

# The Need for a Hermeneutics of Tolerance, Mutual Respect and Peaceful Coexistence for a Healthy Christian-Muslim Relations



Edward Agboada<sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Department of Religious Studies, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi - Ghana.

## ABSTRACT

Christian-Muslim relations in recent times have raised concerns the world over. There have been increments in polemics and prejudices. Although the root causes of many of these have been political, religion has often been used as a tool to manipulate sentiments and legitimize the political and social agenda. The lack of a hermeneutics of tolerance, mutual respect and peaceful coexistence for Christian Mission and Muslim Da'wah activities continue to create the, 'we' and 'them', and the 'majority' versus 'minority' status. The challenge is to strive not only to nurture their separate learning in order to survive in the increasingly religiously pluralistic world but to find effective and more efficient ways to interact and collaborate across differences of faith and non-faith environments. This paper discusses the need for hermeneutics of tolerance, peaceful coexistence and mutual respect between Christians and Muslims. It concludes that when Christians and Muslims come to an understanding of each other, it keeps out intruders like politicians who would want to manipulate their religion for political and economic benefits, remove religious barriers and create opportunities. This article contributes to the dialogue on religious tolerance and its importance in fostering societal growth and development.

Correspondence

Edward Agboada

Email: [agboadaedwards@gmail.com](mailto:agboadaedwards@gmail.com)

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## INTRODUCTION

There are an estimated 9 billion people in the world, 32% are said to be Christian, 23% Muslim, 15% Hindu, 7% Buddhist, and 0.2% Jewish. 157 countries have a majority Christian population, while 49 have a majority Muslim population. Christians and Muslims together make up approximately 55% i.e. 4.5 billion people across the globe.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, failure to live in peace with one another, collaborate on issues of common concerns and endeavour to create an atmosphere of tolerance, peaceful coexistence and mutual respect consequently would result in negative repercussions on world peace and stability. It is therefore important for Christians and Muslims not only to strive to nurture their separate religious learnings in order to survive in the increasingly religiously plural world, but they must also find a more effective and efficient way to communicate and collaborate across differences of faith and non-faith settings. This article, therefore, looks at the two religions, their belief systems and similarities. It also discusses the hermeneutics of faith and

<sup>1</sup> Pew Research Centre Religion & Public Life, the Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050

the need for practicing hermeneutics of tolerance, peaceful coexistence and mutual respect which are key to societal development.

### **Christianity and Islam**

Christianity and Islam are considered Abrahamic; thus, they have Abraham as their progenitor. Christianity begins with the foretelling of the birth of Jesus the main actor of Christianity by the Angel Gabriel to the young Virgin Mary. The story continues with his life, ministry, crucifixion and resurrection from the dead. The core beliefs of Christianity are summarized in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4. Thus, Christians believe that Jesus died for their sins, was buried, was resurrected, and thereby offers salvation to all who will receive Him in faith. Beyond these core beliefs, are many others that are, indicative of what Christianity is and what Christians believe.

Christians believe that the Bible is inspired, “God-breathed” (Word of God) and that its teaching is the final authority in all matters of faith and practice (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:20-21). Christians believe in one God that exists in three persons—the Father, the Son (Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit. Christians believe that mankind was created specifically to have a relationship with God, but sin separates all men from God (Rom. 3:23; 5:12). Christianity teaches that Jesus Christ walked this earth, fully God, yet fully man (Phil.2:6-11), and died on the cross. Christians believe that after His death, Christ was buried, He rose again and now lives at the right hand of the Father, making intercession for the believers forever (Heb. 7:25).

Christianity proclaims that Jesus’ death on the cross was sufficient to completely pay the sin debt owed by all men and this is what restores the broken relationship between God and man (Heb. 9:11-14; 10:10; Rom. 5:8; 6:23). Christianity teaches that in order to be saved and be granted entrance into heaven after death, one must place one’s faith entirely in the finished work of Christ on the cross. If Christians believe that Christ died in their place and paid the price of their own sins, and rose again, then all are saved. There is nothing that anyone can do to earn salvation. One cannot be “good enough” to please God on their own, because all are sinners (Isa. 53:6; 64:6-7).

