



Interreligious Dialogue: Revisiting Comparative Theology for Social Harmony in Pluralistic South Africa

Dr. Kelebogile Thomas Resane
Research Fellow
Department of Historical & Constructive Theology
Faculty of Theology & Religion
University of the Free State, Bloemfontein
South Africa

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Abstract

This article examines and explores the importance of interreligious dialogue within the multireligious and multicultural communities. The dialogical tool to be used in this endeavor is Comparative Theology. Through the literature review, the scenario of religiously diverse communities, especially in South Africa, is painted both historically and sociologically. Comparative Theology is defined and historically identified. Theology of dialogue is brought forth as a method that Comparative Theology can use towards social harmony in pluralistic South Africa. Social harmony as a sociological anticipation is defined and related to theology. Social harmony is presented as the form of collective philosophy, which means working together for the greater good, and putting the societal or organisational needs above and ahead of the needs of an individual. The intention is not to convert but to understand and see how harmonious coexistence can be initiated and achieved. Interreligious dialogue is not an initiative of weighing error from truth. It is an engagement with the other, and as dialogical partners coming from different traditions, Comparative Theologians provide guidelines towards this dialogue. Reflective suggestions are highlighted, and these are networking and partnership development for human survival. Christ's example of crossing the cultural and religious barriers is elaborated as a model to follow. Contact without contamination is the driving force. Disengagement and personal insulation are not an ideal option. Christian theologians are encouraged to engage dialogically with people of different religions, as dialogue is the better option towards understanding of the other.

Keywords: interreligious, Comparative Theology, dialogue, diversities, pluralities, harmony

Introduction

This paper aims to conscientise the reader that diverse religious communities create a platform for Comparative Theology to initiate and engage in interreligious dialogue in order to understand neighborhood and appreciate cordial humanity drawn from each other as it is God's will that *t we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good and pleases God our Savior (1 Timothy 2:2-4)*. The fundamentalists and some conservatives will shoot down any idea of dialoguing with people of different faiths as they interpret this as compromise (Kreeft, 2017). The text to Timothy here is quoted within the context of prayers and intercession for government authorities, but it is easy to ignore that these intercessions should *be made for all people (2:1)*; and that it is not only prayers and intercessions called for, but thanksgiving too. The government authorities that should be prayed for, and thanked for, are all multi-religious and to a certain extent, multicultural. This text and others remind us that 'It is in the multi-faith context that the early church



grew and flourished. This can happen today too' (Fernando, 2001:50). It is a clear picture that Christians and theologians should give thanks for the realities of faith diversities as much as for cultural diversities both in civic and community compositions. Engaging Comparative Theology should remind us of Jesus himself. He was 'criticized by both Pharisees and Sadducees in theology, and by both Herodian collaborationists and revolutionary zealots in politics' (Kreeft, 2017:7).

One of the inevitabilities of life in the postmodern era is religious diversities and pluralities. The communities of the world are in majority the diversities of religions. Indeed, 'No religious community is exempt from the pressures of diversity, or incapable of profiting from drawing on this new religious template' (Clooney, 2010:3). Despite this admixture of religions in communities, each religious community is not prepared to abandon its religion but prefers to coexist peacefully with others as much as possible. 'The fact that we all have to acknowledge that we live in a world of many religions is one of the major challenges of our time' (Krüger, Lubbe & Steyn, 2009:3). This notion is extended by Crafford (in Meiring, 1996:220) that 'All over the world people are becoming increasingly aware of the multireligious context in which they live.' South Africa is not an exception to this human dynamism. It is indisputable that 'South Africa is a diverse and complex society. In this society, many new challenges are arising although more long-lasting challenges continue to impact contemporary society' (Womack, Duncan & Pillay, 2020:1). After all, this coexistence is inevitable.

