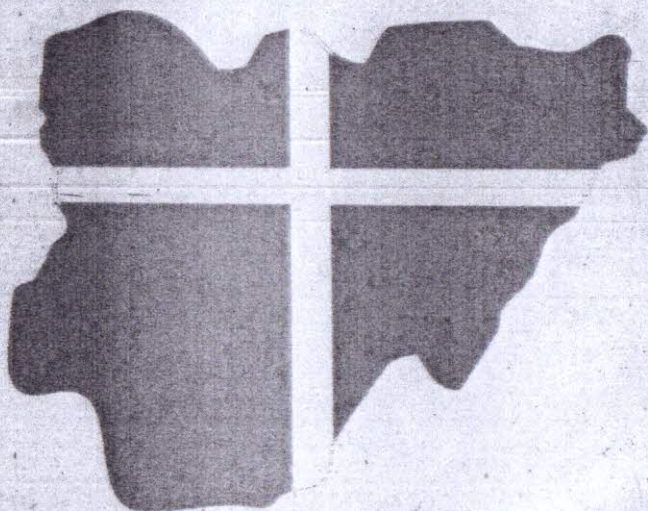


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SEPARATING THE CHAFF FROM THE WHEAT: ENGAGING COMPARATIVE RELIGION FOR WORLD PEACE

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Abstract

Comparative study of religion gained currency in the nineteenth century when evolutionary theory was applied to the study of religion; and particularly in the Christian belief in creationism. The evolutionary method became crucial as a result of divergent truth-claims, ways of salvation, etc. held by different religious traditions. No doubt, truth-claim coupled with religious cleavage, religious sentiments and fundamentalism has often led to intra- and inter-religious conflict. The reason for these effects is the inability to study, understand, appreciate and respect other faiths and beliefs than one's own, which is the hallmark of comparative religion. All these effects are the chaff in our pluralistic society. This paper seeks to posit that scientific study of religion recognises gamut of faiths in the world, and this recognition does not serve as an impediment but rather a demonstration of many in one with open-mindedness, tolerance and accommodation. The latter constitute the wheat for world peace.

Introduction

Comparative religion is a subject that has gained currency in the nineteenth century. In fact, comparative religion was brought about by a monumental speech delivered by Fredrick Max Muller on 19th February 1870. Thus, this monumental

speech exposed students and scholars alike to the scientific study of religion. No doubt, religion is very sensitive, touchy and all-pervading; the claims of today's religions to absolute-truth, inclusivity, sectarianism, bigotry and fundamentalism to salvation have long possessed this beautiful universe. These various truth-claims have resulted in the earth with attendant violence around the world. In the history of the world, people from various centuries and traditions have come to use religion to justify the violence.

The phenomenon of religion lends credence to descriptive, historical, systematic and hermeneutical approach to the study and understanding of religious beliefs. The imperatives of comparative religion in recent times have enabled students as well as scholars to be scientific, responsible and sympathetic to the study and understanding of the world's living religions. These comparative religious characteristics have continued to help the researchers to better appreciate and mutually respect other faiths other than theirs. Thus, the mutual respect for one's religious beliefs and the subsequent intolerance of others is the chaff that must be separated from tolerance, respect and amity that serve as the wheat. It is therefore the intention of this paper to critically and systematically look at the conceptual meaning of comparative religion and what its importance have for world peace.

A Conceptual Meaning of Comparative Religion

Comparative Religion is also described as "Comparative Study of Religion" or "History of Religions". Thus, Comparative Religion according to Kasiera "is the study of the inter-relation of the various religious traditions and of the way in which religious themes and ideas are fused in these traditions."¹ The

above reveals that the essence of comparative religion is to understand the various religions and to as well identify their similarities and differences. In the words of Tiwari "comparative religion is a comparative study of the important features of the different religions of the world in a perfectly scientific spirit."² Dopamu states that:

Comparative Religion as a study is not restricted to comparisons between religions, but it involves comparisons between concepts, themes, elements, topics or phenomena of different religions. A real comparative study of the religions of the world must take into account the fact that similar themes and concepts abound in world religions just as they differ in many respects.³

Viewing Dopamu's definition critically, it is important to establish that issues like concepts, themes and elements are evident in it. He believes that there are certain things which religions share in common with respect to beliefs, practices, and values.

