

**Interreligious Learning as an Indispensable Component of Ecumenical Theological  
Formation**

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**Introduction**

In fulfillment of the GETI requirement and complying with the notion of writing a final paper on any of the various themes that were dealt with during WCC Assembly and the GETI specific lectures, I am deeply motivated to focus on the indispensability of the theme of interreligious learning in ecumenical theological education and formation. This paper, therefore, explores the case that has been made on the necessity of mainstreaming interreligious studies with emphasis on Christian/Muslim relations in the curriculum of all Christian theological institutions. This may not be unconnected to the visibility of other religions in our world today.

It is worth noting that the GETI offered me incredible opportunity to engage on contemporary issues differently and most critically too. The various themes that were discussed were informative and thought provoking as they sparked fresh thinking that triggers proactively constructive engagement as we try to live out the Christian ethos of justice and peace. The theme of the WCC Assembly was “God of Life, Lead Us to Justice and Peace”. The theme in itself compels us to introspectively examine ourselves in the light of life, justice and peace, wherein we ask the question, where have you tolerated injustice at the expense of genuine peace? The various themes engaged with during the plenary sessions, *madang* workshops and ecumenical conversations seemingly humanized the theme of Justice and Peace in our deeply fragmented and unjust world. I attended all the plenary sessions particularly the thematic plenaries. The sessions were tremendously fascinating. I was inspired by the presentations ranging from God of life, lead us to justice and peace; living together in God’s justice and peace; a call to life-giving witness; the journey of the fellowship; God of life, lead us to do justice in today’s world; and God of life, lead us to build peace in today’s world. From among the numerous ecumenical conversions listed, I intentionally joined the ecumenical conversion number six, titled; “Developing effective leadership: contextual ecumenical formation and theological education”.

The ecumenical conversation x-rayed ecumenical theological education and formation, resting on core moral and spiritual values of the churches, is vital for the future of the ecumenical movement and the integrity of Christian mission. It not only preserves the ecumenical memory but more importantly develops responsible and conscious agents of change within communities, churches and civil society. But how is this to be done today? The search for creative, inclusive and transforming leadership is rooted in the prayer “God of life, lead us to justice and peace”<sup>1</sup>. During the various sessions of the ecumenical conversation, I had the opportunity to make a case for interreligious learning, particularly Christian/Muslim relations studies, as an imperative for ecumenical formation and theological education insofar as our dream is to have a world defined by justice and peace as desired by God of life.

### **Rationale of the Paper**

The demand for the inclusion of interreligious learning (Christian/Muslim relations) in the curriculum of Christian theological institutions cannot be over-emphasized as Christians do not live in isolation of those belonging to other religions. Christianity also cannot claim monopoly of religious space globally as Christianity in itself is experiencing decline in some parts of the world while it is also growing in other parts. Therefore, in some places Christianity is a minority religion and in other places a majority. The religious demography globally clearly shows that no religion has dominance globally and that no region is without the presence of more than two religions. Because of the existence of other religions, it is therefore of utmost importance that interreligious studies be taught in the seminaries and Bible colleges for the benefit of our world. Like the renowned theologian Han Küng has asserted that “there can never be peace in the world without peace between the religions”. Peace between religions can only be guaranteed if adherents of all the religions understand and respect basic belief system of the other. How can that be realized? It is only through learning.

Similarly, I am compelled to deal with the topic of my paper by my passion for justice and peace activism and the realities of religious tension and intolerance in our world today and particularly my context. Also, it is predicated on my life’s experience of violent conflicts where religious

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<sup>1</sup> World Council of Churches, 2013. Programme Book WCC 10<sup>th</sup> Assembly. Busan, p 19.

people and institutions were target rather than political agents and agencies. Violent conflicts that are being experienced in my context and continent are mostly linked to religion, which is often if investigated deeper, the underlining reasons are deeply rooted in economic and political factors. But, religion has become an easy vehicle used to instigate and perpetrate heinous acts against the other. Ecumenical formation and theological education is an academic framework that equips young minds to theologically engage with temporary issues or challenges that confront our world that has provided space for all religions. Therefore, making a case during the ecumenical conversation that focuses on ecumenical formation and theological education was the right place.

### **Interreligious Learning Necessary for Justice and Peace**

Undoubtedly, theological education has a strategic role to play in peace building efforts. It is an indispensable tool in galvanizing and consolidating on the struggles being made to ensure sustainable peace is enjoyed globally by all humanity regardless of one's sex, race, ethnicity, religion, tradition, social status, and region of habitation. Similarly, it embodies a force that propels transformation in attitude, behavior and reasoning as humankind interact with each other in such a multi-religious universe that we have found ourselves. Reinforcing the call for the integration of interreligious learning with particular reference to Islam and Christian/Muslim relations, Johnson Mbillah argues strongly that, "since Islam is not only a religion in the conventional sense of the word, there are pastoral, relational, dialogical, political and governance issues which border on Church and society which a study of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations will assist the church to have a deeper conversation with Muslim neighbours on matters that members of the two communities may not agree with" (Phiri & Werner 2013:630-1).

