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Christian-Muslim Relations in Ghana: The Role of the Youth

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Abstract

All across the world there is a growing interest in interfaith activities especially the one between Christians and Muslims. It has been argued that the nature of the relationship between these two faiths could determine the peace of the world in the future. This essay therefore gives a consideration to the youth of these faiths and contends for a recognition and involvement of these young people in interreligious relations. This contention finds credence in the light of current religious extremist activities especially from the Muslim quarters. These groups do not “view young people as an afterthought.” This essay to some extent reflects my personal experience as a young person growing up in a Muslim-Christian family: my father being a Muslim and my mother and siblings being Christians; it also draws data from research I am currently conducting on youth and interfaith dialogue.

Keywords: youth, young people, christian-muslim relations, interfaith/interreligious dialogue.

Introduction

“This is the great new problem of mankind. We have inherited a large house, a great ‘world house’ in which we have to live together—black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu—a family unduly separated by ideas, culture and interest, who because we can never again live apart, we must somehow learn to live with each other in peace” [p. 1] (Martin Luther King, Jr. 1967 in Patel, & Brodeur, 2006).

There cannot be any better description of the world than this given by the distinguished erstwhile civil right activist, Martin Luther King Jr. So diverse is the world today that even in a single community in a region of a country, people differ from each other in several respects. This diversity comes with its attendant benefits and challenges. Where this diversity has been well managed, it has produced great results in community and nation building. Part of managing this diversity within the human race especially in terms of faith or religion, is dialogue—interreligious dialogue in the context of religion. Dialogue has been acknowledged as helping people with diverse orientations to still “...somehow learn to live with each other in peace,” as King Jr has underscored above. Interreligious dialogue takes several forms and shapes. Dialogue partners could be Muslims and Christians, Christians and Hindus, Christians and Jews etc.

In this essay I explore the dialogue between Muslims and Christians in Ghana in West Africa sub-region. Attention will be given to how the relationship between adherents of these two

dominant faiths has been over the years in politics, education, social and economics. Very central to this essay will be a consideration of the youth of these faiths and to contend for a recognition and involvement of these young people in interreligious relations. The essay will also, to some extent reflect my personal experience as a young person growing up in a Muslim-Christian family: my father being a Muslim and my mother and siblings being Christians; it also draws data from a research I am currently conducting on youth and interfaith dialogue. It is important to note that the terms youth and young people will be used interchangeably as well as interfaith and interreligious dialogue. Having said this, it will give shape to the discussions in this essay by first taking a cursory look at Muslim-Christian relations over the world and Africa.

Overview of Christian-Muslim relations in the world and Africa

The relations between Christians and Muslims date back to many centuries in history. It is conspicuous that Christianity predated Islam. But the nature of the relationship between the two Abrahamic faiths has shaped world history over the centuries. Indeed, it is acknowledged that the nature of this relationship has varied at different points in time in history: violent clashes, confrontation, tolerance and peaceful coexistence (Ayoub, & Omar, 2007). In assessing this relationship in a historical context, it is important to commence from the era of the Prophet Mohammed. Islam came after Christianity in a historical sense, and therefore it makes sense to assess the relationship from the period the initiator, or 'founder' so to speak, of the faith (Islam) lived.

Fredrick N. Mvumbi indicates that there were Christians in Mecca and Medina in the days of the Prophet and they were in the minority (Mvumbi, n.d). He further indicates that the Prophet encountered them in his trade and was friendly to them. Mbillah (2010) has hinted that the Prophet Mohammed in his young life encountered the Christian monk, Bahira also referred to as Nesto or George in some sources. Interestingly, Mbillah indicates that Khadija, the wife of the Prophet had a Christian cousin, Waraqa ibn Naufal whom the Prophet would have encountered. Indeed, it is said that the Muslims in this era considered the Christians as 'people of the Book,' and to that extent, equal with Muslims (Mvumbi, n.d). "...a relationship of friendship reigned during the Makkan period between Muhammad and the Christians within and outside Arabia" [p.15] (Mvumbi, n.d). It is worth adding that, in the early days of his prophethood, Mohammed encountered a Christian delegation made up of a bishop, 45 scholars and 15 men who visited him in Medina. This delegation wanted to know what faith the Prophet was preaching. During this encounter, it is said that they could not agree on the person of Jesus Christ. However, their disagreement did not stop the Christian delegation from requesting help from Prophet Mohammed, neither did it bar him from rendering the help requested (Mbillah, 2010).