The notable contemporary Comparative Theologians include scholars such as Francis X Clooney, who is making marks in this field by a few books, articles, and chapters in the books, and editing some in contributions by some scholars (*Comparative Theology 2010; How to do Comparative Theology 2018*). Other scholars include the likes of David Tracy, known for his 1986 essay on the subject in *Encyclopedia of Religion*; Keith Ward (*Religion and Revelation 1994; Religion and Creation 1996; Religion and Human Nature 1998; Religion and Community 2000*); Robert C Neville (*Behind the Masks of God: An Essay Toward a Comparative Theology 1991; On the Scope and Truth of Theology 2006; Ritual and Defence: Extending Chinese Philosophy in a Comparative Context 2008*); Raimon Panikkar (*Interreligious Dialogue 1999*); James Fredericks (*Buddhists and Christians: Through Comparative Theology to Solidarity 2004*); John Thatamanil (*The Immanent Divine: God, Creation and the Human Predicament 2006*). This list is not exhaustive, there are still many out there and new ones cropping up all the time.

Defining comparative theology

It is with sadness that Comparative Theology is a missing subject in many faculties and departments of theology and religion's curriculum of many learning institutions. Maybe this is one of the theology's parochial attitude or self-imprisonment in silos of insular or sectarian attitude. I know that for many theological field studies, Comparative Theology is hidden under the study of religions, and in some cases under ecumenical studies and historical theology. The observable distinction is that Comparative Theology pays an attention on how theology is practiced in multiple religious traditions. It does so by exploring theological themes through the practice of comparison. Putting that sectarian attitude aside, Comparative Theology is thinking of both reflection and method of theological themes exemplified in various religious traditions. It is a constructive practice with the aim of fulfilling the theology's definition as 'faith seeking understanding.' As *faith seeking understanding*, Comparative Theology eventually involves the theologian in questions of *faith*, particularly in finding a response to the other tradition's *faith experiences* and its 'articulation' of the world in *scripture*. It is 'an intellectual discipline which enquires into ideas of the ultimate value and goal of human life, as they have been perceived and expressed in a variety of religious traditions' (Ward, 1994:40). Something that annoys the conservative Christian theologians is the missing of a very important ingredient that comparative theology exerts itself



towards the goal of knowing God. This goal is unachievable without understanding, 'not only to understand better these traditions but also to determine the truth of theological matters through conversation and collaboration' (Thatamanil, 2006:3). In consonant with the aim of this paper, Cornille (in Clooney & Von Stosch, 2018:21) points out that the aim of Comparative Theology is 'not only to shed new light on the truth of a particular religion, but to actually discover or decide the truth through dialogue.' Comparative Theology remains and continues to be 'a manner of learning that takes seriously diversity and tradition, openness and truth' (Clooney, 2010:8). Humanity with its religious diversities, remains a community. Humanity created in the image of a trinitarian communal God cannot escape its essence of communality. Peoples in their religious convictions and affiliations remain the community that bears the image of God.

South African picture

According to Statistics South Africa, there are four major religions in South Africa. These are Christianity (86%), African Traditional Religions (5.4%), Islam (1.9%), Hinduism (1.1%) and Judaism (0.9%). The statistics further inform us that 84.2% South Africans subscribe to Christianity divided in the following Christian traditions: African Independent Churches (25.4%), Pentecostalism (15.2%), Catholicism (6.8%), Methodism (5.0%), Calvinism (4.2%), Anglicanism (3.2%), other formations (13.7%).¹ This shows that South Africa is basically a Protestant country. Prior to democratic era, due to apartheid that was always associated with Calvinism, this country was regarded as a Calvinistic country. Non-Christian religions were on the margins, and basically not even included in Religious Education school curriculum. The school curriculum was dictated and established on Reformed or Calvinistic ideals. This suppression of other religions (Christian and non-Christian) blinded the eyes of many that Christianity is 'the only' genuine religion. All the religious views were centered around and judged through Reformed Christianity. Now global plurality has become a reality and the current situation is that of increasing plurality and complexity (De Gruchy, 2011).

