

Volume 1, Issue 1 (April 2024)  
ISSN 3049-9704

# Journal of Religion

# and Public Life





RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Mission and Interfaith Dialogue: Finding a Neutral Domain for Mission

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**Abstract:** Interfaith dialogue works well in promoting peaceful coexistence among different religious groups. However, there is tension between successful missions and harmonious relationships; for example, when religious groups focus on interreligious relationships, they weaken evangelism. Once they focus on successful evangelism, they must pay more attention to interfaith relationships. This tension seems less within one religion. Christians who dialogue among themselves unite under one faith in Christ the Saviour. Muslims unite under the doctrine of *tawhid*, or oneness of Allah. However, what unites different religious groups is still being determined. It could be the neutral domain of a secular state. This article will, therefore, explore how interfaith dialogue and religious mission fit into the neutral domain.

**KEY WORDS:** Interfaith dialogues, Mission, Evangelism, Gospel witness, Neutral space

## Introduction

Successful mission and successful interfaith dialogue seem incompatible. This is likely because different principles guide each of the two. Principles on which a successful mission operates define religion in a black and white manner (Balagangadhara 2014). There seems to be no middle ground in the truth of faith. The middle ground in religious beliefs would be seen as indifference if not unfaithfulness. The middle ground is a compromise or agreement between two extreme positions or viewpoints. It considers a common area or interest that opposing groups share. The middle ground is essential because it brings people closer to any dialogue. It is often a way of weighing two points open-mindedly to find common interests or beliefs in each side of an argument.

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However, religious commitment is only sometimes friendly to a middle-ground way of seeing things (Lewis 1952). Probably, the main reason people commit themselves to a particular religion is that they believe such a religion describes the will of God in ways that other religions cannot describe. In other words, adherents of any religion would think that anything contrary to descriptions they read in holy books associated with their religion goes against God's will. Sometimes, religious people are seen as ignorant when they stick to what they believe is the will of God (Eller 2020). They are seen as people who effortlessly become vulnerable to the sly teachings of clerics who use religion as a rallying tool for dominance over others in ways motivated by unenlightened self-interest. Religious people, in turn, may regard people who quickly change their religious views and beliefs to fit new values and schools of thought as believers lacking principles that develop a deeper understanding of faith (Carvajal 2005). In all these differences, engaging in interfaith dialogue may help promote peaceful coexistence among religious groups. However, it would hardly change dogmatic views of religion. Dogmatic views come from one's belief systems.

Belief systems generally influence how people approach interfaith dialogue. People who believe in the rights of individuals above that of a community, approach interfaith dialogue from the viewpoint of individual autonomy. They think individuals are autonomous and, therefore, are entitled to determine how to relate to others even if such a relationship is opposed by groups to which they belong. In individualist communities, people can express their views freely during interfaith dialogue. They do this without the fear of spoiling the reputations of their groups. In individualist societies, a group may not get punished because of an individual's views.

In the same way, an individual cannot get any punishment because of belonging to a particular group. Individualists argue that it is always wrong to generalise individuals as good or bad because of what their religions do. This argument is plausible because people view things differently, regardless of whether they are collectivists or individualists. For example, radical Muslims have their views of Islam, and moderate Muslims have opinions that differ from the ones of radicals. These different groups often exist in one community.

Yet, ignoring collective identities in the name of individualism may not always work. Some people would treat individuals as members of any group they disagree with. This is one of the reasons why one group smaller than the other in some communities would sometimes suffer because of their religious views. This is true in countries or communities where citizens of other religions or even moderate Muslims suffer attacks by radical Muslims like Al-Qaida. The same is true of radical Christians who hardly tolerate diverse views. It would, therefore, not be unrealistic for anyone to argue that there will always be diversity within a particular religion. This diversity comes from different understandings of the nature and the will of God.

It would be unrealistic to argue in the African context that the values of religion do not necessarily translate to the values of individuals. Individuals often relate to communities in Africa and Asia. In Africa and Asia, religions that collectively value and tolerate violence as one means of spreading a religion, even on a smaller scale, would

produce individuals who engage in violence in the name of religion. Nonetheless, if such religions change and develop collective teachings against violence in spreading such religion, then individuals who value and engage in violence in the name of such faiths would change. It is along this line that moderates develop. It would be true, for instance, that one would be violent within the overall understanding of radical Islamic values which they believe transcend individual values. Nevertheless, moderate Muslims influence their members to think and behave differently. The same holds for most religions, such as Christianity and other ideologies.

