

Religion and poverty alleviation in South Africa

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South Africa, like all nations, faces several societal ills. In recent years, poverty has seen an increase in its prevalence rates – gaining attention from local, national, and international institutions. Poverty as a global phenomenon has existed for centuries and is predicted to continue for the foreseeable future. Amid this gloomy prediction, religion offers a beacon of hope. Religious communities provide a sense of comfort, security, and hope for a better future. However, they are also institutions capable of great social change and influence. Considering South Africa's diverse and large religious community, the question of how religious communities can support poverty alleviation efforts and curb the growth of poverty becomes important, necessary, and relevant to the existing discourse on multilateral collaboration towards poverty alleviation.

Contribution: This article contributes to understanding different religious views on poverty towards understanding the importance of the religious community and interfaith dialogue and collaboration in addressing the growth of poverty in South Africa.

Keywords: religion; interfaith dialogue; poverty; South Africa; poverty alleviation; social change; multilateral collaboration; theology.

Introduction

South African society faces many challenges ranging from gender-based violence (GBV), excessive crime, poverty, corruption, and service delivery. The variety of societal ills that plague South African society can be traced back to South Africa's history of apartheid and its institutionalisation of poverty.

According to Lephakga (2016:1), the attainment of democracy in 1994 brought a number of expectations that included 'an end to institutionalised poverty among the blacks in South Africa, their inclusion in the main economy and their reconciliation with the black selfhood...'. These expectations came as South Africa saw an end to the apartheid era, which promised a bright and prosperous future for South Africa.

Despite the end of apartheid bringing the hope of a new and better South Africa, poverty remains a stumbling block, thwarting the nation's promise of development. According to Statista (Cowling 2023),¹ as of 2022, 18.2 million South Africans live in extreme poverty. This is an increase of approximately 120 000 people since 2021, and it is estimated to increase to 18.5 million by 2025 (Cowling 2023). Although South Africa has made some progress in tackling poverty since its attainment of democracy, there has been a sharp increase in the poverty lines between 2011 and 2015 – threatening to reverse the progress made (Sulla 2020).

Since 1994, South Africa has prioritised the addressal of poverty. In 1998, a series of reports entitled 'War on Poverty' were published by the first democratic President, Nelson Mandela aimed at eradicating poverty (treasure.gov.za 2007). In addition, in 2004, President Thabo Mbeki declared:²

Endemic and widespread poverty continues to disfigure the face of our country. It will always be impossible for us to say that we have fully restored the dignity of all our people as long as this situation persists. For this reason the struggle to eradicate poverty has been and will continue to be a cornerstone of the national effort to build the new South Africa. (treasure.gov.za, p. 1, 2007)

Considering this, poverty is a major societal ill that plagues South African society and hinders all forms of growth and development. This article is set within the context of poverty in South Africa by evaluating the contribution that religious communities can make to poverty alleviation.

1. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1263290/number-of-people-living-in-extreme-poverty-in-south-africa/>

2. [treasure.gov.za](https://www.treasure.gov.za) 2007

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Religions in South Africa

Despite multiple attempts to define religion, it remains a challenging task that includes a variety of different approaches ranging from psychological, sociological, philosophical, anthropological, and theological perspectives (Beyers 2010). There remains a number of challenges when attempting to define religion, for example, Beyers (2010) notes that Western scholarship has dominated narratives of defining religion. As Christianity has been the predominant religion of the West, the Western understanding of religion has dominated the scholarly field and largely impacts perceptions of religion (Beyers 2010).

The domination of Western scholarship on definitions of religion as articulated by Beyers (2010) is exhibited by Dow's (2007) statement that:

Religion is a collection of behavior that is only unified in our Western conception of it. It need not have a natural unity. There is no reason to assume, and good reason not to assume, that all religious behavior evolved together at the same time in response to a single shift in the environment. (p. 1)

Dow (2007:1) makes the above-mentioned statement in calling for a scientific study of religion that examines observable behaviour. However, Dow's (2007) approach to religion is not applicable to a non-western society as the concept of religion is constructed to fit within the confines of Western conceptualisation. Without paying special attention to the problems with defining religion, this article requires a working definition of religion as its point of departure. In addition, within the multicultural and multifaith South Africa, a definition of religion that acknowledges the faith and belief of practitioners while providing a working definition for scholarship is then required to include non-Christian traditions (such as Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, the Bahai faith, etc.) and African traditional religious systems.