There is nothing more to be done because Christ has done all the work! When He was on the cross, Jesus said, “It is finished” (Jhn 19:30), meaning that the work of redemption was completed. According to Christianity, salvation is freedom from the old sinful nature and freedom to pursue a right relationship with God. ‘Where we were once slaves to sin, we are now slaves to Christ’ (Rom. 6:15-22). As long as believers live on this earth in their sinful bodies, they will engage in a constant struggle with sin. However, Christians can have victory in the struggle with sin by studying and applying God’s Word in their lives and being controlled by the Holy Spirit—that is, submitting to the Spirit’s leading in everyday circumstances.

Islam on the other hand literally translated “surrender” or “submission” to the will of Allah was founded in the Middle East in the 7th century C.E. This was in the Arabian Peninsula on the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad originally known as Abu al-Qasim Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Abd al-Muttalib ibn Hashim. and articulated by the Qur’an, (first authority) considered by its devotees to be the verbatim word of the Muslim God (Allah), and, for the vast majority of adherents, chronicled teachings and normative practice (Sunnah) and teachings (hadith) of Prophet Muhammad. In its fullest form, Islam is a complete system of life, defining the ethics and behaviour of its people with religious, legal, political, economic, and social laws influencing the cultural and social identity of followers.

It is built on the belief that the Muslim God (Allah) is the one and true God with no partner or equal. Known as *Tawhid* in Arabic, Islamic monotheism is the single most important concept of faith and life including *Tawhid Ar-Rububiyyah*, (Oneness of Divine Lordship), *Tawhid Al-Uluhiyyah*, (Oneness of the Divine Nature), *Tawhid Al-Asmaa was Sifaat*, (Oneness of the Divine Names and Attributes). This means that, in Islam, no act of worship or devotion has any meaning or value if the above concept is in any way compromised. Tawhid in a much broader meaning denotes the totality of the discussion of God, his existence and his various attributes. Tawhid constitutes the foremost article of the Muslim profession of faith. The first part of the *shahada* (the Islamic declaration of faith) is the declaration of belief in the oneness of God.

To attribute divinity to anything or anyone else, is *shirk* - an unpardonable sin according to the Qur'an, if repentance is not sought afterward. Muslims believe that the entirety of Islamic teaching rests on the principle of Tawhid. There are three traditional categories of Tawhid; Tawheed al-Rububiyya, (Oneness of Divine Lordship), Tawheed Al-Uluhiyah, (Oneness of Divine Nature), Tawheed Al-Asmaa was Sifaat, (Oneness of Divine Names and Attributes).

Tawhid al-Rububiyya: Oneness of Lordship: Muslims believe that Allah caused all things to exist. Allah is the only One Who created and maintains all things. Allah is not in need of help or assistance in His Lordship over creation. Muslims reject any suggestion that Allah has partners who share in His actions. While Muslims greatly respect their prophets, including Mohammad and Jesus, they firmly separate them from Allah.<sup>2</sup>

Tawhid al-Uluhiyah/'Ebadah: Oneness of Worship: Because Allah is the sole Creator and Maintainer of the universe, it is to Allah alone that Muslims should direct their worship. Throughout history, people have engaged in prayer, invocation, fasting, supplication, and even animal or human sacrifice for the sake of nature, people, and false deities. Islam teaches that the only being worthy of worship is Allah (God). Allah alone is worthy of all prayers, praise, obedience, and hope.<sup>3</sup>

Tawhid Adh-Dhat wal-Asma' was-Sifat: Oneness of Allah's Attributes and Names: The Quran is filled with descriptions of Allah's nature, often through attributes and special names. The Merciful, the All-Seeing, the Magnificent, etc. are all names which describe Allah's nature and should only be used to do so. Allah is distinct from His creation. As human beings, Muslims believe that one may strive to understand and emulate certain values, but that Allah alone has these attributes perfectly, in full, and in their entirety.<sup>4</sup> Islam has several branches and variety within those branches including the Sunni and Shi'a each of which claims different means of maintaining religious authority.