Close to his death however, he did not look friendly anymore towards the Christians he encountered; this was in part the consequence of his increased sphere of influence and political power in Arabia, during which time he imposed his religion on those he conquered. However, through his conquests, he recognised Christians and did not persecute them, but that only on the terms of a peace pact where they were supposed to pay taxes to him, lest they risk persecution. On this note, one may concur with Mvumbi that Prophet Mohammed had regard for the Christians in the early stages of his encounter with them on the basis of friendship but his "...attitude changed from friendship to tolerance" towards the end of his life time [p. 17]. After his death, Mvumbi notes that, the first four Caliphs continued the Prophet's policy of tolerance towards the 'people of the Book' though he argues that Caliph Umar evicted the Christians from Arabia during his time (Mvumbi, n.d).

Moving on in this historical sketch of the relations between Muslims and Christians, still drawing on the work of Mvumbi, it is recorded that in the days of the Umayyad Empire, the Muslim rulers tolerated, just like the Prophet himself, their Christian inhabitants under the same pre-condition of paying tribute to the empire and additionally, not building new churches. On the other hand, there was the Abbasid Empire, another Muslim empire, where Christians living there experienced pockets of persecution especially in places where they refused to pay taxes. Not only that but also fornication, attempt to marry a Muslim or convert a Muslim to Christianity were grounds of severe persecution in the Abbasid empire, Mvumbi has indicated.

The history of Christian-Muslim encounter from the lifetime of Muhammad to the end of the `Abbasid dynasty is long, rich and important because of its development. Anyone who understands it can paint it as time of struggles, confrontations, negotiations, intimidations, confusions, suspicion,

wars and reconciliations. All these qualifications, optimist as well as pessimist, will help us to [under]stand Islam and Christianity for an effective encounter [p. 21-22] (Ayoub, & Omar, 2007).

One could agree with Mvumi's assertion and recount the days of the Crusades which started against the background that there was no more war to fight in Europe (i.e. the West) and the warring class had to be found something else to do and so there was the need to 'invent' a ground to channel the efforts and blood thirsts of these warriors (Ayoub, & Omar, 2007). Helping to rid the Holy Land (Jerusalem) from the habitation of the pagans, Muslims inclusive, saw great persecution of Muslims by Christians during these Crusades. Of course, there were people like Saint Anselm of Canterbury who did not accept the idea of Crusade wholeheartedly (Slomp, 2009). One therefore observes that, not only were Christians persecuted by Muslims but Christians also have persecuted Muslims; at least looking through the period of the Crusades. This historical observation is very important as it throws light on present relations between adherents of these two major world religions. Indeed, there have been periods of overt clashes just as there have been times of relative peace between the two faiths (Migliore, 2014).

Now, turning to Africa specifically—the continent in the early centuries saw Christian kingdoms such as: 1) Nubia (al-Maris) 2) Makuria (al-Muqarra) and 3) Alodia (Alwa), all existing in the Nile valley around 580AD (Haafkeens, 1995). They had peaceful relations to the Muslim Egypt for about six centuries, Haafkeens has noted. However, by the 16th century, all these Christian kingdoms were annexed by Muslim rulers, several factors accounting for it (ibid). Moving from this time in the history of Christian-Muslim encounters in continental Africa, during the colonial days, European colonialists adopted pragmatic ways to deal with Christian-Muslim encounters. For instance in Northern Nigeria, they cooperated and used Islamic rulers to administer the territory through a system of Indirect Rule. They limited Christian mission work in such areas while in other places less Islam dominated, Christian mission was permitted and supported (in the areas of education, health etc). Christian-Muslim relations in Africa in colonial days mirrored some aspect of the picture of the global relations as sketched before: “...*conflict and rivalry rather than cooperation*” [p.305].

In post-independence Africa however, there was a reorientation in Christian-Muslim relations. There were nationalistic calls to cooperate, on political and economic grounds, to build a new independent Africa. Therefore, in places like Nigeria, Senegal etc, Protestant and Roman Catholic churches formulated programs that sort to shape the relations between Christians and Muslims in a positive manner and also contribute to building new states (Haafkeens, 1995). Haafkeens has further noted that this re-orientation did not however take away the conflicts and tensions. He observes that after the efforts put forth to foster Christian-Muslims relations in the 1960s, there was however, a turn in a counter direction where revivalist movements especially in Islam, produced more tensions and rivalry in states like Nigeria, Sudan etc.