As such, this article offers a preliminary definition of religion that describes religion as the belief in a supernatural entity (a god, gods, or 'higher power'³) that exists outside of the confines of the material world. This definition is functional within the context of this article as it operates as an umbrella term to include the different religious and/or faith communities that exist within South Africa. It also enables this article to use the term 'religion' as a term that is inclusive of all faith systems and religious organisations that exist in South Africa.

Regarding the religious communities of South Africa, the US Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom published a 'Report on International Religious Freedom: South Africa'⁴ that quantifies the different religious communities in South Africa. According to this report, as of 2019, South Africa's total population is estimated at 55.9 million of which:

3. That is inclusive of a 'collective consciousness'.

4. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/south-africa/>

- 81% is Christian, of this 84% is Protestant, 11% is Roman Catholic, and 5% belong to other denominations.
- 15% adheres to no particular religion or declined affiliation.
- 1.7% is Muslim, of which the majority is Sunni.
- Hindus, Jews, Buddhists, and African traditional religions are collectively less than 4% of the population.

Although 15% of the South African population accounts for adherents to no religion (which may include atheism), the vast majority of the South African population is religious. Figure 1 offers insight into religious practices followed by South Africans, proving that South Africans are a religious people:

According to Figure 1, most Christians, Muslims, and followers of African traditional religions observe their religious practices at least once a week while most Hindus observe their religious festivals at least once or twice a month.

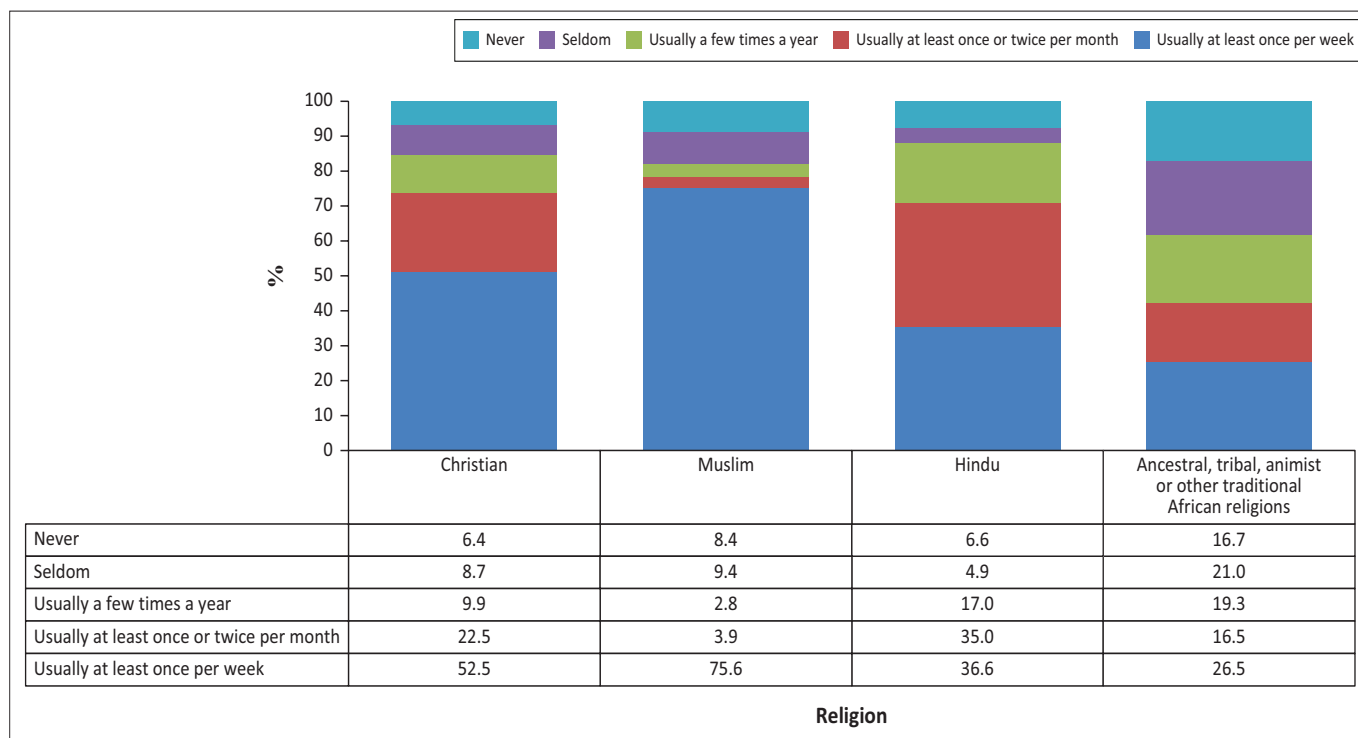
Considering that approximately 85% of the South African population adhere to a religion, this article uses the term religion as referring, namely to Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, and African traditional religions – as the major religions found in South Africa.