## Interfaith Relations

Interfaith is defined as "of, relating to, or between different religions or members of different religions."<sup>5</sup> Interfaith makes way between belief communities – religious, spiritual, and irreligious – to create understanding and community between the "barriers" that individuals and societies have established between people. Interfaith encourages intentional collaboration within communities to build relationships between diverse individuals so that understanding and respect can be established.

Interfaith relations is the daily living together of people of different faiths in mutual understanding and respect that allows them to live and cooperate with each other in spite of their differences.<sup>6</sup> Interfaith relations aim to increase mutual understanding and good relations, identify causes of tension, build understanding and confidence to overcome or prevent tensions and break down all possible barriers and stereotypes, which lead to distrust, doubt and chauvinism.<sup>7</sup> Healthy interfaith relations is not translated to mean forgetting or talking away or brushing aside differences. It does not aim at coming to a common belief rather it aims at accepting the religious differences and cooperating with each other irrespective of the differences.

The desire to encourage understanding, inspire good relations, correct stereotypes, explore similarities and facilitate cooperation among religious faiths have brought about the development of various models, which have gone through several definitions and redefinitions and taken on various forms. Notwithstanding, there have been certain emphasis including interfaith/interreligious dialogue and distinct scope, dialogue of life and dialogue of ideas.

<sup>2</sup> "From the article on Tawhid in Oxford Islamic Studies Online". Oxfordislamicstudies.com. 2008-05-06. Accessed 24<sup>th</sup> April 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Tawhid in Oxford Islamic Studies Online"

<sup>4</sup> Tawhid in Oxford Islamic Studies Online"

<sup>5</sup> Dakota Riehl, What is Interfaith? <https://msucicblog.wordpress.com/interfaith-information/> Accessed 17<sup>th</sup> May 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Ronald, Kronish, "Inter-Religious Dialogue as a Method of Peace Building in Israel-Palestine" (2014), <http://www.coistine.ie/what-is-interreligious-dialogue>. accessed 14<sup>th</sup> February 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Martha Frederiks, "Hermeneutics from an Interreligious Perspective?" *Exchange* 35, (2005): 102-110.

Dialogue has become the cornerstone of interfaith collaboration, bringing people together through person-to-person discussions about aspects of religions or cultures. The essential purpose of dialogue is to learn, which entails change. At the very least, to learn that one's dialogue partner views the world differently is to effect a change in oneself. Reciprocally, change happens for one's partner as s/he learns about oneself.<sup>8</sup> The process of dialogue with individuals who come from different religious backgrounds takes sensitivity and structure.

Dialogue of life in simple terms entails coexisting peacefully with "the other" in spite of obvious religious differences. In the dialogue of life, people from different religious traditions live and interact in their everyday lives. Dialogue of life differs from interreligious dialogue. Interreligious dialogue primarily involves listening to one another about the content of each other's faiths while dialogue of life entails faith communities and individuals "sharing with openness" what God is doing in the life of his people.

Basically, interfaith dialogue is the attempt to build the openness, understanding and trust needed for religions to live and cooperate with each other despite their differences. Dialogue is not only conversational (*dialogue of ideas*) but also an encounter between people (*dialogue of life*). It depends on mutual trust, demands respect for the identity and integrity of the other, and requires a willingness to question one's own self-religious understanding as well as an openness to understand others on their own terms.<sup>9</sup>

Unlike interreligious dialogue, which seeks, among other things to build understanding on similarities between different faiths, dialogue of life does not only seek similarities but also brings peace even amidst acknowledged differences. The process thereby generates peaceful co-existence and enables people to promote spiritual and cultural values, which are found in the distinct outlooks of followers of other religions. Peaceful co-existence leads to a growth in a relationship through a process of mutuality that generates greater understanding and mutual enrichment.

