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Proclaiming the gospel in an interfaith environment: Missiological and ecumenical approach

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Author:
Peter White[1] ●

Affiliation:
[1]Department of Practical Theology and Missiology, Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Peter White,
pwhite@sun.ac.za

Proclaiming the gospel (Christian witnessing) in an interfaith environment is an increasingly critical concern for Christians in today's globalised society. This article intends to explore a missiological and ecumenical approach to address the challenge of sharing the message of Christ in multi-religious contexts. Drawing on missiological and ecumenical perspectives, the article makes suggestions on how Christians can engage with members of other religions through respectful and authentic dialogue. Such an approach involves recognising the values and beliefs of other religions. The words Christian witnessing, mission and evangelism were used interchangeably in the article in reference to proclaiming the gospel.

Contribution: The article concludes that a missiological and ecumenical approach is vital for the effective proclamation of the gospel in an interfaith environment, creating opportunities for meaningful dialogue and fostering spiritual growth in both the Christian and non-Christian communities. It also makes a case for the integration of interfaith dialogue and encounters in the theological and ministerial formation curriculum for pastors and church workers.

Keywords: mission; evangelism; interreligious dialogue; interfaith; gospel; ecumenism.

Introduction

The religious beliefs and ways in which individuals practise their religion, as well as their social and interpersonal lives, all reflect the diversity of our society (Kärkkäinen 2003:18). The act of living out one's religion includes emotions and inner perceptions, such as the sense that a heavenly entity is overseeing the devotee's life.

Interfaith issues and challenges can be traced as far back as the early days of the Old Testament and have manifested throughout the Bible. Despite this being an issue that has lived with the human race for several years, there have always been examples of how believers have lived and professed their faith in an interfaith environment (Gn 11:6–9; Ac 17:26–27; Rv 7:9–11). Studying the ministry of Jesus Christ while on earth, he was faced with the challenge of the existing Jewish religion and other religious worldviews. It was very clear that Jesus' approach to his mission agenda was dialogue, teaching and missional discernment. On several occasions, he was in the synagogues for dialogue (Lk 4:16–19). We also read of the apostle Paul sometimes using the same approach to bring to the fore his evangelistic message (Ac 17:22–34).

Bosch (2011:488) argues that 'the two major unsolved problems for the Christian church are its relationship: (1) to the worldviews which offer this-worldly salvation and (2) to other faiths'. In light of the issues discussed above, this article seeks to address the question: How can Christians proclaim the gospel in an interfaith environment?

To address this question, I will discuss the reality of the contemporary interfaith phenomenon and conceptualise the core ideas of the gospel and evangelism. The articles will also discuss theological and ecumenical responses or approaches for proclaiming the gospel in a contemporary interfaith environment. It will consider core ideals from the Bible, the theology of religions and ecumenical documents. The article also argues for the integration of interfaith or interreligious dialogue and encounters in the theological and ministerial formation curriculum. The term interfaith and religious dialogue will be used interchangeably in inference to dialogue between diverse faith or religious orientations and praxis. This article contributes to the existing discourse on interreligious encounters and dialogue from missiological and ecumenical perspectives.

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The reality of interfaith phenomenon in contemporary society

Interfaith phenomenon refers to the interactions that occur between people of different religious backgrounds, whether between individuals, organisations or at a larger societal level. It involves dialogue, collaboration, mutual respect and understanding between people of varying faiths. In an interfaith setting, people of different religious identities work together to identify some common ground and where differences can be acknowledged and even celebrated (Musser & Sunderland 2005:1; Swidler, Duran & Firestone 2007:2).

The reality of the interfaith phenomenon in a religiously diverse world is unquestionable. As the world becomes more globalised, people of different religious backgrounds are increasingly coming into contact with each other. According to Knitter (2002:7), 'Plurality is a significant fact of religious and cosmic Life and therefore should be appreciated'. This, therefore, makes it important that we know about other religions in order to properly engage them (Knitter 2002:6).

According to a Pew Research Center analysis, there were 5.7 billion religiously affiliated individuals in 2010, and this number is projected to increase to nearly 9.3bn by 2050. This increase in religious diversity is because of various factors including migration, globalisation, secularisation and intermarriage (Pew Research Center 2023). This data has therefore compelled interfaith initiatives in various communities as they serve as a vehicle for promoting peaceful coexistence and understanding between different religious communities. At the broader level, the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) has recognised the importance of interfaith dialogue in promoting understanding and reducing violence and conflict. The UNAOC affirms that 'interfaith dialogue is an indispensable step in advancing respect for diversity, promoting human rights, and countering terrorism and violent extremism' (UNAOC 2023). From the Christian perspective, the World Council of Churches (WCC) (2013:78–79) has developed a guide for churches in order to avoid interfaith conflicts.