Religious perspectives on poverty

Religion and poverty share a bond with one another, in that every religious tradition offers teachings on the moral responsibility that individuals have towards the addressal of poverty. Prior to studying recent scholarly literature on the role of religion on poverty alleviation, this article offers an insight into the different religious views relating to poverty alleviation (Table 1).

Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, and Buddhism each have texts that are regarded as ancient and sacred. Considering that this article is set in context of South Africa, it is pertinent to look at an African traditional religious perspective. As African traditional religions do not have a textual history like Abrahamic or Eastern religions, the Malagasy proverb functioned as an African proverb that offers insight into the position of African traditional religions on poverty (Kagama 2015; Tasie 2013; Theanacho 2021).

Reflecting on Table 1, among the different religions found in South Africa, the religious stance on poverty is the same. It is a message, a call, that urges its followers to participate in efforts directed towards poverty alleviation. Religious communities then have an obligation towards addressing poverty in society. Considering the sacredness of the texts and traditions within religious communities (and their use as an authority on religious practice), the obligation towards poverty alleviation can be described as a divine order or mandate prescribed to all members of the community.



Source: <https://businesstech.co.za/news/lifestyle/126445/the-most-popular-religions-in-south-africa/>

FIGURE 1: Percentage distribution of religious observance by religious affiliation, 2015.

TABLE 1: Lessons on poverty alleviation from religious texts.

Religion	Scripture
Christianity	1 John 3:17 – ‘But if anyone has the world’s good and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him?’
Islam	Quran Surah 2:33 – ‘And be steadfast in prayer; practice regular charity, and bow down your heads with those who bow down [in worship]’
Hinduism	Tirukkural 225 – ‘Great is the power of enduring hunger, but greater is the power of removing the hunger of others’
Judaism	Deuteronomy 15:7-8 – ‘If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need’
Buddhism	The Brotherhood, chapter 1, segment 2, verse 7 ⁵ – ‘... Their minds [those who believe in Buddha] should be like the fruitful earth that nourishes everything without partiality, that serves without complaint, that endures patiently, that is always zealous, that finds its highest joy in serving all poor people ...’
African traditional religions	Malagasy Proverb ⁶ – ‘However little food we have, we will share it, even if it’s only one locust’.

If one were to assess the different religions on an individual basis (e.g., Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, etc.) regarding poverty alleviation efforts, it is clear that religious communities understand the relationship between faith and poverty alleviation.

With regard to the Christian tradition, Ayiamba et al. (2015:43) describe the participation in poverty alleviation efforts by the Christian church as a ‘mandate’ where the ‘fight against poverty’ is described as accomplishing ‘Jesus Christ’s mission to whole heartedly serve and minister to all; both rich and poor of the World’. Ayiamba et al. (2015:43)

5. Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai 2015:210.

