOGUE

The exploration of these concepts is done to provide insight into ways of witnessing to Christ authentically among people of non-Christian faith and to identify areas that can enhance evangelical witnessing.

Mission as Dialogue

Mission as dialogue is rooted in the reality that God is dialogical in his nature and the way he acts in the world.⁵⁶ For this reason, Christian theology should be a theology of dialogue which is rooted in conversation with and listening to the local, cultural and religious context.⁵⁷ Bevans and Schroeder propose that this dialogue should manifest itself in forms of the dialogue of life, the dialogue of social action, the dialogue of theological exchange and the dialogue of religious experience.⁵⁸

Bevans and Schroeder's full description of the above four elements of dialogue reveals that the dialogue of life happens where Christians and people of other faith or no faith get to know each other, learn from each other and reduce the tension that exists amongst themselves.⁵⁹ In the dialogue of social action, these groupings of people work together for common issues of justice while the dialogue of theological exchange involves among other things, probing of doctrines and practices among experts. Finally, the dialogue of religious experience is about the convergence of different religious traditions amidst divergent content and method. The above model of mission as dialogue acknowledges that the church itself is only a learner in the process, not an expert involved in a monologue. In all these forms of dialogue, there is the need to pay attention to all the variety of human experiences in order to learn in practice what it means that Jesus is the king and head of the human race while boldly bearing witness to him.⁶⁰ This learning experience is necessary but complicated

⁴⁸ Shorter, *Evangelization and culture*, 41.

⁴⁹ Shorter, *Evangelization and culture*, 41.

⁵⁰ Martin Mostert, "The liturgy of conversion: the evangelical praxis in the Methodist Churches of Cape Town" D.Phil. Thesis unpublished, University of Stellenbosch, 2018, 43–52 .

⁵¹ Das, *Becoming a follower of Christ*, 21.

⁵² Scot McKnight, *Turning to Jesus: the Sociology of conversion in the gospels*. (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 27.

⁵³ Samartha, *One Christ many religions*, 148.

⁵⁴ Samartha, *One Christ many religions*, 148.

⁵⁵ Das, *Becoming a follower of Christ*, 22.

⁵⁶ Bevans & Schroeder, *Prophetic dialogue*, 41.

⁵⁷ Balia & Kim (eds.), *Witnessing to Christ*, 46.

⁵⁸ Bevans & Schroeder, *Prophetic dialogue*, 68–69.

⁵⁹ Bevans & Schroeder, *Prophetic dialogue*, 68–69.

⁶⁰ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 148–149.

as circumstances that warrant its implementation are not only limited to the interfaith or interreligious milieu but prevail even within the ecumenical movement itself.⁶¹ Therefore, adherents of the Christian faith enter into a dialogue with people of other faiths while striving to harmonize relations among Christian denominations as well. This complexity poses a great challenge in the ecumenical movement leading to the development and understanding of the Christian faith through the revelation of new insights and discoveries, and this is how the historical church is able to assume new cultural forms.⁶²

For dialogue to be authentic and meaningful it should be preceded by self-identification as it makes people of faith have some conviction to share in the dialogue.⁶³ Where there are no convictions to share, there can be no real dialogue.⁶⁴ For Ariarajah, convictions create a likelihood for each dialogue partner to discover areas of agreement and disagreement and the possibility of divergence of interests. One great conviction that the evangelizers should uphold is that God went before them and therefore they should move from the expectation of meeting God who has preceded them and has been relating to people within the context of their own culture and conviction.⁶⁵

Mission as Prophetic Dialogue

The generic description of mission as dialogue created a conceptual framework that enables a smooth transition to an exposition of the foundations and role of prophetic dialogue in God's mission. As mentioned earlier, God is a dialogical God and not just dialogical but is prophetic in dealing with creation.⁶⁶ Explained allegorically, prophetic dialogue is perceived as a dance originating in the dance of the Trinity through history; a dance performed according to the beautiful rhythm of dialogue and prophecy, boldness and humility, and learning and teaching.⁶⁷ For Bevans this dance is the rhythm of God moving through history in a beautiful and complex manner as it changes with time, place, creation's groaning and humanity's response; and to respond to it, discernment is needed to reveal the required action or behavior such as listening, prophetic witness or proclamation.⁶⁸