The interfaith initiatives named above aim to promote dialogue, understanding and mutual respect among people of different faiths. They offer crucial opportunities to build bridges between people from different religious backgrounds, fostering peaceful coexistence and reducing conflict and violence.

Having acknowledged the reality of a religiously diverse world, the subsequent subheading will attempt to conceptualise the theological perspectives of the gospel and evangelism.

Conceptual and theological perspectives of gospel and evangelism

The basic definition of the word gospel is usually in reference to 'the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ – the bloodshed through his death, and resurrection' (White 2022:3). In other words, 'it refers to the message concerning Jesus Christ, the kingdom of God, and salvation' (ed. Brown 1976). The Church is an agent called to participate in God's missionary agenda of sharing his love shown through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. The WCC (2013) submits that:

> [A]ll Christians, churches, and congregations are called to be vibrant messengers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which is the good news of salvation. Evangelism is a confident but humble sharing of our faith and conviction with other people. Such sharing is a gift to others which announces the love, grace, and mercy of God in Christ. (p. 53)

We proclaim the gospel by both verbalising and living it through our actions (Bevans & Schroeder 2011:20–21). The central idea of the gospel is the expression of the love of God towards humankind despite our limitations, sinful nature and diversity in options. This idea is based on the following scriptural verses:

- 'For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved' – (Jn 3:16–17 NKJV)
- 'God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (Rm 5:8 NKJV).

According to Keum (ed. 2013:71), evangelism is a prophetic calling that involves speaking truth to those in power with hope and love. It is the act of spreading the good news or gospel to bring people to the knowledge of Christ (Bosch 2011:419, 421; Moreau 2000:341). This includes 'sharing the story of Jesus Christ's life as recorded in the gospels, which tells of God's love for creation, reconciliation, and forgiveness' (eds. Walls & Ross 2008:24). Evangelism is a natural result of true faith and each generation of the church must renew its commitment to evangelism as a vital way to share God's love with the world.

Evangelism is the 'kerygmatic dimension of mission. It includes but is not limited to preaching, witnessing, and providing literature' (Krintzinger, Meiring & Saayman 2004:37). According to the WCC (2005:7–9), evangelism is crucial for witnessing in mission and involves humbly proclaiming God's grace and joining in the daily struggles of the poor. Its ultimate goal is the salvation of the world and the glory of the Triune God. Evangelism is a mission activity that clearly and unambiguously emphasises the importance of the incarnation, suffering and resurrection of Jesus Christ, without limiting the saving grace of God (World Council of Churches [WCC] 2013:68–69). It aims to share this good news

with those who have not yet heard it, inviting them to experience life in Christ and become disciples.

In the ecumenical document – 'towards common witness' – the World Council of Churches emphasises the need for common ground and shared values in order to effectively communicate the gospel message to people of different faiths. It was noted in the document that while there may be theological differences between Christian denominations, the common mission of spreading God's message should be prioritised (WCC 2009; WCC Central Committee 2005:39–58). The World Council of Churches believes that:

[T]he church has received all that is necessary to witness the gospel of Jesus Christ. This witnessing can happen, based on the example of the early church, either spontaneously or in more specific/fixed ways. In their view, the call to evangelize is not merely a call in words but is a witness in both word and deed (i.e. involving service and identification with others' life situations). (WCC 2013:68–69)

The church has a responsibility to share God's holy and life-giving plan for the world, as revealed through Jesus Christ. It must also reject values and practices that harm communities. Christians are called to recognise the sinfulness of discrimination in all its forms and work to change unjust structures. This means that the church must not allow oppressive forces to exist within its own community but instead act as a counter-cultural force for good.

How then would the church be able to fulfil its evangelistic mandate in a pluralistic world? Discussions below address this concern from three perspectives: theological approach/ response, ecumenical response, and integration of interfaith engagement in ministerial and church leadership formation.

Theological and missiological approach

The challenges associated with how Christians can proclaim their faith in an interfaith environment led theologians to propound the idea of the theology of religions. Theology of religions is a field of study that seeks to understand the meaning and value of other religions from a theological perspective, especially in missionary and other encounter situations. Theology of religions goes beyond just theology and doctrine; it also involves our attitudes, mindset, love and ability to relate to others. It is about how we approach and engage with people of different faiths (Bronk 1996:129; Knitter 2002*)*.