Those who believe in communal duty rather than individual rights would argue that religion defines what individuals do. To them, religious values are collective values that the holy books define. For the reasons mentioned above, religions that change their older ways of doing things to fit into emerging values differ from religions that maintain the original values of their founders. Consequently, some religious groups can approach interfaith dialogue from the angle of universal human rights (Orton 2016), while others approach the same from the viewpoint of duty (Francis 2013b). This means that principles exist on which people approach interfaith dialogue.

From the above discussion, this article seeks to explore ways in which interfaith dialogue is carried out. It explores how interfaith dialogue, aiming at peaceful coexistence among different religious groups and fruitful religious missions, is successfully carried out. It assumes that religious mission rarely focuses on the promotion of peaceful coexistence among religions in the sense that it targets people from another religion for conversion. The article will first discuss principles of belief and interfaith dialogue to understand how they may facilitate effective religious missions. It will then examine the rules of interfaith dialogue and mission to see how they enable the success of both interfaith dialogue and religious missions involving intentional conversion of nonbelievers and adherents of other religions to that of those involved in a particular religious mission. After this, the neutral domain and mission will be explored to understand how interfaith dialogue could fit into the mission without affecting it.

### **Principles of Beliefs and Interfaith Dialogue**

Since interfaith dialogue and religious missions seem incompatible, it is crucial to analyse principles that guide interfaith dialogue about religious beliefs. The probable irreconcilability of interfaith dialogue and religious missions relates to the proposition that interfaith dialogue aims to promote peaceful coexistence among religious groups. In contrast, religious missions aim to convert people whom the missionaries carrying out evangelism consider spiritually lost. However, the conversion of adherents from one religion to another often angers leaders of the former religion, leading to a need for more peaceful coexistence between religious groups. Therefore, this section explores how principles guiding beliefs and dialogues might lead to the compatibility of interfaith dialogue and religious missions.

Interfaith dialogue and beliefs are two different things. Nevertheless, they share some principles. Different scholars and practitioners have mentioned these principles.

This section mainly draws from Leonard Swidler's ideas. Swidler (2014) shows that beliefs and interfaith dialogue require learning from the other's point of view to change one's attitudes. Change in one's attitudes leads to maturity in one's faith despite constant interactions with people of different religions. Potentially, learning that leads to maturity in faith needs efforts from anybody engaging in interfaith dialogue. It is possible that learning to change one's attitudes may not happen if one comes to interfaith dialogue with aims other than understanding the position underlying the other's beliefs. The understanding of what lies behind a person's beliefs leads to genuine learning in interfaith dialogue.

Learning in interfaith dialogue comes from sympathetic listening. Sympathetic listening never aims to outwit an opponent but to understand opposite positions as clearly as possible. One of the main reasons for sympathetic listening is to find how an opponent's position is persuasive to them. A biased listener would often want to hear the other validate the listener's own view of the other's position rather than hear the other person justifying the position they are taking. Sympathetic listening differs from biased listening because it values understanding what the other truly believes in. Knowing that one's belief is different reduces stereotypes and attitudes that aim to force different believers to be like us in their beliefs and practices. Crucially, the reduction of stereotypes enhances friendship among people of different religions.

Friendship among people of different religions would increase if such people engaged in interfaith dialogue in a sincere and trustworthy manner. Such dialogues would only succeed with trust among people who engage in interfaith dialogue. Covert intentions of winning the other as a convert to one's religion would fall under factors that would reduce trust among groups or individuals engaging in interfaith dialogue. Partly because of these covert intentions to win converts, interfaith dialogue and mission would hardly succeed when combined. They seem to undermine trust among people.

Trust often increases among people of different religious beliefs when they are honest with one another. Honesty is one of the principles of interfaith dialogue. Honesty in interfaith dialogue enhances its success. Dishonesty could lead to failure. Through honesty, one would compare the ideals of their beliefs to an opponent's ideals. Honest interfaith dialogue assumes equality of opposite sides. These equal sides should be willing to learn something from each other.

