

# Effects of Interfaith Dialogue on Christian Missions

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## ABSTRACT

The cultural and religious diversity of the world has no doubt made Christians devise various means to fulfil the Great Commission of making disciples of all nations. Likewise, peaceful coexistence that enhances the quality of life has become a most demanding human need, especially in the last two decades. The intricacy of diverse faiths, beliefs, traditions and languages, coupled with religious fundamentalism and fanaticism, has led to religious communalism, arson, looting, killings, rape, and damage of properties in various nations. Since there can be no peace among the people without peace among religions, there can be no peace among religions without dialogue. Interfaith dialogue serves the purpose of bringing peace among the people of the world. However, this paper examines interfaith dialogue's positive and negative effects on missions through the descriptive research method. It explains some of the positive effects of interfaith dialogue, which include providing a peaceful environment, eliminating ignorance and misconception, deepening one's faith, fostering collaboration with other faiths, assisting in seeing the truth, and effectively witnessing to people of different faiths. However, some adverse effects of interfaith dialogue include the promotion of religious pluralism, placing the least priority on eternal peace with God, encouraging cultural arrogance, hindering evangelism, and encouraging syncretism. Given the positive and negative effects of interfaith dialogue on Christian missions, Christians are encouraged to be involved in interfaith dialogue with wisdom and caution only to accept what would bring about the Great Commission's fulfilment.

## INTRODUCTION

The Christian faith's attempt to understand its relationship with other religious traditions began in the early Church when the new faith grappled with diverse religio-cultural environments, including Jewish and Graeco-Roman worldviews. Again, history is replete with evidence that from the patristic period through the medieval to the modern era, there had been divergent schools of thought on understanding and relating to a religious lifestyle that was not based on Christian convictions.<sup>1</sup> Many gatherings occur in many parts of the world among religious leaders and scholars on improving the world through peaceful

coexistence.

One of the remarkable gatherings of the modern era was in October 1986, when Pope John Paul invited prominent religious leaders to come together to pray for peace in the world.<sup>2</sup> This event electrified the world and kickstarted what is now known as the interfaith dialogue. In a nutshell, interfaith dialogue, also known as inter-religious dialogue, is the positive interaction between different denominations, faiths, cultures and beliefs. For instance, it can discuss the issues of peace, poverty, world hunger, and oppression, among others and how religions can work together to stop such things. However, the Christian faith is not only limited to solving the immediate problems of society but must show the way to eternal life with God. The Lord gave his disciples the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations, and it must not be compromised or neglected to any other activities. Therefore, apart from the introduction and conclusion, this paper explains through a descriptive research method the positive and negative effects of interfaith dialogue on Christian missions.

## CONCEPT OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

The term "dialogue" is obtained from the Greek *dia-logos*, which means "through word." Dialogue is, therefore, "talking together" or "conversation."<sup>3</sup> Therefore, dialogue builds the openness, understanding and trust needed for people to live and cooperate despite their differences.<sup>4</sup> Interfaith dialogue implies the coming together of people of different faiths to a mutual understanding and respect.<sup>5</sup> It means interfaith dialogue is primarily a conversation or interaction between believers of different faiths or religious traditions. It is a cooperative, constructive and positive interaction between persons of different religious traditions (faiths) at both the individual and institutional levels, and the primary goal is that each party remains true to its own beliefs and, at the same time, respects the right of the other to practice their faith freely.

1. Paul O'Callaghan, "Cultural challenges to faith: a reflection on the dynamics of modernity", *Church, Communication and Culture*, Vol. 2, No. 1, (2017):25

2. John Paul II, "Speeches 1986 October", Address Of John Paul II To The Representatives Of The Christian Churches And Ecclesial Communities Gathered In Assisi For The World Day Of Prayer, Page 1

3. Abroo Aman Andrabi "Interfaith dialogue: its need, importance and merits in the contemporary world" *International Journal of Advanced Academic Studies*, Vol2 Issue 3(2020): 264.