6. CivSource Africa 2020:15.

affirm the importance of poverty alleviation efforts in the Christian faith by noting its centrality to faith expression and religious practice. As the largest religion in South Africa, Christian efforts for poverty alleviation are vital in contributing towards governmental policies and programmes. This is evident in evaluating the involvement of the church in poverty alleviation efforts in South Africa and Africa at large (Kakwata 2020; Yenga 2004). An example of the priority of poverty alleviation in the Christian faith is evident in the Paradigm Shift⁷ organisation, which is a partnership of different churches that support entrepreneurship among the poor as part of contributing to poverty eradication solutions.⁸

In Islam, the practice of Zakat is central to religious practice and acts as a strategic system dedicated toward helping the poor, needy, and impoverished (Damilola, Nassir & Baba 2015). Zakat is one of the five pillars of Islam and is a payment that is mandated by Islamic law on an annual basis that is used specifically for addressing poverty and other charitable activities (Dhaoui 2015; Dutsinma & Dansabo 2017; Rahman & Siradjuddin 2020). As one of the pillars of Islam, Zakat is considered as one of the essential practices that all Muslims must follow and has been a part of Islamic practice since its establishment (Damilola et al. 2015; Hitchcock 2015). The practice of Zakat is more than just a practice that affirms one’s faith as a Muslim, it contributes to society as a whole by supporting governmental initiatives of sustainable development through microfinancing and is

7. <https://www.shiftingparadigms.org/model/>

8. <https://tifwe.org/churches-help-the-poor-by-facilitating-entrepreneurship-in-south-africa/>

potentially able to eradicate poverty (Damilola et al. 2015; Dhaoui 2015; Dutsinma & Dansabo 2017). In recent years, South Africa has benefitted from the Islamic Relief South Africa Organization that used Zakat funds to empower impoverished South Africans with sustainable developmental opportunities (e.g., subsistence farming), while also providing emergency relief, educational initiatives, and seasonal projects – all aimed at social welfare and upliftment.⁹

In the Hindu tradition, the teaching of *nishkama karma* [selfless action] emanates from the 'Bhagavad Gita' as a call to perform actions that contribute to social upliftment, welfare, and poverty alleviation (Shunmugam 2022). Additionally, Kautilya's 'Arthashastra' is an economic treatise that urges Hindus to participate in welfare initiatives as part of a communal contribution to social and economic development within a community (Shunmugam & Sukdaven 2022). Considering *nishkama karma* and the 'Arthashastra', a Hindu model of social development begins with the 'eradication of poverty' by 'relying on the strength' of the community and promoting 'harmony with the environment' (Kumar 2016:26). A Hindu approach to religious practice is one that contributes to social welfare initiatives that are inclusive of poverty alleviation efforts (Shunmugam 2022; Shunmugam & Sukdaven 2022; Tiwari et al. 2022). An example of this is the Project 108 initiative of the South African Hindu Maha Sabha that applies a grass roots approach to community engagement in addressing the economic issues that South Africans face (South African Hindu Maha Sabha 2023).¹⁰

In addition to Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, the Jewish, Buddhist, African traditional religions, and other religions found in South Africa, share a similar vision that is displayed by recent community upliftment programmes in South Africa. Despite this, poverty is estimated to have grown in South Africa by 9% in 2020. The challenge is then, how does religious activities that are community driven reconcile with the rise of poverty? This leads to the question of 'what can religious organisations do to address poverty in South Africa?' changing to 'what more can religious organisations do to address poverty in South Africa?'. As most religious organisations have a record of community-based initiatives that focus on addressing poverty, the question 'what can religious organisations do to address poverty in South Africa' is reduced to a mere review of current and historical activities without providing an explanation for the growth of the poverty rates in South Africa or a way forward in addressing poverty. Restructuring the question to ask 'what more can religious organisations do?' allows for the construction of theories and initiatives that enhance existing work further enabling poverty alleviation efforts.