A failure to recognise other people's ideals often leads to stereotypes. That is, people who go into interfaith dialogue with biases would easily assume that they know what the opponents and their ideals are, instead of concentrating on themselves and their own beliefs. In other words, it would be a stereotype for a Christian to claim to know what Muslims and their ideal beliefs consist of during interfaith dialogue, rather than listening to Muslims themselves explaining them. The same is true the other way around. In the same way, dialogues would likely fail when people come into discussions assuming that they know where they disagree with their opponents. Such an attitude assumes the superiority of one particular side over the other.

There are times when one religious group would think that the only way to get engaged in interfaith dialogue is to use its holy book, such as the Holy Bible or the Qur'an,

as the guide to discussions. For example, some Muslim scholars argue that the Qur'an should always guide interfaith dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims (Shah, Hussin, Majid, Mohamad, & Othman 2013). They assume that the Qur'an "has a role to explain the evidence of truth to the opponents" (Shah et al. 2013: 2450). The aim of explaining this evidence of truth to the opponents is that they should believe in Islam. The same thing is true among some Christians. They regard dialogue among religious groups "as an opportunity to share God's love with people who have yet to accept him" (Freeman 2017: 195). These assumptions precisely fit the goal of the religious mission. The problem is that engagements in interfaith dialogue to convert others to one's religion limit the success of such interfaith dialogue.

Interfaith dialogue, which has the chance to succeed, is the one in which two sides can quickly come up with common ground positions. Coming up with common ground positions leads to success in interfaith dialogue because it builds trust between groups with different religious beliefs. Common ground positions come from issues that both sides value the most in a dialogue. For example, two sides in interfaith dialogue may value issues related to justice, the priority of unconditional love, or promoting human rights. Swidler (2014) observes that people who identify common ground first can succeed in tackling complex issues in interfaith dialogue because they move from known to unknown matters in belief. Common ground issues can make each side in a dialogue closely examine where they fall short and where they do well in practice. People usually arrive at common ground positions when they are capable of self-criticism. Individuals capable of self-criticism are likely to put themselves in one another's shoes to tackle genuine disagreements in religious belief.

This section argued that principles of interfaith dialogue and beliefs would resolve the problem of potential incompatibility between interfaith dialogue and mission. Interfaith dialogue helps people of different religious beliefs learn from one another. This learning may strengthen one's own beliefs despite constant interaction with people of different religious beliefs. Principles of interfaith dialogue and beliefs generally succeed in showing how people with different religious beliefs can live together, regardless of their religious differences. However, how can these principles facilitate a successful mission? We are yet to understand how interfaith dialogue and religious missions driven by the intentional conversion of other people to one's religion can succeed together. We now turn to the rules of interfaith dialogue and mission to understand how they enable interfaith dialogue and mission success.

### **Rules of Interfaith Dialogue and Mission**

Interfaith dialogue rules prevent practices and behaviours that undermine harmony among religious communities. However, rules for religious missions ensure that those who engage in mission works adhere to God's commands and will. Commands and the will of God are found in holy books such as the Qur'an and the Bible. These books illustrate why it is essential to bring people to God. This means that most religions agree on the importance of religious mission for bringing people to God. For them, the need for

peaceful coexistence among religious groups and individuals does not involve preventing evangelism. This section will explore how these different rules could result in the success or failure of combined interfaith dialogue and religious mission in any community.

Tensions among religious groups frequently lead to disharmony in any community. A religious mission that aims at turning people to God is often the leading cause of tension among religious groups. When tensions among competing religious groups disturb harmonious life among the people in a community or a country, interfaith dialogue is considered one of the potential ways of promoting peaceful coexistence among groups with diverse beliefs (Alam 2016). Yet, interfaith dialogue may prevent religious groups from engaging in missions to convert people to their respective religions. They may even use interfaith dialogue to convince people to leave religions of which they are already members.

Given that some religions respect the choice of individuals in matters of faith, others do not tolerate such a choice. This means converting individuals from such faiths through interfaith dialogue would generally stamp failure on interfaith dialogue, leading to more tensions and disharmony among religions. For this reason some countries put in place rules that guide interfaith dialogue and mission.