Despite the picture so far painted on the relations between the two faiths in Africa, Johnson Mbillah has posited that:

“It is well known that it is in sub-Saharan Africa...that one can notice Christians and Muslims living as members of the same family, sharing in the joys of birth and the sadness of death and celebrating religious festivals together; as if there were no stark differences between Christianity and Islam” [p. 93-94] (Mbillah, 2010).

But the rise of extremist groups under the umbrella of Islam in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa and the atrocities they have unleashed on humanity all in the name of Islam and ‘Jihad’ (holy war)* give much need for the relationship between the two faiths to be taken seriously. Some of these extremist groups which some have classified as terrorist groups include ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), Boko Haram (now Islamic State in West Africa; changing of name resulting from its pledged allegiance to ISIS), Al-Shabab (in Somalia), Al-Qaida, Taliban etc. The activities of these groups all over the world under the name of Islam continue the mistrust and suspicion between Islam and Christianity, as Mvumbi, Ayoub and Omar have noted. Further, if one recounts the killing, or say ‘slaughtering’ of Christians and non-Muslims by ISIS in Libya, Syria, Iraq etc; or the merciless gunning of 147 Kenyan students early this year by Al-Shabab militants, an Islamic extremist group, and the rest of the atrocities in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria etc by

* Even Ayoub and Omar (2007) has argued that war/fighting is just one part of Jihad and that the meaning of Jihad goes beyond just fighting.

Islamic extremists, it only presses to the fore the pertinence for continued Muslim-Christian dialogue in our world today. Even more pressing in Europe today, I think, given the recent attack in Paris (on November 13, 2015).

Also, one cannot but agree with Daniel L. Migliore that:

"If the ecumenical church today is challenged to a deeper recognition of God's covenant with Israel as an integral part of Christianity's own identity, so too fresh reflection on the complex relationship of Christianity and Islam is necessary, and increasingly so as a result of recent world events" [p.339] (Migliore, 2014).

For Migliore (2014), a promising door to this 'fresh reflection' on Christian-Muslim relations is the issue of "A Common Word." "A Common Word" was an open letter (dated October 17, 2007) addressed to Christian scholars and church leaders by a group of Muslim scholars and leaders (138 in number) inviting Christians to dialogue on the basis of the love command enshrined in both the Qur'an and Bible—love for the one God and love for one's neighbours. The letter did not only iterate but also postulated that "The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians" (ibid, 340). I assent to a large extent to this postulation given the realities of events across the world following the activities of these Islamic extremist groups.*

In reflecting on the dialogue possibilities occasioned by this invitation, Migliore sees three major areas for dialogue between the two faiths, albeit at a theological level: what in the field of dialogue is technically called dialogue of minds or experts (Küster, 2014). These three areas include: a) how both faiths read their sacred texts i.e. the Bible and the Qur'an, b) how both faiths perceive to be the character of the one God who commands love to the one God and love to one's neighbours: 'radical monotheism' vs. 'Trinity' and c) the last point of dialogue would be on the nature of the love command itself: whether the love to be shown to the one God and neighbours sources from the one God himself as a gift to his people or the people themselves.

From this global and continental sketch of the relations between the two major world religions, let's narrow the discussion towards the main context of this essay—Ghana, by looking at how the relationship between the two faith communities has played out.

Christian-Muslim relations in Ghana and their different forms

Ghana is predominantly a Christian country in terms of having a Christian majority of the total population. The recent Population and Housing Census (in 2010) revealed a total population of about 24 million, of which 71.2 % are Christians (i.e. Catholics, Protestants, Pentecostal/Charismatics, etc) and 17.6 % are Muslims (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012). In geographical terms, Ghana is divided into a Muslim dominated north and a Christian dominated south; similar to Nigeria. From the above statistics, one can notice the population gap between Christians and Muslims. Their interactions have not been as violent as in other African countries like Nigeria or Sudan. In fact, the interaction between the two religions can be conceptualized as a dialogue of life: where people of different faiths interact with each other on a daily basis as people living together in one community or geographical location (Küster, 2014).

In general terms, their interaction fits the description given by Mbillah (2010) as cited before: *"...that one can notice Christians and Muslims living as members of the same family, sharing in the joys of birth and the sadness of death and celebrating religious festivals together; as if there were no stark differences between Christianity and Islam."* The relationship is one of existential reality. In Northern Ghana, one could find households inhabited by Muslims and Christians either as blood relations or as tenants or as married couples. As indicated earlier, I come from a similar background: I have a Muslim father and a Christian mother and siblings. In addition, most of my maternal relatives—both uncles and aunts are Muslims.