9. <https://www.islamic-relief.org.za/about-us/where-we-work/south-africa/>

10. <https://sahms.org.za/project-108/>

In navigating such a discussion, it is important to re-evaluate the causes and contributing factors to poverty – as these seem to be immune to the poverty alleviation efforts of religious communities. Understanding the causes and contributing factors of poverty further enables the discourse on how efforts made by religious communities can be enhanced to support poverty alleviation efforts.

Poverty: Causes and contributing factors

The subject of poverty is one that continues to baffle politicians, economists, social scientists, and religious practitioners. It dates back to well over 2000 years with references from the Bible and TaNaK contributing to understanding how ancient people navigated the discussion of poverty alleviation (Scheffler 2013).

Despite the long history of discussion on the root causes of poverty, a straightforward answer is not possible. As the geo-political landscape continuously shifts, the causes of poverty are either amplified or change resulting in a number of theories on the root causes of poverty. While the geo-political landscape is a major factor to consider when evaluating the contextual causes of poverty, some factors are applicable in any context.

According to Sambit (2016), the following factors can be understood as the root causes of poverty in the contemporary era:

1. Institutional development – the growth of economic institutions that form a neocolonisation of global south nations, making the rich (Europe), richer and the poor (the global south), poorer.
2. Colonial history of the global south – the history of European colonisation of the global south contributes to restrictions on socio-economic development, corruption, and other counter-productive ills as, economically, Europe maintains control over the global south.
3. Geography and development – the geographical placement of human settlements according to the link between the natural environment and food security.
4. Diseases and other ailments – the effect of diseases and other ailments on mortality and fertility rates, which further effects food production and security.
5. Technological advancements – the strong link between technological advancements and capitalism, which places technology as a tool for economic gain rather than as an innovative practice to transform and enhance the success of society.

Supporting this, Kirlioglu and Kirlioglu (2015) observe that while poverty is multidimensional and effects developing and developed nations, the above-mentioned factors serve as the basis for understanding poverty as a global phenomenon that is one of the 12 basic problems recognised by the United Nations.

While Kirlioglu and Kirlioglu (2015) and Sambit (2016) offer a general understanding of the root causes of poverty on a global scale, the phenomena of poverty in South Africa requires a deeper, contextual, investigation.

Poverty in South Africa can largely be attributed to its history of apartheid and colonisation. Racial segregation and oppression, as fundamental principles of apartheid and colonisation in South Africa, meant that non-whites were systematically denied opportunities that allowed for economic activity thrusting the indigenous people of South Africa into an endless cycle of poverty (Motloung & Mears 2002). The attainment of democracy in 1994 saw the start of poverty alleviation efforts in South Africa; however, as poverty eradication is a 'long-term project', South Africa began a little too late in tackling the plight of poverty (Aliber 2003:473).

As the South African government of 1994 embarked on undoing the deeply rooted injustices of apartheid, social and political issues were enhanced by corruption among governmental representatives (STATSSA 2016; Georgiva & Krsteski 2017). The challenges posed by corruption by state leaders impacted poverty alleviation efforts as South Africa's history of apartheid and colonisation was no longer the sole factor for poverty in South Africa.

As corruption spread through the different layers of South Africa's government, the increase of the unemployment rate was added to inequality as a major cause of poverty in South Africa (Aliber 2003; Motloung & Mears 2002; Van der Westhuizen & Swart 2015). In March 2018, Statistics South Africa published a report on overcoming poverty and inequality where South Africa's history of systematic inequality was argued as the main cause of poverty (STATSSA 2016). Inequality, as the main cause of poverty, is shown to have a direct link to economic and employment opportunities resulting in poverty affecting some race groups more than others (STATSSA 2016).

The report displays that African and/or black females with no education are most susceptible to poverty and that 'Black South Africans consistently exhibit the highest poverty rates... [as] in 2015, 47% of the households headed by black South Africans were poor'. (STATSSA 2016:13). Referring back to Sambit's (2016) root causes of poverty, it is clear that the conversation of poverty alleviation in the South African context requires a discussion on South Africa's racial inequality as a major contributor to poverty.