The end result is better relations between religions within the same community. Using dialogue as a method of interacting with and understanding religions is not unprecedented in the history of the study of religions. It is an indispensable tool for interacting, understanding and relating not only to followers of religions, their tenets of beliefs and practices but also their sacred texts. There are varying categorisations of dialogue. Eck identifies six types of such: the parliamentary, institutional, theological, spiritual and the dialogue of life.<sup>10</sup> Archbishop Marcell Zago described by Haney, identifies five forms: the living dialogue or dialogue of life, dialogue of cooperation, dialogue of religious experience, theological dialogue and official dialogue among religious authorities.<sup>11</sup>

Superfluous to contrast, it would be extremely difficult to achieve a meaningful interfaith/ interreligious cooperation or collaboration without the appropriate methodological tool in hermeneutics that seeks to provide an all-encompassing theological foundation to vouchsafe the needed openness, understanding and trust to bring about tolerance, peaceful coexistence and mutual respect for each other.

## Hermeneutics

Etymologically the root of the word hermeneutics is derived from the Greek word ἑρμηνεύω (*hermēneuō*, "translate, interpret" from ἑρμηνεύς (*hermeneus*, "translator, interpreter").<sup>12</sup> The noun *hermeneia* means the utterance or explication of thought; and the name, Hermeus, refers to the playful, mischievous, "trickster"

<sup>8</sup> Dakota Riehl, What is Interfaith? <https://msucicblog.wordpress.com/interfaith-information/>.

<sup>9</sup> Nathan Iddrisu Samwini, "The Need for and Importance of Dialogue of Life in Community Building: The Case of Selected West African Nations". *Journal of Inter-Religious Studies* 6, (2011).

<sup>10</sup> Diane L. Eck, "Dialogue and Method: Reconstructing the Study of Religion" in "A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age", (Ed) Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> M. S. Haney, "Envisioning Islam: Imam Mohammed and Interfaith Dialogue". *The Muslim World*. (2009).

<sup>12</sup> Ernest, Klein, "A complete etymological dictionary of the English language: dealing with the origin of words and their sense development, thus illustrating the history of civilization and culture", (Elsevier, Oxford, 2000), 344.

Hermes.<sup>13</sup> As the divine, wing-footed messenger of the gods, Hermes was gifted with the ability to translate or interpret messages from the gods into a form that humans could understand.

Audi<sup>14</sup> and William<sup>15</sup> indicate that as a science of interpretation, hermeneutics is the study of the theoretic and methodology of interpretation, especially in biblical texts, wisdom literature, and philosophical texts that assume that there are several methods of reasoning and ambiguities of expression, which consequently aims at eliminating the imaginary variances regarding text and context to ensure that text is accurately understood.<sup>16</sup> This includes both the verbal, and non-verbal as well as semiotics, presuppositions, and pre-understandings.

Palmer outlines six different domains of hermeneutics including (1) Hermeneutics as a Theory of Biblical Exegesis. (2) Hermeneutics as Philological methodology (3) Hermeneutics as the Science of Linguistic Understanding (4) Hermeneutics as the Methodological Foundation for understanding (*Geisteswissenschaften*). (5) Hermeneutics as the Phenomenology of Dasein and of Existential Understanding (6) Hermeneutics as a System of Interpretation: Recovery of Meaning versus Iconoclasm.<sup>17</sup> According to Palmer, each of these represents a standpoint on the act of interpretation, although each domain brings to the forefront legitimate but different influences on the act of interpretation.<sup>18</sup>

Martin Heidegger developed the concept of the hermeneutic circle to envision a whole in terms of a reality that was situated in the detailed experience of everyday existence by an individual (the parts).<sup>19</sup> The hermeneutic circle describes the process of understanding a text hermeneutically. It refers to the idea that one's understanding of the text as a whole is established by reference to the individual parts and one's understanding of each individual part by reference to the whole. Neither the whole text nor any individual part can be understood without reference to one another, and hence, it is a circle. However, this circular character of interpretation does not make it impossible to interpret a text; rather, it stresses that the meaning of a text must be found within its cultural, historical, and literary context.

