Building Bridges Through Shared Spirituality: A Practical Theology of Fasting and Prayer Among Christians and Muslims in Mombasa

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters/vol7/iss1/10
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Christians and Muslims who live at the coastal region of Kenya frequently engage in inter-religious conflict. Following Gerben Heitink, action domains of religion and society where practical theology is seen as a theology [medium] of action. This research aims at establishing what Christian pastors and Muslim imams could potentially do to build bridges around the shared spirituality of prayer and fasting. Questionnaires and interview guides for focused group discussions were used to collect data which from a sample size of 60 respondents who were selected randomly and purposively. The data were analyzed and the results discussed. The research established that there is a very strong positive relationship between shared prayer and fasting practices and building bridges among Christians and Muslims living near the coastal region of Kenya. The study concludes that spiritual practices of praying and fasting together are effective in building bridges among Christians and Muslims on Mombasa Island.

Keywords: Building bridges, interreligious, Christian-Muslim, spirituality, conversations, conflict transformation, radicalization, Peace.

Introduction

With the world as a global village people of different cultures and religious affiliations live together even when practicing different lifestyles. From the religious perspective, people in the same neighborhood find themselves deeply rooted in different belief systems. Driven to the extreme, some of these breed tensions which may eventually lead to communal violence (Volf, 1996).

Africa today is a space of competition and often even outright conflict between Christians and Muslims unlike anywhere else in the world. Azumah (2012) writes that since peace between Muslims and Christians is crucial for world peace, it goes without saying that peace between Christians and Muslims in Africa is something the rest of the world cannot afford to ignore.

The Kenyan Coast “comprises the Indian Ocean coastal strip with the capital city at Mombasa and was inhabited by the Mijikenda and Swahili, among others. The province covered an area of 79,686.1 km. In the recent past the Northeastern region and the Coastal region of Kenya has been frequented by terror attacks” (Sesi, 2003).

The Mombasa Island in particular has been a victim of such violent attacks in recent years. Being the second largest city in the country, Mombasa has a population of 1.34m. It plays host to several Islamic extremist groups with jihadist tendencies. Attacks by militant Islamists against civilians in East Africa (outside of Somalia) rose from just a few in 2010 to roughly 20 per year since then.

Background

Since the coastal region of Kenya is a hotspot for extremist violent activities targeting members of a different religious persuasion, there have been many attempts by civil society and the government of Kenya to foster interfaith conflict resolution. Many scholars have also made
their attempt to provide a working model to resolve these conflicts. However, there is not a comprehensive and holistic approach to enable the Muslims and Christians at the Kenyan coast to live in peace and harmony without any fear of recurrence of violent interfaith conflicts. Identifying the common spiritual practices of the two religions and, through them, finding a lasting solution to the conflict offers a way forward. These practices are prayer and fasting.

**Theoretical framework**

Azumah (1996) posits that the Arabs who brought Islam to Africa established communities that were modelled on the Islamic Sharia tradition. He also observes that although African Islam was dynamic, it was constantly reshaped by interpretations of the Jihadist tradition. Many of the settlers who brought Islam to Africa participated in slavery and ended up denigrating African culture. This explains why the coexistence of Muslims and Christians has always been potentially conflicting.

A study carried out among the Digo, which is a subtribe of the Mijikenda people who live at the Kenyan coast, revealed that the practice of prayer can be integrated in a peoples’ culture and contextualized to fit into their calendar of events. This study proposes a similar integration while basing it on the theory of practical theology (Sesi, 2003).

Based on Heitink’s (1999) model of practical theology, this study approaches the building bridges between Muslims and Christians at the coastal region of Kenya by strategically forming the vision of both Christians and Muslims to reflect a shared identity which is achieved through praying and fasting together. The end goal of Practical theology is action.

**Research Questions**

i. How does Christians praying together with Muslims at the coastal region of Kenya influence building bridges between Christians and Muslims?

ii. How does Christians fasting together with Muslims at the coastal region of Kenya influence building bridges among them?

**Methods**

The sample size was determined using both non-probabilistic and probabilistic sampling techniques. Purposive sampling was used to select religious leaders and simple random sampling was used to select respondents for focused group discussions. Since each of the churches and mosques have a capacity of 200 members each due to the Covid-19 social distance protocols, the target population was 600. The sample size was 60 respondents which was 10% of the target population. According to Mugenda, & Mugenda (2003), this is ideal for such a study. They were all given questionnaires with five-point Likert scale questions. The researcher also used a semi structured questionnaire for the focused group discussions. From each church and mosque there were two leaders that is pastors and Imams, purposively selected. There were also 18 randomly selected respondents. The return rate for the questionnaires was 97% which was 58 questionnaires. The data was then cleaned, coded and analyzed using SPSS version 28.