In light of our encounter and exposure to other religions, the theological and philosophical responses resulting from the awareness of the reality of religious diversity sometimes lead to the following questions:

• Is there one way to 'truth' and 'salvation' for all or there are many/different ways?

• Should we make room for discussing truth claims and degrees of values, or we should just tolerate each other, or just cooperate to find solutions for social problems (e.g. poverty, inequality, exclusion, racism, violence, etc.)?

Knitter's response to the above concerns is that religions of the world should form a 'dialogical community of communities'. In his view, this would give room for scriptural reasoning to address issues within and between religions (Knitter 2002:8). In addition to Knitter's call, Kritzinger (2008) argues that the dialogue within such encounters should be seen as missional encounters. He called this approach 'missional encounterology'. According to Kritzinger's (2008) theory, interreligious encounters often take place in one of three 'postures': 'shoulder to shoulder, face to face, and back to back'. He argues that Christians should be open to collaborating with people of other faiths 'shoulder to shoulder' on community projects for the greater good, without compromising their commitment to witnessing to others and engaging in interreligious dialogue 'face to face'. The true test for all participants in such dialogue is how they speak about other religions 'back to back' when those individuals are not present. In other words, it is important to maintain respect and integrity in our discussions about other faiths, even when they are not present to hear what is being said.

The goal of Kritzinger's theory is to advance a sincere and objective approach to interreligious dialogue and encounters. However, it should be noted that the goal of religious dialogue is not to reach an agreement about the interpretation of a text, as though only one interpretation can be drawn from a text (Ford 2006:347). Only on the foundation of mutual respect and trust can dialogue occur. A minimum level of self-criticism of oneself and one's own religion or ideological traditions is required of anyone engaging in interreligious dialogue (Sammons 2014). It is essential for participants in interfaith or interreligious dialogue to recognise the distinctiveness of each faith (Ford 2006:348; Moyaert 2013:66). Pachuau and Jørgensen (eds. 2011) argue that:

The plurality of religions has now been accepted as the fact of life. Christian mission cannot be conceived without acknowledging the plurality of religions and the demand for a dialogical mode of existence and way of witnessing. Christians must treat people of any faith and no faith with genuine respect in their act of witnessing to the gospel. (pp. 13–14)

The World Council of Churches' guidelines on dialogue with people of living faith and ideologies affirm that:

[D]ialogues mean witnessing to our deepest conviction, whiles listening to those of our neighbors. It does not imply sacrificing our own position- It would then be superfluous. Dialogue, therefore, requires commitment. (WCC 1979:16)

For example, Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well changed the cultural orientation and worldview of the woman towards the Jews (Jn 4:1–26). Peter's encounter in his trance in Acts 10, and a missional visit to the house of Cornelius changed his worldview of mission to the Gentiles (Ac 10:33–46). These encounters are to serve the divine

agenda of God and not our personal and denominational doctrines and visions. Kritzinger (2008) calls these encounters missional encounterology. They are encounters that give room for mutual respect and dialogue without the sense of religious superiority (Bevans & Schroeder 2011:28). 'Authentic evangelism is grounded in humility and respect for all, and flourishes in the context of dialogue' (WCC 2013:70). The church is called to be witnesses for Christ in the world and not judges. It should be noted that the call to salvation and conviction is the work of the Holy Spirit (Bosch 2011:423, Jn 16:7–9).

Ecumenical response to proclaiming the gospel in a religiously diverse society

In June 2011, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, the World Evangelical Alliance, and the WCC released a joint statement on how Christians should witness their faith in a world that is increasingly diverse and multi-religious. The statement addresses issues such as interreligious coexistence, tensions and conflicts and missionary conduct, as well as outlining the overarching principles that should guide all Christian activity in the interreligious arena. Their statement discusses two major issues (WCC 2013:78–79): the basis for Christian witness and principles for Christian witnessing in an interfaith environment. These two issues would be discussed in the subsequent subheadings.

The basis for Christian witness

World Council of Churches outlines biblical bases that compel the church and for that matter Christians to preach the gospel and practise their faith in a pluralistic world. Their submission is based on biblical examples and how Jesus Christ approached his ministry in a similar context. They affirm that:

> The example and teaching of Jesus Christ and of the early church must be the guides for Christian mission. Mission in Christ's way involves affirming the dignity and rights of others. (WCC 2013:70, 78)

They submit that for Christians it is an honour and pleasure to share the reasons for their hope with others, and they do so gently and respectfully (1 Pt 3:15). Although practising and sharing the gospel might be challenging, difficult or even illegal in certain settings, Christ commands Christians to persevere steadfastly in solidarity with one another in their testimony to him (Mt 28:19–20; Mk 16:14–18; Lk 24:44–48; Jn 20:21; Ac 1:8). Genuine friendships between Christians and those of other religions can help Christians overcome this obstacle. Participating in community development – social evangelism – is an additional method of achieving this. Dialogue with individuals of diverse cultures and religions is a crucial component of Christian testimony (WCC 2013:78).

