Christian-Muslim Theological Dialogue: The Case of Catholic Universities of East Africa

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Abstract

Christians and Muslims interact on a daily basis but as far as their beliefs and practices are concerned, there is a general mutual apprehension, suspicion, stereotyping, mistrust, insulting and even physical confrontations. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to examine how Catholic universities in East Africa can help Christian students and others to rethink their attitudes towards Muslims in view of the official teaching of the Church. The findings from the reviewed formal Christian and Muslim statements show that theological dialogue is valid and necessary for fostering peaceful relations. It therefore urges Catholic universities and other learning institutions to assist students to know more about their own religious traditions and those of others through formal theological training, seminars and provision of reading materials in order to participate effectively in this kind of dialogue.

Keywords: Christian-Muslim theological dialogue, Common Word between Us and You, Catholic Universities, Nostra Aetate, Religious Studies.

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Introduction

Christians and Muslims habitually live together constructively, sharing in the daily routines of life. However, their conversations on the theological level are usually shunned in the name of peace. Islam and Christianity pose mutual theological challenges on issues such as the nature of Jesus, the concept of God and the genuineness of their Holy books. These differences cause conflicts between the two religious' traditions.

While religion is seen as a cause of conflicts, it is also a powerful force in the resolution of tensions. Hans Kung clarifies this latter aspect of religion thus: "But religions can also have liberating effects, oriented out on the future and beneficial to human rights. They can disseminate trust in life, generosity, tolerance and solidarity, social commitment, spiritual renewal, social reforms and world peace."[1] Motivated by Kung's assertion that religion can have liberating consequences, formation of interreligious dialogue is essential in averting religiously related conflicts. Universities, for instance, can act as catalysts of change since they generally prize freedom of expression and non-discrimination.

This study is contextualized in East Africa, which, according to the colonial territories of *German East Africa* and the British East Africa Protectorate, comprises of these three countries: Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania.[2] In these countries, there is a number of Catholic founded universities, but the study focuses on *The Catholic University of Eastern Africa* (CUEA), *St. Augustine University of Tanzania* (SAUT) and *Uganda Martyrs' University* (UMU). The paper is written within a Christian theological tradition, and more specifically, from a Roman Catholic perspective. It is from this background that the writer evaluates Christian and Muslim relations and urges for theological dialogue for their peaceful coexistence.

The writer was motivated by her experience of teaching a mandatory course of Comparative Religion to undergraduates in SAUT. The key objective of this course is to

[1] Hans Kung, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic* (London: SCM Press, 1991), 46.

[2] Judy Pearsall, ed., "East Africa" in *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 582. The term East Africa also has a wider geographical coverage that includes Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia in addition to the aforementioned three countries. Cf. "East Africa" in *Merriam-Webster's Geographical Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Springfield: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2001), 339.

enable students to acquire basic knowledge about world religions such as Christianity and Islam. This course is supposed to be taught objectively, that is, without stating whose beliefs are better than the others. Nonetheless, the presentation of differing beliefs and practices of Christians and Muslims at times degenerates into heated arguments. Topics of contention include, for instance, the fundamental belief by Christians that Jesus is the 'Son of God', whom Muslims acknowledge simply as a prophet.[3] When confronted with these religious truth claims, some students somehow became confused and sought guidance from the teacher. It was from this kind of setting that the author started thinking of forums of theological dialogue that could help the students to be faithful to their own beliefs and practices and equally understand and respect those of others.

Moreover, both Christians and Muslims generally support interreligious dialogue as attested in their official statements. Among Roman Catholics for instance, in addition to the Biblical teachings on peaceful relations, the document entitled, "The Declaration on the Church's Relations to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*"[4] (thereafter *Nostra Aetate*), invites them to engage in dialogue rather than confrontation. Similarly, some Protestant and Orthodox Churches, under the umbrella of the World Council of Churches, encourage interreligious dialogue as the document "Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies"[5] shows. In the same vein, Muslims, in addition to Qur'anic sources, uphold interreligious communications with Christians as vital. This is clearly exemplified in the document, "A Common Word between Us and You"[6], which is still unprecedented in the Muslims' efforts to promote peaceful relations with Christians. Despite this general support for dialogue, little is being done by Catholic universities in East Africa in the sphere of theological dialogue.