In all this, evangelizers have to avail themselves to the leadership of the Spirit as epitomized in the creation story.⁶⁹ It is the same Spirit that since creation inspires prophets to "faithfully announce a message either in words or in deeds".⁷⁰ This implies that mission as prophecy requires the church to move with the Spirit who enables the man and woman of faith to be someone who listens, who is attentive, who sees, who has a sensitivity to the world and to fellow humankind.⁷¹ In addition, it is remarkable that just like evangelism, prophetic dialogue requires speaking forth with words (proclamation) and speaking forth without words (witness), including speaking against without words and speaking against with words.⁷²

Finally, prophetic dialogue invigorates the church to assume the image of a teacher, storyteller and a trail guide.⁷³ In such a dialogical atmosphere the evangelizer serves as an exemplary teacher who imparts knowledge and also creates awareness on things that are known; a trail guide who uses his/her knowledge to disciple people; and a storyteller who narrates the story of the gospel in the language and context of the hearer.

⁶¹ Shorter, *Evangelization and culture*, 28.

⁶² Shorter, *Evangelization and culture*, 40.

⁶³ Shorter, *Evangelization and culture*, 41.

⁶⁴ Wesley Ariarajah, *The Bible and people of other faiths* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1985), 39.

⁶⁵ Balia & Kim (eds.), *Witnessing to Christ*, 46.

⁶⁶ Bevans & Schroeder, *Prophetic dialogue*, 41.

⁶⁷ Stephen B Bevans, "A prophetic dialogue approach" in *The mission of the church: five views in conversation*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 9.

⁶⁸ Bevans, *A prophetic dialogue approach*, 9.

⁶⁹ Bevans & Schroeder, *Prophetic dialogue*, 41.

⁷⁰ Bevans & Schroeder, *Prophetic dialogue*, 42.

⁷¹ Bevans & Schroeder, *Prophetic dialogue*, 42.

⁷² Bevans & Schroeder, *Prophetic dialogue*, 48..

⁷³ Bevans & Schroeder, *Prophetic dialogue*, 49-52.

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

The need for interfaith dialogue emanates from the recognition of the reality and existence of religious pluralism. This pluralism does not only exist between the Christian faith and other faiths but also exists within Christianity. Hence interfaith dialogue may also occur between members of different Christian orientations within the ecumenical movement.

Religious and cultural pluralism has created an urgency to review the attitude of Christians among people of other faiths. As briefly highlighted in the previous chapter, historically Christian missions used to look down upon other faith but in this postmodern era, the need for treating other faith with respect is inevitable.⁷⁴ This change of attitude has partly been triggered by the demise of colonialism. At the height of colonialism, some regimes were upfront in elevating Christianity above other religions. For instance, the Roman Emperor Theodosius issued a decree that demanded that all citizens of the Roman Empire be Christians, and in 1832 Gregory XVI regarded the demand for freedom of religion as insane.⁷⁵ All these efforts led Knitter to argue that, they perpetuated the exclusivist attitude of Christianity which purported that Christian faith was unique, superior, definitive, normative and absolute.⁷⁶

The pervasion of religious pluralism and the resultant religious freedom necessitate the need for an authentic dialogue. For Gort, such dialogue should assume that in the midst of differences between cultures and religions of various people, there is a basic stratum of human commonalities that makes it possible for them to communicate with one another and to discover points of contact among themselves.⁷⁷ Gort further argues that the quest for interreligious coexistence that is open, peaceful and cooperative prevail in four forms of dialogue, namely, dialogue of histories, dialogue of theologies, dialogue of spiritualities and dialogue of life.⁷⁸ In summary, these forms of dialogue entail an analysis of past relations between or among the religions involved; removal of barriers to respect and tolerate people of differing faith; sharing of spiritualities of reconciliation; and the emergence of interreligious solidarity on issues of social justice. In this creative tension, sharing of religious conviction with openness, mutual respect and listening to one another is required. However, this should not be construed for sacrificing one's position as true dialogue presupposes a commitment to faith.⁷⁹ These principles of authentic dialogue suggest that dialogue and mission can only be conducted in an environment of humility, culminating in a peaceful co-existence among people of various faiths.⁸⁰ While this co-existence and openness among religious convictions is necessary, Stott warns that Christians should not cultivate a total openness to an extent of suspending their convictions concerning the truth of the gospel and personal commitment to Christ as that would destroy their integrity.⁸¹

CONVERGENCE BETWEEN EVANGELICAL WITNESS AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Distinctive Reciprocal Relationship

Evangelical witness and interfaith dialogue share a useful conceptual relationship. This relationship is nicely captured by Shorter who highlights that evangelism and dialogue do not undermine one another but they complement each other.⁸² He posits that dialogue is a necessary prerequisite of proclamation. This reciprocity is also affirmed by the WCC which posits that evangelism does not only encompass proclamation of deepest convictions but also involves listening to others.⁸³ This sharing of conviction should be preceded by assessing the prevailing circumstances of the evangelized.⁸⁴

⁷⁴ Bosch, *Transforming mission*, 474.