Despite apartheid ending nearly 30 years ago, inequality is recognised as one of South Africa's most severe socio-economic challenges, with South Africa being recognised as a nation with the highest amount of economic inequality (Francis & Webster 2019a). This inequality is made evident in the economic impacts of coronavirus disease 2019

(COVID-19) on South Africa where race, gender, and education are seen as dividing lines with regard to access to health systems (Nwosu & Oyenubi 2021). In addition, during the lockdown in South Africa, it was reported that 34% of adult South Africans went to bed hungry – a substantial increase from 11.3% in 2018 (Nwosu & Oyenubi 2021). Statistics examining the effects of COVID-19 on South Africa's economy display that black South Africans were most affected by changes in the economy, unemployment, and food security (Wegerif 2021).

While Sambit's (2016) root causes of poverty may be applicable, South Africa's history of apartheid adds inequality as one of the leading causes of poverty (Francis & Webster 2019b; Gadin 2012; Leibbrandt, Wegner & Finn 2011; STATSSA 2016). As inequality is recognised as one of the leading causes of poverty in South Africa, any poverty alleviation effort is required to address the plight of inequality; simply put, overcoming inequality in South Africa means overcoming poverty. Addressing inequality in South Africa includes the addressal of employment opportunities and access to education as unemployment and education are recognised as contributing factors to the high poverty rates in South Africa (STATSSA 2016).

Understanding inequality as a major factor that causes poverty in South Africa, and as one that is linked to unemployment and access to education, means that strategies designed to address poverty are multilateral as they do not simply end poverty but affect other socio-political and structural policies of South Africa. Considering this, poverty alleviation efforts require systematic changes to address inequality and skills development programmes that address the unemployment and access to education crisis in South Africa (Mbuli 2008; Motloung & Mears 2002).

Against this backdrop, evaluating the role of religion in addressing poverty requires an understanding of how religion can contribute to the addressal of inequality, unemployment, and access to education in South Africa. Considering the existing initiatives by religious organisations on poverty alleviation contrast with the growth of poverty in South Africa, an alternative approach is required in the fight against poverty.

A way forward for religion and poverty alleviation

Most religious texts emphasise the importance of addressing poverty. Table 1 illustrates that the central theme of religious belief systems and practice is directly linked to poverty alleviation efforts. Furthermore, religious communities boast a long history of community engagement initiatives where addressing poverty is considered a central theme. Regarding the role of religion on poverty alleviation, Beyers (2014) confirms that:

Religion can play a role in addressing poverty. Religion not only becomes the moral consciousness reminding society of being

generous to the poor but also seeing the poor as fellow human beings ... , ... [r]eligion not only functions in an ethical and ideological capacity when when responding to poverty. Religion can motivate people to engage actively in participating in activities alleviating poverty. (p. 7)

Despite this, the growth of poverty in South Africa remains an unavoidable fact that urges religious communities to re-evaluate their role in promoting a better society, with particular reference to poverty alleviation efforts. The general consensus is that religion has an important role in addressing poverty – a role where it teaches, motivates, and guides people towards participating in poverty alleviation activities (Beyers 2014; Damilola et al. 2015; Kakwata 2020; Kumar 2016:26; Yenga 2004).

This important role is not confined to or is the sole burden of one religion, it is instead a shared responsibility for all faiths. Yet, religion is losing the war on poverty. Why? The answer to this question is not a simple one as it is partnered with the repeated question 'How do we end poverty?'. Perhaps the reason why religion is losing the war on poverty is similar to why governments (secular and theocratic) around the world are struggling to end poverty. Corruption, poor infrastructure, limited access to natural resources, unemployment, inequality, among others all constitute the causes of poverty (and the challenges when addressing poverty) (Addae-Korankye 2019; Gadin 2012; Georgiva & Krsteski 2017; Lewis 1966; Sambit 2016).

