

The Hermeneutics of the Phenomenon of Dialogue between Christians and Muslims in Contemporary Kenya

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Abstract

Kenya is a multi cultural society comprising over forty different ethnic communities. But, it is also a nation where the plurality of religious faith is evident. Thus, plurality exists side by side with religious pluralism. What seems obvious is the tendency to acknowledge religious plurality which underscores the number and demographic account of these religious traditions. Accordingly, it is easier to note an apparent suspicion that may seem to exist between the two monotheistic religions- Islam and Christianity. The existence of the uneasiness between the two religions as exacerbated by recent activities of Al Shabaab and Al Qaeda fundamentalists who have not only threatened the security of the nation, but have actually destroyed lives of Kenyans through bombings or military actions. It is the argument of our paper that since these inimical activities are associated with Islamic faith, Kenyans should be open to interreligious dialogue to iron out unnecessary discrimination against Muslims and to prevent prejudices and suspicions based on apparent ignorance of what Islam religion stands for as a religion of peace and respect for human dignity. The paper therefore explains the concept of interreligious dialogue, its various types and interpretation to find a trajectory for peaceful coexistence and provide an opportunity for mutual cooperation based on genuine dialogue that leads to practical activities that enhance co-existence.

Key Words: Religion, dialogue, interfaith/ interreligious dialogue, Al Shabaab, Al Qaeda and mutual understanding.

1.1 Introduction

Kenya is a culturally and religiously pluralistic society with forty-two (42) ethnic groups and several religious affiliations, the main of which are Christians and Muslims. This is probably why Ongong'a and Akaranga (2015) hinted that in the current century, an increasing share of Kenyans is going to identify with either Christianity or Islam. That is, the existential reality and impact of these two Abrahamic religious traditions can hardly be ignored. What affects Muslims as a community will directly or indirectly impact on Christians as well. In Kenya, the two groups are not only neighbors' under one government, but they live next door to one another, chop in the same supermarket, board the same public transport vehicles, take their children to the same schools and may even work in the same place.

Such social and public sharing assumes amicable understanding of one another's tradition and way of life, be it religious tenets or otherwise. The needed close relationship cannot accommodate any finger pointing, identity, discrimination or divisive expressions such as; "they" and "us" in the name of religious conviction. Today, because of the impact of globalization that has enhanced human interactions, friction between different cultures and faiths are erroneously identified and categorized not only according to the peoples' political affiliations but, is equally based on their religious identity (Reef and Toro, 2009). Religion however, can be a very sensitive social phenomenon which hardly tolerates criticism. This is why, it is essential that where two groups of people living side by side, but following two different religious faiths must open up a trajectory for a dialogue.

This will enable not to focus more on what differentiates these people but rather, look for the common values that unite those (Heelas, 1998).

The term dialogue is etymologically derived from two Greek words: *dia*, meaning *through* and *logos* which is interpreted as *word or meaning*. To have a dialogue is therefore to engage in making meaning through the spoken or written word (Kalafa and Ombuge, 2012). Interfaith or inter-religious dialogue is thus defined as: *all positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of faith which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment in obedience to truth and respect for freedom* (Gerard Forde., 2013).

The main purpose for any interreligious dialogue is the desire for mutual understanding. But, this may be thwarted by animosity caused by misinterpretations of activities associated with one of the groups from the opposite religious faith. It is a dialectic process through which both parties are able to learn from each other. It prevents preconceived ideas, feelings and prejudices that curtail free and mature conversation (Ongong'a, 1983). This is because, in such a dialogue, the purpose is not to persuade others of the truth of one's own faith or to "convert" and ask them to surrender their own faith (vide Bea, 1964), but rather, to freely have a conversation and address issues at hand (Ongong'a and Akaranga, 2015). If this is the case, what then are the current possible causes for an urgent need for a dialogue between Christians and Muslims in Kenya today?

