

## Contextual Scriptural Reasoning: A Model for Inter-religious Peacebuilding in African Contexts

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### Abstract

The religious landscape of sub-Saharan Africa in the twenty-first century has witnessed drastic changes that include the spread of both Christianity and Islam. A further dimension to this scenario is the inter-religious mingling of adherents from the two religions as people migrate between regions and access to technology makes new information available. These religious encounters have tended to be violent in pockets of the African continent. Such violence has been propagated by ideological precepts that are based on religious texts and their varied interpretations. Additionally, there have arisen different models used for inter-religious dialogues as adherents of the two religions find themselves neighbouring each other. A popular model has been the public debates (*mihadhara* in Kiswahili), which have generally been characterized by ambivalent relations between Muslims and Christians in Kenya, where this paper is situated. The *mihadhara* concept is basically steeped in polemical engagements which aim at outshining the other in the religious debates. Different scholars have studied the phenomenon of *mihadhara* in Kenya, and there is a consensus that the competitive nature of the debates is more confrontational than peacebuilding. This study offers an alternative model of inter-religious engagement that enhances socio-religious peace. The model is called

contextual Scriptural Reasoning (SR), which aims at offering religious hospitality. The African context is no stranger to the virtue of hospitality. The *Ubuntu* philosophy buttresses the need for African Muslims and Christians to offer each other religious hospitality. The *Ubuntu* philosophy and the African hospitality virtue serve as bedrocks underlying the contextual SR model. The essence of the model is to “listen” to each other’s scriptural basis of common themes found in both the Bible and the Qur’an. It is not about agreeing on contentious scriptural issues, instead it is about striving, even when the parties disagree, to encounter the other in an amicable and peaceful way. In so doing, the premise aligns with the theme of promoting contextual peacebuilding within the African context.

Key words: *Mihadhara* (public debates), contextual, scriptural reasoning, *Ubuntu*, hospitality, peacebuilding, inter-religious dialogue

### **Introduction**

Africa continues to experience movements of people from region to region in the twenty-first century. These movements have enabled more interactions between members of different religions, who meet at different places including professional workplaces, marketplaces, business places, academic spaces, travel destinations, etc. Such interactions may elicit religious discussions in a formal or informal way as people meet. Some of these religious encounters have resulted in violence while others have seen peaceful coexistence of adherents. People continue to be weary of religion as a potentially volatile concept that has caused untold suffering over time. Contemporary Africa is now being seen as a breeding ground of religious conflict, yet scholars of religious studies in Africa have not been overtly keen to address the issue (Wijsen, 2007).

This paper seeks to contribute to fill the lacuna of inter-religious scholarship in Africa. It is premised on the need to offer an amicable approach to religious coexistence as people of

different religions intermingle across the continent. A contextual scriptural reasoning model is herein suggested as a complementary approach to the popular polemical public debates (*mihadhara*) that have been employed in Christian-Muslim encounters. A brief history of scriptural reasoning approach will be provided after giving a rationale of why another model is proposed.

Africa is witnessing an influx of non-Christian religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Chinese religions, and others in the twenty-first century. However, the focus of this paper is the inter-religious<sup>1</sup> encounters between Muslims and Christians. These two religions are growing at a fast rate with growing interactions between Muslims and Christians. The western African region has witnessed great inter-religious antagonism that has left a trail of death and destruction. The eastern African region has not been spared either with the persistence of militant Islamic groups in various parts of the region. Such violence tends to drain people economically, socially, and physically, causing a lethargy that makes them seek for amicable coexistence. Yet, without a real understanding and relationship with each other, misunderstandings can lead to a break in relations and ultimately violence. Thus, models of hospitality are needed to build long-term relationships and understanding. Therefore, the proposed model of scriptural reasoning is deemed to be relevant for the contemporary African scene as it has been in the west where it continues to be practiced.

The model proposed herein takes a contextual inclination by conversing with the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*, which offers a conduit towards peaceful coexistence. It also inculcates the virtue of hospitality that is deemed to create a more conducive environment for inter-religious engagements. Additionally, both the Qur'an and the Bible verses are included to justify the scriptural basis for offering the model for peaceful religious coexistence.

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<sup>1</sup> The terms "inter-religious" and "interfaith" will be used interchangeably in this paper.