4. Emmanuel Martey, The Challenge of Inter-Religious Dialogue and Praxis to the African Theological Community [https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/WOCATI\\_2008\\_-\\_Presentation\\_on\\_INTER-RELIGIOUS\\_DIALOGUE\\_CATI\\_-\\_Emanuel\\_Martey.pdf#:~:text=The%20term%20%20dialogue"%20is%20derived%20from%20the](https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/WOCATI_2008_-_Presentation_on_INTER-RELIGIOUS_DIALOGUE_CATI_-_Emanuel_Martey.pdf#:~:text=The%20term%20%20dialogue) (Accessed 5<sup>th</sup> October, 2024)

5. Ibid.

In a general sense, interfaith dialogue has come to be accepted as an encounter between people who live by diverse faith traditions in an atmosphere of mutual trust and acceptance. Therefore, interfaith dialogue seeks to bridge the gaps between the world's faiths or religions. It aims to recognise that in the splendour of the human heart across every culture and time, men and women seek to discern and understand the transcendent and how it can be a blessing and grace for their lives and the human community. Furthermore, it recognises that people find different pathways to the transcendent. An authentic interfaith dialogue recognises that everyone needs to be faithful to their religious tradition with a pure conscience.

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Also, an interfaith dialogue seeks to make others see the richness of other faiths and religions, which binds them together and those elements that set them apart.<sup>6</sup> Interfaith dialogue seeks to recognise that at the deepest level, humans are called to live/relate with one another, so they should answer the following questions: who they are, why they are here in this world, and, ultimately, their destiny. It also recognises that human families are bound together

6. Johannis Siahaya<sup>1</sup>, Yanti Mulia Roza, Achmad Siddiq, Ilham Tri murdo, and Muhammad Nafi, "Interfaith Dialogue in the Context of Globalization: The Role of Religion in International Diplomacy" International Journal of Science and Society , Vol. 5 No. 4 (2023):851.

not just by pain and tragedies but most especially by the particular essence of human nature rooted in the transcendent. Therefore, interfaith dialogue should not be necessary because of external forces like crisis, war, and poverty.

Considering what interfaith dialogue seeks to achieve, it is clear that interfaith is not an easy task. It takes humility, commitment, interconnection, empathy, and generosity or hospitality.<sup>7</sup> For instance, doctrinal humility seeks to know the absolute truth irrespective of one's tradition. Furthermore, it takes a humble person to accept correction or an error when someone else points it out. Interfaith dialogue involves some principles that are necessary for it to be effective. Below are highlights of six principles of interfaith dialogue as stated by Leonard Swidler, a highly respected American scholar in interreligious dialogue<sup>8</sup>.

**First Principle:** The primary purpose of dialogue is to learn, that is, to adjust and grow in the understanding and perception of reality and then to act accordingly.

**Second Principle:** inter-ideological dialogue, Inter-religious, must be a two-sided project within each ideological or religious community and between ideological or religious communities.

**Third Principle:** Each participant must come to the dialogue honestly and sincerely.

**Fourth Principle:** In inter-religious, inter-ideological dialogue, one must not compare one's ideals with their partner's practice, but rather one's ideals with their partner's ideals and one's practice with their partner's practice.

**Fifth Principle:** Each participant must define himself. Conversely, the interpreter must be able to recognise herself in the interpretation.

**Sixth Principle:** Each partner must come to the dialogue with no hard-and-fast expectations regarding where the points of disagreement are.

These principles can apply to all forms of interfaith dialogue, and if they are appropriately implemented, the conversation will be fruitful.

### The Church and Interfaith Dialogue

An accurate and comprehensive understanding of "ecumenism" obliges the Church to dialogue with people of other faith traditions. It is because the Church's ecumenical mandate or vision is not only to bring unity and renewal of the whole Christian community but also to embark on a worldwide mission and seek the unity of the whole human

7. Dodeye Uduak Williams, Interfaith Dialogue, Peacebuilding, and Sustainable Development in Nigeria: A Case of the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), The Palgrave Handbook of Religion, Peacebuilding, and Development in Africa, (Palgrave: Macmillan, 2023), 553.

8. Leonard Swidler, Principles and Guidelines for Interfaith Dialogue : How to Dialogue, <https://www.kings.uwo.ca/kings/assets/File/academics/centres/cjcml/PGID-%20How%20to%20Dialogue.pdf#:~:text=understanding%20of%20reality,%20and%20then%20to>

race, that is, the entire inhabited earth.<sup>9</sup> The Church must be seriously involved in interfaith dialogue to bring harmony and peace. Likewise, theology and theological education should be taught and done with the concern of the people of other faiths, and inter-religious dialogue should be taken seriously; this means that interfaith dialogue is to become an essential and constitutive part of the Church's mission and it is significant for Christian theology. Currently, "theology of dialogue" has become one of the most significant missiological currents and has found a firm place of acceptance in the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches.<sup>10</sup> Such a theological understanding has led the ecumenical bodies to initiate some contacts with African traditionalists, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists and to convene bilateral and multilateral conferences. However, interfaith dialogue has some positive and negative effects on missions.