It is important to keep in mind that while it is the duty of the church to share their faith in Christ with others, the Holy Spirit ultimately performs the act of conviction and conversion (Jn 16:7–9; Ac 10:44–47). We must also recognise that the Spirit moves in ways that are completely beyond our control (Jn 3:8). Further to this, the WCC mission conference at San Antonio in 1989 affirmed that: 'We cannot point to any other way of salvation than Jesus Christ; at the same time we cannot put any limit to God's saving power' (ed. Wilson 1990:31). This claim of the WCC on the saving power of God makes a lot of sense in the light of the sovereignty of God.

Principles for Christian witnessing in an interfaith environment

The World Council of Churches has outlined a set of 12 guidelines for churches to follow as they strive to carry out Christ's commission in a suitable way, especially in situations involving multiple religions (WCC 2013:78–79). The 12 principles can be summarised into five keywords: love, respect, discernment, deeds and justice. These keywords can be utilised as ecumenical mission approaches for interreligious dialogue and encounters.

Acting in God's love

As God is the source of all love, Christians are obligated to practise it in their witness and to treat others with respect (Mt 22:34–40; Jn 14:15). They are obligated to live and witness in accordance with the example and precepts of Jesus Christ, showing honour and glory to God the Father by sharing his love (Jn 20:21–23). The approach of love should manifest in both words and deeds.

For the sake of love for humankind, Christians are obligated to abhor all types of violence, including psychological and social abuse of power. Additionally, they must abhor violence, unfair discrimination and persecution by both religious and secular authorities, as well as the desecration of sacred sites, objects or literature. Furthermore, they must give room for the right to religious freedom, which includes the freedom to publicly declare, practise, spread and change one's religion. This stems from the dignity of the human person, which is rooted in the fact that all people were created in God's image and likeness (Gn 1:26–27). Therefore, the rights and obligations of every human being are the same. Christians are obligated to carry forth a prophetic testimony against political exploitation of religion or instances of religious persecution.

Mutual respect and solidarity

Christians are obligated to cooperate with everyone in an atmosphere of respect while advancing justice, peace and the common good. A key component of such commitment is interreligious collaboration. Christians need to understand how the gospel both shapes and enlivens cultural traditions. Christians are required to respect all people, even when the gospel calls into question certain cultural practices (Bevans & Schroeder 2011:28, 38, 59).

Identifying aspects of one's own culture that the gospel challenges is another task for Christians. Christians are also urged to speak truthfully and with respect, to listen in order to learn about and comprehend the views and practices of others and to recognise and value what is true and admirable in those beliefs and practices. Any criticism or remark should be given in an atmosphere of respect for one another, being careful not to misrepresent other religions. Christians are expected to act with moral excellence, love, compassion and humility and to reject all forms of conceit and lowliness. They must also act with integrity, kindness, compassion and humility (Gl 5:22). To promote a greater level of understanding, reunification and collaboration for the common good, Christians should continue to cultivate relationships of respect and trust with people of other religions.

Discernment in ministries

> Discernment is one way we connect with God. It is a part of spirituality that opens us to God's movement in our lives. It flows out of a larger commitment to yield our attention, agenda, and action toward God. Discernment is an ongoing attitude and practice of Christian spirituality in every missionary activity. (White 2016:257)

The Apostle Paul urges Christians to commit themselves to prayer while maintaining a vigilant mind (Col 4:2). Lonsdale (2005:240) posits that 'Discernment in mission involves one's ability to join in with the Holy Spirit and discern what the Father is doing in their context'. Christians are encouraged to be discerning in their interreligious encounters. They should give room to the leading of the Holy Spirit on how to approach such dialogues and encounters (Bevans & Schroeder 2011:31). In the Christian's involvement in the healing ministry, the church is expected to discern how to approach it, uphold human dignity in full and ensure that people's vulnerabilities and needs for healing are not exploited. Christians must recognise that changing one's faith is a major decision that requires time for thoughtful contemplation and preparation as well as a procedure that guarantees complete personal autonomy. This decision should be taken based on one's conviction.

