

## **TOWARDS ENHANCING MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN INTER- RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN THE CONTEXT OF KENYA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Purpose:** The study aimed to examine measures that can be put in place to promote effective Muslim-Christian dialogue in the context of Kenya.

**Methodology:** A mixed research design was used, integrating quantitative and qualitative data. The study targeted three mosques and three churches, with a population of 1,806 Muslims and Christians. A sample of 186 respondents (93 Muslims and 93 Christians) was selected using random and purposive sampling. Data collection involved surveys for attendees and interviews with religious leaders, analyzed using SPSS for quantitative data and thematic analysis for qualitative data.

**Findings:** The study found that while Muslims and Christians engage in inter-religious dialogue with mutual respect, challenges such as doctrinal differences and historical tensions persist. However, strong support exists for interfaith initiatives to foster understanding and cooperation.

**Conclusion:** Fostering interfaith activities, exchanges, and educational programs can significantly enhance inter-religious dialogue and promote peaceful coexistence.

**Recommendations:** The study suggests increased institutional support for interfaith initiatives, inclusion of inter-religious dialogue in educational curricula, and establishment of regular discussion forums to strengthen mutual understanding.

**Keywords:** *inter-religious dialogue, Muslim-Christian relations, Inter-faith understanding, Doctrinal differences, Peaceful coexistence, Religious leaders, measures to promote Muslim-Christian dialogue*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Kenya, a country characterized by its ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity, has long grappled with the complexities of inter-religious relations. Among the most prominent religious groups in Kenya are Christians and Muslims, who together form a significant portion of the population. Historically, these two religious communities have coexisted peacefully, contributing to the rich tapestry of Kenyan society. However, the relationship between Muslims and Christians in Kenya has not been without its challenges. inter-religious tensions, influenced by local, regional, and global dynamics, have occasionally surfaced, threatening the social cohesion and peaceful coexistence that are vital for national stability (Mwakimako & Willis, 2014).

In Nairobi County, the capital city of Kenya, the inter-religious landscape is particularly vibrant. Nairobi is a melting pot of various religious communities, making it a microcosm of the broader Kenyan society. The city hosts numerous religious institutions, including mosques and churches, which serve as focal points for religious life and interfaith interactions (Mwakimako & Willis, 2014). Despite this vibrant religious landscape, Nairobi has witnessed episodes of inter-religious tensions and conflicts, often exacerbated by socio-economic disparities, political manipulations, and global religious narratives (Odhiambo, 2020). One of the critical issues contributing to inter-religious tensions in Nairobi is the lack of effective dialogue between Muslim and Christian communities. While there have been various efforts to promote interfaith dialogue, these initiatives often face significant challenges. These challenges continue to vary from doctrinal differences, historical grievances, and mutual suspicions continue to hinder meaningful interactions between these communities. The lack of mutual understanding and trust exacerbates these challenges, preventing the establishment of a solid foundation for dialogue. Additionally, socio-political factors such as marginalization, poverty, and radicalization further complicate the landscape. Marginalized groups, often feeling disenfranchised, may be more susceptible to radical ideologies that deepen divisions.

Political manipulations significantly exacerbate inter-religious tensions, as politicians often exploit religious identities for political gain, using divisions to secure votes or weaken opponents. While Kenya's elections have historically been shaped more by tribal affiliations than religious or ideological differences, strategic manipulation of religious identities has still contributed to mistrust and hostility between communities (Cheeseman, Lynch, & Willis, 2020). This exploitation fosters an environment where inter-religious cooperation becomes increasingly difficult, except in post-election periods when religious leaders unite to mediate

conflicts between winners and losers. Such moments highlight the potential role of religious leaders in fostering reconciliation, yet the overall political landscape continues to hinder sustained interfaith trust and collaboration (Kanyinga, 2014).

The persistent politicization of religious identities underscores the need for robust mechanisms to prevent political interference in interfaith relations and to promote inclusive governance that respects religious diversity. Nairobi, as a global city, has experienced rapid population growth and economic expansion, which have contributed to the weakening of barriers between Muslims and Christians. The city's modern civilization and business innovations have created spaces for increased inter-religious interactions, yet deep-seated political and social challenges continue to hinder constructive dialogue (Odhiambo, 2020; Omenya, 2019). To promote lasting interfaith understanding, more comprehensive and context-sensitive approaches are needed to address these challenges and encourage peaceful coexistence.

Despite the recognized importance of inter-religious dialogue, there is a notable gap in understanding the factors that facilitate or hinder such interactions. Previous studies have often focused on the broader national or regional levels, with limited attention to the specific dynamics at play within Nairobi County. This oversight neglects the city's unique blend of socio-cultural and religious influences, which shape the interfaith interactions between Christians and Muslims (Omenya, 2019). Nairobi's distinct context, characterized by its diverse population, rapid urbanization, and socio-economic disparities, requires a tailored approach to inter-religious dialogue.