[3] Adil Nizamuddin Imran, *Christ Jesus, the Son of Mary: A Muslim Perspective* (Lombard: Book of Signs Foundation, 2009), 69 ff.

[4] Vatican Council II, "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*", in *The Documents of Second Vatican Council* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2013).

[5] World Council of Churches, *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1979).

[6] The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, Jordan, 2007, https://www.acommonword.com, accessed August 29, 2019.

Forms of Interreligious Dialogue

To begin with, dialogue derives from the Greek term dialogos. Dia is a preposition, which means between, though, across, of and by. Logos comes from legein, which means to speak.[7] Based on this etymology, dialogue can be understood as a talk between two or more people. Pius Rutechura explains that genuine dialogue between religions "stems from a willingness to meet on level ground, without being judgmental or losing one's own faith identity in the process. Fruitful dialogue demands that we nurture skills and attitudes to overcome prejudices as well as a tendency to dominate and force our own beliefs on others."[8] It follows then from this definition that if Christians and Muslims meet in honest dialogue, they should meet as equals without one group trying to overpower the other or cunningly attempting to convert them.

According to Roman Catholicism, there are four forms of interreligious dialogue. These were first mentioned in the document "Dialogue and Mission"[9] and later reiterated in "Dialogue and Proclamation".[10] The first one is the dialogue of life. In this category, people endeavour to live in a neighbourly spirit and share their day-to-day struggles. Second, there is the dialogue of works whereby Christians collaborate with others for the wellbeing of a society. The third is the dialogue of theological discourse in which experts try to deepen knowledge of their own religious heritages and at the same time recognize the religious values of others. The fourth type is the dialogue of religious experience, which is concerned with the sharing of spiritual treasures of religious traditions by those engaged in dialogue.[11]

[7] V. Crapanzano, "On dialogue", in *The Interpretation of Dialogue,* ed. T. Maranhao (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 276.

[8] Pius Rutechura, "A General View of Interfaith Dialogue in AMECEA Region", in *Interfaith Dialogue: Towards a Culture of Working Together,* ed. Frederick Ntendika Mvumbi (Nairobi: The Catholic University of Eastern Africa, 2009), xx.

[9] Francesco Gioia, "Dialogue and Mission", in *Interreligious Dialogue: The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997), 575 -577.

[10] Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, "Dialogue and Proclamation, Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and The Proclamation of The Gospel Of Jesus, Christ", 1991, no.42, http://www.vatican.va/, accessed January 13, 2019.

[11] Ibid.

Application of the Four Forms of Religious Dialogue in Catholic Universities

Dialogue of life is often visualized among students by the concern, esteem, and friendliness they have towards those of other religions. Students try to establish rapport with others and share in their joys and sadness. Generally in the three selected universities, if one of the students loses a close relative, students usually contribute towards funeral costs on a classroom basis or otherwise. They also participate in organized activities like sports, games and cultural activities irrespective of their religious affiliations. In doing all these, they endeavour to bear witness to religious values in their lives.

Dialogue of action involves moving from attitude to cooperation, especially in areas of endorsing the communal good. It also deals with issues like peace, justice and the advocacy of human rights. In the named Catholic universities, there is a general emphasis in formal and informal settings on subjects such as justice, the dignity of human life, and an impartial sharing of resources. Student council leaderships often lobby on behalf of particular justice issues, such as the availability of provisions for physically disabled students, places of worship for various religious groups, preservation and protection of the environment and the need to have qualified and responsible academic staff.