⁷⁵ Bosch, *Transforming mission*, 474.

⁷⁶ Bosch, *Transforming mission*, 475.

⁷⁷ Jerald D Gort, "The search for interreligious convivance, ongoing challenge and charge," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 29, no.3 (2008), 756.

⁷⁸ Gort, *The search for interreligious convivance*, 758-760.

⁷⁹ Bosch, *Transforming mission*, 484.

⁸⁰ David T. Adamo, "Christianity and the African Traditional Religion(s): the postcolonial round of engagement," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 32, no.1 (2011), 5.

⁸¹ John R.W. Stott, *Christian mission in the modern world* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 91-92.

⁸² Shorter, *Evangelization and culture*, 42.

⁸³ Keum, *Together towards Life*, 35.

⁸⁴ Abraham, *The logic of evangelism*, 72.

Considering that dialogue is primarily experiential, it serves as a primary mode of evangelization as according to Shorter it expresses the relational aspect of evangelism.⁸⁵ From this observation, it is evident that dialogue creates an environment for an explicit witness to the gospel whereby the church listens to the Spirit to discern what shape the dialogue should take. Through discernment, the church would know when to witness or proclaim either as a storyteller, teacher or trail guide.

Explicit witness to the gospel is also a prerequisite of dialogue as according to Shorter the Christian converser must carry out preliminary self-identification, and must continually resort to Christ as the dynamic norm of God's self-revelation in other traditions.⁸⁶ Self-identification and drawing revelation from God are crucial in prophetic dialogue as they empower the church to be sensitive to the hearer, knowledgeable to impart the gospel and create awareness of the things that the dialogue partner knows about their relationship with the Triune God. In this way, the dialogue of spiritualities and dialogue of life may be achieved.

Promotion of Mutual Respect

Evangelization is characterized by the dialogical qualities of listening and mutual respect. For Shorter these qualities manifest themselves in four types of dialogue, namely witness of a silent presence, theological discussion, spiritual sharing and active collaboration in life situations.⁸⁷ Shorter maintains that the fourth form of dialogue is critical in evangelism as it culminates in joint initiatives and practical cooperation. He also notes that it serves as a necessary precondition for the efficacy of official institutional dialogue.

Mutual respect is partly achieved through recognizing that other faiths are not mere sets of speculative ideas about the eternal destiny of people but are inclusive systems and theories of life.⁸⁸ If the church acknowledges this, it should evangelize in an authentic dialogue without coercion. Integral to this act of mutual respect is respectful intercultural communication which is likely to result in the emergence of interreligious solidarity on issues of social justice, for instance.

Intercultural Communication

Both evangelism and interfaith dialogue happen in an environment that is influenced by culture and religion, where the latter two also influence each other. This necessitates the need for intercultural communication which presupposes that the sharing of the gospel should be presented in forms and terms appropriate to the local culture.⁸⁹ It is therefore crucial for the church to empower itself by gathering the profile of the dialogue partners ahead of any evangelistic activity. Where the gospel is taken across significant cultural and linguistic boundaries, it might be necessary to gather specialist information about the nature of modern cities, or character of a rural community, or the relation of persons to established Christian communities.⁹⁰ This is fundamental, as every culture uses its own lens to interpret scripture, past doctrinal formulations, ethical practices, and liturgical customs.⁹¹

The indispensability of intercultural communication has also been articulated by Lourens Minnema who posits that religion is a cultural phenomenon and interreligious dialogue is a specific case of intercultural communication. If religion is a cultural phenomenon, it is vital that dialogue and evangelism be cognizant of how they influence culture and vice versa.⁹² This relationship is summed up by who advances that dialogue presents an opportunity through which cultures are evangelized, consequently, evangelization and inculturation seek the conversion of peoples and cultures by the gospel.⁹³

⁸⁵ Shorter, *Evangelization and culture*, 42.