Palmer submits that there are particular hermeneutic domains that suit the unique beliefs, philosophies and practices of the interpretive inquirer. He adds that, "meaning is what understanding grasps in the essentially reciprocal interaction of the whole and the parts" —a sentence as an example. "And meaning is something historical; it is a relationship of whole to parts, seen by us from a given standpoint, at a given time, for a given combination of parts. It is not something above or outside history but a part of a hermeneutical circle always historically defined".<sup>20</sup>

Palmer again observes that interpretive hermeneutic understanding differs from other ways of understanding by presupposing that all texts and non-texts are strange and inaccessible - and, as such, distanced from the interpreter. Yet, a paradox exists, despite the sense of strangeness and distance between the interpreter and the individual and/or text, there is an assumed link or commonality between the two, making the event of understanding feasible.<sup>21</sup> Søren submits that understanding the meaning of a text is not about decoding the author's intentions.<sup>22</sup> It is about establishing real relationships between reader, text, and

<sup>13</sup> J. Caputo, *Radical hermeneutics: Repetition, deconstruction and the hermeneutic project*. (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987); N.J. Moules, "Hermeneutic Inquiry: Paying heed to history and Hermes - ancestral, substantive, and methodological tale". *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 1(3), Article 1. . (2002). Accessed December 20, 2017, <http://www.ualberta.ca/~ijqm>

<sup>14</sup> William L. Reese, "Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion". (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980), 221;

<sup>15</sup> Robert Audi, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (2nd ed.). (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., 1999), 377.

<sup>16</sup> Ann E. McManus Holroyd "Interpretive Hermeneutic Phenomenology: Clarifying Understanding." *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, 7 (2), (2007): 1-12

<sup>17</sup> Richard E. Palmer, *Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer*. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969).

<sup>18</sup> Palmer, *Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer*.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art." *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Trans. Albert Hofstadter. (NY: Harper Collins, 1971).

<sup>20</sup> Palmer, *Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer*.

<sup>21</sup> Palmer, *Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer*.

<sup>22</sup> Harnow Klausen Søren, "Levels of Literary Meaning," *Philosophy and Literature*, 41, (1), (2017): 70-90.

context.”<sup>23</sup> Wilhelm Dilthey used the example of understanding a sentence as an example of the circular course of hermeneutic understanding. He particularly stressed that meaning and meaningfulness were always contextual. Thus, the meaning of any sentence cannot be fully interpreted unless we know the historical circumstances of its utterance.

The event of understanding is an ongoing effort basic to human existence in this world. Travelbee suggests human beings are motivated to create meaning in the different experiences that shape their life.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, language is pivotal in hermeneutic interpretation because it shapes all situations and experiences that people find themselves in. Laverty argues that language and understanding are inseparable structural aspects of human beings in the world.<sup>25</sup> Through one’s own unique experiences, he/she is moved to reflect on our dominant ideologies and usual rules of understanding. However, the scientific modes of understanding entail a kind of knowing that moves away from existence and personal experience into a world of concepts. By contrast, interpretive hermeneutic understanding is rooted in a historical encounter and concerns itself with personal experiences of being here in this world.<sup>26</sup>

In general terms, the field of hermeneutics has two main branches: one concerned with the activities of interpretation, the other concerned with the philosophy of understanding.<sup>27</sup> The first of these addresses the practical issue of how to interpret the text; the second is more abstract and conceptual, and explores questions such as what one means by understanding, and how understanding comes about. The activities of interpretation the first tend to generate rules and standards; while the philosophy of understanding second tries to articulate principles rather than procedures. Therefore, the first exerts a direct influence on methodology; the second exerts a more indirect one.