With regard to the *dialogue of theological exchange,* all the selected universities in East Africa offer courses on world religions, which can act as preliminaries for theological dialogue. Nonetheless, little is being done to equip students with values and skills of interreligious dialogue. While students are not necessarily theological experts in their own religions, they ought to be initiated and guided on how to engage in this kind of dialogue. As Michael Miller rightly says, "the orthopraxis of interreligious dialogue, often carried on in the local churches, requires the solid theological expertise that can be provided by Catholic universities."[12]

The *dialogue of religious experience* is somehow related to that of theological exchange except that it extends to sharing of spiritual experiences. In this case, it can act as a catalyst of fruitful cooperation and mutual enrichment. In the selected Catholic universities, Christians and Muslims conduct their own worship and hardly know what the

[12] Michael Miller, "Catholic Universities and Interreligious Dialogue", *America The Jesuit Review* 192, no. 21, June 20, 2005, http://groups.creighton.edu/sjdialogue/documents/articles/america_miller.html,accessed 6-17-18.

others really do. While worship in one's own religion fosters faithfulness to one's religious tradition, if used exclusively, it denies the students the opportunities of knowing and sharing in the religious experiences of others.

The above analysis of the forms of dialogue, in view of their manifestation in Catholic universities, has highlighted the fact that the dialogue of life and action are generally being implemented. However, those of theological exchange and religious experience are rarely engaged in, at least formally. All four forms of dialogue are interrelated and essential; nonetheless, the focus of this paper is on theological dialogue that seeks informed judgement on religious beliefs and practices. For as Francis Arinze explains, believers of different religions need settings where they can "articulate their beliefs and practices and present them to others and be able to listen to others as they formulate their own convictions."[13] If well planned, theological dialogue serve this purpose and eventually lessen mutual prejudices and hatred that impede peaceful coexistence.

Christian-Muslim Demography and Conflicts in East Africa

According to the *International Religious Freedom Report* survey, conducted by the USA Department of State, the total population of Tanzania was projected to be 51 million by the year 2015. This survey quotes "The Pew Forum Survey of 2010" that estimated that 60 per cent of the population were Christians and 36 were Muslims. Among the Christians, the Roman Catholics were the majority. But according to popular opinion, the number of Christians and Muslims in the country was almost equal. It should be noted that the Tanzanian government does not gather religious identification data in its census.[14] With regard to Uganda, the *International Religious Freedom Report* for 2015 put the total number of people at 37.1 million. Among these, Christians were estimated to be 85 per cent, out of which 42 per cent are Roman Catholics; the Muslims were estimated to be 12 per cent.[15] And in Kenya, the same *International Religious Freedom Report* of 2015 indicated that the total number of the population was 45.9 million. 82 per cent of them are

[13] Francis Arinze, *Church in Dialogue - Walking with Other Believers* (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1990), 165.

[14] US Department of State, "Tanzania 2015 International Religious Freedom Report" https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/256291.pdf, accessed May 14, 2018.

[15] US Department of State, Uganda 2015 International Religious Freedom Report, https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/256295.pdf, accessed May 14, 2018.

Christians, among whom 23 per cent are Roman Catholics. The number of Muslims was estimated to be 11 per cent.[16]

The above exposition of the religious demography in the selected countries of Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya shows that the presence of Christians and Muslims in East Africa and consequently in many Catholic universities. In these countries, the constitutions prohibit religious discrimination and advocate for freedom of religious expression. Despite these legislative measures, there have been violations of religious freedom, which have resulted in conflicts between Christians and Muslims.

The derogatory *comparative preaching strategies* that were used in the 1980s in Kenya and Tanzania, and to some extent in Uganda, can be cited as an example of such conflicts. On their part, Christian evangelizers organized large crusades to discredit Islam. These often had missionary evangelists from other countries such as Reinhard Bonnke, a German who regularly visited Tanzania and Kenya and belonged to a group known as "Christ for All Nations". Bonnke is quoted as having pointed out thus against Islam, "We are gripped by a holy determination to carry out the Great Commission of our Lord, which is a command to attack the strongholds of Satan".[17] This example shows the kind of language, which was used by some Christians to ridicule Muslims and their religion.

Muslim fundamentalists on their part preached against the Bible and the basic Christian beliefs. They also had a visiting preacher, Ahmed Deedat. This preacher, for instance, attacked the divine authorship of the Bible.[18] Joseph Wandera explains how Deedat argued that Muslims find it unacceptable that the Bible can be called the word of God when it sounds like history, personal letters and mere speculation.[19] In their

[16] US Department of State, Kenya 2015 International Religious Freedom Report https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/256247.pdf, accessed May 14, 2018.

