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Considering the evangelism mandate in the face of interfaith dialogue in South Africa

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Evangelism is about forming Christian identity, but what is important is how to sustain Christian identity in a religiously pluralistic society. Can one cultivate dedication to a specific religious tradition without vilifying, assimilating, or relativising other religions? It is crucial to recognise that fostering healthy relationships with the religious 'other' is a critical element of ecclesial mission in the contemporary global context. As much as Christians need to be educated in intra-religious identity formation using evangelism training, they also need to be prepared for inter-religious dialogue. This article questions the role and purpose of evangelism in a post-colonial South Africa by firstly exploring the historical role of evangelism and thereafter uses current examples from interactions with the Hindu religion to reveal the way in which evangelism perpetuates outdated colonial values. It argues for the need for inter-faith dialogue as well as considers how Christian communities could engage interfaith dialogue.

Contribution: The article considers the interplay of the Christian mandate of evangelism with the need for Christians to live in plurality and religious diversity. It places at the forefront the neglected need of inter-faith dialogue essential for social cohesion in broader society.

Keywords: interfaith dialogue; pluralistic society; evangelism; social cohesion; South Africa; religions.

Introduction

The practice of evangelism inside the church has faced examination in recent years, and this scrutiny is justified. Religious traditions are by their nature dogmatic. They draw rigid boundaries between 'the truth', which is their faith, and 'other truths or falsehoods', faiths of others. Evangelism that is centred around Western values, male dominance, and lacks sensitivity towards different religions, races and cultures has frequently been presented as the standard. However, although there have been valid criticisms of evangelistic approaches, it is still seen as necessary to effectively convey the message of evangelism.

Evangelism, from the Greek 'εὐαγγέλιον', literally means 'good news'. The function of evangelism within the Christian faith serves mostly as a proclamation of faith – it is the bold and public statement that aims to share the 'good news of Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection' (Bowen 2011:3–4). Evangelism is about taking the message or 'good news of Jesus Christ' to the 'lost' to express gratitude for what was gained through Christ (Trumper 2015:1–2). Evangelism requires that preaching, teaching, counselling, and witness be oriented towards sin and grace. This makes evangelism a vital part of the Christian faith that contributes to the public confession of faith and 'the growth and expansion of the Church as an institution' (Ogunewu 2014:74). The practice of evangelism allowed for the Christian faith to grow from a small group of people to a major religion under the Roman Empire within 300 years (Balge 1978; Behr 2011). While the notion of proselytisation exists in other religions, the concept of evangelism is largely Christian (Abraham 1994).

In the South African context, the history of apartheid and its racial oppression has added to the complexity. More recently, the search for general truths and values that bring people together despite their religious and cultural differences has shaped modern education for the most part. Prior to this, people did not trust efforts to protect and define cultural and religious differences. The intolerance towards other religions is portrayed by the perceptions of the 'non-Christian' as satanic, demonic, and ultimately evil. Evangelism in pre-democratic South Africa was characterised by the perception that diversity was a catalyst for social unrest and a barrier to social cohesion and integration. The effects of this system still linger, and interfaith dialogue can be impacted by the deep-seated divisions and mistrust that were created. Interfaith dialogue is the process of getting

to know people and their traditions, forging a positive interfaith relationship, and developing an association that fosters harmony, peace, and constructive exchanges and cooperation (Ilhami 2019; Kefa & Moses 2012).

In the new democratic society of South Africa, plurality, religious freedom and diversity are now valued. South Africa is a country with a rich tapestry of religious diversity, including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and indigenous African religions. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa allows for freedom of religious expression, thought, and practice within the confines of the fundamental rights set out within the constitution. Religion, culture, and language are entrenched in sections: 9(3), 15(1) to (3), 30, 31, 185 and 234 (Coertzen 2014). Additionally in 2010, the South African Charter of Religious Rights and Freedoms was endorsed which brought together members of the Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Baha'I, African traditional religions, and the African Independent Church (AIC) communities (among others). The religious bodies that were signatories to the charter have a constituency of approximately 10.5 million people, less than half of South Africa's population of approximately 50m people (Coertzen 2014:129).