### **Brief History of Scriptural Reasoning (SR)**

The concept and practice of Scriptural Reasoning (SR) began as Textual Reasoning (TR) in the early 1990's. Some scholars of modern Jewish philosophy and rabbinic texts met within a university setting to discuss the Jewish sacred texts. Their aim was to understand one another and to respond to postmodern challenges of the time in the west. Later in mid-1990's, some Christians joined the forum, and it became an avenue for interfaith discussions between Jews and Christians. Peter Ochs is one of the scholars who developed the concept of TR within the Jewish context, which provided the foundation for SR. Muslims were invited to join later and thus SR became an inter-religious involving the three Abrahamic religions.

Ochs envisioned a world where religion did not have to instigate violence. In his book, *Religion Without Violence*, he emphasises the need for adherents of different religions to exercise patience and respect in reading each other's scriptures to understand one another's precepts (Ochs, 2019). Ochs drew his initial SR practice and theory from Charles Sanders Peirce's writings on pragmatism (Ochs, 2004). Ochs seems to have been drawn to Peirce's theory of pragmatism, which asserts that learning occurred in a setting where there are shared experiences of shared realities, as Anne Moseley reports (2018, p. 25). Moseley further discusses useful insights concerning the theological and philosophical groundings of SR in its initial formulation and practice in the early 1990s. She mentions that SR integrated four theological stands:

1. Jewish textual reasoning
2. Christian post-liberal text interpretation
3. Text-based Christian philosophies and theologies
4. Muslims' concern for the Qur'an and Islam in relation to Western modernity

(Moseley, 2018, p. 26).

These stands were inculcated into the Cambridge Interfaith Programme (CIP) that was founded in 2002 and has partnered with the Rose Castle Foundation in organising SR events in the recent times. These two UK based organisations are committed to peaceful coexistence by promoting interfaith dialogues and mutual inter-religious understanding.

Another organization that employs the SR model of interfaith dialogue is the Oxford-based Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies (CMCS), which similarly promotes peaceful coexistence by bringing Muslims and Christians to read their respective scriptures using the SR theory and practice. I, (Judy), got the idea of an African contextual SR while attending some of the SR sessions organized by CMCS. It was a profound experience to witness how Christians and Muslims interrelate based on common themes from their respective scriptures. Such an approach offered a more amicable interaction than what has been popular in contemporary African contexts as discussed below.

### **Scriptural Dialogic Conversations in Contemporary African Contexts**

The idea of inter-religious dialogue is not strange in the African contexts especially in the eastern African region. Thus, a relevant question is not whether such dialogues happen, but which type of dialogue is prevalent in the region. Scholars of inter-religious conversations all agree that these dialogues are between people, and not between the religious systems. Therefore, it is not Islam conversing with Christianity, but rather Muslims conversing with Christians as people, and vice versa. This section outlines how Christians and Muslims have engaged in dialogues using their respective scriptural texts in contemporary African contexts.

Various scholars have examined the inter-religious dialogues between Muslims and Christians. John Chesworth provides a useful historical basis to illustrate how the concept of *mihadhara* was started within the eastern African region. Using archival data, Chesworth narrates how pioneer missionary, William Ernest Taylor (1856- 1927), set a precedence of publicly engaging with Muslims at the marketplaces in Mombasa (Chesworth, 2006, p. 161).

Joseph Wandera examines the phenomenon of inter-religious public preaching in the western parts of Kenya almost a century after the initial public debates of Taylor and other pioneer missionaries. His doctoral dissertation entitled, “Public Preaching by Muslims and Pentecostals in Mumias, Western Kenya and its Influence on Interfaith Relations” reveals the competitive nature of the inter-religious scenario that is enhanced during the popular *mihadhara* (public preaching) sessions. Wandera outlines how both Christians and Muslims engaged in textual dialogue using rhetorical means to demean the other. He concludes that such conversations are basically ineffective and often ended in tension and violence requiring the intervention of the police force (Wandera, 2013a, p. 136). Wandera supports this inference in his study of Eastleigh, a suburb in Nairobi that is heavily populated by Somali Muslims. *Mihadhara* is “one of the most common religious phenomena in Eastleigh,” (Wandera, 2013b, p. 27) where Muslims mainly structure their preaching after Ahmed Deedat’s polemics.<sup>2</sup> One main feature of the Eastleigh *mihadhara* is the use of scriptural references. Muslims use Biblical references while Christians use Qur’anic citations in their respective rebuttals. Unfortunately, such a strategy has led to violence and tension on several occasions. Wandera reports:

Because of its approach, which is mainly adversarial and touching on the central doctrines of both Christianity and Islam, members of the audience are always tense and exhibit a negative attitude towards each other. In an interview with Abdurrahman Hassan he clearly explained the effects of these activities, “Sometimes Muslims have exchanged bitter words with their Christians counterparts while preaching. I clearly remember in June 2005 when the exchange was so bitter that Muslims and Christians

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<sup>2</sup> The late Ahmed Deedat was an Indian based in Durban, South Africa, and was popular for his polemical debates and preaching against Christians.

engaged in physical fights and the police had to intervene” (Interviewed in 2013 at Eastleigh, Nairobi) (Wandera, 2013b, p. 29).