Wotogbe-Weneka's Comparative Religion as "the study of religious traditions of man. In other words, it is a study that takes into account the fact that there are in the world of men various religious traditions each of which makes sense to the adherents or the believers of the faith".⁴ It is germane to state that human kind is designed religiously and his/her religious affiliation or confession matters a lot to him/her. Dopamu further asserts that the purpose of Comparative Religion is not to assert the truth or falsity of any religion or to incorporate value judgement about other religions, but to show that the religions of

humankind are similar in many ways and also different in significant ways.⁵

According to the *Lexicon Webster's Dictionary*, Comparative Religion is "a comparative study and classification of the origin and growth of the interactions and influence of the various religious systems."⁶ Sharpe also gives a comprehensive meaning of Comparative Study of Religion as

The application of the comparative method to the data provided by the religions of the world, past and present. This involves the assignment to each of a place within a scheme of progress; development or evolution, and the assessment of their value.⁷

In another vein, Graeve sees Comparative Study of Religion as

the branch of the non-normative study of religions that investigates scientifically the similarities and differences between various religions or religious phenomena, in order not only to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of its object in itself but also to determine the presence- and in this case also the nature- or absence of reciprocal or unilateral influences between the various religions or religious phenomena.⁸

Gbenda defines Comparative Religion as "the unbiased method of discovering the faith, beliefs, practices, facts and empirical or observable experiences of two or more religions in order to establish area they agree and disagree."⁹ To this end, Comparative Religion is the systematic and scientific study of all

living religions with the aim of comparing their concepts, themes, doctrines, liturgies, traditions among others and to explore areas of common interest or convergence and points of departure.

Comparative Religion: An Overview

Comparative Religion as a subject or discipline started in 1870 when Fredrick Max Muller delivered his monumental speech on the science of religion. According to E. J. Sharpe, the subject became current in the late nineteenth century as a synonym for the German word *Religionswissenschaft* (the science of religion).¹⁰ Interestingly, Comparative Religion as associated with the brainwork of Max Muller "was influenced by the theory of evolution which developed in the late nineteenth century."¹¹ This theory, according to Dopamu was applied to the materials available on the world's various religious beliefs and practices to build up a glaring picture of the history of religion on evolutionary pedestals.¹² Max Muller did not only establish the credentials of comparative study, but also provide valuable material on which to base it and wrote several books to validate it. The most essential therefore of these was the fifty volume series on *Sacred Books of the East* (1879-1910) which opened the eyes of the West to the religions of the East.¹³

From all indications, it is clear that Fredrick Max Muller, a German philologist, established the Comparative Study of Religion as a formal and independent field. Gbenda adds that other pioneer scholars in the same field after Max Muller included E.B. Tylor, James G., Frazer, Andrew Lang, J.F. Lafitau, W. Wundt among others.¹⁴ Comparative Religion became recognized as an autonomous discipline in tertiary institutions in the late nineteenth century. With the recognition of Comparative

Study of Religions today, so many religions in the world are easily known as the world gets smaller and closer by virtue of information and communication technology, the impact of various faiths is felt globally. Comparative Study of Religions has made interested scholars to know something about the background of the world's religions.¹⁵

It is germane to take a look at a glance the graphical chart of the religions of the world. Tiwari¹⁶, Sen¹⁷ and Umejesi¹⁸ corroborate the assertion that Hinduism is the oldest of all living religions. They added that it has neither any definite date of its origin nor any definite founder associated with it. Without equivocation, they maintained that Hinduism is the oldest of all the Semitic, Sino-Japanese and Chinese religions.¹⁹ However, Mc. Dowell and Stewart posit in their chart that Judaism is the oldest world's living religions.²⁰ The duo nevertheless writes from the perspective of Christianity. Suffice it to present a chart of world's living religions.

S/N	Religion	Date Founded	Founder	Deity	Sacred Book
1	African Religion	As old as Africa	None	Supreme Being	Oral Tradition
2	Hinduism	Ca1900BC	None	Brahman and others	Vedas
3	Judaism	Ca1800BC	Abraham	Yahweh	Torah
4	Shintoism	660BC	None known	Nature gods	Ko-ji-ki and Nihonji
5	Zoroastrianism	660BC	Zoroaster	Ahura Mazda	Avesta
6	Taoism	604BC	Lao-Tzu	The Tao	Tao-te-ching