Since 1994, the South African government has made numerous efforts to foster interfaith dialogue as part of peace keeping, development, and social cohesion initiatives (Dolamo 2006; Freeman 2017; Idris 2003). This is because of the internationally recognised potential of interfaith dialogue as an important and necessary undertaking that has the potential to amplify development (Ibrahim et al. 2012). Interfaith dialogue becomes a challenging task as the implication of the term 'dialogue' requires the recognition of different faiths and identities, and the joining of 'hands in equality and respect' towards contributing to social upliftment (Siddiqui1997:57). Religious diversity can create challenges in finding common ground and understanding across different religious traditions. Promoting enhanced dialogue among individuals, who identify with various religious faiths, has frequently been regarded as a constructive approach to fostering community cohesion in the face of perceived threats and conflicts that may result from such divisions.

The challenge of interfaith co-existence is about working towards the common good which is necessary to stabilise the fragmented South African society. Evangelism, on the other hand, can be seen as a deterrent to interfaith collaboration. Christians often hold core beliefs and doctrinal disparities which can make it challenging to find common ground and engage in meaningful dialogue with other religions. Navigating these differences while maintaining one's own convictions requires careful thought and sensitivity. The function and intent of evangelism in a pluralistic society are questioned in this article. It explores the historical role of evangelism and uses a current day example from interactions with Hinduism to reveal the way in which evangelism perpetuates outdated colonial values. Arguing for the need for inter-faith dialogue, it considers how Christian communities could better engage interfaith dialogue.

Evangelism and religion in South Africa

In exploring the history of evangelism in pre-democratic South Africa, this article looks at two European settlers (the British and the Dutch) that occupied and colonised lands in Southern Africa that then led to the founding of the country 'South Africa'. While there is evidence of migratory groups settling in Southern Africa, the 'colonisation' of Southern Africa typically refers to European occupation. This is because of the little information on pre-European history of Southern Africa, that African migratory patterns and settlements were viewed more as African indigenous group movements rather than invaders or immigrants, and that European settlement and colonisation is distinguishable from other migratory patterns as it violently sought to reconstruct the world according to the European image (Oliver 2017; Piotrowski 2019). Furthermore, the appearance and establishment of Christianity (and evangelism) in Southern Africa is typically associated with the settlement of the Dutch (1652) and British (1795) (Landman1988; Masondo 2018; Resane 2020). Studying evangelism in the context of pre-democratic South Africa can be divided into two segments. Firstly, the pre-apartheid evangelism which includes: (1) evangelism according to the Dutch (1652–1835), (2) evangelism according to the Boers (Orange Free State and Transvaal) (1835–1948), and (3) evangelism according to the British (colonies of Natal and Cape) (1795–1934). Secondly, evangelism under the apartheid government (1948–1994).

Prior to the establishment of apartheid (1948), Christian colonial agents saw the Africans in Southern Africa as a 'blank slate, savages that needed to be civilized' (Masondo 2018:210). Supported by the expanding colonialism, missionaries at this time used evangelism towards the objectification of Africans to advance slavery and economic activity. This was achieved by the dehumanisation (considering Africans as 'sub-human' and 'under-developed') and deprivation of human dignity of the African people (Masondo 2018:211; Resane 2020:17). Here we see the notion of the civilised European Christian saving the pagan African (Masondo 2018:212; Resane 2020:19).