Due to the negativity that results from these public debates, Wandera suggests a “diapaxis” model where members of different faiths engage in “joint actions on matters of common concern in order to enhance peaceful co-existence” (Wandera, 2013b, p. 33).

Patrick Mburu Kamau also carried out an empirical study of inter-religious dialogue between Muslims and Pentecostal Christians in Nairobi, Kenya. Like Wandera, Kamau notes that the contemporary use of religious texts, the Qur’an, and the Bible in the public preaching (*mihadhara*) by the Pentecostal Christians and the Muslims, has elicited more tension than constructive inter-religious engagement (Kamau, 2013, p. 17). He therefore proposes a model which he calls “Integrated Inclusivism Conceptual Model” as an alternative to the polemical engagement (Kamau, 2018, p.62). This model has four parts as outlined below:

Part A: Shared theological concepts

Part B: Socio-political and economic dialogue

Part C: Divergent theological concepts

Part D: Constructive Christian-Muslim dialogue

Essentially, Kamau’s model points to the need for peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Christians despite the divergent theological concepts that are often used to cause antagonism.

Kamau and Wandera cited above have studied the Kenyan inter-religious circle, while Chesworth’s studies include Tanzania and Uganda. Tanzanian polemical approach has fundamentally influenced much of the East African locations. This influence is attributed to Ahmed Deedat’s visit to Tanzania in June 1981 where many Muslims embraced and propagated his methods and polemical style (Chesworth, 2007, p. 115).

In Uganda, missionary Henry M. Stanley had an opportunity in 1875 to explain the Bible to Kabaka Mutesa, who had embraced Islam from the Arab traders (Chesworth 2007, p.

81). A century after this amicable encounter, the inter-religious scenario in Uganda has changed and is now riddled with “hatred, conflict and destruction,” according to Serunjogi Umar, who conducted an empirical study on the Muslim-Christian relations in the country (2015, p. 2).

The negative impact of the popular *mihadhara* approach involved in Muslim-Christian relations in Africa is affirmed by Tabea Scharrer who asserts that the debates serve to create a plethora of “intellectual superiority” in Kenya. The competitive nature of the *mihadhara* elicits criticism from both Muslims and Christians (Scharrer, 2022, p. 213). Essentially, the competitive opposition that tends to create an atmosphere of religious superiority, whether by Muslims or Christians, does not lead to peaceful coexistence. Instead, it pits adherents of different religions against each other and creates unhealthy socio-religious tensions that may act as time-bombs in future. There is, therefore, the need to suggest an alternative approach to Christian-Muslim engagement in the African context. The suggested model of contextual Scriptural Reasoning (SR) is deemed to be such an approach that is contextualised and employs the African values of hospitality and *Ubuntu* humanness. Before discussing the model, it is necessary to briefly recount Qur’anic and Biblical passages that acknowledge or advocate for scriptural reasoning.

### **Qur’an on Scriptural Reasoning and Inter-religious Dialogue**

Muslims regard the Qur’an as a source of eternal guidance, and thus consult it frequently to solve emerging issues. The Qur’an is used alongside the Hadith, the Prophet’s sayings, and actions. This section highlights some of the passages in the Qur’an that have reference to scriptural reasoning as well as inter-religious dialoguing between Muslims and non-Muslims.

### **Scriptural Reasoning and Interpretation of the Qur’an**



The concept of Scriptural Reasoning in Islam is evidenced in the conversations between the traditionalist versus modernist Muslims' respective views on interpretation of the Qur'an. Muslims believe that the interpretation of the Qur'an as a universal message revealed to different prophets at various historical times, should stem from a comprehensive understanding of both its linguistic-lexical and historical modes (Sachedina, 2005). This approach then becomes essential as Muslims engage with non-Muslims in reading their Qur'an together. As Muslims participate in such inter-textual readings, they are also expected to understand the Qur'anic theology and injunctions. Islamic jurisprudence prescribes four ways in which the ethical/legal issues in the Qur'an can be understood or reasoned among themselves:

1. *Ijma* (Ar. for "consensus"): Considered a secondary source of the Islamic law (Sharia) after the Qur'an and Hadith, which provides legal-ethical ruling from a consensus of Muslim jurists.
2. *Qiyas* (Ar. for "analogical reasoning"): Another secondary source of Sharia, where Muslim jurists offer analogical reasoning of ethical-legal issues not directly addressed in the Qur'an or Hadith.
3. *Ijtihad*: Application of independent logical reasoning by an expert in Islam to solve emerging issues not covered in the Qur'an or Hadith.
4. *Madhhab* rulings: *Ijtihad* relies on the Islamic jurisprudence according to the four schools of Islamic thought (*madhhab*), namely, Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi, and Hanbali. Muslims are allowed to choose any of these schools for interpretation of theological or legal/ethical issues.

It is imperative for non-Muslims who engage in contextual SR to understand the kind of intra-theological reasoning that goes on among Muslims as discussed above. It is also expedient to note that the Qur'an and Hadith are the primary sources of the Islamic law, and

thus are paramount to Muslims. Contextual SR dwells mostly on the Qur'an, hence the need to appreciate the kind of intra-textual hermeneutics applied to the verses (Sachedina, 2005). The discussion on Qur'anic hermeneutics is beyond the scope of this paper, yet it is important to caution Christians not to apply the principles of Biblical hermeneutics while reading the Qur'an during the contextual SR sessions. The Qur'an ought to be read on its own terms and interpretive principles when discussing the common themes found in the Bible. One significant verse in the Qur'an that refers to such common themes is S. 3: 64.

فُلْيَا هَلْ أَلْكُتَبِ نَعَالُوا إِلَى كَلِمَةٍ سَوَاءٍ بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَكُمْ أَلَّا نَعْبُدُ إِلَّا اللَّهَ وَلَا نُشْرِكُ بِهِ شَيْئًا وَلَا يَتَّخِذَ بَعْضُنَا بَعْضًا أَرْبَابًا مِّنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ فَإِنْ تَوَلَّوْا فَقُولُوا اشْهَدُوا بِأَنَّا مُسْلِمُونَ

Say: O people of the Book! Come to **common terms as between us and you**, that we worship none but God; that we associate no partners with Him; that we erect not from among ourselves lords and patrons other than God...(Yusuf Ali)

The phrase “common terms as between us and you” in Arabic (*kalimantin sawāin baynanā wabaynakum*) has been translated in various ways, including: “a word equitable between us and between you” (Saheeh International); “a word that is just between us and you” (ibn Kathir); “that tenet which we and you hold in common” (Asad); etc.<sup>3</sup> The *asbab al-nuzul* (occasion for revelation) of this verse goes back to the historical account when a delegation of Najran Christians visited Prophet Muhammad in Yathrib (Medina) in 632 AD (<https://www.alim.org/quran/tafsir/ibn-kathir/surah/3/64/>). It is on such a basis that this verse (S. 3: 64) is widely used by Muslims to assert the commonality between them and Christians. Both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars have attempted to explain the meaning and application of this verse. Henning Wrogemann, for instance, is a non-Muslim scholar who has discussed S. 3: 64 from a Christian perspective and suggests a polyphonic understanding in inter-religious engagements (2021). Tumin, Makrufi, and Purnomo mention the verse in their

<sup>3</sup> Different translations derived from: <http://en.noblequran.org/quran/surah-al-imran/ayat-64/>

discussion on the discourses on Islamic practices of tolerance in the modern and classical eras. They request people to use their “mind and intellect to examine and analyze the truth of God’s saying” in reference to S. 3: 65 (Ye People of Scripture! Why dispute ye about Abraham, when the Law and the Gospel were not revealed till after him?”) (Tumin et al., 2020, p. 66). This aspect of tolerance is evident in the following discussion on the Qur’an and inter-religious dialogue.

### **Qur’an and Inter-religious Dialogue**

The phenomenon of inter-religious dialogue has been a critical discussion in Islamic circles. There are some Muslims who do not approve it and are not willing to participate. However, the Qur’an has guided Muslims in carrying out dialogues with adherents of other religions. It seems that the Qur’anic directives are not very explicit, thus making some Muslims becoming antagonistic to inter-religious conversations (Ilhami, 2020). Historical intolerance by and against Muslims in different places and eras has contributed also to the apprehension towards inter-religious dialogues. This section will, however, highlight some of the verses that refer to inter-religious conversations and tolerance between Muslims and non-Muslims.