### Interfaith Hermeneutics

Interfaith hermeneutics is the use of a multi-faith, multi-religious-based interpretive methodological paradigm that considers the availability of multiple multi-faith, multi-religious interpretive tools for scripture reading and interpretation. This is to ensure that scripture is not interpreted using the limited interpretive tools available to each specific religion but rather taps into the availability of multi-faith, multi-religious interpretive tools to each religion to arrive at a deeper meaning of scripture. According to Martha Frederiks, interreligious hermeneutics can either be focused on “Interpreting the Texts” or “Interpreting the Encounter with ‘the Other’”.<sup>28</sup>

In the latter case, interreligious hermeneutics comes close to comparative theology, understood as an interpretive approach to other religions that engages the self in a potentially transformative encounter with the religious other.<sup>29</sup> What takes place in such dialogical processes is a repositioning of the self into a larger interpretive whole. This approach to scripture study and interpretation presents adherents of religious traditions the opportunity of appreciating the tenets of beliefs and religious practices of other religions in an attempt to eliminate the often hostile, stereotype and vilification of the beliefs and religious practices of the ‘religious other’.

Many of the prejudicial incidences that have evidenced the realities of interfaith encounters in the past, and in inherited and culturally conditioned patterns of reasoning and practice have contributed to influencing the opinions and attitudes of religious people towards each other, although, those conditions

<sup>23</sup> Ramberg, Bjørn and Kristin Gjesdal, “Hermeneutics: Continuations”, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2003, 2005.

<sup>24</sup> J. Travelbee, *Interpersonal Aspects of Nursing*. (Philadelphia: F. A. Davis, 1971).

<sup>25</sup> S.M. Laverty, “Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A comparison of historical and Methodological Considerations” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2(3), (2003) Accessed on September 10, 2019, [http://www.ualberta.ca/~ijqm/backissue/2\\_3final/html/laverty.html](http://www.ualberta.ca/~ijqm/backissue/2_3final/html/laverty.html)

<sup>26</sup> Palmer, *Interpretation theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer*, 10.

<sup>27</sup> Palmer, *Interpretation theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer*, 10.

<sup>28</sup> Frederiks, “Hermeneutics from an Interreligious Perspective” 102 -110.

<sup>29</sup> Leirvik Oddbjørn, “*Interreligious Studies: A Relational Approach to Religious Activism and the Study of Religion*”. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 192.

have since changed.<sup>30</sup> It is therefore important that religious people endeavour to develop a methodology of scriptural interpretation that is compatible and appropriate with their current social, cultural and political circumstances within which they find themselves to bring about an understanding that encourages tolerance, peaceful coexistence and mutual respect.

In spite of the apparent negative impression of religious encounters in the past, as religious people interact with each other in each particular generation, they come to grips with the limits of their suppositions and recognise that their religious views are largely shaped by imposed social, cultural, and inherited apprehensions of previous generations which according to Hick are formulations of people living in a certain place at a certain time, subject to particular historical exigencies, and therefore reformable.<sup>31</sup>

It is, therefore, necessary that religious people come to terms with the limits of their peculiar linguistic and hermeneutical traditions and seek richer and more pervading tools that allow for an insightful understanding of scripture, eliminating polemics, prejudices and antagonisms. With the availability of the plurality of interpretations arising from the interplay of subject and object in every act of interpretation, Christians and Muslims must be able to come out with a methodology that affords each the opportunity to appreciate the tenets of beliefs and religious practices of the other. Often, emphasis on particular socio-cultural, political and traditional incidence tends to overshadow the true imports and meaning of scripture.

It is necessary, that religion permit their scriptures to an interpretation devoid of monopolized and imposed meanings and dross of dogma. The traditional interpretation of scriptures has often aimed at confirming and continuing with already existing traditions. For example, traditional Christian doctrine is Christocentric, thus, Christ is the sole full and true revelation of the will of God for humanity. In this sense, the very elements of truth in other religions are understood in relation to the fullness of truth found in Christ alone. In a typical approach, Muslims self-understanding on the other hand incorporates an awareness of and direct link with some biblical traditions.<sup>32</sup>

Muhammad, his companions, and subsequent generations of Muslims have been guided by the Qur'an that they have understood as a continuation and completion of God's revelations to humankind. A hermeneutics of tolerance, peaceful coexistence and mutual respect will be able to synchronise the principles enshrined in the various interpretive tools available to each religious tradition and come out with prepositions that establish true religious belief and practice. This will enable religious people to build the confidence necessary to create an environment of tolerance, peaceful coexistence and mutual respect to live and cooperate with each other.