Furthermore, existing interfaith initiatives in Nairobi have often been sporadic and lacked systematic evaluation. This inconsistency has hindered the development of a cohesive strategy for promoting inter-religious understanding and cooperation. There is a pressing need for empirical data to assess the effectiveness of these initiatives and to identify best practices that can be scaled up or replicated. Such data would provide valuable insights for policymakers, religious leaders, and other stakeholders involved in promoting inter-religious dialogue and peace-building (Chimaraoke, 2018).

Additionally, the lack of systematic evaluation means that successful strategies and interventions are not consistently identified or shared. This gap impedes the ability to build on past successes and to develop a more robust framework for interfaith engagement. Empirical research is crucial for understanding what works, what doesn't, and why, thereby enabling more

informed and effective policy decisions. As such, the current study intends to examine the dynamics of Muslim-Christian inter-religious dialogue in Nairobi County, with the ultimate goal of enhancing these interactions and contributing to a more peaceful and cohesive society. By focusing on the specific challenges and opportunities within Nairobi, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding that can inform targeted interventions. The insights gained from this study will be instrumental in developing strategies that foster mutual respect, reduce prejudices, and build bridges between the Christian and Muslim communities, ultimately strengthening the social fabric of Nairobi.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopted a mixed research design to integrate both quantitative and qualitative data, ensuring a comprehensive analysis. Conducted in Nairobi County, Kenya, where Christians and Muslims engage in inter-religious discourse, the study targeted three mosques, Jamia Mosque (Nairobi Central), Musjid Al-Huda (Nairobi West), and Noor Mosque (Nairobi East), and three churches namely Cathedral Basilica of the Holy Family (Nairobi Central), Mariakani Christian Centre (Nairobi West), and New Apostolic Church (Nairobi East). The target population consisted of 1,806 Christians and Muslims, derived from average church and mosque attendance. A sample size of 186 respondents was selected, comprising 93 Muslims and 93 Christians, with 10% randomly sampled from the 898 Muslims and 886 Christians, while purposive sampling was used to select three Imams and three clergy members. Data collection involved self-administered survey questionnaires with both closed-ended and open-ended questions for 90 Muslim and 90 Christian attendees, along with interview guides for the six religious leaders, conducted in Nairobi's South C, West, and Central regions. Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 22 for descriptive and inferential statistics through correlation, presented in frequency tables, bar charts, and pie charts, while qualitative data was analyzed thematically and presented using narrative.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Measures to Enhance Muslim-Christian inter-religious Dialogue**

The study aimed to explore strategies for enhancing inter-religious dialogue between Christians and Muslims in Kenya. Table 1 displays how the respondents are distributed based on the measures proposed to improve interfaith communication between these two groups.

Table 1: *Measures to Improve inter-religious Dialogue Between Christians and Muslims*

| Statement                                                              | Yes |       | Not sure |      | No  |     |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|-------|----------|------|-----|-----|
|                                                                        | (F) | (%)   | (F)      | (%)  | (F) | (%) |
| Organize interfaith events to foster understanding and cooperation     | 136 | 91.9  | 12       | 8.1  | -   | -   |
| Reject any notion of superiority of one faith over another             | 143 | 96.6  | 4        | 2.7  | 1   | .7  |
| Balance the concept of predestination with human freedom               | 116 | 78.4  | 27       | 18.2 | 5   | 3.4 |
| Facilitate open discussion on nature of god in different faith         | 148 | 100.0 | -        | -    | -   | -   |
| Engage religious leaders to promote dialogue and cooperation           | 148 | 100.0 | -        | -    | -   | -   |
| Promote tolerance and understanding, avoid stereotypes.                | 147 | 99.3  | 1        | .7   | -   | -   |
| Dispel misconception and challenge prejudices about each other beliefs | 144 | 97.3  | 3        | 2.0  | 1   | .7  |

When asked whether by organizing interfaith events to foster understanding and cooperation as a measure could improve inter-religious dialogue between Christians and Muslims, an overwhelming majority (91.9%) of the respondents agreed with the statement, while only 8.1% of them were not sure about the statement. These findings underscore the recognition of the positive impact that interfaith events can have in promoting dialogue, understanding, and cooperation between individuals of different religious backgrounds. The high level of agreement suggests a shared belief in the value of such initiatives in facilitating peaceful and constructive interactions among diverse faith communities. In the same line, Tanner (2019) observes that Interfaith events provide a platform for Christians and Muslims to learn about each other's beliefs, practices, and traditions, thus becoming an essential engine for social transformation.

Direct interactions help dispel misunderstandings and stereotypes, leading to a more accurate understanding of each other's faith, appreciation, respect and cooperation. Panikkar (2018) also recommends in their study that participants can ask questions and clarify misconceptions about each other's faith in a friendly and non-confrontational environment. Open dialogue allows for honest discussions about sensitive topics, and hence, fostering deeper understanding.