7	Jainism	599BC	Mahavira Jina	Originally none- Now Mahavira	Angas
8	Buddhism	560BC	Gautama Buddha	Now Buddha	Tripitaka
9	Confucianism	551BC	Confucius	Heaven	The Analects
10	Christianity	4BC	Jesus Christ	Yahweh	The Bible
11	Islam	A.D 570	Muhammad	Allah	Qur'an
12	Sikhism	A.D. 1469	Guru Nanak	True Name	Granth Sahib ²¹

We maintain that African Religion is the oldest living religion. The religion is as old as Africa herself without founder and definite date. Judaism for instance, which was considered by Mc. Dowell and Stewart as the oldest living religion recognised Cush and River Euphrates in the Garden of Eden coupled with Egypt, Ethiopia and others. This is a clear indication that these cities or nations have their root in Africa and they even existed before the *Pentateuch* was recognized as the Holy Writ or Scriptures of Judaism. By this antecedent, it clearly shows that Africa as a continent was fully in place before other world living religions, because African Religion is as old as Africa herself. Therefore, African Religion is the oldest of the world's living religions. Dopamu opposes the view that African Religion is not a fossil or dead religion stating that it is the oldest living religion. He stresses:

We unequivocally state that Afrel is a world religion. We need no apology for this assertion. The most important criterion for the status of a world religion is the element of livingness.... A painstaking study of Afrel shows that Afrel fulfils

all these requirements and must be counted among the major world religion. Recognition of its status as a world religion should not be considered a concession, therefore, but rather a reversal of long-standing prejudice. As a world religion, Afrel is living in the sense that millions of people both in Africa and in the diaspora are still found as adherents today, even though it is being profoundly affected by the revolutionary changes of modern times, and by the incursions of Islam and Christianity.²²

Afrel here is an acronym for African Religion. Having established that, it is appropriate to look at the attributes and aims of Comparative Religion.

Attributes of Comparative Religious Researchers

Comparative Religion is a scientific study and as such it is objective in the sense that an attitude of objective knowledge-seeking is willingly adopted so that all sorts of preferences or prejudices for or against any religion are completely shunned.²³ It is the responsibility of the scientific study of religion to objectively compare and understand religions of other faiths than one's own. This will extend to the fundamentals and themes of all living religions. Thus, knowledge of understanding and comparison would help and facilitate religious dialogue and co-existence of all living faiths.

It is stupendous task of students or scholars of Comparative Religion not to be "over-enthusiastic to exhibit maniac tendencies in either bringing useless and far-fetched points of similarity or exposing unnecessary, unimportant and artificial points of differences among religions"²⁴ Tiwari again

asserts the correct attributes of comparative religious scholar thus:

A very balanced mind-unbiased, unprejudiced, trained in scientific neutrality and yet sensitive to the deeper convictional aspects of religion- is required to undertake and accomplish this task.... In fact, valuable comparisons and evaluations have been made and they can very well serve as our guides in the stupendous task that we have embarked on...²⁵

No doubt, this intellectual and scientific exercise needs utmost sincerity, sympathy, charity, open-mindedness and objectivity in analyzing beliefs and doctrines without any prejudice or one-sidedness.²⁶ Besides, a comparative religious scholar must be fair to all religions in terms of evaluation and judgement. Bahm adds that "Comparative religions as a study cannot approach being an objective science until those who study it become willing to commit themselves to comparisons based on objective standards"²⁷ True emphasis is placed on the fact that whoever is evaluating any religion other than his, must give up preference for the beliefs and ideas of his own religion or any particular religion, Cantwell Smith in the same direction observes that "it is the business of comparative religion to construct statements about religions that are intelligible within at least two traditions simultaneously."²⁸ Alamu states the task of comparative believer of religion. Thus:

The task of a comparative believer is to be open-minded and sympathetic. To make profitable study of religion comparatively, a scholar must appreciate the innuendoes of other faiths and each religion must be seen in terms of its own

perspective. A scholar of comparative study is always a business-like person with an ideal combination of non-aggressiveness, sociableness and pleasantness.²⁹

The above disquisitions are the characteristics every comparative religious scholar must possess in the course of his/her exploration and investigation about other faiths. However, Parrinder assures a comparative religious believer thus:

To study different religions need not imply infidelity to one's faith, but rather it may be enlarged by seeing how other people have sought for reality and have been enriched by their search. Knowledge leads to understanding, and understanding to tolerance of people with a different view point.³⁰

In the final analysis, it is the responsibility of students or scholars of comparative religion as a discipline to equip themselves with the basics and adequate knowledge of other faiths in order to respect and as well acknowledge these beliefs without syncretism or infidelity. For "he who knows one knows none"³¹