South Africa is a multi-religious country, though Christianity is a major religion for the higher percentage of the populace. The minority religions such as Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and African Traditional religions make themselves audible in a public space. They share certain percentage in many of radio stations, television channels and are always engaged with government to discuss civil matters. This should be celebrated rather than regarded as a threat by Christian-orientated people, although for some of them, this may also be 'an unsettling phenomenon for people who are religious' (Clooney, 2010:3). Disagreements and contentions are inevitable regarding the comparative processes within communities. In the past, cultural divisions were intertwined with religious divisions. The apartheid's ideology with its separate development policy necessitated separate geographical population settlements. The white population in the cities and suburbs were religiously Christians, and within the fold the Jews in their conglomerates were practicing their Judaism. When I grew up in Johannesburg, this was very clear. The Jews were mostly in the immediate northern suburbs of the city, especially Yeoville, Orange Groves, Norwood, Highlands North, Sandringham etc. This settlement pattern is still noticed by the presence of the synagogues. The eastern suburbs of Bertrams, Bezvalley and Troyville were mostly occupied by the Portuguese speaking people, hence several Catholic Churches in the area. Immediately on the west of the city, especially Fordsburg, settlers there were of Indian origin, therefore noticeable of mosques. The black population forcefully uprooted from Fitas (today's Pageview) and Sophiatown (Melville and Newlands) and resettled in Soweto was the only group that was religiously mixed and dwelt together in their different religious traditions. The black population throughout South Africa dwells together in their different faith expressions (denominationally and traditionally). Devotees practice their *meetlo* or *amasiko* (cultural or religious practices or rituals)

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_South_Africa (Viewed 16 May 2022).



side by side with each other without any neighbor's feeling of encroachment or resentment. The same applies to the Coloured people who are mainly Christians with some minority Muslims. When the 'black' church buys the property in the previously white suburb, the black neighbors don't have a problem. In fact, they welcome it and feel honored to have a place of worship in their neighborhood. On the other hand, the white neighbours who claim longevity of residence are the ones who always refuse the petition or proposal as the new church will disturb their comfort and threaten their security. Many black church properties that were previously owned by whites are always dragged by their white neighbors to the ward councilors, police, municipality, or sometimes to court for making noise either through music or outdoor activities. This shows how apartheid denied people understanding each other when coming to issues of worship and doing church generally. For South African whites, especially of the Afrikaner stock, the church is a holy space, a place of worship to be revered in silence and serenity, while for blacks the church is a place of connection, a place of fun and enjoying freedom from the wares of the world.

Many black Christians' lives revolve around the church. It is not a place for Sunday but a daily encounter point of *koinonia*. Like the New Testament synagogue, the church from blacks' perspective, is a center of learning. It plays a crucial role for social formation and *diaconal* opportunities. These South African historical demographics realities show how 'the apartheid government enforced separation, prevented inclusion, and suppressed necessary inter-religious, inter-faith pluralism in the society' (Paul, 2009:141). However, the multireligious and multicultural metamorphosis of South African demographics created and continue to create 'a foundation for dialogue whereby people of different faiths can come to know each other better' (Crafford in Meiring, 2009:242). Multicultural communities in their varying locales 'have the same hopes and aspirations. They want to have their basic human needs fulfilled, for example food and water, shelter, health, community and happiness' (Steyn, 2000:64).

The irreversible truth is that all religions had metamorphosed and evolved through dialogue and interaction with others. It is a fact that 'our society is diversified into people with many castes, colors, races and genders etc.' (Sharma, 2015:5). To some extent, these diversities had to interface, talk in order to formulate a dogma, liturgy, or confession. In all of them, there are convergences, as Steyn (2000:65) highlights that "All religions urge humans to take care of the environment and the other life forms that share the planet with them.' All communities are now embarking on sharing the same spaces, though they all – individually or corporately possess ideas of deity and divine revelation of some sort in some various manners.' Some South African scholars warn sternly that "Sooner or later – at home, at school, in neighbourhood, on the sports field or in the workplace – we will encounter people who belong to other religions, or who do not belong to any organized form of religion at all" (Krüger, Lubbe & Steyn, 2009:3-4).