[17] Grant LeMarquand, *Theological Education in Contemporary Africa* (Eldoret: Zapf Chancery, 2004), 182.

[18] Ahmad Deedat, *Is the Bible God's Word?* (Chicago: Kazi, 1981).

[19] Joseph Wandera, "Christian-Muslim Co-existence in the Light of Sacred Texts and Present Contexts: With a Special Reference to Mihadhara in Nairobi," in *Christian-Muslim Co-existence in Eastern Africa*, F. Stenger, Joseph Wandera and P. Hannon, P., eds. (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 2008), 78.

discussions, Deedat and his supporters tried to convince Christians that they were not attacking the Bible as such but their unfounded beliefs about it.

While the propagation of faith in the named countries is legal, the language that was used was often offensive. It should be noted that these outreach strategies were used by 'revivalist' movements and not by mainstream denominations, but they affected everyone. Christians and Muslims who attended these debates were inevitably shocked to hear their fundamental beliefs derided and also angered by the hostile tone of these exchanges. Eventually open-air preaching was banned by civil authorities but the craving in people to discredit what others believe in and practice continues.

Christian-Muslim Theological Dialogue in Formal Statements

This section deals with the formal contemporary statements on Christian-Muslim dialogue with the aim of highlighting its necessity and validity. It includes authoritative writings of Christians and Muslims pertaining to dialogue. The emphasis on the formal statements is based on the fact that Christians, particularly Roman Catholics, regard them as binding in matters pertaining to faith and morals. The term contemporary refers to the period ranging from 1962-65 (the date of the Second Vatican Council) onwards. During this council, Catholics formally acknowledged religions, such as Islam, as worthy of respect, whose true meaning Christians should seek to discover.

Interreligious dialogue from a Catholic perspective

Before the 1960s, the RCC hardly acknowledged the salvific value of other religions. However, a great change occurred in the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). In the document, *Nostra Aetate*, Roman Catholics, as well as other Christians, are challenged to reassess their attitudes towards the adherents of other religions. *Nostra Aetate* states that "One is the community of all peoples, one their origin, for God made the whole human race to live over the face of the earth."[20] This statement points to the fact that humankind has the same origin and destiny. It thus sets the ground for mutual understanding and collaboration. Hence, as Jacques Dupuis rightly comments, dialogue

[20] Vatican Council II, *Nostra Aetate*, 2013, 216, no.1.

has a double basis. It is made up of a community that originates from God and it is to God that it is destined. [21]

Moreover, in the third section, the focus of *Nostra Aetate* is on Islam. This section states that the Church has a high regard for Muslims and admits that in the past there have been many quarrels and dissensions between them. It therefore urges Christians to overlook the past and make sincere efforts to reconcile with Muslims. It reads:

> The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one, God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God…Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding ...[22]

In the above text, there are similarities between Christianity and Islam, which could form the base of their conversations; one of them is the belief that God is both creator and judge. This acknowledgement of similarities is a positive element in the document because we tend to think in terms of what divides us. Besides, it is noteworthy that the declaration admits that followers of both religions are responsible for the hostilities amongst them and that attempts should be made to rectify them. Moreover, Islam is acknowledged as a religion in its own right that ought to be engaged with by the Christians.

On its part, the "Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, *Lumen Gentium*" (thereafter *Lumen Gentium*) refers to Abraham. While Christians tend to stress Abraham's faith, which enabled him to respond to God's call to leave his country for a promised land, Muslims emphasize his understanding of the oneness of God. The document states, "But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place there are the Muslims, who, prophesying to hold to the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one, merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind."[23]

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[21] Jacques Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions: From Confrontation to Dialogue (*London: Orbis Books, 2001), 222.

[22] Vatican Council II, *Nostra Aetate*, 2013, 217, no. 3.

[23] Vatican Council II, "Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, *Lumen Gentium*", in *The Documents of Second Vatican Council* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2013), 78, no. 16.