The Problem of Truth and Peace

The pivot of all living religions is peace. However, the bane of truth and peace in world religions arises because of absolute claims to truth. This truth and peace claimed by the different religions as graphically charted above appears to be incompatible in many ways. Indeed, on the part of many, it is an axiom that religion leads to conflict, backwardness, superstition and hatred because there is no consensus on the truth and peace

claims. Edward Schillebeeckx on his own challenges on his fellow Christians as follows: "The unshaken certainty that one continues to possess the truth oneself while others are mistaken is no longer a possibility."³²

Thus, to assert that one's own way is the only possibility for grasping religious truth is to live in a time warp. Knitter buttresses that truth-claims raise legitimate criticisms of religion into one's tradition, which constitute an acid that not only scours away abuses and outdated thinking but also may corrode even the core attitudes of spirituality.³³ Interestingly, there is no unanimous acceptance of a particular religion as having final authority on truth. In other words, there is no parameter or calculus to measure or gauge the best religion or the true religion. However, this total celebration of diversity has made multiplicity to take priority over violence. Today, this problem of truth and peace claims is strong and more pronounced amongst Christians and Muslims in the Semitic world. These religions are of Semitic origins. With the tension soaked and absence of universally applauded and adjudged religion, attempts have been made by scholars to explore the various attitudes toward the understanding of religions. Some of these phenomena are exclusivism, inclusivism, fanaticism, particularism and fundamentalism.

Exclusivism maintains that only its own religious teaching is right and all other ways are excluded.³⁴ Harold Netland sees exclusivism as "the position which holds that the central claims of one's own traditions are true, and that where beliefs of other traditions appear to be incompatible with those of one's own tradition, the former are to be rejected as false"³⁵. The above definitions represent historically dominant Christian and Muslim view of others religious individuals who are not interested in Christ and Prophet Muhammad. Umejesi and Igboin argue that

predominant Christian attitude on exclusivism was institutionalized in popular piety expressed in the axiom of Catholic Church: "*Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*" meaning "outside the Church, no salvation which the protestant church expanded to "outside Christianity no salvation"³⁶

From Islamic point of view as argued by Umejesi and Igboin, the doctrine of "take no others for lords beside Allah" clearly demonstrates that Allah is the only God who Muslims must worship. All teachings or traditions which go contrary to this are labelled as an expression of Kufr and therefore an abandonment of faith. The Muslims article of faith: There is no other God except Allah and Prophet Muhammad is His messenger, the pillars of Islam and Muhammad being the seal of Prophet-hood are unequivocal declaration of exclusivism.³⁷ Thus, for the exclusivists, any recognition of the truth or peace of other religions or religious figures is a slap in the face of God;³⁸ it denigrates what God has done in Jesus and Prophet Muhammad.

Inclusivism seems to depict the dominant attitude towards followers of other religious paths. This is challenged by the deepening and more human encounters with people of other cultures and religions, sobered by the truth, beauty, and lack of Christian presence evident among non-Christian religions. In other words, Christ is within the religions and Christ is above the religions.³⁹ In another development, inclusivism is the doctrine that teaches that salvation is possible to believers of other religions, but insists that it is the secret and often unrecognised work of Christ.⁴⁰ Knitter observes that Jesus is constitutive of salvation; that is God's offer of truth and peace has been about, or made possible, by the historical life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Therefore, whatever truth or peace of the spirit is found in other faiths is in some way anonymous Christian-Christian

without a name caused and directed toward fulfilment, in Jesus and his community.⁴¹ Essentially, the intention of inclusivism is to avoid the risk of open attack on other faiths but seeks righteously creative way of incorporating Christian theological conviction into them.

Particularity simply describes the recognition of a particular religious faith as superior to the exclusion of others. In the province of religion, Christians and Muslims have essentialized their religion as superior to each other as well as other faiths. The result of which is conflict, violence, misgiving, mistrust and misrepresentation. Fundamentalism in another development represents a movement or point of view characterised by a return to fundamental principles or rigid adherence to those principles, often intolerance of other views and opposition to secularism. Knitter sees a fundamentalist as a person who is angry and a conservative who is willing to take a stand and fight.⁴² Fanaticism is also part of the problem of truth which we also witness in our contemporary society.