Since South Africa is a multireligious nation where religious inclusivity is an inevitability, interreligious dialogue should strive 'to foster understanding, tolerance, and social cohesion in order to actively shape the relationships between individuals of other religions and worldviews (Mokotso, 2021:10). This South African proliferating religious diversities is taking a new shape. It is, therefore, comprehensibly factual that Christians are encouraged to 'seek not only to coexist with, but to understand those of other faiths' (Lamb in Pfitzner & Regan, 1999:164) in their communities. The once colour-bar is now invaded by polycentric realities as neighbours are of different race groups and of different religions. During apartheid era: "These religions lived apart from each other, they are now to an increasing degree to be found together in the same neighbourhood, requiring that Christians have to take up some or other position in respect of practitioners of other religions who have now become their neighbours" (Crafford in Meiring, 2009:220)



God's people (*ecclesia*) is in and is the part of this multireligious environment, which is described by Küng (1968:484) as 'the present world is after all the place, and the present hour the time, in which it has to carry out its mission.' It is the place where the community must initiate and engage in some interreligious dialogue. South African multireligious communities are a valid rationale 'worthy of consideration by people living in societies with other religious orientations' (Thorpe, 1991:1). The Comparative Theologian who is a church member, is to take a lead by giving some guidelines of how to engage this kind of dialogue. This is the ministry to the world. Once the tracks are laid by Comparative Theology, the interreligious dialogue kicks in. According to King (2010) in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Diversity*, interreligious dialogue is an 'intentional encounter and interaction among members of different religions as members of different religions.' It is when people of different religions as individuals or institutions positively interact in cooperative and constructive understanding of each other's set of beliefs. Interreligious dialogue is distinguished from syncretism as it is a dialogue that intends to promote mutual understanding between different religions or belief systems in order to enhance acceptance of others who are religiously different from us. It is an opportunity to discover each other as neighbours, 'for in discovering others, we discover ourselves' (Krüger, Lubbe & Steyn, 2009:3).

The democratic South Africa should not be deceived by the majority Christian confessions. The 15% of other religions is a huge number to reckon with. Historically, 'Christianity has always existed in the context of conversation with other traditions' (Veeneman, 2018:169). To engender understanding, mutual or peaceful coexistence, cooperation, tolerance, teamwork, we should acknowledge the wisdom of Leonard Swidler, Khalid Duran, and Reuven Firestone (2007:2):

1. "In the dialogue of the head, we mentally reach out to the other to learn from those who think differently from us."
2. "In the dialogue of the hands, we all work together to make the world a better place in which we must all live together."
3. "In the dialogue of the heart, we share the experience of the emotions of those different from us."

The citation above shows that interreligious dialogue is a mental, practical, and emotional engagement without getting 'stuck into some sort of self-serving colonizing of the other... seeking somehow to make sense of what is found in this particular moment and place' (Barnes in Clooney & Von Stosch, 2018:301). It is not just a matter of what is heard, seen, or tasted but an application of mind and heart to make sense of the religious diversities and pluralities a theologian finds herself in. This inevitability needs caution and sensibility with open mind that carries no bigotry or prejudices of any kind. Multireligious space is a platform of ideological wars, but Hans Küng (1988:205) provides wisdom here that: "Ideological opponents are neither to be ignored nor labeled as heretics nor ideologically co-opted, but to be interpreted with the greatest possible breadth and tolerance, *in optimam pattern*, and at the same time exposed to fair, objective discussion."

Interreligious dialogue is not an initiative of weighing error from truth. It is an engagement with the other, and as dialogical partners coming from different traditions, the caution of Ford (2013:174) is important that 'each theological tradition needs to develop its own rationale and ethic for such engagement.' Comparative Theology is a guideline towards interreligious dialogue. Dialogue is one of the recommended approaches for the church to play its role in the present time. According to Küng (1968:484), the church is important to offer sociological, psychological and historical



analyses, and equally to examine and apply pastoral and moral theology.’ This is an appeal to the church as the community of the Spirit to initiate through Comparative Theology, the critically needed interreligious dialogue in the religious diversities as a way of building human sanity and sensibility. This must be done in genuine Christian love that is forbearing and kind toward those with whom there is disagreement (Strauch, 2006:161).

Comparative Theology Through Dialogue

Dialogue (*dialeptomai*) regards the viewpoints of the listeners some weight. In Greek philosophical analysis of the New Testament, it speaks of the meeting of minds, with no attempt to cause another to change religions, but for each to seek to enrich the other without conversion in view (Ariarajah, 1985:61-71). For the twenty-first century Christians, there is undoubtedly the importance of dialogue with people of other religions, as this leads to encounter with them (Stott, 1975:69). The world is a platform on which the Christian missional expression should be exercised. This is the fulfilment of our Lord’s priestly prayer: *They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world (John 17:16-18)*. ‘Though we are not of this world, we go into the world and participate in its activities’ (Fernando, 2001:36). It is very clear then that there is no way of understanding or discovering the truth without learning to dialogue.