The function of evangelism under European missionaries in pre-apartheid times was, therefore, involved intimately in the colonial process of Southern Africa (Comaroff & Comaroff 1985). Where the primary objective was expanding European customs and religion under the guise of promoting civilisation (Resane 2020) and establishing the settlement of Europeans in the spiritually and morally deprived lands of Southern Africa (Prill 2019). This is a constant feature among the European settlers (Dutch, Boer, and British) that functioned within the parameters of the pre-apartheid era and portrayed Southern Africa as the 'dark' (Masondo 2018:210; Prill 2019:82) continent that required 'redemption' (Wariboko 2018:64). This further developed the 'white

superiority complex'. Amid this, Landman (1998:359) narrates the story of a Khoikhoi woman named Krotoa.[1] Krotoa is referred to as the 'Black Eve' of Southern Africa as she is identified as the first convert to Christianity orchestrated by the Dutch settlers of 1652. Landman (1998:359) notes that these Dutch settlers were followers of Calvinism and saw no need to convert the locals – it was Jan van Riebeeck's housewife, Maria Quevellerius, who converted Krotoa so that she could function as a translator. Krotoa's story displays the initial resistance of African people to Christianity as, shortly after Jan van Riebeeck departed, Krotoa was rejected by her community resulting in her abandoning her Christian lifestyle and resorting to alcohol and prostitution (Landman 1998). The story of Krotoa is one that portrays the destructive nature of evangelism in the lives of indigenous South Africans, where European settlers disregarded the lives and communities of Africans yet used the concept of 'sharing the gospel' for their own economic and political conquest (Prill 2019).

Other denominational traditions like the Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Baptists began establishing 'missional stations' from the mid-1800s that would aid in converting the indigenous people of Southern Africa (Erlank 2003; Lamola 1988; Resane 2020). As more Africans began to convert to Christianity, the emergence of AICs dawned on the South African soul, much to the dismay and disapproval of the European parent churches (Erlank 2003; Lamola 1988). The initial disapproval that was faced by AICs may be attributed to the notion that European missionaries were inviting Africans to participate in *their* understanding and interpretation of Christianity (Evans, Bekker & Cross 1992; Kealotswe 2014; Molobi 2011). However, as racist and discriminatory practices filtered into the church, the African people sought to create a church that was a home for themselves, a place of worship but also a place of emotional and mental security (Daneel 1987; Nmah 2010).

Irrespective of the growth of Christianity among African communities in the mid-1800s and early 1900s, European settlers and their descendants maintained the 'white superiority complex'. In 1934, the union of South African parliament saw South Africa being declared a sovereign independent state from British colonial rule. Fourteen years later, in 1948, the National Party become the ruling party of South Africa and implemented apartheid – a political policy that saw the subjugation of all non-white groups living in South Africa.

The National Party's contribution to understanding the evangelist rhetoric of the pre-1994 era is encapsulated by Masondo (2018:212) who states, 'in fact, the National Party stood for the "Christian guardianship" of the European race of the non-white races'. The dispensation of the National Party is one that allowed for religious justification of the inhumane apartheid system. By 1948, Christianity was well established in African, Coloured, and Indian communities in

1.Renamed Eva by the Dutch following her baptism in 1652 (Landman 1998).

South Africa; however, this did not deter notions of white supremacy. In the 1960 religious census, 94% of the white South African population was Christian (Hurley 1964), with the majority being members of the Afrikaans speaking Dutch Reformed Church (Kumar 2012).

The position of the Church from 1948 to 1994 is similar to what it was from 1652 to 1948 in terms of religious freedom, plurality, and dialogue (Coertzen 2008). It was that, Christianity was the 'true' religion and that all non-Christian members of society required deliverance. This ideology continued to develop as the Christian community began to grow among non-white South Africa. However, it should be noted that the high conversion rates during the apartheid era were not an indication of non-white communities supporting the white supremacist agenda. Instead, Gopalan (2010) and Evans (2015) suggest that social and economic aspects functioned as major contributing factors for Christian conversions among non-white communities.

The position of Christianity under apartheid on other faiths is neatly phrased by Wright (1984:6) who states, '… it is equally unbiblical to overlook the realm of the satanic and the demonic in human religions …' Wright (1984) exhibits the common Christian understanding of religions in that, if it is not Christian, it is wicked. Forced baptisms and conversions, racism, slavery, the rejection of African customs, traditions, and religion were rejected as evangelists sought to establish a western ethnic superiority complex (Marmursztejn 2020; Prill 2019; Wariboko 2018). Wariboko (2020:60–62, 64, 74) provides historical recounts of the pressure used in forcing African people to forsake their identity, culture, and religiosity, and accept the Christian faith.