- Humanity as one family with one origin despite tribal or national differences:

S. 49: 13 “O Mankind We created you from a single (pair) of a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other).”

- Respect for sincere believers in God:

S. 2: 62 “Those who believe (in the Qur’an), and those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Christians and the Sabians – any who believe in God and the Last Days, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.”

- Relation with People of the Book:

S. 29: 46 “And dispute ye not with the People of the Book except with means better (than mere disputation), unless it be with those of them who inflict wrong (and injury) . . .”

Commenting on S. 29: 46 in footnote 3472, Yusuf Ali asserts,

Mere disputations are futile. In order to achieve our purpose as true standard-bearers for Allah, we shall have to find true common grounds of belief . . . And also to show by our urbanity, kindness, sincerity, truth, and genuine anxiety, for the good of others. (Ali, 1989, p. 998)

- Preference for Christians:

S. 5: 82 “. . .and nearest among them (Muslim believers) in love to the believers will you find those who say, ‘We are Christians’ because among these are men devoted to learning and men who have renounced the world, and they are not arrogant.”

- Not to deride others:

S. 49: 11 “O ye who believe! Let not some men among you laugh at others; it may be that the (latter) are better than the (former); nor let some women laugh at others. . . Nor defame nor be sarcastic to each other, nor call each other by (offensive) nicknames . . .”

There are some Muslims who use the term *kaffir* (translated as disbelievers) on non-Muslims. This verse therefore exhorts all Muslims to avoid name-calling and instead observe correct etiquettes and tolerance. Only God knows the real status of human beings and thus no one has a right to judge others.

- Deal gently with non-Muslims:

S. 3: 159 “It is part of the mercy of God that thou dost deal gently with them (unbelievers). Wert thou severe or harsh-hearted, they would have broken away from about thee; so, pass over (their faults), and ask for (God’s) forgiveness for them, and consult them in affairs (of moment).”

This verse shows how the Prophet would behave when he encountered people of different faiths, emphasizing that harshness hinders propagation of Islam. Muslims are therefore encouraged to be polite during conversations with non-Muslims and to avoid any superiority demeanour.

These verses illustrate that the Qur'an endorses inter-religious conversations among different groups of Muslims as well as with non-Muslims. It is imperative to understand others who do not hold similar beliefs. This understanding stems from obtaining the necessary knowledge of adherents who do not ascribe to Islamic tenets. Such understanding and knowledge prevent prejudice or negative preconceptions, which inhibits peaceful coexistence (Sulaiman, 2021, p. 43). Ilhami consents with what Sulaiman says about inter-religious dialogue and further asserts that dialogue often occurs inevitably because of differences or "pluralism" (Ilhami 2020, p. 45) that has been allowed by God according to S.11: 118 "If thy Lord had so willed He could have made mankind one people; but they will not cease to dispute."

### **Scriptural Reasoning in the Bible**

For Christians who would seek to participate in contextual SR, it is imperative to heed the injunction by Jesus calling for every Christian to love their neighbour as themselves. In Matthew 22: 34-40, a pharisee (an expert of the Law) went to Jesus and asked him, "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." Such an imperative forms the basis for any scriptural engagement with non-Christians as we also see the following examples of dialoguing in the Old Testament, and scriptural reasoning in the New Testament.

### **Dialoguing by Patriarch Abraham in the OT**

Abraham's engagement with Lot in Genesis 13: 5-9 has been proposed as a basis for dialoguing found in the Old Testament. We appreciate Chukwunonso Egbedike's article (2019) that recommends Abraham's model of dialogue for Christian-Muslim inter-religious encounters in African contexts. Egbedike refers to the same pericope of Genesis 13: 5-9 and mentions the dispute between the herdsmen of Abram and his nephew Lot. To avert any further violence between the two groups, Abram takes the initiative to dialogue/reason with Lot. Gen. 13: 8 alludes to this dialoguing: "So Abram said to Lot, 'Let's not have any quarrelling between you and me, or between your herdsmen and mine, for we are brothers.'" Abram acknowledged the need for amicable coexistence with Lot, his nephew whom he calls his "brother" in a socio-cultural sense. He offered to separate instead of fighting his "brother" and thus humbled himself by allowing the younger Lot to be the first to choose the land to occupy as they parted ways. Abram was much older than Lot and should have been the first one to select where to go, yet he humbly gave up the rights to choose first. Apart from displaying this important virtue of humility in dialoguing, Abram (now Abraham) showed his heart of hospitality by welcoming "strangers" to dine with him.