Dialogue is a tool towards mutuality and communality. Absence of dialogue drives people into some parochial mode, leaving us shallow and lean about the meaning of life. Lack of interreligious dialogue leads to dysfunctional communities. ‘Dysfunctional relationship results in an encapsulated mind-set that allows a religious group to comfortably live in the world of “we/us” and “them/they” (Augsburger, 1986:22, Tuduks, 2020:392). There is no Comparative Theology without dialogue, since all theology is a form of social engagement, a form of political theology (Katangole in Wabanhu & Moerschbacher, 2017:202). It is through dialogue that interreligious coexistence comes into being. The goal of this dialogue is that through understanding each other, there will certainly be peace, because ‘there will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. There will be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions’ (Musser & Sunderland, 2005:1). The same notion is echoed by Küng (1988:209) that ‘Peace among the religions is the prerequisite for peace among the nations.’

The goal is social harmony

From the top of the head, social harmony is thought of in terms of peace, amity, unity, concord, consonance, harmony, stability, and even consistency. It can be defined as “...a procedure of assessment, articulate, and encourage trust, admiration, peace, harmony, respect, generosity and equity upon other people in any society regardless of their religion, caste, gender, race, age and occupation etc. among other aspects.”²

Social harmony is a sociological anticipation. In philosophical conceptualization and within cultural epistemologies, social harmony speaks of well-being in social settings. It indicates a good quality of life for people individually and socially. Its sociality invites communality. We all agree with Sharma (2015:5) that ‘Social harmony is quite essential for truly being social as being social also means living harmoniously with each other.’ It is a phenomenon experienced in community that lives together in unity. Clapp (1996:194) captures it well that ‘Beginning where we already are,

² https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309978658_Promoting_People's_Well-being_and_Social_harmony_through_Social_work_Education/link/5827231508ae5c0137edcab0/download



we can first recognise that we are inseparably communal creatures.’ It is an ecstatic experience of Psalm 133 (New Living Translation)

*How wonderful and pleasant it is
when brothers live together in harmony!
² For harmony is as precious as the anointing oil
that was poured over Aaron’s head,
that ran down his beard
and onto the border of his robe.
³ Harmony is as refreshing as the dew from Mount Hermon
that falls on the mountains of Zion.
And there the Lord has pronounced his blessing,
even life everlasting.*

Comparative Theology aims to reach that state where experiencing peaceful coexistence becomes a norm for communities. Peace is the goal of social harmony, for ‘if the people will live with peace in mind, it will lead to peace in society which ultimately paves way for peace at world level’ (Sharma, 2014:152). This is the apex of social harmony. It is our common value and our common human heritage. This harmony is defined by Malik (2016:26) that:

Etymologically, harmony means ‘joint’. It is understood as ‘binding together and being in concord with one another and the cosmos and in the context of communities of different thoughts and belief – be it social, economic, political and ecological’. It simply means living with unity and mutual reciprocity, beyond class, caste, creed, religion and gender barriers.

Looking at this citation, it may sound an impossible notion and or an impassible possibility. The bottom line is that when Christians come into dialogue with different religions, an unimaginable possibility emerges. Sharma (2015:5) continues to enlighten us that:

The term ‘social harmony’ refers to the construction of a harmonious society within the aspects of a federal or communist republic. Social Harmony is defined as a process of valuing, expressing, and promoting love, trust, admiration, peace, harmony, respect, generosity and equity upon other people in any particular society regardless of their national origin, weight, marital status, ethnicity, colour, gender, race, age and occupation etc. among other aspects.

This demonstrates that social harmony is the context in which the community members do not experience any form of discrimination, prejudice or bigotry due to their ethnic, sexual, social or economic background or orientation. Social harmony is the realisation of human freedom with no qualms regarding identity of members of the community. Indeed, as Sharma (2014:152) highlights: “Harmony helps in generating collective consciousness among individuals, groups and organizations to provide unique and valuable services for the whole. Harmony will create the spirit of unity in diversity and the collective consensus to solve”.