It is expected that in the course of interreligious learning, the students will be exposed to the broad approach of interfaith dialogue which must be historically grounded, theologically credible and practically appropriate. Wherein, those involved are ultimately guided by the core biblical/theological principle "Imago Dei". The principle enunciates our humanity and that **ALL** humankind are made in the image of God. With this realisation and acceptance, maiming, killings and destructions to properties on religious reasons and others would not be condoned or tolerated. And religion will not be manipulated by unscrupulous and greedy elements to attain their selfish ambitions.

Similarly, theological institutions should intentionally broaden their course on Islam to include Christian/Muslim dialogue. The course should metaphase to the status of an inter-disciplinary module offered in the final year of studies. Meanwhile, to compartmentalise this modular idea, first and second year modules should focussed primarily on Islam, its historical antecedents, theological disposition, hermeneutical trajectory and the expected way of life as should be emptied by Muslim in their daily lives. While, the final year module should dwell heavily on Christian/Muslim dialogue, with students exposed to practical engagement with Muslim sisters and brothers who would be invited intermittently to join in a day's course or two. This may not be easy with most of the institutions in the North because of their suspicion and nursed prejudices against Islam and its adherents. However, those of us committed to the cause of peace by the use of theological education as our instrument would not relent.

Apparently, mainstreaming interreligious learning as part of the core of ecumenical formation and theological training will offer the world the chance to understand the fact that religion has an active significant role to play in the restoration of genuine peace that is nourished by justice. This will only be possible when those being trained in various seminaries and theological faculties are exposed to the basic non-negotiable doctrines or tenets of the other religions, especially Islam. The pedagogy will be designed in such that is more dialogical in nature wherein scholars of the other religions are invited to teach or deliver keynote addresses/inaugural lectures on core areas of their religions. The knowledge that will be acquired will certainly stimulate fresh thinking that is positive towards the other. And this will no doubt challenge and deepen Christian self-understanding through such encounters with neighbours of other religions.

Furthermore, theological institutions must consider it urgent to equip their students with skills in Contextual Bible Hermeneutics (CBH) while dealing with issues that relate to other religions, particularly Islam. This concept offers participants the resource to locate biblical provisions as they relate to the existential realities of the people. Similarly, participants are able to engage and interrogate the biblical statements in the light of the presenting realities. With this skill, the students who normally become ministers and leaders in the Church will be cautious in their preaching and response to issues that hinge on religious interface. Thereby, all manner of inciting and derogatory sermons and speeches which have the propensity to trigger violent conflict are

dismantled. The Reader in the effort of outlining areas that caution be applied in interreligious conversation is to acknowledge the need for different theological contexts with a clear recognition of patient listening, and look on dialogue as an aspect of spirituality. While engaging in such dialogue, the need for sensitivity must be applied in areas of vocabulary, and when making reference to terms such as mission, witness and conversion.

Lastly, Theological Education by Extension (TEE) has seemingly wielded more students than the regular residential programme, therefore TEE programmes must deliberately include CBH concept in its transfer of knowledge while integrating interreligious learning (Christian/Muslim relations). Somewhat, TEE due to its large pool of students who graduate with deficiency in class interaction are engaged as leaders and ministers in the Church and by extension the wider and religiously plural society. With the discernible deficiencies, instructors must develop strategies and put in place mechanisms that would guarantee appropriate transfer of knowledge that would lead to mutual religious interaction rather than religious bigotry and extremism that leads to no way but self-destruction and communal disharmony.

## **Conclusion**

Obviously, Islam is being taught in some theological institutions globally but most of their pedagogy is framed not to prepare the students for constructive engagement with their fellow Muslim sisters and brothers but for radical conversionist evangelism. With this discovery, I am being tempted to speculate that the theological educators and institutions have not done much in the use of the resources that abound in theological reservoir to mitigate causes of violent conflicts. It is evident though that theological educators themselves are skeptical of engaging with the Muslim clerics/scholars in constructive dialogue. Such disposition has militated against their active involvement in constructive dialogue that may lead to de-radicalization of the radicals and deconstruction of religious bigotry and exclusivism.

As I advocate for the inclusion of interreligious studies particularly Islam and Christian-Muslim relations within and beyond my context, it will expedient to emphasize that well informed scholars in the fields of comparative religious studies and Christian/Muslim relations should be engaged to handle the courses. Engaging the right fellows will enrich the process of knowledge

transmission. The institution that does that can be sure that their graduates will unquestionably contribute immensely to the efforts of building trust between adherents of the different religions. The trust will eradicate the deeply entrenched prejudices and stereotypes against each other, which have led to devastating suspicions and confrontation with a bit to prove the other wrong and I better. The foregoing statement formed part of my verbal presentation during one of the ecumenical conversation sessions. Literally, all those who took part in the ecumenical conversation number six expressed support for intentional integration of interreligious learning in the curriculum of all theological training institutions for the good of humanity.

May we find eternal peace that is transmissible in our interaction with our sisters and brothers of other religious traditions as we recognize the image of the divine in one another.

**Wassalam!**

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