In challenging Christian theological approaches to engaging with 'other' religions, Kritzinger (1991:217) notes that some of the perceptions that Christians have towards other religions are: (1) 'pagan', (2) 'heathen', (3) 'uncivilised', and (4) 'backward'. Additionally, Krtizinger (1991:217) quotes Koyama (1979:124) who states:

> [*W*]hen we label a person as a non-Christian, we are looking at him as an object, negatively and arrogantly. No one can appreciate being viewed in this way.

Kritzinger (1991:217–218) quotes Koyama (1979:124) as part of a broader argument that is set on a contextual, pluralistic approach to religion by addressing the perceptions that Christians have towards other religions.

In 1994, with the attainment of democracy came a number of promises – free quality education, non-racialism, nondiscrimination, economic empowerment, decolonisation, and with relevance to the multi-faith community, equality, freedom of religion, and the promotion of a religiously plural society. More importantly, the post-1994 government produced a non-racial constitution which deemed South Africa a religiously plural society. Freedom of religion became one of the important aspects of the constitution.

It must be noted that the changes made in South Africa's political landscape brought changes in how the religious 'other' was viewed. This was observable during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 1995 (Meiring 2005). The TRC was established to investigate gross human rights violations during a certain period in South Africa. All religious traditions, and not just the Christian tradition, were part of deliberations and played a key role in facilitating the process of national reconciliation (Lubbe 2015; Meiring 2005). This was significant as it was one of the initial recognitions towards other religions made at a governmental level.

Coming to the present time, despite South Africa having attained democracy nearly 30 years ago, poverty, inequality, unemployment, injustice, racial and ethnic conflict, and violence still remain a massive societal challenge (Fourie 2017; Mtshiselwa 2014; Van der Westhuizen 2015). In the face of these challenges, the religious sector value has been diminished. This is possibly because of changes in the religious landscape despite South Africa's constitution accommodating the practice of religious freedom (Evans 2015; Henrico 2019). These changes speak to the diminished role of religion largely because of changes in religious education policies at primary and secondary level (allowing for the use of religious education to reaffirm constitutional values such as diversity, justice, tolerance, and respect). These changes were necessary because the rights of non-Christians were violated by national Christian education model that was introduced by the National Party. Also, the change in the establishment of interfaith bodies to facilitate interfaith dialogue (such as the National Religious Leaders Forum [NRLF], National Interfaith Leadership Council [NILC], the later merger of the NRLF and NILC – the National Interfaith Council of South Africa [NICSA], and the Cape Town Interfaith Initiative, among others). Finally, the inclusion and development of non-Christian traditions (such as African Traditional Religions) as a discipline under Religion Studies at public universities (Naidoo 2013, Ntho-Ntho & Nieuwenhuis 2016). This positive development is seen as more balanced towards multi-faith offering, moving away from the expansive Christian faculties of theology (Naidoo 2023).

These changes allowed for equal treatment and recognition of all religions in South Africa – while these changes are major and positive, navigating the diversity of religions (and ensuring that there is religious tolerance and inclusivity) often dominates conversations pertaining to the contribution that religions make to the social and political spheres of South African society (Van der Walt 2011). As a result, great strides have been made in terms of South African policy pertaining to promoting positive interfaith relations. These contributions being that of: (1) supporting governmental initiatives that are for the promotion of a cohesive society that enables sustainable social development, (2) contributing to poverty alleviation efforts, (3) promoting peaceful relations among all of South African citizens, and (4) addressing societal ills such as inequality, racial prejudice, and

unemployment (Benson 2013; Freeman 2017; Shunmugam 2024). However, the potential of the actual contribution of interfaith platforms and activities to addressing societal challenges in South Africa has been limited in our divided society.