In *Nostra Aetate* and *Lumen Gentium*is, there is a reference to Abraham, which is significant. It implies that although there are differences in the way Christians and Muslims understand Abraham, there is a common recognition that he is a model for those who wish to be faithful to God's commands. *Lumen Gentium's* assertion that Christians together with Muslims adore one God is also noteworthy because there are some Christians who do not admit that they worship the same God as Muslims, since for them God can only be understood as a Trinity.[24] Likewise, some Muslims criticize the Christian claim to monotheism and consider them as "associators" who worship God along with other beings.[25] In this case, *Lumen Gentium's* affirmation of 'together with us' invites Christians to recognise that although their understanding of God is different from that of Muslims, it is the same God they all worship.

World Council of Churches

The World Council of Churches (WCC) was established in 1948 and includes the main Christian denominations of the Eastern and Western worlds with a few exceptions, such as the Uniates. Member churches of this structure also endeavour to dialogue with Muslims. Although the RCC is not a member of this organization, it often sends representatives to its assemblies. In its early stages, the WCC was preoccupied with evangelism, but with the passage of time, members incorporated dialogue with other religions in its objectives. Among the vital documents of the WCC is the one entitled "Guidelines on Dialogue", which portrays interreligious dialogue as a necessary ecumenical activity and provides theological justifications for the enterprise.

In relation to Islam, in 1992 the WCC issued a document entitled "Issues in Christian-Muslim relations: Ecumenical Considerations". This document points out similarities between Islam and Christianity which could form the content of their dialogue,

[24]Mark Durie, *Revelation? Do We Worship The Same God?: Jesus, Holy Spirit, God in Christianity and Islam: Guidance for the Perplexed* (Australia: City Harvest Publications, 2007). In this book Durie explains that while Muslims insist that they believe in the same God like Christians, this is not true. Hence, he attempts to demonstrate that there are good reasons for Christians to challenge the Islamic viewpoint through a careful study of God in the Bible and Allah as expressed in the Qur'an.

[25] Michael Fitzgerald and John Borelli, *Interfaith Dialogue: A Catholic View* (London: Orbis Books, 2006), 113-114.

such as, the belief in one God, prophets, prayer and love of neighbour. It also acknowledges the fact that there are tensions between the two faiths. For instance, it states:

> A frequent cause of tension between Christians and Muslims arises from the fact that both Islam and Christianity are Da'wah or missionary-oriented religions; both believe that they have a divine call to invite others to join their respective faiths. This right and duty is not to be denied. Yet in their eagerness to spread their faiths and bring others to the knowledge and worship of God, they should attempt to exercise their mission or Da'wah in ways that respect the freedom and dignity of persons and maintain harmony between the communities.[26]

Interreligious dialogue in the WCC is both approved and opposed. It is opposed because there is fear by some Christians that it betrays mission and leads to relativism and syncretism, key elements, which appear to weaken, hinder and be in conflict with dialogue.[27] It is crucial to note that if the dialogue of theological exchange is to be fruitful, there is need to properly address this tension. The reservations of some members notwithstanding, interreligious dialogue remains an important aspect of the WCC.

Interreligious dialogue from an Islamic perspective

Unlike Roman Catholics who are headed by the Pope and are guided by Ecumenical Councils, Muslims do not have a central authority. Hence, the challenge to those who wish to dialogue with them is that there is no institution representing them worldwide nor are there agreements on who should represent them. Qamar-ul Huda explains that the insistence in Islam of not having a centralized establishment to oversee its temporal and theological affairs was meant to guard against any distinct authority to subdue the believers. This is so because for Muslims, to have humanly erected institutions to govern over the faithful could interfere in the direct connection between the believer and the creator.[28] Christians in this case have to dialogue with Muslim institutions, groups and spiritual leaders who might at times have differing views on particular issues.

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[26] World Council of Churches, *Issues in Christian-Muslim Relations: Ecumenical Considerations*, Geneva, 1992, no. 7, https://www.oikoumene.org/, accessed on January 18, 2019.