Social harmony is the form of collective philosophy, which means working together for the greater good, and putting the societal or organisational needs above and ahead of the needs of an individual. This philosophy of “collective” should be returned as a way of creating harmony in societies of diversities. There is no doubt that ‘Social harmony creates a harmonious and sustainable peace, beyond wars, terror and poverty’ (Sharma, 2014:153). The notion can further be defined as social cohesion and extended that it ‘is a necessary condition for the sustainability of peace and societal stability’ (Cox et al., 2014:2). This leads to conclusion that religious



institutions that engage dialogue possess some potency to create bonding and bridging of social capital both internally and relationally within a given society. This harmony is not an automatic mechanization that will emerge within the proliferated societies. Resane (2021:4) points out that 'dialogue should be a means towards societal harmony, peace and stability.' Justifiably so, religion is an important partner in social issues and public life and therefore also in the formation of social capital and social cohesion (Cloete, 2014:4). This means that confessionalism should be open to dialogical possibilities emanating and emerging from pluralistic contexts. After all, 'No one loses his or her authentic identity in dialogue with other people. But in dialogue with other people everyone acquires a new profile' (Moltmann, 1994:108).

Situation calls for new reflections

Our twenty-first century is the era of the generation that strives for the preservation and propagation of a cultural human sensibilities based on truth reflected or expressed in and by anthropocentric realities. One of these realities is multicultural and multireligious demographics. One African philosopher, Matolino (2014:53) emphasises that the individual needs other people for both physical and biological survival. One needs community in order to exploit capacities and functions divinely endowed with. Palmer (2015:121) confirms this from African theology perspective that 'Christians should not exist in isolation; rather, they should live in community.' Resorting to isolation and withdrawal is self-defeating, self-destructive, nonsensical, and counterproductive. Humans were created to go forward, not backward. It is a situation described by Parsley (2007:187) that: "It is not a conflict of guns, but of ideas; one in which the fight is for institutions, not territory; hearts, not hills. It is a clash of paradigms, value systems, and visions of the future - a war for the soul of our nation."

If there is a time for valuing the importance of Comparative Theology in life, it is this century of multireligious communities living gregariously in one location. Multireligious and multicultural communities as a phenomenon is irreversible. Sociality is inevitable. Nkadimeng (2020:109) captures this well that 'All people are by nature social and tend to live in communities.' And these communities exist in diversities. It is a demographic reality that calls for sensible networkings and partnerships developments interreligiously for social harmony. Veeneman (2018:169) is correct that: "Like much of its history, Christianity's contemporary context makes it impossible to think about doing the work of theology without considering what intersecting points there may be with other faiths."

Monocultural ideals are stale and irrelevant for this century. Traversing religious landscape monoethnically is an almost impossible adventure to experience life. Monoethnicity is replaced by polyethnicity when coming to religious composition of communities. Coming closer to the neighbours and striking religious dialogue is not a compromise, but a desire to achieve peaceful cohabitation. It is a human essence to know one's neighbour. The Setswana expression: *o sekhurumelo sa pitsana efe?* (to which pot are you a lid of?) is a diplomatic inquest in your neighbour's deep identity. Networking and partnership formations do not express similarity, agreement, or consonance, but acknowledging that one by himself or herself alone cannot tackle life trivialities. Humans were never created to be lonely rangers lost in the forest or sea of life. Humanity is the highest symbiosis in this world.