While these factors are the major causes of poverty, they do not provide an answer to why religion in South Africa fails to curb the growing rates of poverty. Considering the six religions discussed in this article, a crucial factor that may inhibit their contribution to poverty alleviation is religious intolerance. Religious intolerance refers to the actions that deny the right of people (belonging to a different faith) to freely practice and express their beliefs.¹¹ The exact origins of religious intolerance are difficult to pin point; however, it is likely to have begun with an individual who influenced others – forming a group and influencing others (Van der Walt 2016). While religion is a source of tolerance and intolerance, the causes of conflict (politics, economics, poverty and/or class division) often develop along the lines of ethnic and/or religious lines (Abu-Nimer & Smith 2016; Carlile, Galbraith & White 2020). Religious intolerance, conflict, and other associated tensions fuel the apathy and disinterest between different religious groups to collaborate with one another. In turn, this fosters a sense of competition among the religions where the conversion of people is prioritised over a valued contribution to society. Religious intolerance serves as a foundation for social apathy where religious organisations are more concerned on increasing their following as part of establishing their superiority over other religious organisations – as opposed to engaging activities that contribute to social upliftment, such as poverty alleviation efforts.

11. <http://encyclopedia.uisia.org/en/problem/religious-intolerance>

While this function of religious intolerance can be easily observed as a global phenomenon, this article positions it within the context of South Africa because of South Africa's constitutional framework. According to the '2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: South Africa' by the U.S. Department of State,¹² South African constitution (which provides for the freedom of religious expression and belief) prevents violent interactions between different religious groups. Despite minimal to no violent exchanges between different religious groupings in South Africa, conflictious situations and tensions do arise along the lines of hate speech – where the report documents this as largely affecting the Jewish and Muslim communities of South Africa.

Although South Africa has not been victim to any major, grotesquely violent incident, religious intolerance can be observed in the cases of hate speech reported by different religious organisations. For example, the case of Pastor Simeon Bradley Chetty, a self-appointed evangelist who claims he was exercising his right to freedom of expression when the South African Hindu Dharma Sabha (among other Hindu organisations) reported him to the Equality Court for hate speech against Hinduism.¹³

Assessing all claims and reports made to the Equality Court and Human Rights Commission of South Africa that pertain to freedom of religious expression proves a daunting task. Resolving those matters is beyond the scope of this article and perhaps even that of the judicial system. However, the claims and reports do point to subtle, passive aggressive tensions and symptoms of religious intolerance among the different religious communities of South Africa – a phenomena that resurfaces in South African media frequently.

The points of tensions that point to religious intolerance in South Africa further exhibit the 'competition of religions' – where religious organisations in South Africa focus extensively on proselytisation rather than the addressal of societal issues. Observing this beckons the question of 'what next?' for the religious communities in South Africa regarding poverty alleviation.

Attempting to answer this question, South African politicians and governmental institutions have given attention to the need for and importance of interfaith dialogue. However, considering the efforts of the South African government on promoting interfaith dialogue, little has changed in terms of religious intolerance and the effect that the religious community has had in mitigating the growth of poverty in South Africa.

Is interfaith dialogue then the appropriate response to mobilising the religious community of South Africa towards addressing the growth of poverty?

12. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/south-africa/>

13. <https://www.iol.co.za/the-post/news/hindu-society-takes-pastors-to-court-ba379266-a972-4ccc-8c5d-736013d0e4de>

Interfaith dialogue is the process of 'getting to know' people and their traditions; it requires an acknowledgement of the differences in belief, faith, and truth as part of understanding different perspectives and 'points of views' (Ilhami 2019; Kefa & Moses 2012). Interfaith dialogue proves to be challenging as it requires the acknowledgement of a legitimate 'other' in religious belief – thus posing major theological implications for some religious traditions. For example, monotheistic religions that believe in the notion of a 'one true god' struggle with the acknowledgment of a religious tradition that believes in a multiplicity of different deities (Freeman 2017).