⁸⁶ Shorter, *Evangelization and culture*, 42.

⁸⁷ Shorter, *Evangelization and culture*, 43.

⁸⁸ Balia & Kim (eds.), *Witnessing to Christ*, 36.

⁸⁹ Balia & Kim (eds.), *Witnessing to Christ*, 36.

⁹⁰ Abraham, *The logic of evangelism*, 172.

⁹¹ Bevans & Schroeder, *Prophetic dialogue*, 70.

⁹² Lourens Minnema, "Correlations between types of culture, styles of communication and forms of interreligious dialogue," *HTS Theological Studies* 70, no.1 (2014): 1.

⁹³ Shorter, *Evangelization and culture*, 39.

Contextualization

In everyday life, it is not uncommon for people to say “I was quoted out of context” to denote that another person has misunderstood the prevailing circumstances under which the speaker said something. This observation highlights the importance of contextualization in all facets of life including, sharing the gospel. While there is no universally accepted definition of contextualization, one learns that in witnessing to God’s mission, contextualization acknowledges that while the truths of scriptures are never-changing, witnessing to them happens in an ever-changing human context.⁹⁴ The reality is that evangelization and interfaith dialogue in contemporary mission is contextually different from that which is reflected in Scripture. For instance, in Acts, most of the characters were Jews or people who were familiar with the Jewish tradition and religion, therefore much of the preaching centred on the internal debate within the Jewish community on who Jesus was.⁹⁵ This is not the case in most of the geographies and cultures where the gospel is preached today.

In recognition of this reality, Newbigin argues that, it is not enough for the church to go on repeating in different cultural situations the same words and phrases.⁹⁶ He proposes that new ways of proclaiming the Trinitarian faith while maintaining the original biblical sources and meaning be established in this contemporary era. This implies that Christian witnessing in the contemporary milieu requires that the church should be both faithful to Jesus and appropriate to the people that it serves,⁹⁷ as new believers ordinarily enter into God’s presence with their cultural identities just as Jesus retained his Jewishness when he died and rose.⁹⁸ Through contextualization, the church is able to determine how to share the gospel among people of other faiths in a humble, sensitive and relevant manner. Prophetic dialogue contextualizes by enabling the man and woman of faith to be someone who is sensitive to the world and humankind.⁹⁹ While proclaiming the gospel to the world, evangelism pays attention to the context of the hearer, making a careful study of the social and personal circumstances of the hearer(s).¹⁰⁰

RECOMMENDATIONS

The researcher recommends that:

- Interfaith dialogue should be embraced by adherents of all faiths as a harmonious way of sharing each other’s faith.
- Evangelical witness should be done with respect for other faiths without negating the significance of the commission received from Jesus Christ.
- These recommendations and those from empirical studies on this topic should be tested in various contexts to determine how evangelism could be optimized within the context of interfaith dialogue.

CONCLUSION

This article illustrated that evangelism and interfaith dialogue are distinct but interrelated as authentic evangelism takes place within the context of the dialogue of life and action in the spirit of dialogue.¹⁰¹ It also acknowledges that prophetic dialogue which is crucial in interfaith dialogue requires speaking forth and against with words (proclamation) and speaking forth and against without words (witness).¹⁰²

⁹⁴ Craig Ott, Timothy C. Tennent, & Stephen J. Strauss, *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical foundations, historical developments, and contemporary issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 266.

⁹⁵ Ariarajah, *The Bible and people of other faiths*, 40.

⁹⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An introduction to the theology of Mission* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1995), 27.

⁹⁷ Cornelius J.P. Niemandt, “Artisanal cheeses or artisanal Jesus: loving your postal code enough to reflect it in the life and theology of the church,” *South African Journal of Missiology* 42, no.1–2 (2014).

⁹⁸ Michael Moynagh, *Church for every context: an introduction to Theology and Practice*, (London: SCM Press, 2012), 183.

⁹⁹ Bevans & Schroeder, *Prophetic dialogue*, 41.

¹⁰⁰ Abraham, *The logic of evangelism*, 172.

¹⁰¹ Keum, *Together towards Life*, 35.

¹⁰² Bevans & Schroeder, *Prophetic dialogue*. 44–48.

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