No one religion or denomination has the full and whole truth. God is both infinite and ineffable. For this reason, by definition, God cannot be captured adequately in human concepts and human language. Thus, while man's knowledge of God may be true, it is always only partial. God can be truly known, but God cannot be adequately thought of. All faiths and all religions are journeying towards the fullness of truth. No one religion or denomination may consider its truth complete, something to permanently rest within; rather it must see it as a starting point from which to journey.

### **The Importance of Interfaith Hermeneutics**

A primary connecting point of religion is hermeneutics or how the leaders and congregants of a particular religious group interpret their sacred text. Hermeneutics characterizes an individual's worldview as a result of their interpretation of religious texts. Personal values are formed from the interpretation of a sacred text. Since a sacred text is believed to be divinely inspired, adherence to these values is uncompromising. Cultural

<sup>30</sup> Michel Thomas, "Social and religious factors affecting Muslim-Christian relations." *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*; (1997); A.B. Willem, "Christian Muslim Relations: a burdensome past, a challenging Future", *Word & World*, XVI, (2), (1996): 117-128.

<sup>31</sup> John Hick, "*Islam and Christian Monotheism*", in Dan Cohn-Sherbok (Ed.). *Islam in a World of Diverse Faiths*. (New York: St Martin's Press, 1997).

<sup>32</sup> Lamin Sanneh, "*Christian Experience of Islamic Da'wah, with Particular Reference to Africa*", in Christian Mission and Islamic Da'wah-proceedings of the Chambesy Dialogue Consultation, the Islamic Foundation, (1982).

boundaries are established on the basis of beliefs that are valued by individuals in a particular culture.

Understanding the hermeneutic that forms the foundational values of a religious group is a critical component of interfaith relations as well as the propensity for violence of religion. Hermeneutics shape one's perception of and response to others. How religious leaders interpret holy texts and tenets can lead to the inspiration of noble deeds or divine sanction for ugly acts of brutality. In Christian-Muslim relations, one needs to know the hermeneutic that shapes the primary values of the other religion.

### **The Need for Hermeneutics of Tolerance, Peaceful Coexistence and Mutual Respect**

Given the ever-closed proximity of people of different religious groups interacting with each other in daily life experiences, it is clear that they are exposed to the practical daily living of their religious counterparts. They experience and learn more about each other. There are Christians and Muslims who read each other's sacred books. It is therefore important to develop a methodology of scriptural reading and interpretation that takes into account these factors.

In spite of the enormous advantages of the hermeneutics of tolerance, peaceful coexistence and mutual respect for Christian Mission and Muslim Da'wah activities, several challenges impede and restrain the attempt.<sup>33</sup> Discussions in academic literature incorporate a range of disciplines and provide different perspectives, which often concentrate on the old-same hostile, intolerant and antagonised encounters.<sup>34</sup> Few, however, detour on the need for a revised methodology encounters that encourage tolerance, peaceful coexistence and mutual respect.<sup>35</sup>

The cumulative impasse of such a methodology raises two concerns:

- (i) Can religious bodies strive to nurture not only their separate learning in order to survive in the increasingly religiously plural world?
- (ii) Can they endeavour to find a more efficient and effective way to interact and collaborate across differences of faith and non-faith environments without becoming syncretic?

Two reasons make this pursuit particularly significant:

- (i) The first is that the world is weary of the atrocity and havoc wrought in human history in the name of religious fanaticism, which has caused many people to revolt against religion and boycotted it as a practice no longer relevant in moulding society or determining the rightness of or wrongness of society's actions. In other developments, some governments have promulgated state laws that prohibit public expression of religion and push for a more secular state and the attempt to share one's religion is considered an infringement on another's right.
- (ii) The second is that the world has become a global village. People of different religious persuasions now find themselves living in close proximity and interacting in both structured and unstructured ways i.e. in academic institutions, corporate organisations, healthcare facilities and at sporting activities either participating or cheering their favourites on.<sup>36</sup> Common interests in matters of social, political and religious importance such as corruption, social injustices, exploitation of the weak and vulnerable, and political despotism affect all people irrespective of religious backgrounds. Without collaboration, tolerance and mutual respect for the tenets of religious beliefs and practices of the other there can be no peace and they would not have the peace to go about their religious activities. Hence the need to adopt an encompassing scriptural interpretive tool like the hermeneutics of tolerance, mutual respect and coexistence.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas, "Social and religious factors affecting Muslim-Christian relations."