This kind of interaction does not only take place at the household level but also in the area of economics and politics. It is not uncommon to visit any public and private institution and find both Christians and Muslims working together peacefully and in harmony (at least on the surface). For instance, the Presbyterian Church of Ghana's Northern Presbytery has an institution called Presby Agric Services. This institution, interestingly, employs both Muslims and Christians alike.

* I like to refer to them in this manner since for me the word terrorist group is controversial.

This is one aspect that reveals the nature of the relations between Christians and Muslims in Ghana, albeit at a general level.

Moreover, because this essay has something to do with youth, it is relevant to add that, Christian-Muslim encounters play out in educational institutions as well. Christian and Muslim students attend the same school, sit in the same classroom/lecture theatres, and share dormitory/hostel facilities. On the political level, since Ghana returned to constitutional democracy in 1992, and especially after the tenure of the first president of the current Republic (Jerry John Rawlings), there have been a Christian president and a Muslim vice president (as found during the tenure of John Agyekum Kuffour: 2000-2008). Even though both the current President and his Vice are Christians, some of their government appointees are Muslims. So one can observe a reflection of the household situation as indicated earlier, in national politics and economics.

This existential interaction between Muslims and Christians goes even further where it is possible to find Muslims in a church during a Christian wedding ceremony and vice versa. For example, during the wedding ceremony of my brother in 2012, his colleague workers and friends, including his clients many of whom are Muslims, formed the majority of the wedding guests in the church auditorium* on that day. The same can be said of other occasions such as funerals, as Mbillah (2010) has hinted in the earlier quote.

This picture of the nature of the Christian-Muslim encounters in Ghana looks very impressive and promising, but it will be an inaccurate depiction if mention is not made to the fact that there have been instances of tension and conflict. These tensions and conflicts arise mainly, but not exclusively, from evangelistic activities of Christians, especially in Muslim dominated areas. For instance, the Outreach Department of my local congregation once reported that they were pelted with stones during an evangelistic venture in a Muslim dominated community in Northern Ghana. Aside from that, earlier this year (February 2015), a group of about 300 Muslims went on a demonstration in the Western Region of Ghana, to register a plight that Muslim students were forced to attend Christian activities and put off their Hijabs (in the case of female Muslims) in the mission founded schools they enrolled (Citifmonline, 2015b). This became a national issue where the President of Ghana at his State of the Nation address to Parliament warned that no educational institution in the country had the right to impose a religious activity on another and that each person under the laws of Ghana had the freedom to choose and practise their religion.

Subsequent to this warning by the President and the demonstration of the Muslim students, the Ministry of Communication issued an official statement on behalf of government to the effect that heads of educational institutions across the country risked their jobs if they limited students in the practice of religion. This evoked a quick response, a counter statement as it were, from the Catholic Bishops Conference of Ghana directing the heads of Catholic educational institutions to be firm and continue their duties as defined by the Catholic Church without fear or intimidation. Now, this was from the Roman Catholic quarters (who form 13.1% of the total Christian population in Ghana). What about the rest of the Protestants? Under the umbrella organization of the Christian Council Ghana (CCG), a statement was issued calling for peace and advising that the issue be left in the hands of the Ghana Peace Council, religious leaders and the Ghana Education Service to handle without political interference (Citifmonline, 2015a). It is worth elaborating further on this incidence in the history of Muslim-Christian encounters in Ghana.

Before the statement of the CCG, it had said earlier that if any Muslim was aggrieved of any infringement on their religious right, they should go to court. This, coupled with the statement of the Catholic Bishops' Conference prompted the National Chief Imam of the Muslim community in Ghana to issue a statement, with the first point as follows:

"We are deeply saddened by the uncompromising position taken by the Christian Council and Catholic Bishops' Conference in the statement issued on 3rd March 2015 as well as other earlier statements coming from certain individuals like the PRO of GES and the Deputy General Secretary of GNAT regarding the Muslim community's demand for freedom of worship in educational institutions and workplaces in Ghana; to the extent that a Constitutional provision could be undermined, and worse than that, potentially undermine the harmonious and peaceful coexistence that we have enjoyed all these years" (Myjoyonline, 2015).

* Presbyterian Church of Ghana, Ridge Congregation, Tamale, Ghana

There was a back and forth conversation on this incident but in the end, both sides agreed to remit the matter to the appropriate institutions to handle it amicably; and that is exactly what happened. This therefore reveals the extent of the relations Christians and Muslims in Ghana have shared over the years. The point that has to be made in this section is that the relations between Christians and Muslims in Ghana have not been extraordinarily different from the rest of the entire continent except that one can talk of Ghana's case being exemplary. What should the role of young people in Ghana, who are said to be the future leaders of the country, look like to ensure that the current state of the Christian-Muslim encounters is maintained and even improved? To this we now turn.