Acts of service and justice

According to Micah 6:8, Christians are obligated to uphold justice and display gentle love. In addition, Matthew 25:45 calls us to identify Christ in the least of their brethren and sisters through serving those around us. Serving others through providing services like education, healthcare, relief efforts and acts of justice and advocacy is a crucial component of sharing the gospel. Christian outreach must not take advantage of those in need or in conditions of poverty. Christians ought to reject and abstain from using any kind of enticement in their charitable deeds, including monetary incentives and awards.

The call for ministerial training and formation that expose students to interfaith engagements

Theological formation of ministers is critical for their effectiveness in engaging with diverse communities and promoting religious pluralism. In a globalised society, it is essential for religious leaders to be equipped with the ability to engage with people of different beliefs and faith traditions without compromising their own beliefs. This dynamics therefore calls for exposure to interfaith engagement and dialogue as part of the theological formation is essential to prepare ministers for the complexities of interfaith relations and enable them to promote interfaith understanding and cooperation.

The missional framework for ministry development in the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) calls for a shift and renewal in thinking about ministerial development. The document states that one of the core capacities that must be developed is described as, 'Discerning where God is at work' and 'the ability to discern opportunities for missional ministry in the community' (DRC 2018:3, 35). The community in this context goes beyond the Christian community. It extends to where God is at work. It is theologically accepted that God is at work from everywhere to anywhere. This therefore calls for a broader view of theological education in a pluralistic world. In view of this call for a missional shift in theological and ministerial development, I submit that ministerial and theological education should take note of the complexities and diversities around us and prepare students to be relevant in the changing dynamics of society.

A theological formation that includes interfaith engagement and dialogue can enhance the minister's ability to develop meaningful relationships with members of other faiths. According to Hadjioannou (2019), interfaith engagement transcends religious boundaries, providing an opportunity for the minister to learn about and appreciate the religious beliefs and practices of other communities. Through interfaith dialogue, the minister can forge relationships based on respect and understanding, which is crucial for effective ministry in a religiously diverse context. Furthermore, exposure to interfaith engagement and dialogue in theological formation helps ministers to become more effective advocates of religious pluralism (Root 2017:116–117). Wuthnow (2007) notes that theological education can provide ministers with the tools to articulate religious pluralism in a way that is consistent with their faith traditions. This equips them to engage critically with religious exclusivism and promote true religious tolerance and freedom. According to Kalsi (2019), exposure to interfaith engagement in theological formation is critical in equipping ministers to be more culturally sensitive and empathetic towards people from different religious backgrounds.

The call for the integration of interfaith engagements in theological training should be approached through a

phenomenological and sometimes comparative perspective. Students should be introduced to how to apply the concept of *epochē*, that is, the suspension of one's belief and preconceived views and the bracketing of the phenomena under investigation or discussion (Smart 2018:3–4). By suspending one's beliefs and judgements, the person is required to focus on simply describing and understanding religious beliefs and practices without imposing their own values or opinions on the subject. This approach allows for a more objective and unbiased analysis of religious phenomena. Applying *epochē* in the study of religions can lead to a more accurate and nuanced understanding of religious phenomena. The comparative approach would help students to appreciate the uniqueness, similarities and differences within various religious traditions (Kritzinger 2008; ed. Meiring 1996).

Conclusion

Religious plurality has been with humankind for several years and therefore cannot be ignored in decision-making and societal well-being. In view of this, the article discusses how the church approaches its missionary call in the context of a religiously diverse society. The article was approached from a missiological perspective by relying on ecumenical documents and core ideas from sources on theology of religions and interfaith dialogue.

It was noted in the article that interreligious dialogue focuses on building relationships and fostering understanding between Christians and people of other faiths. This approach involves engaging in interfaith dialogue to learn about and respect the beliefs and practices of people from different religious backgrounds. The ultimate goal is to create a sense of mutual respect and cooperation that can lead to shared action and positive social change. It was also argued that mission and evangelism in a pluralistic world can be challenging, as it requires a deep understanding of one's own faith as well as the faith of others. It also requires a willingness to challenge one's own assumptions and biases in order to build positive relationships and bridge gaps between different communities. This approach requires the need for respect, understanding and collaboration among people of different faiths. By working together, Christians and those of other faiths can build a more peaceful and just world for all. The WCC (2019) submits that 'Religious tolerance for peaceful co-existence in society is a must if humankind is to flourish'. Furthermore, the message of God's kingdom is one of hope for the realisation of a fair and inclusive world. Inclusivity promotes just relationships within the community of humanity and all of creation (WCC 2012:18).

Acknowledgements

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