The evangelist rhetoric and the South African Hindu community

Despite these governmental efforts to foster interfaith collaboration, the evangelism rhetoric of the apartheid era remains intact with colonial Christian perspectives on other religions, point in case being interactions and perceptions with the South African Hindu community.

The roots of the Hindu community in South Africa are intertwined with the arrival of the 1860 Indian indentured labourers. The majority of these Indian workers settled in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, bringing with them the richness of Indian culture and religion (Desai & Vahed 2010). Hinduism is often referred to as the oldest religion, and, with no sole author that can be accredited as the founder of the religion, the term Hinduism can be understood as the different religious beliefs followed by the native people of Hindustan or India (Shunmugam 2022). These different religious beliefs are established on the religious teachings and rituals of the Vedas – primarily because of the Hindu acknowledgement of the Vedas as the oldest and most authoritative texts of Hinduism. As of 2014, it is estimated that there are roughly 500 000 Hindus in South Africa – that is half of the entire Indian population of South Africa (Gopal, Khan & Singh 2014:28–29). Since the arrival of the 1860 indentured labourers, the Hindu community assimilated into South African society, producing crucial role players that championed the anti-apartheid cause (Gopal et al. 2014; Marais & Olalere 2022).

Since the 1860s, interactions between the Hindu and Christian community are marked by intolerance and violence (Hofmeyr & Oosthuizen 1981; Marais & Olalere 2022). The evangelical approach to Hindus remains one that portrays the Hindu as primitive, blind, idol worshiper, satanic and demonic (ultimately evil), condemned to eternal damnation, and ultimately an individual that follows a corrupted and ineffective religion that offers no salvation (Benson 1998; De Beer 2010; Hein 1956; Hivner 2011; Knitter 2004; Sichone 2022; Von Stietencron 1997). In 2007, the Hindu American Foundation stated that, with the expansion of the Internet and technology, hate speech and intolerance towards Hinduism have increased (Hindu American Foundation 2007). Some of the bigotry comments that pertain to Christian perceptions of Hinduism that are found globally and in South Africa include (Hindu American Foundation 2007:15–50):

> Satan created all the gods of India. They are demons who will rob your soul and take you into hell. Satan controls all false gods by telling the great lie … that after death, the soul is reincarnated. (p. 15)

> [E]nslaved … spiritual filth … lost … immorality … (p. 17)

With reference to a Southern Baptist Convention on Diwali:

> Mumbai is a city of spiritual darkness. Eight out of every 10 people are Hindu, slaves bound by fear and tradition to false gods and goddesses … (p. 18)

> Thus we see that the Hare Krishna cult, along with all of the other forms of Hinduism, is in reality the worship of Satan. It is estimated by authorities in India that even today there are approximately 100 reported human sacrifices to Kali every year, as one might expect from Satan-worship. Shiva: The Destroyer, a god of the Hindu triad. Because of his designation as 'the Destroyer,' he is possibly Satan. (p. 20)

Despite countless other references to hate speech, extremism, and bigotry, the comments listed above encompass the general remarks made about Hinduism and Hindus. Another example from South Africa is a pastor (and a self-proclaimed evangelist) Simeon Bradley Chetty that has made use of malicious terminologies when referring to the Hindu faith. Chetty was taken to Equality Court in September 2020 after a video surfaced showing Chetty hurl insults at the Hindu faith. Chetty's comments were (Somduth 2022):

> My father was a Telugu, my mother was a Tamil and while they were growing up they said, you know what? They have no meaning. They worship idols. They worship other gods, but I am here to tell you that the name of Jesus is above every other name. (p. 1)

> Let me ask you this question: Why would a Telugu man worship Jesus? Why would a Muslim man worship Jesus? Why would every religion give their life to Jesus? (p. 1)