## POSITIVE EFFECTS OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE ON CHRISTIAN MISSIONS

### 1. It Provides a Peaceful Environment for Living

In a multicultural and multireligious global environment, dialogue becomes necessary to promote understanding and acquaintance with one's neighbours. Without dialogue, people will all end up in diverse conflict situations. Similarly, in a pluralistic situation, dialogue becomes a contention to find a mutual basis for peaceful coexistence.<sup>11</sup> Unless people learn how to walk together in harmony and peace, they will drift apart and destroy themselves and others simply because they believe differently.<sup>12</sup> For instance, in Africa, interfaith engagements after conflicts and civil wars have produced encouraging results in countries like Liberia and Sierra Leone because they unlock the tensions and conflicts between religious groups.

In the political context, dialogue is understood as the opposite of conflict. In contrast, entry into dialogue could bring conflict and hostilities to an end, and the abrupt end of dialogue can resume conflicts and even war. Among believers of different faiths, enmity has been created because of the prejudices and stereotypes that have been handed down from generation to generation, and even today, and there is the reinforcement of such misrepresentations that generate religious intolerance and fundamentalism. In the name of religion, several crimes are being

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(accessed 5<sup>th</sup> October, 2024)

9. Martey.

10. World Council of Churches and the Wm. Eerdmans in 2002, Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement article on Interfaith Dialogue, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/dictionary-of-the-ecumenical-movement-article-on-interfaith-dialogue#:~:text=The%20following%20article%20by%20S.%20Wesley> (accessed 5<sup>th</sup> October, 2024)

11. Roger Campdepadrós-Cullell, Miguel Ángel Pulido-Rodríguez, Jesús Marauri, and Sandra Racionero-Plaza, "Interreligious Dialogue Groups Enabling Human Agency" *Religions* Vol. 12, No.189 (2021), 2.

12. Ibid.

committed against humanity daily. Therefore, Christians are to promote interfaith dialogue that will bring about peaceful coexistence between humankind.

Interfaith dialogue becomes necessary when people cannot live out their faith. Through interfaith dialogue, the peaceful environment will allow Christians to demonstrate their Kingdom lifestyle of love, peace, kindness, and loyalty, which can bring others to the knowledge of God. Christians are the light of the world; therefore, when allowed to live freely in their environment, they cannot be hiding. Likewise, they are the salt of the earth, and their impact is irresistible. Therefore, the results of peace that could be generated from interfaith dialogue can create an atmosphere for believers to win more souls and disciple many.

### 2. It Eliminates Ignorance and Misconceptions about Christianity

Interfaith dialogue provides an appropriate platform for Christians to explain their beliefs, doctrines, and practices. It will eliminate ignorance about the Christian faith and reduce misconceptions about it. There are many misconceptions about Christianity. For instance, some other faiths believe Christians worship three "Gods": God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.<sup>13</sup> Such a misconception can be clarified through various means, such as the scriptures and practical illustrations. Therefore, interfaith dialogue can remove ignorance and misconceptions about participants' practices and beliefs and promote critical appreciation, informed understanding, and balanced judgment on matters of faith.<sup>14</sup> Through the explanation and information by Christians during the interfaith dialogue, some may see reasons to believe in Christ or to help inform others, which could be a means of "evangelism".

### 3. It Helps to Deepen One's Faith

In dialogue, all partners as "believers" are invited to deepen their religious commitment to respond with increasing sincerity to God's call and gift of the Divine Self. For Christians, this comes through Christ Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. For Christians to engage in meaningful dialogue, they must be grounded in their faith and have strong beliefs. The same thing is expected of all dialogue partners. It calls for adequate preparation in which they must ask themselves questions concerning their faith. For example, Christians must be willing to answer questions about the doctrine of the Trinity, and that of the incarnation must be responded to well because they are frequent questions. Therefore, Christians need to have a broad knowledge of their faith and a deep understanding that will enable them to explain it to others simply

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13. Andrabi.