Gen. 18: 1-15 recounts the narrative of Abraham welcoming three men into his compound and ensuring they were well fed and refreshed. There was a conversation that ensued where the men disclosed their intentions to Abraham. This may not be a case of scriptural reasoning, but the element of hospitality is important as one thinks about contextual SR. The significance of Abraham can also be used in inter-religious public discourses that employ the biblical and Qur'anic constructs of his righteousness as a *hanīf* (Jadim, 2023).

### **Scriptural Reasoning in the NT**

In the NT, Paul provides vivid examples of reasoning as indicated in the following verses especially in the book of Acts of the Apostles.

- Acts 17: 2 “As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue (at Thessalonica), and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them (Jews) from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. ‘This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ,’ he said.”
- Acts 17: 17 “So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the market-place day by day with those who happened to be there.”

The Greek word for “reasoning” is *dialegomai* or *dialogidzomai* from which the English word “dialogue” is derived. In Greek, the prefix *dia-* means “through, across to the other side,” while the suffix *-legō* means “speaking to a conclusion.” Thus, the literal meaning of *dialegomai* is to get a conclusion across by exchanging thoughts. In the New International Dictionary of New Testament, the basic sense of the word *dialegomai* is to “discuss.” In classical and Hellenistic Greek, the word was employed by philosophers to mean conversations that were aimed at offering teachings. In the NT, the word is used in several instances. For Paul and early disciples, it meant being able to answer questions about one’s faith (e.g., 1 Peter 3: 15). Paul expounded significant themes from the OT and the audience was allowed to ask questions (Fürst, 1975, p. 820-821). Thus, scriptural reasoning as a dialogue is a discussion (give and take) and not a formal sermon or merely lecturing at length, but responding to questions as Paul did, where “Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks” (Acts 18: 4).

Paul lived during the Graeco-Roman times of the first century B.C. The religious scenario was replete with different religions. The Romans and Greeks were polytheistic unlike the Jews who were strictly monotheistic. Paul encountered all these religious traditions as shown above where he employed the dialogue strategy with love and respect. In his speech

before the Areopagus council at Athens, Paul quoted some poetic phrases coined by the Greek philosophers as illustrated in Acts 17: 28, “‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’” Quoting such lines shows that Paul had interacted with the philosophers’ literature and thus was able to dialogue with them from a point of understanding.

Paul’s world portrays some similarities with the African context. Religion in the Graeco-Roman world was not a private or individual matter, but was corporate and communal, which is like the African religious context that was and remains a cooperate entity (Togarasei, 2015, p. 161-162). The suggestion to have an alternative inter-religious engagement between Christians and Muslims in the African contexts will leverage on this fact that religion is not a private affair. Furthermore, the virtues of respect and hospitality are common in virtually all African societies, which makes the contextual Scriptural Reasoning appropriate within the contexts. The following section discusses how these virtues can be harnessed within the SR model even though the model originated from a non-African context.

### **Leveraging the African *Ubuntu* Philosophy for Peaceful Coexistence**

A Xhosa (South African) proverb, *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (“A person is a person through other persons”), laid the grounds for the principles of *Ubuntu* philosophy in other African contexts. This philosophy was further entrenched in John S. Mbiti’s popular sentence: *Mundu ni mundu nundu wa andu* (Translated: A person is a person because of other persons); an adage that has been propagated widely as “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.” Mbiti’s assertion seemed to counter Rene Descarte’s philosophy of “I think, therefore I am” that embeds the Western concept of individualism (Gathogo, 2022). The *Ubuntu* philosophy is an African expression of thoughts that embrace the humanness of every person and hence calls for communality as opposed to individualism. The philosophy



has elicited many scholarly works as Chowdhury et al. note on their list of recent works on *Ubuntu* (Chowdhury et al., 2023, p. 22).

The virtues embedded in the *Ubuntu* philosophy may not be exclusively African, yet they display a unique African orientation that should be leveraged for inter-religious coexistence. Such virtues like cooperation, mutual respect, interconnectedness, collectiveness, etc. are emphasized in the contextual SR model to enhance sustainable peacebuilding in places where adherents of different religions live together. To emphasise the need for this harmonious coexistence in line with *Ubuntu* philosophy, myriads of African proverbs have been composed and passed from generation to generation. Table 1 shows some examples of such proverbs.