With the matter being handed to the Equality Court, Chetty offered his apologies (Somduth 2022); this, however, was short-lived as Chetty uses 'freedom of speech' and 'freedom of religion' as justification for his degrading comments on the Hindu faith (Somduth 2022; Swain 2022). Like Chetty, Pastor Pukreesamy (also known as Pastor Bob Perumal) made similar remarks in a sermon at the Congregational Church of Queensburgh (KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa) that was recorded and shared onto social media in December 2023. In his sermon, Pukreesamy is seen calling the Shiva Lingum a demon that is invading Europe through yoga (Singh 2023; Somduth 2023a, 2023b). Pukreesamy and Chetty are two examples of pastors that were taken to South Africa's Equality Court highlighting the discriminatory and degrading terminologies that Hindus in South Africa are subjected to.

Evangelical statements towards the Hindu faith are not limited to preachers on a pulpit but extend to academic discourse and research in South Africa. De Beer (2010) completed a study on 'Church planting in the South African Indian community, with reference to the Reformed Church in Africa' with the University where the following is listed as the recommendations of the research. With reference to Hindus, Muslims, ancestral believers, secularists, and the Reformed Church in Africa (RCA):

> Radical conversion to Christ and his Word should continue to take centre stage in the life of the RCA. (p. 224)

> With regard to theological education 'Demonology' is recommended as a subject of 'pastoral concern'. (p. 225)

The position adopted by De Beer (2010) is one that extends beyond Hindus to portray all non-Christians as people that are in need of salvation and deliverance, which is part of the Christian need to proselytise. In support of De Beer (2010), Denysschen (2014) outlines a 'step-by-step' manual on how to convert Hindus with special references to Hindu literature, customs, and belief. Adding to this are sources such as Benson (1998), Dangal and Lozano (2018), and Sichone (2022) that support the notion of the 'backward' Hindu in dire need of salvation and deliverance. The case of disregard for the dignity of Hindus as autonomous individuals free to believe in their religion is not only limited to Hindus in South Africa but extends to followers of Islam, the Baha'I Faith, African Traditional Religions, and other minority religions in South Africa (Isilow 2017; Deokiram 2017; Masondo 2017). The challenge here is how does a Christian share the story of Christ in a way that does not strip the non-Christian of their dignity as a human and is it possible for non-Christians to have their religious beliefs acknowledged and deemed valid?

The implications of evangelism on interfaith dialogue

Authentic and sincere interfaith dialogue can only be embraced through the lens of pluralism, which regards all religions as equal in value. This may explain why, notwithstanding the enduring opposition from fundamentalists, religious pluralism is presently advancing gradually but consistently. The typology of religious pluralism, which is widely acknowledged, comprises exclusivism and inclusivism (Netland 2001). Exclusivists maintain that there exists a singular, genuine religion, deeming all others to be false. Inclusivists argue that the absolute truth is only represented by one religion, and that all others possess only partial measures of it. Christianity is an exclusive religion, in that there is only faith through Christ and South African Christians appear to be having difficulty settling on a stance regarding religious pluralism and how to interact with adherents of other faiths (Freeman 2017). If we perceive our own tradition as the exclusive purveyor of truth and hold all others to be in error, dialogue serves little purpose beyond persuading the other to adopt our perspective.

Considering the definition of interfaith dialogue (Ilhami 2019; Kefa & Moses 2012) and the notions of equality and respect attached to it (Siddiqui 1997), the disposition of evangelism acts as a restriction to interfaith dialogue. Henderson states 'if we know the truth, why should we sully it or allow ourselves to be tempted away from it by the untruths of those who claim truth in falsehood?' (1998:34). This viewpoint eliminates the potential for acquiring knowledge regarding the religious beliefs and practices of others, since assertions regarding an alternative truth are inherently false.