In fact, these characteristics have succeeded in exposing the faithful to the problem of interpretation of religions, to be biased against other faiths, and have contributed to the ills of the society. These various schools instead of illuminating the minds to the nitty-gritty of other faiths with care and sympathy, they rather cast aspersion over the bipolarity and unparallel understanding of a particular faith than others. To this end, knowing one particular faith without others is equivalent to knowing none. This is what critical understanding of Comparative Religion tries to avoid since understanding and sympathy for other faiths are imperatives of Comparative Study of Religion.

The Imperative of Comparative Religion on World Peace

Based on the various concepts as conduits to the overriding of the understanding of religions, it became obvious that the various parameters in gauging religious meanings could not offer peace to the world. In recent times, a handful of scholars have supported the use of pluralism as a recipe for peace and world order. Scholars see pluralism as a way of integrating, tolerating and accommodating other faiths than theirs. Religious pluralism has been the trend in ensuring world peace. However, Knitter argues that "the awareness of pluralism does not lead simply to a total celebration of diversity, nor is the pluralism without its problems."⁴³ Nevertheless, within the purview of scientific study of religion it is not a sin for multifarious religions to cohabit considering their areas of common interest. The imperative of comparative religion is to respect and exist side by side with sympathy and objectivity. With this sympathy and objectivity towards other faiths, like Schillebeeckx asserts, multiplicity of religions will not be evil or conflict centred. According to him:

The multiplicity of religions is not evil which needs to be removed, but rather a wealth which is to be welcomed and enjoyed by all... There is more religious truth in all religions together, in one particular religion.⁴⁴

With experiential sympathy and open-mindedness coupled with scientific objectivity, the values and rudiments of other faiths would be rhapsodically enjoyed and embraced by all without syncretism and infidelity.

Furthermore, one of the imperatives or attributes of comparative religion is open-mindedness. A comparative

religious believer believes that religions pragmatically speaking go beyond fundamentalism and particularity. Therefore, he or she must with his/her understanding and privilege of knowing other faiths embrace other religions with open-mindedness which is far more than patronizing accommodation; which does not lead us to deny our faith, but also does not impose as Hans Kung argued any particular response; which turns criticism from outside into self-criticism and at the same time accepts everything which destroys nothing of value in the religion.⁴⁵

Scholars of comparative religion also see the need for various religious adherents to interact on the level of ecumenical dialogue in order to foster world peace. Ecumenical dialogue should transcend individualism and religious particularity. Hans Kung, one of the scholars or advocates of comparative religion also supports ecumenical dialogue as a recipe for peace. He says:

Ecumenical dialogue is today anything but the speciality of a few starry-eyed peaceniks. For the first time in history, it has now taken on the character of an urgent desideratum for world peace. It can help to make our earth more livable by making it more peaceful and more reconciled....Ecumenism *ad extra*, oriented toward the whole inhabited earth, are independent. Peace is indivisible; it begins with us.⁴⁶

Paul Knitter, another apostle of comparative religion also looks beyond ecumenical dialogue to the level of correlational theology as a way of entrenching world peace to all religious believers. According to him;

Thus, a pluralistic-correlating model for a theology of religions affirms not just the

possibility but the reality of other authentic religious believers and therefore of other true religions. Such a statement is based on evidence. It is not a blanket endorsement of all that goes on within the walls of religion, but it does affirm that much of what we will encounter in the lives and world of other religious persons will be true and meaningful and challenging not just for them but also for us.⁴⁷

This correlational model as a prerequisite for world peace recognizes, affirms, embraces and wrestles with the patent and real diversity amongst religious traditions. In its dynamic relatedness, this model holds vision of togetherness, common ground or basic unity with the understanding of other traditions and their uniqueness as well as the same common essence that radiates like a hidden diamond with the heart of every religion.⁴⁸

Oliver, a scholar of religion assesses the trend of religion toward peace by exploring the Talmudic law of 'seek peace and pursue it'. He lends his voice to the understanding that the rabbinic traditions focus mainly on the importance of mercy and condemnation of all wanton destruction.⁴⁹ The Jewish rabbis acknowledged the interconnectedness or unity of humans and conclude from that fact that peace is God's original intent for all human beings. The obligation to promote peace is universal. Briskly speaking, co-existence and constitutive peace are the paradigm of comparative study of religion.