**Table 1**  
***Some African Proverbs Alluding to Ubuntu***

Language	Proverbs
Kiswahili	<i>Kidole kimoja hakiui chawa</i> (One finger cannot kill lice)
Kikuyu	<i>Mugogo umwe nduaraga iriuko</i> (One log does not make a bridge)
Kikuyu	<i>Gutiri gitaturie kingi</i> (Nothing exists without the other)
Bambara (Mali)	<i>Boko kele tesseka bele ta</i> (One finger cannot lift a stone)
Luhya (Bukusu, Kenya)	<i>Okhalia weng'ene tawe</i> (Do not eat on your own)
Zulu	<i>Ikhaya liyikhaya uma kuyisaga sokuvakashelwa</i> (A home is a home if it is visited)

These are a few proverbs that epitomize the *Ubuntu* philosophy that depicts humanness as God intended it to be. Diversity in religion should not polarise people in any region where adherents of different religions coexist. The contextual SR model thus should be a natural output stemming from the *Ubuntu* philosophy in African contexts.

#### **Leveraging the African Hospitality for Inter-religious Coexistence**

African hospitality can be redefined in contextual SR as a key component of inter-religious coexistence. Hospitality in African contexts is an aspect of the *Ubuntu* philosophy

discussed in the previous section. It is expedient to offer a separate discussion on hospitality to reinforce the relevance of contextual SR within the African contexts.

The uniqueness of African hospitality is in its pragmatic nature, it is not merely an abstract concept. Generally, the African host painstakingly ensures that the visiting guest or stranger is comfortable and satisfied. Mligo presents interesting examples of how guests are treated in different African settings right from the time they enter the host's premise to the time they exit (2021, p. 14-15). Some principles of African hospitality gleaned from these examples include: offering the best for the guest; mutual respect between the host and the guest; mutual exchange of gifts by the host and guest; deep conversations with active listening; escorting the guest before bidding them farewell, etc.

The theory and practice of Scriptural Reasoning (SR) ride on the virtue of hospitality. SR proponents have highlighted the importance of the venue of meeting to offer a place of hospitality where different voices can be heard and understood (Moseley, 2018, p. 239). Moseley further emphasises the significance of the space where hospitality is offered. Such a place should be an "in-between" space where everyone is welcomed and does not feel threatened. She therefore developed the concept of a "Story Tent" and uses gazebos where children from different religious affiliations gather to listen to stories from their respective sacred texts. The idea of a tent suggests a liminal space where the "pupils could become both guests of the storytellers, who would share from their traditions, yet also hosts, with their own stories to share" (Moseley, 2022, p. 17). Such a concept of hospitality is not foreign to the African mind.

Such an accommodative nature embedded in African hospitality makes the contextual SR applicable for Africans. Essentially, the SR contextualised model seeks to offer comfortable religious spaces where mutual respect is exhibited by members of different faiths. In the African context, offering such hospitality entails accommodating people who do

not agree with each other. Similarly, SR is not about adherents of different faiths agreeing with each other but agreeing to disagree with understanding, which is also a basic ethos of *Ubuntu*. There is need to offer a physical space where such agreements to disagree can be expressed. Moseley's idea of a story-tent can be contextualised to providing a room or a hut in which people feel free to discuss religious texts without being threatened. The venue of contextual SR would therefore be in a neutral space outside the normal places of worship (temple, churches, mosques, synagogues, and others). For the rural areas, tree shades are usually important areas for meeting of elders. Thus, contextual SR can also take place under the trees.

Accommodating adherents of different religions in African contexts also means including the oral African traditional religions (ATRs). We appreciate Maniraj Sukdaven's article, which calls for inclusion of ATRs in SR discussions. Sukdaven does not provide a model of such an inclusion but proposes that contextual SR can revolve around the concept of material religion, which includes the non-text materials like objects, images, spaces, etc. (Sukdaven, 2018, p. 5). The application of such a suggestion in contextual SR would be that respective themes of different ATRs of the participants are considered as they discuss the various texts. African Christianity and Islam have been practiced alongside borrowed elements from respective ATRs in a tribal group. For instance, some aspects of the concept of a Supreme God have been inculcated within African Christianity and Islam. This is seen in the different tribal names for God that have been borrowed from ATRs. Thus, during the contextual SR discussions of God's names or attributes, SR participants can be asked to include a discussion of the tribal names of God and his attributes.