The challenge for Christians is acknowledging the 'other' religion as there is an apparent conflict between being a

Christian and acknowledging a person of another faith as valid and legitimate within their own right (Freeman 2017; Kritzinger, Meiring & Saayman 1994). Christianity, like many other religions, holds the belief that it possesses exclusive truth or salvation. This can make Christians hesitant to fully engage in interfaith dialogue, as they may worry about compromising their faith or diluting their beliefs in the process. There is also the fear that participating in interfaith dialogue could lead to syncretism, where their own faith is compromised or weakened. Striking a balance between understanding other beliefs and maintaining the integrity of one's own faith can be a challenge. Engaging in interfaith dialogue may be met with scepticism or resistance from fellow Christians or church communities who view it as unnecessary or compromising. Social and cultural pressures can hinder Christians from actively participating in interfaith dialogue, as they may fear judgement or ostracism (Freeman 2017). Misunderstandings and stereotypes can arise when discussing religious beliefs and practices. Christians may encounter biases or preconceived notions about their faith, and they may also hold their own biases towards other religions. Overcoming these misunderstandings and stereotypes requires open-mindedness, empathy, and a willingness to listen and learn.

A fundamental struggle for Christians and evangelists as 'messengers' of the gospel, is acknowledging the validity of other religions while maintaining faith in Christ (Beyers 2017:11). How then do evangelists go about their work? Schrimpf (2017) offers a solution to this problem by qualifying the difference between 'evangelism' and 'proselytisation'. Evangelism is bearing witness; it is ecstatically sharing the good news to everyone and not just non-Christians (Schrimpf 2017). Proselytisation, on the other hand, carries with it the notion of 'you must believe in what I believe in' and imposes one's belief on another in a self-validating manner (Schrimpf 2017). This imposition can be dehumanising.

The evangelist rhetoric, as exhibited in the above historical description, is one that carries with it the notion of proselytisation. Stemming from the colonial era, it only acknowledges another person if they believe in the same thing. During colonialism, non-Europeans were only acknowledged as 'human' if they adopted the norms, culture, and values of European civilisation (Nkomozana & Setume 2016). Simply, if you believe in what we believe in, practise what we practise, speak as we speak, then you are human (not equal to the European but human nonetheless). Considering this, the element of proselytisation in evangelism functions as a colonial tool that dehumanises and demonises the non-Christian, implicating any interfaith exchange. Any factor that restricts interfaith dialogue can then be seen as a factor that is opposed to development, equality, and ultimately, the Constitution of South Africa. This is established on the grounds of the potential of interfaith dialogue in contributing to sustainable social development and cohesion (Freeman 2017; Ibrahim et al. 2012; Kefa & Moses 2012; Shunmugam 2022).

If evangelism shifts from its disposition of 'proselytising' to 'sharing the gospel', it may still have a place in democratic South Africa. Closing in on nearly 30 years of democracy, the now multicultural, multifaith, and multiethnic accepting South Africa no longer has space for an outdated dehumanising practice that aims to paint all people with the same colour of religion. Inscribed on its coat of arms, the rainbow nation screams: 'Unity in Diversity!' – this applies not only to race, but to all factors that form a diverse community. Thus, it is imperative that a pluralistic approach to understanding religions and their interaction with one another is inevitable, resulting in approaches to religion containing a universal outlook as opposed to a uni-dimensional view (Beyers 2017; Rose 2013). This further establishes the need for Christianity to interact with other religions in South Africa in a mutualistically beneficial manner as opposed to a 'us' and 'them' approach.

An appropriate response

Expressing concern for religious individuals as 'targets of evangelism' can be perceived as condescending. As much as Christians need to be educated in intra-religious identity formation using evangelism training, they also need to be prepared for inter-religious dialogue, and churches and universities need to do more in nurturing this exchange. For example, Christian education in congregational settings should prepare its members to live in deep Christian discipleship with interreligious solidarity, bridge-building potential about life and faith in a religiously plural world. Mary Boys (1997:62) terms this as an 'education for paradox', a distinctive approach to faith formation: one that seeks to foster 'religious commitments that are both clear and ambiguous, rooted and adaptive'. In order for this education to be highly efficient, it must extend beyond the confines of the academic classroom to encompass the individuals occupying the pews. This inclusivity not only prevents the division between the church and the academic community, but it also actively enlists and educates members of the congregation in profound Christian discipleship, preparing them for a life of faith in a religiously diverse society.