14. "World Council of Churches, Ecumenical Considerations for Dialogue and Relations with People of Other Religions, Geneva, WCC, 2003". Paper received by the Central Committee and sent to churches for study. <https://oikoumene.org/resources/documents/ecumenical-considerations-for-dialogue-and-relations-with-people-of-other-religions#:~:text=Dialogue%20partners%20are%20responsible%20for> (accessed 5<sup>th</sup> October, 2024)

and practically.

In all these, there is the need to formulate the Christian belief so that the stranger or the non-Christian can understand and believe. The dialogical process, therefore, helps to clarify and makes Christians understand their beliefs more, thus making them more robust to be involved in missions and evangelism. It prepares Christians for the challenges that may arise from their encounters with other people of other faiths.

#### **4. It Helps to Foster Collaboration to Fight against Evil in Society.**

Interfaith dialogue testified to the unity of the human family by discovering the bridges to the Transcendent. The peace and unity promoted by interfaith dialogue allows the human family to work together for a common purpose in society, mainly where human rights, social and economic justice and peace in the community and the nation are concerned and lovely.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, interfaith dialogue searches for means to bring to bear the deeper resources of our respective faiths on the fundamental problems of human existence that arise because of human finiteness.

Christian missions are all-encompassing in that they seek not only the spiritual well-being of humanity but also social, political, economic, and physical well-being. Due to the enormous challenges in society, the interfaith dialogue allows Christians to collaborate and network with other people of other faiths to confront the evils in their society. The Sovereign Lord can use interfaith dialogue to create relationships leading to soul and societal transformation.

#### **5. It Helps to Seek Out the Truth in Other's Faith**

Interfaith dialogue is not only about bringing mutual understanding but also about mutual enrichment. Some have affirmed that in the dialogical process, there is mutual enrichment of the life of believers of God from different religious traditions.<sup>16</sup> It is argued that each believer becomes spiritually more prosperous than before the religious encounter and, therefore, becomes a better believer. In a sense, interfaith dialogue can give the person involved a broad perspective about truth and life. There is an element of truth in every religion of the world, which can benefit anyone who cares to learn in humility.<sup>17</sup> Since the Fall in the Garden of Eden, God has always sought to reveal Himself to people through diverse means.

Hence, in inter-religious dialogue, people seek the truth in their faith and that of their neighbours.

15. Andrabi

16. Rupert Wegerif, "Dialogic Education". In *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Education*. (England: Oxford University Press, 2018)3

17. Terry F. Godlove "Truth, Meaning, and the Study of Religion" *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, Vol. 30 (2018): 357.

Dialogue is, therefore, to be viewed as "a common pilgrimage toward the truth, within which each tradition shares with the others the way it has to perceive and respond to that truth."<sup>18</sup> In inter-religious dialogue, all the partners become pilgrims walking together towards truth. The Christian faith has an excellent opportunity to reveal the truth to others through interfaith dialogue. Christians have the scriptures and the Holy Spirit, and their primary purpose is to reveal the truth (Jesus) to the world.

#### **6. It Helps to Understand How to Witness Effectively**

Interfaith dialogue can be fruitful if adequately carried out. Dialogue is not antithetical to missions; on the contrary, it promotes missions. If one does not take one's belief or religion seriously, one will not be eager to talk and tell others about it. Missions are, therefore, part of dialogue because Christians are to share and tell others about their faith. Dialogue and witnessing cannot be separated in real-life situations. Through engagements in interfaith dialogue, Christians will be able to notice some loopholes in other faiths, which can serve as an opportunity to witness to others. An appropriate understanding of other people's points of view will create an understanding of how to respond and witness Christ effectively without being unnecessarily offensive.

Due to the intense studies of Christians about Islam, there have been a handful of records of missions and evangelism successes. Likewise, to a certain extent, progress has been made in inter-faith dialogue, especially between Christians and Muslims, which has yielded evangelistic fruits. Christians should be involved in interfaith dialogue with the main world religions and all faiths. Although Christians are to be encouraged to engage in interfaith dialogue, there are still some possible negative influences of interfaith dialogue on Christian missions.

### **NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE ON CHRISTIAN MISSIONS**

#### **1. It Promotes Religious Pluralism that Hinders Christian Missions**

Promoting religious pluralism through interfaith dialogue is one of the significant challenges confronting Christian missions. Religious pluralism is the view that all religions ultimately lead to God, and it is not appropriate for any faith to claim they are the only way to God. Interfaith dialogue promotes such an understanding that negates the Christian claim that Jesus is the only way to God. Therefore, interfaith dialogue denies the need for the conversion of people of other faiths.