One of the rules governing interfaith dialogue is moderation (Alam 2016). Moderation aims to discourage extremism among religious people. Moderate religious people are expected to tolerate people with different views of religion. They engage in interfaith dialogue with their opponents with open minds. Moderates are expected to deal with opponents like brothers and sisters even when they disagree on the fundamentals of faith. In other words, moderates are assumed to respect the views of their opponents even when they disagree. Moderation is generally part of the rules because it enables people engaged in interfaith dialogue to develop mutual trust among themselves. Moderate religious people usually put peaceful coexistence on top of whatever they do about other religious groups.

To reduce tension among religious people who engage in evangelism, some countries put in place rules against proselytisation or evangelisation. The rule against proselytisation inhibits evangelists from dissuading people from another faith group to convert to their group. Regulators in Singapore, for example, argue that proselytization would 'threaten religious harmony' (Neo 2017: 973). They regard it as often insensitive to the feelings of opposite groups. Singaporean regulators believe that proselytisation would consistently denigrate the beliefs of opposite religious groups because it convinces believers to change from their current religious affiliations to other ones. For instance, since Christians believe that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, they will denigrate people who think they would go to God without passing through Jesus Christ. Muslims also believe Islam is the only true religion (Shah, Hussin, Majid, Mohamad, & Othman 2013). Judaism will regard both Christianity and Islam as religions practised by those who are outside God's chosen people.

Because of the above, rules for interfaith dialogue and mission regard individuals and groups that engage in these activities as responsible for their actions (Neo 2019). The responsibility rule implies that people are accountable for what they say during interfaith

dialogue and when engaged in evangelism. In communal societies, hurtful things that one member of a particular society says against others would be counted as the responsibility of such a society. For example, in Singapore, laws that prevent religious groups from proselytisation target only religious leaders when this law is broken by any individual belonging to a particular religion (Neo 2017). The argument is that religious leaders influence their members. This means they can caution them against saying things that would hurt the feelings of others. However, in individualist societies, no one is responsible for what others say, even if such individuals were tasked by their religious groups to evangelise. Sometimes, religious groups would get around this problem by including confidentiality rules in discussions. The confidentiality rule ensures that whatever someone says during interfaith dialogue remains a secret known only by participants, and nobody else knows it.

Rules for interfaith dialogue and mission aim to prevent religious people from disturbing peaceful coexistence among their groups and the general public. This achieves the goal of interfaith dialogue. But the religious mission still needs to be achieved. For example, the rule against proselytisation prohibits the conversion of adherents of one religion to another under all circumstances, even if individuals would be willing to convert to another religion. Put differently, harmony is often the goal of interfaith dialogue, and saving lost lives is not. So individuals who belong to a particular religion do not have a chance to hear something different from what they have always been told about salvation and their relationships with Almighty God. Having such a chance would lead to better choices for individuals. We now focus on the neutral domain to see if it can resolve these irreconcilable functions between interfaith dialogue and religious missions.

### **Neutral Domain and Mission**

The neutral domain falls under secular responsibility (Biar 2022) because it involves the state's neutrality in religious matters (Neo 2017; Alexander 2019). Whether engaged in interfaith dialogue or not, religious groups can hardly be neutral in matters of faith that define who they are. Religions define matters of faith in black and white (Balagangadhara 2014). Each religious group would strongly believe that its understanding of God's will is correct, and the one of any opposite religious group is false. This means that missionaries follow definitions of matters of faith from the perspective of their religions when engaged in religious missions to turn people to God.

For this reason, it is not easy to combine interfaith dialogue and religious missions in ways that guarantee their effectiveness simultaneously and for the same purpose. Nevertheless, the actual neutral domain could achieve some effectiveness in both. In this section, we explore ways to realise this effectiveness.

The neutral domain would likely achieve effectiveness in both interfaith dialogue and religious mission in some ways. It could accommodate the two because it is indifferent to religious competing definitions of right and wrong, or true and false. The neutral domain plays the middle-ground role in balancing public interests in ways that individuals or groups would rarely manipulate. It allows people of different values to live



harmoniously without giving up their respective values. When people are in the neutral domain, they play a game of fairness to fit into it. This living together requires dialogue among those who compete in ways that disturb peaceful coexistence.