Freeman states (2017) that it is critical to differentiate between mere awareness of other religious communities and actual exposure to them. This requires Christians to confront deeply held beliefs and engage in discussions that may challenge their worldview. It may also involve addressing sensitive topics such as religious violence, human suffering, or social injustices related to religion. Restructuring Christian mission to incorporate dialogue into evangelism is necessary, with the emphasis on 'testimony as dialogue' (Richie 2013:55). There should be sensitive sharing of the gospel message as 'giftive' mission, as the gift of Christ based on the metaphor of free gift. More than the conquerors of other faiths or the harvesters of souls that count success in the number of converts, the testimony of Christ should function as understanding how God engages with the world (Richie, 2013).

Within the theological education curriculum, there should be a theology for interreligious dialogue (interreligious studies) undergirded by a theology of religions to understanding the history of religions. According to Kim and Kim (2016), Christianity should be studied as a world religion, and scholars in the Global South should give more significant consideration focussing on non-Western Christianity. As a Christian theology of religions, all facets of Christian studies – including church history, theology, interreligious and societal relations – must be reformed and revised in light of the global nature of Christianity. An examination of Christianity within the framework of other faiths would elucidate its unique characteristics as well as its parallels with others, providing Christians with an unbiased perspective of their faith and reversing the regrettable and widespread historical inclination to disregard or stifle interreligious studies (Kim & Kim 2016:280).

In studying Christianity in relation to other religions, Amos Yong's 'foundational pneumatology' considers the influence and presence of the Holy Spirit in the world and in the religions of the world. Yong describes the Holy Spirit as 'both universal and particular, both the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Jesus the Christ' (2000:62). He continues 'whatever truth or grace is present in the religions, can be attributed to the Spirit of Christ, even apart from any explicit epistemological awareness' (2000:65) This approach fosters a balanced and empathetic interaction with other faiths while emphasising the importance of exercising discernment in a world inhabited by various spiritualities. Claremont School of Theology in the United States of America is a good example of interreligious education where theology is studied from both a Christian and Islamic perspective. The vision of this institution is stated as:

> [A]n ecumenical and inter-religious institution, Claremont School of Theology seeks to instil students with the ethical integrity, religious intelligence, and intercultural understanding necessary to become effective in thought and action as leaders in the increasingly diverse, multireligious world of the 21st century. (https://cst.edu/)

We need to look for area of commonalities in theological understandings and practices. This has the potential to foster greater self-awareness, encourage more profound devotion to Christian service, promote mutual understanding, and facilitate the construction of bridges, all of which contribute to the possibility of peaceful coexistence among diverse neighbouring communities. When we consider the legitimate ecumenical relations and public and/or political theology that is necessary for societal engagement, we need to develop an interfaith appreciation and respect for the civil realm and authentic multifaith involvement. This is because ecumenical-interfaith collaborative partnerships on issues of social ethics are essential for contemporary theological education and ministry practice.

Conclusion

This article advocates for the necessity of interfaith interaction in a society characterised by religious pluralism, and it raises concerns about the mandate of evangelism. Devotion to one's own religious beliefs does not automatically prevent one from engaging in interfaith relationship-building, as long as there is a genuine appreciation for the same level of dedication in others. Appreciating one's own religious identity but also respecting the identities of others encourages the development of genuine, open, and trustworthy connections between different faiths. Regardless of the intensity of our personal convictions, we are aware, to some extent, that we have the capacity to choose alternative choices. Furthermore, engaging with a religious 'other' is more than listening to someone's narrative. It involves contemplating a different proposition on the underlying essence of the world, which challenges and confronts our own beliefs. By actively immersing ourselves in the beliefs and practices of a different religious group, we can get a profound understanding of and actively incorporate the teachings of our own religious heritage with greater depth and analytical scrutiny.

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