[27] Douglas Pratt, *Faith to Faith, Issues in Interreligious Engagement (*Oxford, OxCEPT, 2008), 66.

[28] Qamar-ul Huda, "The 40th Anniversary of Vatican II: Examining Dominus Jesus, and Contemporary Issues for Inter-Religious Dialogue between Muslims and Catholics," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 15, no. 3 (2004), 338-339.

Again, the Qur'an contains ideas of spirituality, faith, law and life which are ultimate and cannot be superseded by other statements. Those who support dialogue among religions and those who oppose it use Qur'ānic verses to substantiate their arguments. Some Muslims may support an absolutist attitude towards a particular text while others may oppose it. An example of such texts is:

> Neither the Christians nor the Jews will be pleased with you until you follow their ways. Say, God's guidance is the only true guidance. If you followed their desires after the knowledge which has come to you, you would not have any patron or supporter against God" (Surah 2:120).[29]

Commenting on this text, Muhammad Shafīq and Mohammed Abu-Nimer explain that some Muslims understand it as a condemnation of dialogue with Jews and Christians. However, they argue that historically, it refers to a dispute that erupted after Allah had told Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) to change the place of worship from Jerusalem to the *Ka'bah* in Makah. It is within this context that Allah told the Prophet that Jews and Christians of that time would not be pleased with him until he followed their teaching regarding Jerusalem as a central place of worship. Shafīq and Abu-Nimer assert that this verse did not ask Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) to break his relations with Jews and Christians but rather that total satisfaction with them was impossible.[30] This is one example of texts; which Muslims interpret differently with regard to their relations with Christians.

A significant step was nonetheless taken when an assembly of respected Muslim leaders of the faith wrote to the Christian community lobbying for peace. The document was phrased as *A Common Word between Us and You*[31] [thereafter ACW]. It was meant to halt the intensifying conflict between the two major world religions. This document, which brought together many outstanding religious scholars and authorities, asserts that the base for Christian and Muslim mutual understanding exists in their Scriptures. It is embedded in the two commandments of love of God and neighbour.

[29] *The Quran*, trans. Wahīduddīn Khan (New Delhi: Goodword Books, 2009), 12.
[30] Muhammad Shafīq and Mohammed Abu-Nimer, *Interfaith Dialogue: A Guide for Muslims* (USA: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2007), 7.
[31] A Common Word between Us and You, 13 October 2007, http://www.acommonword.com/sigtype/newsig/, accessed 29 August 2018.

One of the immediate causes of the document was a lecture by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI which was given at Regensburg University in Bavaria, Germany on September 12th 2006. In the lecture, *Faith and Reason* was the main subject, however, the controversy arose when the Pope cited the derogatory remarks that were said about Islam by Manuel II Paleologus, the Byzantine Emperor of Constantinople (1394-1402). The quotation from the Emperor was as follows: "Show me what Mohammed brought that was new and there you will find things only evil and inhuman"[32] Commenting on this quotation Benedict XIV himself said:

> Violence is incompatible with the nature of God and the nature of the soul…Whoever would lead someone to faith needs the ability to speak well and to reason properly, without violence and threats…To convince a reasonable soul, one does not need a strong arm, or weapons of any kind, or any other means of threatening a person with death…[33]

Whereas Benedict XVI had intended to point out that the emperor was saying that violence was irreconcilable with the nature of God and of the soul, the reference to Emperor Manuel II was taken by some Muslims to infer that Islam was an irrational and violent religion.[34] The lecture provoked angry, vehement demonstrations and condemnations from many Muslims worldwide and some people died in the process. Realizing the effects of his comments and the way they were open to misinterpretation, the Pope added a footnote to his lecture that was uploaded on the Vatican's official website. It reads:

> In the Muslim world, this quotation has unfortunately been taken as an expression of my personal position, thus arousing understandable indignation. I hope that the reader of my text can see immediately that this sentence does not express my personal views of the Qur'an, for which I have the respect due to a holy book of a great religion. In quoting the text of the Emperor Manuel II, I intended solely to draw out the essential relationship between faith and reason. On this position I am in agreement with Manuel II, but without endorsing his polemic.[35]

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[32] Benedict XVI, "Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections. Papal Address at University of Regensburg", 2006. http://www.zenit.org/article-16955? =English, accessed February 12, 2019.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Yvonne Haddad and J. Smith, J. I., "The Quest for 'A Common Word': Initial Christian Responses to a Muslim Initiative," *Islam and Christian Muslim Relations* 20, no. 4 (2009), 370.