The conceptual framework depicted in Figure 1 below shows that the independent variables influence the dependent variable. In this study, the independent variables were the shared spirituality practices, which included prayer and fasting. These practices fall under the domain of action in practical theology. On the other hand, the dependent variable was building bridges between Christians and Muslims in the coastal region of Kenya. It would involve peaceful coexistence and harmonious living together.
Survey methods were used. This methodology was appropriate because it enabled the description and narration of the shared spiritual experience of prayer and fasting among Christians and Muslims in the coastal region of Kenya. The research was carried out in Mvita constituency on the island of Mombasa. It focused on Sakina Mosque, Mombasa Pentecostal church and Makupa Catholic church. The three were selected purposively in order to get the views of the Muslims, Protestants and Catholics.

**Results**

An analysis of the views of the respondents on the effect of the shared values prayer and fasting among Christians and Muslims at the coastal region of Kenya was done and the following are the findings:

The respondents were asked questions regarding prayer. Their views are captured in Table 1 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apart from our usual prayer schedules, we are willing to come together with our Christian/Muslim neighbors to:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. Praise God together</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>1.221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. Supplicate together</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>1.161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iii. Thank God together</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>1.235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iv. Pray with our scriptures together</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>1.305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v. Celebrate our religious events such as Ramathan and Christmas together</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>1.396</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vi. Share our common values such as giving alms together</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>1.330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vii. Visit and pray for the sick together</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>1.110</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on responses to five-point Likert scale questions, in Table 1 above we see the respondents observed that apart from their usual prayer schedules, they were willing to come together with their Christian/Muslim neighbors to praise God together (mean of 2.98 and standard deviation of 1.221). They also were willing to supplicate together (mean of 3.14 and standard deviation of 1.161). They would thank God together (mean of 3.14 and standard deviation of 1.235). They would pray with their scriptures together (mean of 3.34 and standard deviation of 1.305). They would celebrate their religious events such as Ramadhan and Christmas together (mean of 3.66 and standard deviation of 1.396). They would also share their common values such as giving alms together (mean of 3.67 and standard deviation of
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1.330). Finally, they would visit and pray for the sick together (mean of 3.83 and standard deviation of 1.110).

The respondents were then asked questions regarding fasting. Their views are reflected in table 2 below:

Table 2: Descriptive statistics on fasting (five-point Likert scale questions).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I am willing to support my Christian/Muslim neighbors during their period of fasting:</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>i. Financially</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>1.158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. Materially such as foodstuff for breaking fast</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>1.276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iii. Morally such as encouraging them</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>1.337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iv. By praying for them</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>1.312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v. Physically such as cooking and eating with them</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>1.298</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is evident from Table 2 that the respondents were willing to support their Christian/Muslim neighbors during their period of fasting financially, the results were a (mean of 3.31 and standard deviation of 1.158); and materially, with items such as foodstuffs for breaking the fast (mean was 3.33 and standard deviation was 1.276). Respondents also were willing to provide moral support, such as encouragement during the fasting (mean was 3.40 and the standard deviation was 1.337); to pray for the members of the other faith (mean of 3.41 and standard deviation was 1.312); and to assist the others physically in matters such as cooking and eating together, (mean was 3.41 and the standard deviation was 1.298).

The respondents were asked questions on building bridges between Christians and Muslims. Their views are captured in Table 3 below:

Table 3: Descriptive statistics on building bridges between Christians and Muslims (five-point Likert scale questions).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>As a result of praying and fasting together, we expect to:</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>i. Live in harmony</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>.915</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. Be more tolerant of each other</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>.848</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iii. Love one another more</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.45</td>
<td>.535</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iv. Help each other when in need</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>.509</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v. Attend each other’s ceremonies such as weddings more frequently</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.71</td>
<td>.459</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in Table 3 above, the respondents felt that as a result of praying and fasting together, they expected to live in harmony (mean of 4.07 and a standard deviation of 0.915); to be more tolerant of each other (mean was 4.18 and the standard deviation was 0.848); to love one another more (mean was 4.45 and the standard deviation was 0.535); to help each other when in need (mean was 4.67 and the standard deviation was 0.509); to attend each other’s ceremonies, such as weddings, more frequently (mean was 4.17 and the standard deviation was 0.459). Since there are small standard deviations across the board, it means that the respondents did not have extreme views on building bridges between Christians and Muslims.
The findings of this study concur with a study carried out in Ethiopia which revealed that Christians and Muslims pray and fast together in order to plead with God to remove the calamity of Covid-19 which they perceive as a punishment from God. By so doing it also enhances their unity.

The results obtained from the focus group discussions revealed that most of the animosity experienced at the coastal region of Kenya was due to radicalization and extremism, which had been occasioned by the Al Shabaab group. They also felt that it was due to focusing on the differences in ideology among the religions instead of focusing on similarities or shared values.

One of the respondents acknowledged verbatim:
*Wale wanao hubiri barabarani wakishutumu dini za wengine pia wanachangia* (Those who preach on the streets and criticize other peoples’ religions also contribute to the enmity).

They also felt that by praying and fasting together their brotherhood as *Mijikenda* people would be rekindled in spite of embracing different religions. This concurs with a study carried out in the Rift Valley which established that the indigenous people felt that they had been alienated by fully embracing the new religions and completely abandoning their traditional ways of life.