<sup>34</sup> Arne Rudvin, "The Concept and Practice of Christian Mission", in Christian Mission and Islamic Da'wah: Proceedings of the Chambesy Dialogue Consultation. (Leicester (UK): The Islamic Foundation, 1982), 16-26.

<sup>35</sup> Johnson Apenad Mbillah "The Causes of Present-Day Muslim Unrest in Ghana". (University of Birmingham, 1999); John Azumah, "The legacy of Arab-Islam in Africa, the Quest for inter-religious Dialogue". (Oxford: One World Publication, 2001); Jane Ellingwood "The Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA): An Evolutionary Perspective". (2008).

<sup>36</sup> Carlos Fonseca, "Globalization and Universality of Humankind in Dialogue". *New Series XXIV*, (1997).

The benefit of the hermeneutics of tolerance, peaceful coexistence and mutual respect for the reading and interpretation of scripture for religious education, communication and community building are enormous. Among the benefits, include:

- a. The broadening of the knowledge base of religious persons about the religious other.
- b. Ensuring cooperation and collaboration on matters of common interest.
- c. Brings about peace and stability necessary for religious institutions to go about their religious activities without hindrances.
- d. Ensures economic growth and development for communities.

A hermeneutics of tolerance, peaceful coexistence and mutual respect for scripture reading assumes that one can move into and experience the symbolic world of the other and because of shared experience, integrate it into one's tradition to encourage tolerance, peaceful coexistence and mutual respect for the religious tenets, beliefs and practices of the other. In other words, the hermeneutics of tolerance, peaceful coexistence and mutual respect for scripture reading serves as the single neutral ground that presents Christians and Muslims the opportunity to tap into the availability of multiple interpretive tools available to each religious faith to help them come to an understanding of the other.

When Christians and Muslims come to an understanding of each other, it keeps out intruders like politicians who would want to manipulate their religion for political and economic benefits, remove religious barriers and create opportunities. In the end, communities also experience the peace and stability needed for growth and development.

## CONCLUSION

In the face of an emerging boycott of religion and its categorisation as superfluous in determining the morality of society due to the many atrocities wrought in human history in its name. There is the need to re-examine existing approaches to reading and interpreting scripture to arrive at an understanding informed by tolerance, mutual respect for the tenets of religious belief and practices of other religions and peaceful coexistence. If this is going to be possible then there is the need to identify an interpretive methodology (hermeneutics) for reading and interpreting scripture that creates the opportunity for shared procedural tools and presents each religious tradition with the opportunity of learning about the other.

To do this, one can only start from the beginning, thus, a careful study of the tenets of religious beliefs and practices of Christianity and Islam. This does not overlook the existence of overwhelming difficulties and challenges presented by textual criticism and the temptation of reductionism that should be surmounted. However, the successes to be achieved by the hermeneutics of tolerance, peaceful coexistence and mutual respect for the reading and interpreting of scripture in spite of the difficulties and challenges are enormous.

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## **ABOUT AUTHOR**

Edward Agboada is an Ordained Minister of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana. He is currently a research student at the Department of Religious Studies, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Kumasi - Ghana. He holds a variety of academic and professional certificates including CIM, Dip. Th., BD (TTS) and MPhil (KNUST), MEd Educational Studies. He was a Senior Lecturer at the Ramseyer Training Center – Abetifi, Ghana where he teaches courses in World Religions, Islamic Studies, Christian-Muslim, Interfaith dialogue, Cross-Cultural Missions, New Religious Movements, Homiletic, and studies in African Traditional Religions.