[35] Benedict XVI, "Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections", 2006, http://www.zenit.org/article-16955?1 =English, accessed 12 February 2019.

One month later, 38 prominent Muslim scholars wrote an "Open Letter to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI". It has this introductory paragraph:

> …we thought it appropriate, in the spirit of open exchange, to address your use of debate between the Emperor Manuel II Paleologus and a "learned Persian" as the starting point for a discourse on the relationship between reason and faith. While we applaud your efforts to oppose the dominance of positivism and materialism in human life, we must point out some errors in the way you mentioned Islam as a counterpoint to the proper use of reason, as well as some mistakes in the assertions you put forward in support of your argument.[36]

The Pope did not respond to this letter, perhaps because of its polemical language. It was eventually followed up in October 2007 by a positive and longer letter titled "A Common Word between You and Us". 138 Muslim scholars, men and women, of various theological and juridical schools, of modern and traditional educational backgrounds, signed the letter. Since then, the original list has been added on by other signatories. It was addressed "to Pope Benedict XVI, the Patriarchs of the Orthodox Churches, the leaders of the larger Christian denominations, and to leaders of Christians everywhere."[37]

The letter is grounded in the significant Qur'ānic passages about which the authors affirm that they back-up Muslims' engagements with Christians. It includes three main parts: love God, love of neighbour and shared ground for Muslim and Christian future dialogue. The theme is derived from the Qur'an 3:64 which states: "Say O People of the Book [Christians and Jews]! Come to a common ground between us and you…"[38] This letter shows the Muslims' willingness and readiness to dialogue with Christians on their fundamental beliefs. Moreover, as G. Speelman observes, it "engages in an implicit dialogue with others within the Muslim world who are less inclined to dialogue with non-Muslims".[39] It thus shows the development of *intra-Islamic* dialogue in the Muslim community.

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[36] Open Letter to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI, 2006, 1, https://www.theislamicmonthly.com/, accessed March 6, 2019.

[37] A Common Word between Us and You, http://www.acommonword.com/sigtype/newsig/, accessed on August 29, 2018.

[38] Ibid.

[39] G. M. Speelman, "The Background of a Common Word," *Exchange*, 39 (2010), 113-114.

ACW provoked negative and positive reactions among Christians and Muslims whose discussions are beyond the scope of this paper. Its significance for Christian-Muslim dialogue can be summarized in three main ways: First, it is grounded in scripture, which, as Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, explains, offers the basis for discourse about God.[40] Williams rightly explains that if we attend properly to the way we use our holy texts, we would be able to discover the true nature of others' faith. If Christians and Muslims read their scriptures together, they may begin to view their dialogue partners in fresh ways. Second, ACW recognizes theological differences between Christians and Muslims as necessary. Third, the fact that ACW has the support of many religious authorities in high-ranking positions in the Islamic and Christian circles, it is crucial to dialogical endeavours.

By and large, the examined official documents are vital in the support of theological Christian-Muslim dialogue. Regrettably, not many people are aware of these statements and those who read them, continue to grapple with their actual meaning and how to implement them.

Catholic Universities and Theological Dialogue

John Paul II, in his Apostolic Constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, mentions a criterion that should characterize Catholic universities. He states that these universities must have a faculty or a chair of theology. The emphasis on Theology is because it is vital in the consolidation of knowledge and the interchange between faith and reason. Moreover, it helps other disciplines to scrutinize their findings and how they impact on society.[41] Among the universities under study, while it is only CUEA which has a faculty of theology, the others too have the needed competence to initiate and facilitate the dialogue of theological exchange. They have some trained staff in theological studies and could make use of visiting lecturers and guest speakers of both religions for that purpose.