**Relationship between praying together and building bridges**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Building bridges</th>
<th>Praying together</th>
<th>Pearson Correlation</th>
<th>.641**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td></td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The findings of the study show that the relationship between praying together and building bridges among Christians and Muslims at the coastal region of Kenya was strong, positive and statistically significant. 

\( r = 0.641; p < 0.01 \). It means that when Christians and Muslims pray together, building bridges between them becomes effective.

**Relationship between praying together and building bridges**

Table 5 reveals that there is a strong positive, statistically significant relationship between fasting together and building bridges among Christians and Muslims living at the coastal region of Kenya \( r = 0.749; p < 0.01 \); it follows that when Christians and Muslims fast together, building bridges among them becomes effective.
Table 5: Relationship between fasting together and building bridges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fasting together</th>
<th>Pearson Correlation</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.749**</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Discussion**

**Towards a Theology of conflict Transformation in interfaith contexts in the Swahili Coast, Mombasa**

This study established that there is a very strong positive relationship between shared prayer and fasting practices and building bridges among Christians and Muslims living at the coastal region of Kenya. In view of the Africa ‘we want,’ based on the “African Union’s agenda of 2063”, sustainability of development features as a key aspect in realizing the set goals. Even though religion is not listed within this agenda, it is common knowledge that it plays a key role in Africa’s stability.

Spiritual leaders therefore have a role to play in reframing spiritual practices to promote peace and harmonious living for Africa to thrive. Consequently, Mbiti’s concept of African Traditional Religious practices indicate that a good religion is holistic and inclusive. Spiritual formation therefore includes all of humanity and is holistic in perspective. The challenge however is how spiritual practices are packaged and passed on to the Church in Africa with little reflection on self-theologizing (Mbiti, 2015).

To realize such a vision calls for “social agents” who in turn will shape the “social arrangements” in society for the well-being of all. Volf appeals to theologians (and religious leaders) to focus on fostering the kind of social agents capable of envisioning and creating just, truthful, and peaceful societies, and on shaping a cultural climate in which such agents will thrive. Religious leaders, in this case Muslim Imams and Christian Pastors, have the responsibility to de-escalate conflict regions as dialogue partners. Volf proceeds to offer a three-stage conflict transformation model applicable for conversations in Churches and Mosques.

The model can be applied in three stages as a tool to assist in conversations to promote tolerable social arrangements in society. The first stage is the **Universalist Option**; which seeks to control the unchecked proliferation of differences and supports the spread of universal values – religious values or Enlightenment values – which alone can guarantee the peaceful coexistence of people; affirmation of differences without common values will lead to chaos and war rather than to rich and fruitful diversity.

The second stage is through the **Communitarian Option**; whose aim is to celebrate communal distinctives and promote heterogeneity, placing oneself on the side of the smaller armies of indigenous cultures. Volf notes that the spread of universal values will lead to oppression and boredom rather than peace and prosperity.

The third stage is the **Postmodern Option**; this entails fleeing both universal values and particular identities and to seek refuge from oppression in the radical indeterminacy of
individuals and social formations; creating spaces in which persons can keep creating larger and freer selves by acquiring new, and losing old, identities (Volf, 1996).

The three stages share a common concentration on social arrangements and offer proposals on how a society (or all humanity) ought to be arranged in order to accommodate individuals and groups with diverse identities living together in a society that guards universal values, or that promotes the plurality of particular communal identities (Volf, 1996).

Churches and Mosques can therefore be the safe spaces for dialogue where Christians and Muslims meet and use the model above to map a new path of spiritual formation and peaceful coexistence. Prayer and fasting already provide a good starting point.

**Pastoral Recommendations**
The study recommends that in neighborhoods, Christians and Muslims form an integrated body of uniform or homogenous believers who pray and fast together. Additionally, Christian pastors and Muslim imams have the opportunity to build bridges around these shared practices common to both of their communities. These could be harnessed through joint dialogue and conversation meetings between the two groups. This will further help initiate relevant action plans.

With the support of the county government of Mombasa, formulation of relevant policies will continue to be enacted to promote the idea of fasting and praying together during the months of Ramadhan and Lent. At the national level, the study recommends that the practice of shared spirituality among Christians and Muslims in Kenya be facilitated by the formulation of relevant policy in the legislative houses.

**Conclusion**
This study has shown that shared prayer and fasting practices among Christians and Muslims living at the Coastal region of Kenya enhances harmonious living leading to building bridges. In light of this revelation, spiritual leaders need to reframe spiritual practices in order to promote peace and harmony among interreligious groups for Africa to thrive.

Muslim Imams and Christian Pastors have the responsibility to mitigate in conflicting regions as dialogue partners. The conflict transformation is to be carried out during conversations in Churches and Mosques which provide safe platforms for dialogue where Christians and Muslims can meet to map a new path of spiritual formation and peaceful coexistence. Prayer and fasting already are a good starting point.

The study concludes that county shared spiritual practices of praying and fasting together are effective in building bridges among Christians and Muslims.
References