We all know the essence of *botho/ubuntu* as *I am because of others* or *a person is a person by others*. This philosophy is not dictated upon by any religious blinkers or stereotypes. It overarches religious differences since its essence and objectives encapsulates 'peace, harmony, development and sharing our common humanness' (Mbillah in Agang, Forster & Hendriks, 2020:260). It is a glue that binds humans into a symphony where self-dependency is an abnormality, but symbiosis and synergy is a culture. 'We depend on others to be born, to survive,



to be buried and remembered. We live and have our being in community, however attenuated it may become' (Clapp, 1996:196). This can never be experienced fully when one's life is entangled with pious counterintuitive outlook of life. Humanity is comradeship for stewardship with and for others. Connection with those of different religious views opens the channel to serve and to reflect the character of Christ. The bottom line remains that humanity is placed here on earth 'not to be comfortable, but to comfort; not to be served, but to serve; to bring glory to God, not ourselves' (Parsley, 2007:211). Those of Christian persuasion should drop the veils of being overly concerned about being correct that they fail to connect (Parsley, 2007:175). Partnership and networking with others pave the way for connecting in order to serve. It creates a platform for compassion, because 'Biblical orthodoxy without compassion is surely the ugliest thing in the world' (Schaeffer in Sweeting, 1985: 79). There is a need for what Mosley (1989:155) calls 'open allegiance' which remains pliant before objective facts and propositions, leaving us kept relative to the authority of the canon. In the multireligious context in the globalised world, as per Moltmann (2000:82), we find some common ground to present our differences, with no intention to criticize or to justify, but to embrace.

In deliberations of interreligious dialogues towards understanding and aiming for peaceful coexistence, Christians should hold on to the principle of contact without contamination. Our positionality remains with the metanarrative that echoes apostolic text that the earth is populated with many visible and invisible gods: "... yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live" (1 Corinthians 8:5-6).

From the Middle Ages, when monasteries were created, Christianity promoted strict separation of the monks from the worldly influences, as association with the world or non-believers was considered unakin to holiness. Environment (considered to be Christian) was regarded as a cushion for life of piety. Efforts were made to create Christian environment, forgetting that although a Christian environment is capable of encouraging godliness, it cannot guarantee it (Lutzer, 1980:31). Disengagement and personal insulation are not an ideal option. As Parsley (2007:201) implores: 'we must advance, not retreat. We must engage, not withdraw.' We are advanced in our faith by engaging other religions for human good, without changing our allegiance to the uniqueness of the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the biblical revelation in its entirety. Comparative studies are not intended to assess the truth or authenticity of different faiths, but to foster and forge understanding of my neighbour as a way of displaying Christ to them without attempting to convert them. Christ's ministry was not discriminatory. Humanity with its concerns was his concerns.

Christ lived in an ancient world filled with racial tensions leading to bigotries, religious diversities dominated by prejudices, anti-colonial bitterness instigating civil rebellions, yet went out to display love by healing numerous people of different races and religions. The Gospel of Matthew records that when Christ was a toddler, was visited by the Magi – the pagan Gentiles who travelled hundreds of kilometers to pay homage to the "King of the Jews"- the embodiment of religion of a race. He disregarded social barriers by giving an object lesson through the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10). He intentionally broke the socio-religious barriers by taking the route through Samaria to encounter a Samaritan woman. 'He clearly did not accept her sinful lifestyle. But he treated her with respect' (Fernando, 2001:34). It was not just an encounter, but an interreligious dialogue that finally revolutionized the city. Fernando continues to point out that 'this approach could be a model to us of how we deal with people whose lifestyle and ideologies are different from ours' (2001:35).

The golden rule of loving your neighbour as yourself remains supreme. Christian love is prompted by the fact that all humans are the careers of *imago Dei*. Humanity is the reflection of God's image,



for 'all humans still have some of the God-implanted characteristics and abilities that were originally created in us' (Fernando, 2001:73). Jesus loved people without any discrimination. Our neighbours may be deemed as perverts, idolaters, moral failures etc. Still, the command remains: *Love your neighbour as yourself* which appears nine times in Scripture (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31,33; Luke 10:27; Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8), 'indicating how important deeply committed love is' (Fernando, 2001:34). Jesus is the embodiment and epitome of love. One recalls Jesus' ministry to a Roman Centurion (Matthew 8:8; Luke 7:2). This was a Roman military chief or general who could be a stench in the Jewish nostrils, but Jesus reached out to him. This encounter demonstrates that Jesus did not respect social status. Furthermore, the synoptics (Matthew 8:26-34; Luke 8:26-39; Mark 5:1-20) record Jesus' encounter with the demoniacs in the town of Gadara, a predominantly Gentile district of Decapolis. Jesus broke all the religious barriers by travelling through pig farms near the tombs, which was something the Jews would consider an unclean undertaking or contact.