1.2. Possible causes for Christian-Muslim dialogue in Kenya today

Before enumerating and discussing possible reasons for the urgent need of an interreligious dialogue in Kenya, it is pertinent to underscore the global concerns and significance of interreligious dialogue in order to contextualize the Kenyan situation. The dialogue and recognition of others' religious traditions was first adopted in the Parliament of World Religions organized in Chicago in 1893. This was the first meeting of leaders and theologians from different world faiths to come together and mark the beginning of global inter-religious dialogue. And in the 1960's, the Second Vatican Council in its document *Nostra Aetate 3* (1965), underscoring the same spirit states: *The Church regards with esteem also the Muslims. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself, merciful and all-powerful, the creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting.*

This Second Vatican Council document has pointed out some areas that actually unite Catholics and Muslims as worshippers of the same God. But, the impetus of interreligious dialogue has been kept active by frequent conferences organized by the World Council of Churches, the Vatican and even the United Nations. International governments have equally acknowledged the need to understand religious sensitivities as a way to maintain international relations and cooperation with different states (vide Reef and Toro, 2009). In this initiative for example, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia took a leading role in 2008 by sponsoring and hosting several interreligious dialogue conferences. Two, out of these conferences are of great importance for our discussion. Reef and Toro (2009) reported that, in 2008, the King hosted a three day gathering in the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia to promote reconciliation among Shiite and Sunni Muslims. At that meeting, King Abdullah, a Sunni, was able to share discussions with the Iranian politician Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a Shiite. The importance of the King's initiative was to show the non-Muslims that, dialogue as an instrument of peace and reconciliation is not limited to Muslims and non-Muslims, but rather, it is necessary even among Muslims themselves. Because, Muslims like Christians, apart from worshipping one God, do not necessarily interpret their religious tenets and practices in the same way. In the same year 2008, King Abdullah announced his intention to support an interfaith dialogue among the three monotheistic religions; Christianity, Islam and Judaism. This, as Reef and Toro (2009) report, *was a diplomatic breakthrough from a nation that does not have ties with Israel, and that follows a strict Wahhabi version of Islam.*

King Abdullah's initiative however, took on a global impact when he, together with the King of Spain Juan Carlos and the Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis hosted a Global interfaith Dialogue Conference in Madrid which was attended by leaders from different world religions (Reef and Toro, 2009). In this conference, for the first time religious leaders called for an international agreement to combat terrorism. Indeed, King Abdullah and his fellow politicians had acknowledged the role played by interfaith dialogue as an instrument of peace. But, even more importantly that those who are accused and labeled as terrorists are believers and worshippers of the one God Yahweh or Allah.

The significance of interreligious dialogue cannot be adequately underscored, whether from a socio-political dimension or from a theological-ethical context. The goal remains the same- peaceful co-existence prompted by mutual understanding, respect for fellow humans; irrespective of their colour, diversity of culture, religious tradition or ethnic background.

Here in Kenya, the relationship between Christians and Muslims has in the recent past been somewhat strained. This may be due to several socio-cultural reasons. But, it is not justified to generalize and associate Muslims with terrorism as either members of Al-Shabaab or Al Qaeda who stand out as major sources of apparent animosity. Just when Kenyans were beginning to live with the memory of the heinous bombings at the American Embassy and at Machakos bus stop in Nairobi, they were adversely hit by another fatal attack at the Westgate shopping centre. This was followed by the bus incident at “Mpeketoni” where several Kenyans were killed on account of being non-Muslims. Then came the systematic killing of students at Garissa University! As if these were not enough, in January 2016, Kenyans woke up to yet more shocking news equally blamed on fundamentalist Muslims. This was the massacre of several Kenyan soldiers on a peace keeping mission at the El Adde army camp in Somalia!

The purpose of this paper is just to enumerate reasons for which hatred may be based, without necessarily pointing an accusing finger to some people. This is important in justifying the need for engaging in an urgent interfaith dialogue so as to prevent unnecessary hatred generated by insufficient knowledge about Islam as a genuine religion which does not in itself advocate violence. As pointed out in one of our earlier paper (Ongong’a and Akaranga 2015), all monotheistic religions tend to be associated with violence in one reason or another. Historians have not forgotten about Inquisition in Europe, a special tribunal set up by the Roman Catholic Church in the thirteenth century to combat heresy. In such tribunals, impenitent heretics were punished by ex-communication or imprisonment or confiscation of goods if not, they were handed over to the state and were burned alive (Scott, 1984/1990) such intolerant and cruel actions were done in the name of God! This is why, Christians must be slow to point fingers at other monotheistic religions. But, the only obvious and apparent neutral way is to be exposed to the types and characteristics of a dialogue in order to chart out the way forward.

1.3. Types and Characteristics of Interfaith Dialogue

In contemporary discourse, there are four types of interreligious dialogue; academic dialogue; the dialogue of religious experience, the dialogue of common action and, the dialogue of life (adopted from Gerard Forde, 2013). Even though all the four types of interfaith dialogue are necessary for the Kenyan Christians and Muslims, our present concern shall only deal briefly with three of them.