The notion then, of a dialogue between different religious traditions, is to foster cohesion, understanding, peace and harmony within the South African context (Atabongwoung, Lutz & Austin 2023). Despite the focus of interfaith dialogue in South Africa largely being on addressing religious tensions and promoting cohesion, historically, interfaith solidarity activities were formed where diverse religious leaders united against a common threat. For example, in 1984, the World Council of Religion and Peace-South Africa (WCRP-SA) was founded as a nonviolent interfaith movement against apartheid (Atabongwoung et al 2023). Interfaith dialogue is a powerful tool when coupled with collaborative initiatives. The simple act of engaging in dialogue between different religious leaders is reduced to an endless theological debate if there is no collaborative initiative that unites different religious communities. Furthermore, the World Council of Churches Central Committee (2002) claims:

There is greater awareness of the interdependence of human life, and of the need to collaborate across religious barriers in dealing with the pressing problems of the world. All religious traditions, therefore, are challenged to contribute to the emergence of a global community that would live in mutual respect and peace. At stake is the credibility of religious traditions as forces that can bring justice, peace and healing to a broken world. (p. 3)

Reflecting on this, the maintenance of the reputation of religious communities as a source of good is at stake when religious traditions do not engage the injustices that prevail. Within the context of South Africa, the alarming growth of poverty is one such injustice that challenges the 'good' reputation of all religious traditions. The process of answering the question of 'what next?' for religious communities in South Africa begins first with an acknowledgement of the potential of all religious communities to address the challenges faced by the South African community. Thereafter, it becomes important to reflect on interreligious dialogue over the past 10 years (its merits and failures) towards determining and planning for collaborative initiatives (such as skills development workshops and community upliftment and/or empowerment programmes) that address the growth of poverty in South Africa.

To do this, it is important that the religious community of South Africa accept and acknowledge the important role that it has in addressing societal ills – in this instance, mainly poverty – and look to interfaith dialogue as a platform for

interfaith collaborative initiatives that foster and promote development (Atabongwoung et al. 2023; Beyers 2014; Damilola et al. 2015; Kakwata 2020; Kumar 2016; Yenga 2004).

Conclusion

The religious community of South Africa undoubtedly has an important role to play in addressing societal ills. This role is not merely a religious imperative endorsed by sacred scriptures but also a matter of social responsibility that all people are subject too. Poverty, is not merely a social ill, it is a crime against humanity and a violation of human dignity and welfare. The addressal of poverty and its growth in South Africa is then an important subject that is of high priority for all sectors of the South African community – governmental, academic, social welfare, and religion. With the large following that religious communities in South Africa boast and their influence on social participation and activities, developing shared platforms for collaboration is one avenue that enables the participation of South Africa's religious community in addressing poverty. As the religious community in South Africa has proven to successfully engage on interfaith platforms towards achieving a common goal (i.e., the end of apartheid), enabling interfaith dialogue and collaboration allows for further development in South Africa.

While there is extensive literature on the role of religion in addressing poverty, much of these engage an individual religion and their task in addressing poverty or religious perspectives on poverty addressal with little attention given to an interfaith initiative – particularly within the context of South Africa (Damilola et al., 2015; Kakwata 2020; Kumar 2016; Yenga 2004). As such, this article establishes itself within the context of exploring how an interfaith collaborative initiative could contribute to existing poverty alleviation efforts. This article presents this by suggesting that the common religious views pertaining to poverty be utilised as the starting point for interfaith dialogue, which then follow through to collaborative initiatives.

Therefore, this article recommends that governmental and academic institutions that focus on poverty alleviation in South Africa should look to the religious community as an asset with the potential to exponentially develop poverty alleviation efforts. This can be achieved by encouraging interfaith dialogue with the objective of collaborative initiatives that supplement other poverty alleviation efforts. The role of religion, or rather South Africa's religious community, is then to participate in and contribute to existing poverty alleviation efforts.

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M.Y.S. is the sole author of this article.

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Disclaimer

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