The youth in Ghana and their significance

According to the Population and Housing Census, *"The results show that Ghana has a youthful population... consisting of a large proportion of children under 15 years, and a small proportion of elderly persons (65 years and older)"* [p. 3] (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012). Given this statistical revelation, it goes without saying that youth have a very central role to play in Ghana. Their significance can be seen not only in terms of the potentials they possess to contribute to national socio-politico-economic development, but also how politicians go after them during campaign trails and sometimes channel their youthful exuberance into violent demonstrations and protests. Their significance is further underscored by the fact that both Muslim and Christian communities established structures that rope in their respective youth into their religions. For instance, the Ghana Muslim Students Association (GMSA), which has a nationwide presence in educational institutions; seeks to bring all Muslim students across the country together and manage their affairs. On the other hand, the various Christian denominations also have their youth fellowships and groups in various educational institutions in the country. Examples of this include, the National Union of Presbyterian Students Ghana (NUPS-G), the Ghana Methodist Students Union (GHAMSU) etc.

The importance of young people in the country cannot be overemphasized here. The important point is that given the potentials that youth hold, special attention has to be given to them in a manner that can harness these potentials for fruitful purposes in terms of national development and religious cooperation. This point is made against the background that a greater proportion of the unemployed in the country are youth. This means that in their idleness and frustrations resulting from unsuccessful attempts to acquire jobs and make ends meet in a rather high cost of living society, they could fall prey to religious extremists and violent groups. Especially given the phenomenon of globalization and the fact that religious terrorist groups now recruit their members through the internet and other social media (as ISIS does). One would therefore not hesitate to concur with Patel (2007) that people who engage in religious violence do not "... *view young people as an afterthought*" [p. 127]. If these extremists do not consider young people as an *"afterthought,"* then there should be no way religious bodies not least Christianity and Islam view them (youth) as an afterthought.

The role of the youth in Christian-Muslim relations

What place do the youth in Muslim-Christian encounters have in Ghana? It is to be argued that they really have a great place and their contribution is and could be enormous. Indeed, Patel (2007) has hinted that his reason for initiating Interfaith Youth Core is that young people hold the potential of contributing to "religious cooperation." Therefore, given Ghana's youthful population, structures that can employ effectively the potential of young people need to be put in place by organizations that are involved in interfaith issues in the country. Young people tend to have a different perspective on issues and given the existential nature of Muslim-Christian encounters in Ghana, young people may tend to consider building friendship and relationship with people they meet in school, work places, etc without necessarily being hindered by their religious background. The data that I have collected on young people and interreligious dialogue* reveal that the majority of the youth had either Muslim or Christian friends and in managing these friendships, they tend to put the friendship ahead of religious difference. This demonstrates a positive input into the future

* this data is part of an ongoing project I am working for my MA thesis on youth and interfaith dialogue.

of interfaith relations in the country. Indeed, Jayeel S. Cornelio and Timothy A. E. Salera, in their research on youth in interfaith dialogue in the Philippines have observed that, “*The view[s] of our youth respondents show that... the significance of interfaith revolves around the person (and not his or her religion), friendships, and collective participation in the community*” [p. 41] (Cornelio, & Salera, 2012).

The point need not belaboured, but it is to argue for a recognition that youth hold a unique input in interfaith discourse and given the fact that the future belongs to them, it makes sense to engage their current potential in the area of Christian-Muslim dialogue and not only in politics and other social activities. In other words, youth of both faith communities in the country “...*should be equal participants with adults, not just people participating for the future*” [p.182] (Smith, 2011).

Conclusion

This essay has looked at Christian-Muslim relations in Ghana in attempt to argue for a more involved role for youth in that endeavour. Therefore, in order to set the discussion in perspective, a historical sketch of Muslim-Christian encounters across the world and Africa has been given. The point has been argued that the nature of Christian-Muslim relations in Ghana, and by extension sub-Saharan Africa, has been one of existential reality: where Christians and Muslims intermix and intermingle daily on different levels of community and national life. The importance of the youth in Ghana has been underscored and the argument is that they hold a potential that needs to be pursued for interfaith dialogue by establishing structures that could create space for them to contribute to interfaith dialogue in the country. This is important as Patel has argued that just as young people hold the potential for “religious cooperation,” they are also most sought after by religious extremists to use in religious violence.

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