1.3.1. Academic Dialogue

One of the achievements that Kenyans have made is to allow both Christians and Muslims to go to the same learning institutions without discrimination. Such sharing of education is nevertheless restricted to secular subjects, meaning that even at the University level, theological issues of the two religions are not commonly discussed by students from both traditions. There is therefore, existential inability by the learners to appreciate the religious traditions that divide them. Since it is these young learners who will in the future comprise the Kenya population of Christians and Muslims, they need to engage in a dialogue at this early stage. This will enable them to acquire and build up openness, understanding and trust needed for both Christians and Muslims to live and cooperate with each other despite their cultural differences. But, academic dialogue is not restricted to students in learning institutions. It does include experts, theologians and religious leaders from both Christians and Muslims who may clarify issues at a societal level and remove unnecessary prejudices. The aim of the said clarification and exchange of ideas is not to reach a common belief, but, simply to clarify what each partner believes in so as to appreciate each other’s spiritual values (Reef and Toro, 2009).

Here in Kenya, one Islamic expression on the teaching of the Jihad is sometimes negatively interpreted as holy war. This has continued to confuse many non-Muslims, especially Christians (Vide, Ongong’a and Akaranga, 2015). In fact, for the majority of Kenyans, Al Shabaab and Al Qaeda are ironically understood as being Islamic holy wars. But, such a conclusion based on apparent ignorance may not go well with those Muslims who know better the concept of the Jihad as expressed in the Quran and in the Hadith. This is an example of a misconstrued interpretation that calls for the urgent need of an academic interfaith dialogue. Kenyan Muslim theologians and religious leaders need to form a forum where such confusing issues could be adequately discussed or explained.

Omar (2010) quoted one of the American Islamic Legal Scholars, Khaled Abou El Fadi, as saying, *in Islamic theology war is never holy, either it is justified or not*. He further says that the Jihad is not directed to other faiths, rather it is meant to purify the soul and refine the disposition. For the Sufi tradition, the Jihad is a spiritual struggle to discipline the lower impulses and base instincts in human nature. In other words, the way most Kenyans seem to understand the term Jihad may not have any Quranic foundation. It is imperative that Muslim academicians must create forums to prevent such misunderstanding. And, the best way to do that is through participating in interreligious dialogue.

1.3.2. Dialogue of Common Action

One of the common characteristics of monotheistic religions is the concern to cultivate justice, peace and sincere acknowledgement of human dignity. The respect of human dignity is paramount in realizing the needed peaceful co-existence which is the primary goal in any interfaith dialogue. A dialogue which is not action oriented may not be productive. In that, it will not achieve the goal intended for any interreligious discussion. The goal for a dialogue is peaceful co-existence to ensure liberty, social justice and moral values. Human dignity is one of the elements that unite humanity. We many talk of human equality, but, that may be difficult to conceive until we accept that we, as humans were created by one God, we share his image irrespective of our religious faith, culture, color or level of economic achievements. If we recognize the dignity of every individual it would be difficult to entertain acts of violence that are often misrepresented under the guise of religion. The dialogue of action is therefore instrumental in achieving any common concern of humanitarian values. But, without an action plan on how to execute the decisions made during the dialogue discussion, the purpose for interfaith engagement will remain unproductive. This calls for the need to work together in order to build the type of community we want, even if it means having volunteers from both sides to participate in a local community service. This is because; working together opens more avenues for sharing out our abilities and therefore appreciates one another irrespective of their religious faiths and or traditions.

1.3.4. The Dialogue of Life

Forde (2013) summarizes the significance of the dialogue of life in the following words: ...is where people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, the ordinary everyday business of getting on with each other, of being good neighbours and living in peace and harmony. Unlike the academic dialogue, the dialogue of life is more of the down to earth option for the discussion of peaceful co-existence. It accommodates everybody, the experts and the non experts! In Kenya, both Christians and Muslims live side by side, share the same environment and its contents. Although most Kenyans live together and share certain things in common, they hardly make any effort to really know or even understand one another. This is the reason why open discussions need to be held so that people can share their immediate concerns related to their culture and even religious traditions. A Christian may buy provisions from a Muslim supermarket or a Muslim could take his or her vehicle/s to a Christian garage. A Christian may pass near a mosque and a Muslim near a church building each day. But, they hardly initiate a conversation that can lead to a sincere appreciation of one another. The mere fact that they are Kenyans is not enough.