Regarding the measure, rejecting any notion of superiority of one faith over another could improve inter-religious dialogue between Christians and Muslims, an overwhelming majority

(96.6%) of the respondents agreed with the statement, while only 0.3% of them were not sure about the statement. These findings highlight a widespread recognition of the importance of fostering equality and respect among different faiths as a means to enhance inter-religious dialogue and understanding between Christians and Muslims. The high level of agreement indicates a shared commitment to promoting a spirit of inclusivity and cooperation in such discussions. In line with the study findings, Gianotti (2015) observes that rejecting notions of superiority ensures that discussions are grounded in respect for each other's beliefs and practices. It encourages participants to listen attentively and empathetically, fostering an environment where both perspectives are recognized, and valued. In addition, Rosemont et al (2015) observe that recognizing that no one faith holds a monopoly on truth encourages humility in dialogue. Participants are more likely to approach discussions with openness to learning from one another, leading to deeper and more meaningful conversations. Interfaith dialogue becomes a platform for learning about each other's beliefs and practices without the presumption of one faith being inherently superior. This mutual learning fosters a spirit of curiosity, interest and understanding.

With reference to balancing the concept of predestination with human freedom as a measure to improve inter-religious dialogue between Christians and Muslims, the majority (78.4%) of the respondents agreed with the statement, 18.2% of them were not sure, while only 8.1% of them indicated that the statement was not true. These findings reflect the diversity of perspectives and the complexity of addressing the relationship between predestination and human freedom in the context of inter-religious dialogue. It also highlights the importance of exploring ways to reconcile theological concepts in order to promote mutual understanding and cooperation between different faith communities. Shedding more light, (Kaya, 2018) observed that acknowledging the complexity of divine predestination and human freedom encourages humility in discussing theological differences. Both Christians and Muslims can approach each other with respect, recognizing the depth of the theological questions each tradition faces. There is always

an opportunity for Muslims-Christians to engage, work and help each other as demonstrated by

earlier Islamic history. Most of modern societies problem can be easily solved together as a united faith group.

About facilitating an open discussion on nature of God in different faith, all the respondents (100%) agreed with the measure. This agreement suggests a shared recognition of the value of open dialogue and understanding when it comes to discussing and exploring the diverse beliefs and perspectives on the nature of God across various faith traditions. It underscores the significance of interfaith conversations that promote mutual respect and learning among people of different religious backgrounds. Kaya (2016) reports that invitation of participants to share personal experiences related to their faith and their understanding of God, narratives can be powerful tools for building empathy and understanding.

On engaging religious leaders to promote dialogue and cooperation, an overwhelming majority (99.3%) of the respondents agreed with the statement, while only 0.7% of them were not sure about the statement. These findings highlight a strong consensus among respondents regarding the importance of involving religious leaders in efforts to promote inter-religious dialogue and cooperation. It suggests that many recognize the influential role that religious leaders can play in fostering understanding, tolerance, and collaboration among different religious communities.

On whether promoting tolerance and understanding, avoid stereotypes thus promoting inter-religious dialogue, an overwhelming majority (97.3%) of the respondents agreed with the respondents, while only 0.7% of them disagreed with the statement. These findings emphasize the widespread recognition of the importance of fostering tolerance and understanding while avoiding stereotypes as essential components in facilitating productive and respectful inter-religious dialogue. This high level of agreement suggests a shared commitment to creating an environment that encourages open and constructive discussions among individuals of diverse faiths.

When asked whether dispel misconception and challenge prejudices about each other beliefs would promote inter-religious dialogue, an overwhelming majority (97.3%) of the respondents agreed with the respondents, while only 0.7% of them disagreed with the statement. These findings highlight the recognition of the importance of fostering understanding and addressing biases and misconceptions as key factors in facilitating productive inter-religious dialogue. Such a high level of agreement suggests a shared commitment to creating an environment conducive to respectful and informed discussions among individuals of different faiths.

## CONCLUSION

The study concludes that various initiatives play a crucial role in enhancing inter-religious dialogue between Christians and Muslims in Nairobi County, with strong support for measures such as organizing interfaith events, rejecting religious superiority, balancing theological concepts, facilitating open discussions on the nature of God, engaging religious leaders, and promoting tolerance and understanding. The shared commitment to fostering mutual respect and cooperation highlights the recognition of direct interactions as a means to dispel misunderstandings and stereotypes. To strengthen interfaith dialogue, the study recommends organizing regular interfaith events, promoting religious equality, encouraging open theological discussions, engaging religious leaders, and implementing educational programs and community initiatives to challenge stereotypes and misconceptions. By adopting these strategies, stakeholders can cultivate a more cohesive and peaceful society where inter-religious dialogue thrives, contributing to greater social harmony.

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