The Jewish sensibilities did not prevent Jesus from helping people of different religions or races as he crossed the well-known Jewish boundary markers to heal the demoniac. He intentionally went out to associate with people directly, for he knew and wanted to demonstrate that 'Love is the most attractive quality in the world. And it lies at the heart of Christianity' (Green, 1992:97). As Philip Yancey (2002:101) says, 'Jesus love cuts across lines, transcends distinctions, and dispenses grace.' The people of other religions or traditions in our societies are our neighbours, and we are here to dialogue with them in order to open ourselves up for them to incarnate God's vision and love for them. Only theologians who love God will expose themselves to that extent. Willard (1998:329) cautions us: "The theologian who does not love God is in great danger, and in danger of doing great harm, for he or she needs to know him and believe with assurance concerning him".

The other reflection is to engage comparatively where we should not lose our identity. Jesus' interreligious encounters mentioned here are explicit that Comparative Theology drives dialogists to be 'biblical without being fundamentalist, spiritual without being withdrawn from the world, and actively engaged with the world but not conformed to it' (Yancey, 2002:166). Jesus abandoned his Jewish comfort zones by travelling through the Gentile territory on some occasions. This is a lesson for the twenty-first Christians residing in a multireligious and multicultural communities to cross the barriers by initiating dialogue to restore broken relationships. Jesus' encounters were not in silence, but conversations accompanied by acts of mercy or compassion. This was the display of contact without contamination. He never lost his race or religion by contacting these people. His approach is a lesson for those residents in the multireligious contexts to understand what one of the comparative theologians, James L. Fredericks (1999) taught that interreligious dialogue is a way for Christians to develop creative and practical skills for living responsibly with non-Christians. It is also a way for Christians to explore and deepen their faith in dialogue with non-Christians. This is also expressed by Lamb (in Pfitzner & Regan, 1999:181) that 'I need the other in order to understand my own position and to better understand myself.' This calls for Christianity to break out of its narrow origins in order to be relevant to the people and cultures in its new context.

God's purpose as revealed in Jesus Christ is 'to bring together in a unified community the many rival groups of human beings' (Macquarrie, 1990:140). Conversations with other religions should be a cultural praxis so that communities become spaces where people of differing and conflicting world views engage in critical dialogues with one another. These communities should develop into the intellectual atmosphere where there is an open and candid exchange of ideas (Thiemann, 1991:169).



Conclusion

Multireligious and pluralistic communities are the realities of this century. Democratic South Africa should catch this reality and learn to live with it as an irreversible reality to reckon with. There is no human existence divorced from this demographic reality. Ideologies that push for monocultural ideals are on the losing side of life realities. The fact remains that communities will continue to compose into diversities of religio-cultural outcomes. Like any community in the cosmos, they 'may be jostled, deprived, squeezed, but is as persistent and hard to kill as a rattlesnake' (Clapp, 1996:194-5). Networking, partnership development, and dialogue are crucial for social harmony. Comparative Theology is invited to take some leading roles through some dialogical initiatives in order to foster peaceful human coexistence. My conviction that I endeavored to express in this article is aligned with Moltmann's conviction (1994:108): "I believe that for us men and women truth is to be found in dialogue. It is only in dialogue with one another that we can discover truth, because it is only in relationship to other people that we form our own identity. We always need the eyes of others if we are to understand ourselves and if we are to overcome our narcissism".

Compassion and solidarity do not develop out of a vacuum. Human proximity creates a platform for social self-understanding. This truth is expressed by Chung (2016:177) that 'Christian self is shaped in the social, narrative character of selfhood, emerging out of dialogue with others.' Comparative Theology teaches us that theology cannot be privatized or just personalized to such an extent that its role becomes dormant in the public spaces occupied by multireligious communities. Truly, 'there is no such thing as private theology' (Singh in Jacob, 2020:143). Theologians are to break out of the parochial silos and engage with communities for the sake of harmony and peace. The argument here is that Christians and non-Christians existing in their diversities can live harmoniously under the common global roof. Communities should relate interreligiously for social cohesion.

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