The main aim of the dialogue of life is to enable both Christians and Muslims in Kenya to be more sincere and not to see one another as mere objects or means of economic gains. The emphasis on the concept of human dignity should be a strong reminder that Kenyans should not view others differently, but they should regard them with respect and openness in order to appreciate their culture and religious tradition. The citizens can hardly overcome the suspicions or cultural barriers unless they are ready to reach out and understand that even though people are different and may have divergent world-views, they are still human beings. They should be regarded with dignity because they share a common heritage from Yahweh or Allah the Creator.

Academic and the dialogue of action can hardly be meaningful or achievable unless we engage in the dialogue of life. Because, the ideal explanations by experts still require openness in interacting with others in a spirit of respect and cooperation. For example, during political campaigns both Christians and Muslims may vote in a candidate without considering the religious connection (Forde, 2013). But, soon after, the suspicion mainly based on religious faith tends to re-surface!

2.1. Interpretations and way forward

Kenya is a pluralistic society with a multiplicity of religious affiliations hence, religious plurality should not be taken for granted.

At this juncture, it is essential to point out that there is an explicit distinction between religious plurality and religious pluralism. The former is concerned with religious diversity, their statistics and demographic account; whereas the latter involves a story of human interactions. The essence of religious pluralism is thus concerned with the contents of the various faiths in a community, their power relations and how they relate to each other including common humanity efforts that can be planned for and worked on jointly (Shockley, 1989). Here in Kenya, therefore, Christians should simply look upon their Muslim colleagues not merely as a collection of individual members of one of the many religions in Kenya, rather they should be seen as people with whom they (Christians) have to relate to amicably and forge areas of communal understanding in order to work together for a common cause. People can hardly work together unless they are open to each other through a sincere engagement in an interfaith dialogue. And, a dialogue does not mean giving up our faith or being converted to another religion. It is rather, an instrument which is meant to provoke readiness, openness so that people can listen and respect each other.

Majority of Kenyan Muslims and Christians are literate people. But, this does not imply that they have adequate knowledge about hermeneutical interpretations of the theological details of their religions. This is why academic dialogue is underscored where experts from both sides need to discuss and explain exegetical problems. More often, misunderstandings between or among any given religious followers occur as a result of ignorance which arouses fear and prevents openness to any meaningful inter-religious genuine discussions. This is why, ignorant persons, be they Christians or Muslims are afraid of theological discussions and may find solace or express their fear through arrogance, suspicion, name calling, identification, discrimination and generalization. For example, just because the Al Shabaab comes from Muslim fundamentalists it is not justified for any Kenyan Christian to identify a fellow Kenyan Muslim with Al Shabaab or as a member of Al Qaeda. Conversely, simply because some Christians recognize the importance of icons in their houses of worship it is not fitting to call every Christian as being a pagan or practicing idolatry!

Most of these negative expressions and labellings are indeed, as a result of lack of openness and opportunity to sit together, discuss and ask questions about what we do not understand or are uncomfortable with. But, while clarifications and explanation are important, they may remain theoretical unless we design or plan for the methods of actualizing the results of our inter faith dialogue. The answer to this concern rests on both the dialogue of action and that of life. Some of the ways of demonstrating mutual understanding and the need to coexist, the interlocutors must plan for communal activities and committees within their neighbourhoods. For example, when a Muslim or Christian is caught up in a problem, those who are able should join hands in helping the one in difficulty irrespective of their religious traditions.

Further, it is not common to see Kenyan Christians and Muslims celebrating together their major liturgical calendars in their religious traditions, namely Eid Ul Fitr after Ramadhan and Easter after Lent. Or, how many Christians send congratulatory message cards to their Muslim brothers and sisters after their long rigorous fasting period! Suppose Muslims and Christians agreed to form a committee to organize their charity communal work like visiting and cleaning a children's home or jointly cleaning parts of their estate especially after lent and Ramadhan won't that give a wonderful opportunity of openness and readiness to talk together and prevent unnecessary prejudice? Kenyan Muslims and Christian need to participate in interfaith dialogue. They should not wait for politicians to tell them how to co-exist in harmony.

Despite the diversity of religious traditional differences, the people of Kenya worship one God and share common teachings about peace. They recognize dignity and unity of humankind and have every reason to cultivate the spirit of interfaith dialogue. An interreligious dialogue does not compromise peoples' religious identity nor is it meant for proselytizing but, it gives an opportunity to learn about others' religious faith. It is vital for humanity to strive and adhere to the demands of a genuine interfaith dialogue in order to co-exist harmoniously like children of one God, Yahweh or Allah under one nation Kenya.

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