#### **2. It Overemphasises Temporal Peace Coexistence to**

18. Namsoon Kang Wonsuk Ma, *The Handbook of Theological Education in World Christianity: Theological Perspectives, Ecumenical Trends, Regional Surveys*, edited by Dietrich Werner, David Esterline and Namsoon Kang (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2010), 800

### **the Detriment of Eternal Peace With God**

Interfaith dialogue promotes peaceful coexistence, which is very important, but this must not be overemphasised to the detriment of eternal peace with God. There is a thin line between living and pursuing peace with people for God's glory and pursuing peace because of the fear of people. Interfaith dialogue seeks to make people live peaceably with others irrespective of where they will spend eternity. At the same time, Christian missions are not limited to making people live peaceably on earth but primarily to seek means of rescuing the dying world from living eternally in hell.

Through interfaith dialogue, Christians and all other faiths are cautioned not to engage in any other activities that will interrupt the peace of the society. At the same time, Christ commands Christians to rescue others from going to hell at all costs. Therefore, Christians are placed in the box of obeying the decision from the interfaith dialogue or the command of their Lord. Any attempt to make converts is defined as bridging the peace of the society, which may attract punishments and persecution.

### **3. It Promotes Cultural Arrogance that Hinders Christian Missions Culture Transformation**

Christian missions are to bring about cultural transformation through the preaching and teaching the Gospel. However, interfaith dialogue demonstrates the attitude that minimises difference to the point of viewing all religious cultures as basically the same. Portraying different religions as the same prevents people from seriously learning from one another. It usually manifests cultural arrogance in which people hold on to their claims and only judge others through the lens of their beliefs and practices. Through the interfaith dialogue claims that all religions are equal and others are to respect other religious practices and beliefs without interference, Christian missions are limited to bringing about the cultural transformational mandate.

### **4. It Hinders the Gospel Proclamation and Evangelism**

Christian missions will be ineffective if all other religions are accepted to be equally a means to God. Likewise, Christian dialogue is Christ-centred and persuasive in winning others to Christ. In a Christian dialogue, others must realise they are on the wrong path and need genuine repentance to turn to God. Therefore, any interfaith dialogue that does not aim to persuade others to have faith in Christ is indirectly making them not believe in Christ and allowing them to hold on to their false religion.

Also, interfaith dialogue hinders evangelism because of its popular theory that each religion or culture is an entirely self-contained system that articulates itself in a particular pattern of symbols and language that can only be comprehended concerning other words and symbols constituting the complete system.<sup>19</sup> This leads

<sup>19</sup> Amir Martin Ebrahimi, "The Concept of Religious Pluralism

to the claim that interfaith dialogue is not primarily about understanding or learning about other religions but accepting them as they are and not changing them.

### **5. It Promotes Religious Syncretism**

Religious syncretism is the phenomenon where a person or group combine the practices and beliefs of two or more religions.<sup>20</sup> Interfaith dialogue accepts all religions as equal in value and relevance. It indirectly encourages people to respect and even accept the beliefs and practices of their faith. Such promotion seems to encourage many individuals, movements, and groups to be involved in syncretism. One of the adverse effects of syncretism is that it brings about confusion about the identity of God. Christian missions could also be challenging as people may see Christianity as one means of reaching God and thereby adding it to their current religion(s).

### **CONCLUSION**

The contemporary world is a multicultural and multireligious society. Christians' survival depends on how they strategically learn to live and walk together in harmony with other non-Christian neighbours and to disciple them for Christ. Through interfaith dialogue, people know how to live and walk together with their neighbours to confront the crises of poverty, oppression, injustice, racism, and sexism. However, Christians are not only to live at peace with those of other faiths but also to fulfil the Great Commission mandate of making disciples of all nations. As good as interfaith dialogue is for peaceful coexistence, it still has a cogent relationship with both positive and negative Christian missions, as explained in this paper.

in a Globalized World: An Analytical and Comparative Study of John Hick and Hossein Nasr's Theories" (Thesis for Master, University of Agder, 2023), 3

<sup>20</sup> Matthew Baerman, "Case Syncretism" *The Oxford Handbook of Case*. Spencer A & A Malchukov (eds) (England: Oxford University Press, 2009) 56



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