State authorities and institutions must be neutral in religious matters (Alexander 2019). Institutions of the state that enforce laws and regulations should avoid promoting any particular religious value or ideological beliefs to guide every person's behaviour in public. The state mostly plays a policing role to keep law and order. If the state does not promote any particular religious value in the neutral domain, it does not prevent any value in favour of another. The state that acts as the police in the neutral domain should be mindful of different values and cannot force anyone to believe in values that their religion prohibits. What the state protects in the neutral domain is the right of an individual to make an informed choice on religious beliefs. In the neutral domain, no religious group has the right to punish any person who has been convinced to switch religion voluntarily based on new information given to them about God and his will.

State neutrality does not prevent anyone from worshipping the Divine Being in public. What it prevents is any worshipper who interferes with the rights of other worshippers. This means that any missionary has the right to talk to people about the truthfulness of their religion. An individual that such a missionary or an evangelist talks to is the one to judge whether or not the claims of truth that such a person makes are convincing. They can accept them and switch from their old religious affiliation to the new one if convinced. If such claims by a missionary of any religion are not convincing, an individual has the voluntary right to remain in their current religion.

Furthermore, a state and its institutions are not obligated to protect people's feelings from being hurt. Such a role is impossible to carry out in a legally convincing manner because individuals can easily implicate people they disagree with in the name of hurting their feelings. Religious and political statements do hurt feelings. For example, explanations of religious truths may hurt the feelings of others because they involve disproving truth claims of opposite religious groups. For this reason, no individual or group can use state powers to protect their feelings from being hurt in the neutral domain. The state in the neutral domain only protects individuals from being physically harmed. Individuals in the neutral domain are equally entitled to legal provisions guaranteeing religious equality to prove and disprove religious claims of truthfulness and falsehood (Balagangadhara 2014).

What one religious group would regard as truth could be considered falsehood by the other. Yet, it would be unlawful in the neutral domain to ban definitions that hurt feelings. Such definitions could be prohibited in religious settings where a person from a different religion would enter a prayer place of another religion and label their beliefs false. This is because prayer places are not neutral domains. They constitute controlled domains. Put differently, prayer places belong to particular religions that possess the right to define things in ways that they believe within the confines of these places.

Neutral domains are places for diverse definitions. People in the neutral domain have the right to choose from these definitions. However, people within the premises of particular religions do not have the right to such choices.

The responsibility of religious groups in the neutral domain is to persuade both people who do not belong to religious groups and those who do, but would choose to switch religions, based on persuasion, not coercion. On this basis religious mission functions together with interfaith dialogue. Interfaith dialogue in the neutral domain promotes peaceful coexistence among people with different beliefs. At the same time, religious mission brings into light different claims to truthfulness and falsehood to persuade individuals to make informed decisions on their religious beliefs without considering any opponent as an enemy. The state ensures that individuals in the neutral domain make voluntary choices based on their convictions. They are not being forced to choose or not to choose.

## Conclusions

This article set out to establish whether or not interfaith dialogue and mission can function together to promote peaceful coexistence among different religious groups and advance each group's mission effectively. It argued that interfaith dialogue can promote harmony among religious groups because members learn from one another. The interaction among them also increases mutual respect and trust for one another. However, this does not resolve the incompatibility between interfaith dialogue and religious missions. This led to investigating principles and rules of interfaith dialogue and mission to understand how they may contribute to the compatibility of dialogue and mission. Regulations and principles for interfaith dialogue and mission mostly succeed in guaranteeing harmony among different religious groups but are unsuccessful in advancing religious missions. For example, the rule against proselytisation prohibits the conversion of adherents of one religion to another under all circumstances, even if individuals would be willing to convert to another religion. All this leaves the neutral domain as a potential area that could effectively combine interfaith dialogue and mission. The neutral domain promotes interactions and dialogues among people of different beliefs in ways that maintain law and order. These interactions and dialogues involve unhindered religious mission works.

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**To Cite (Harvard)**

Zechariah Manyok Biar (2024), 'Mission and Interfaith Dialogue: Finding a Neutral Domain for Mission'. *Journal of Religion and Public Life*, 1, 1: 64-75.

**Disclosure Statements**

The author has not reported any potential conflict of interest.

The author has not reported the use of generative AI in the research for and preparation of this paper.

This research received no specific funding.