In a work: *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on a Dialogue* edited by Irfan Omar, rather takes a critical look at the extent which spiritual value, mutual respect and acceptance of the legitimacy and authenticity of the religious tradition can go. As an attitude of scientific study of religion, Omar argues that

"mutual acceptance must not stop at recognizing and even, accepting, the existence of the other as a fellow human being and a good neighbour. Rather, Muslims and Christians must accept each other as friends and partners in the quest for social and political justice, theological harmony, and spiritual progress on the way of God, who is their ultimate goal."⁵⁰

In accordance with fairness, honesty and objectivity in the study of comparative religion, Omar again asserts as follows:

A final goal is to strive for absolute fairness and objectivity in drawing any comparisons between two traditions. Several guidelines must be strictly observed in this regard. The first is that the ideals of the two traditions should be compared with ideals and the realities with realities. Second, all attempts at scoring points for one tradition over the other by contrasting the good things in it with the bad things in the other must be strictly avoided...Third, the scriptures or traditions of one religion should not be used as criteria to judge the truth or errors of the others.⁵¹

In essence, the foregoing reveals that through fair, honest and objective analysis of different faiths, peaceful co-existence will be stimulated at the global level.

At the level of ethical approach to global peace, Wolfe and Gudorf demonstrate that implementing changes in international arena "requires ethical approaches that go beyond convictions of a particular religious tradition. Understanding similarities among religions and philosophical approaches to ethics can foster a meaningful dialogue about common values in the world today"⁵² This explains that security of universal values can be reinstated by religious moral codes and individual

conscience. The appreciation of diverse traditions can enable us find common values and approaches that make greater understanding possible.

Dopamu, a doyen of African and Comparative Religion with his background as a staunch Christian, states categorically that corporate togetherness of religion should embrace all and sundry without dichotomy. People of all faiths must show concern for one another, help one another, share common burden, and do things together explicate their corporate existence and make them real human being.⁵³ This communal spirit is evident in Africa which the whole world recognizes. "Each of the world's religions has its own historical integrity which must be respected....In an increasingly pluralistic society, where religious dialogue is given a prominent place....The principle of live and let live has often been fostered by Afrel."⁵⁴

Umejesi and Igboin appeal to parallelism as a model for peaceful co-existence on the part of the faithful of all religions. They argue that it is crucial and essential to respect various religions for what they are. God transcends all religions, each religious peculiarity, belief and goal must be taken seriously. Thus, Christian beliefs and practices will lead to the goal-New Jerusalem, Muslims will attain Muslim paradise, and Hindu will strive towards *Nirvana*. Therefore, parallelism concludes that we must respect the visions of particular religion and the goals they seek to attain.⁵⁵ Infact; this parallelistic view of Umejesi and Igboinis in support of Dopamu's earlier position in his *farewell lecture* where he says among others that

The universality of religion is greatly in the interest of humanity ... I would even propound a theory that your religion will determine the guidelines that will be used by God to take you to

heaven... This theory shows that Islamic guideline will not be used for Christians and others religions and Christian guidelines will not be used for Muslims and other religions.⁵⁶

On this final note, the imperatives of comparative study of religion such as sympathy, charity, scientific objectivity, fairness, open-mindedness, parallelism, correlational and ecumenical dialogue, pluralism among others are instruments for world peace. It is true that all these are the 'wheat' capable of fostering world peace, and the 'chaff' is fundamentalism, fanaticism, particularity, exclusivism and inclusivism which are products of parochialism, and individualistic sentiments that must be discarded. All the imperatives of scientific study of religion according to Dopamu speak of peace, and encourage adherents to seek and sustain peace in the local, national and global level. "Their teachings and actions of comparative study of religion impact on peace-building processes. We, therefore, enjoin all religious groups and sects to respect one another's faith and tenet and to practice one's religion without jeopardizing the interest of others. This, we all desire in the interest of humanity."⁵⁷

Conclusion

This paper has explored the imperatives of comparative study of religion as recipe for world peace. It is germane to note without contradiction that religion cleavage and religious conservatism has led to conflicts, unrest, superstition and backwardness. Comparative religion recognises, affirms, embraces, and accommodates basic or essential unity and dynamic relatedness of all traditions. Furthermore, the same confronts the patent and real diversity between religious

traditions. Togetherness or unity constitutes wider orientation toward the whole *ecumene* where peace is indivisible as it begins with us. Scientific study of religion recognizes gamut of faiths in human community and this recognition does not serve as an impediment; rather it is celebration of diversity with open-mindedness, experiential sympathy, balanced view and objective mind. This tendency transcends individualism, prejudice, bias particularity, patronizing accommodation and lip service. This is an urgent desideratum for world peace.

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