Moreover, John Paul II says that "[b]y its nature of being both Catholic and university, a Catholic university is made more capable of conducting an impartial search

[40] Rowan Williams, "A Common Word for the Common Good", 2007, http://www.acommonword.com/category/site/christian-responses/, accessed on 8-29- 2018.

[41] John Paul II, *Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities, "Ex Corde Ecclesiae"* (Nairobi: St. Paul Publications Africa, 1990), no. 19.

for truth, a search that is neither subordinated to nor conditioned by particular interests of any kind"[42] In view of their ability to search for impartial truth and to integrate faith and reason, these institutions are better positioned to promote interreligious dialogue, which values openness to others point of view.

On his part, Francis Arinze, the former president of the *Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue*, asserts that Catholic universities are called to interreligious dialogue because the Church they subscribe to encourages this undertaking. He clarifies this role thus:

> The Catholic university is a major centre of thought and inspiration in the Church. It is deeply committed to dialogue between faith and culture, between belief and reason, and therefore to dialogue with people of differing religious and cultural convictions. After all, a university is an important interlocutor of the academic, cultural, scientific and religious worlds. The Catholic university should therefore be intensely involved in the Church's efforts to meet other believers in dialogue and collaboration.[43]

Catholic universities in East Africa and elsewhere enrol students of different religions, offer courses that foster free thought and speech and an appreciation of differences. These universities could effectively implement the dialogue of theological exchange because they are committed to the search for truth. The discussions they hold can enable the participants to develop the understanding of their own traditions and appreciate others' religious tenets.

Way Forward

The reviewed literature shows that Catholic universities in general have the duty and potential to foster Christian-Muslim theological dialogue. Despite this fact, little is being done by the universities in East Africa in that sphere. The following recommendations could, therefore, pave a way forward for them.

[42] Ibid. 10-11.

[43] Francis Arinze, "The Role of the Catholic University in Interreligious Dialogue", Boston, 2000, http://groups.creighton.edu/sjdialogue/documents/articles/arinze_boston.html, accessed on August 08, 2019.

I. There is need to assist the students and to know more about their religious traditions. This is important because lack of adequate knowledge of one's religion is one of the obstacles for interreligious dialogue.[44] The argument is that one cannot share what one does not understand. A sense of religious identity is thus necessary for those in dialogue to encounter the vitality of others' religious tradition. This aspect will help them to confidently articulate the tenets of their faiths and enrich others. Knowledge of one's faith can be attained through theological training, seminars, and provision of reading materials.

II. Prior knowledge about others' beliefs helps those in dialogue to appreciate their viewpoints. Its concern is to understand religious doctrines, historical facts and theological propositions. This can be done in departments of Religious Studies or Comparative Religion, with the focus on world religions like Christianity and Islam. These courses, when taught objectively, offer opportunities for learners to know what people of different religions truly say about themselves. They create an environment that enables the participants to gain experiential knowledge and overcome suspicions and misconceptions. Religious Studies as a discipline can also act as a forum for interreligious dialogue when dialogical pedagogies that go beyond methodological neutrality are utilized in order to allow students to explore freely their religious truth claims.

III. Christian theologians and scholars ought to collaborate with their Muslim colleagues who are interested in dialogue, and deliberate on how to initiate and assist students. These can arrange occasional colloquia in which students become inculcated in dialogical endeavours.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to show how Catholic universities in East Africa attempt to help students and the community at large to foster Christian-Muslim theological dialogue as recommended in line with Church teaching. Deducing from how the four forms of dialogue are being implemented in the selected East African Catholic universities and from the review of the official statements of Christians and Muslims regarding their position on theological dialogue, we can rightly conclude that there is much that needs to

[44] Ibid. no. 52.

be done. In this case, administrators, teaching staff and the students themselves need to commit themselves to this exercise. One of the approaches that befit multi-faith learning institutions is to design programmes of interreligious learning and occasional seminars on interreligious dialogue. These avenues would then offer opportunities to students to critically and sensitively evaluate religious truth claims, beliefs and practices of other believers, while remaining faithful to their own.