Another aspect of inclusivity for the contextual SR is usage of local languages. Africans are rich in a kaleidoscope of ethnic languages that are both spoken and written. The Qur'an and the Bible have also been translated into the major ethnic languages and thus the

SR discussions can also be conducted in these languages. Kiswahili as the lingua franca in Kenya appeals to many people, especially along the coastal region. Contextual SR sessions can be conducted in Kiswahili and the scriptural verses printed out from the Kiswahili Qur'an and Bible, respectively. Apart from the usage of these contextual languages, it is also expedient to include the women and youth in the SR discussions.

### **Inclusion of Women and Youth in Contextual SR**

In the year 2000 the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR 1325) reaffirmed the significant role played by women in sustainable peacebuilding ('UNSCR 4213th Meeting on 31st October 2000, Resolution 1325, accessed 23 November 2023, <http://unscr.com/files/2000/01325.pdf>). Such a statement might have arisen because of the downgrading of the place of women in traditional societies. It is also a known fact that it is women and children who bear the biggest brunt during violence; hence they should not be ignored in scriptural conversations. The African scenario is particularly guilty of restricting women to house duties and not beyond. It is no wonder that relatively few African women have participated in inter-religious peacebuilding in the past. However, different international forums in contemporary times continue to make deliberate efforts to recognise the significant role of African women. The example of Tanzanian peacebuilder, Anna Abdallah, founder of CofP (Creators of Peace) initiative, is inspiring and serves to motivate more participation of women. She advocates for the involvement of women in sustainable peacebuilding (<https://www.womeninpeace.org/a-names/2017/4/24/anna-abdallah>). The contextual SR model suggested herein takes this cue and recognizes the germane role of African women in the SR discussions.

As we propose the gender inclusivity in contextual SR model, we are leveraging the fact that contemporary Kenyan women have continued to establish women's groups (*chama*) more readily than men. They can be encouraged to start scriptural conversation with their

friends or neighbours especially for those coexisting with women adherents of different religions. Apart from this focus on including women, we also propose a concerted effort to include the youth in inter-religious conversations.

The model of contextual SR intentionally encourages the participation of the African youth bearing the fact that they make up a large part of the population. Again, the UN realizes the potential of African youth by asserting that Africa has the youngest population globally with 70 percent of Sub-Saharan Africa population below the age of thirty (<https://www.un.org/ohrlls/news/young-people%E2%80%99s-potential-key-africa%E2%80%99s-sustainable-development>). The African youth can be encouraged to engage in constructive religious dialogues. More Muslim and Christian students in institutions of higher education can be motivated to engage in contextual SR. Thankfully, inter-religious dialogues have been introduced at some universities/institutes in African contexts, as seen from the following examples.

### **Relevant Examples of Inter-religious Engagement in African Contexts**

This section highlights some relevant contemporary examples that show the workability of the contextual SR model in African contexts. We begin by highlighting one inter-religious forum that takes place within a university setting, which involves the youth. We shall then give a brief report of the contextual SR that we have initiated and participated in another local university. We shall conclude the section by highlighting a contemporary Ghanaian example of a SR forum.

In 2016, a peace and interfaith initiative was undertaken after the 2nd of April 2015 attack at the Garissa University. The organization called “Initiatives of Change (IofC)” was invited by the administration of the university to help establish the initiative. The first inter-religious dialogue held inside the university premise attracted more than 80 students, Muslim and Christian religious leaders, and members of the surrounding community. The aim of such

conversations is to counter inter-religious phobia and misunderstanding while enhancing peaceful coexistence (<https://www.iofcafrica.org/en/interfaith-dialogue-report-garissa-university-kenya>).

The Garissa University initiative for peace and interfaith conversations is a good venture to be emulated by other institutions of higher learning in African contexts. Such forums could use the contextual SR model for sustainable inter-religious conversations. SR has a structured and organized way of dialoguing that can ensure continuity since there are myriads of common themes in the respective scriptures that can be used as topics.

At the Africa International University (AIU) in Nairobi, the contextual SR model of inter-religious conversation has also been in place. Muslim and Christian students and faculty have been participating since June 2023, both in-person and virtually. They have engaged in discussions and have developed a brochure with detailed guidelines for contextual SR sessions. Some of the topics covered together with the scriptural verses are indicated in Table 2 below.

**Table 2**  
**Topics Covered in Past Contextual SR Events at AIU**

Topic	Qur'an verses	Old Testament	New Testament
Fasting	S. 2: 183-187	Isaiah 58: 4-7	Matthew 4: 1-4
Beginnings 1	S. 41: 10-12	Genesis 1: 1-5	John 1: 1-5
Beginnings 2	S. 5: 29-33	Genesis 2: 4-9 Genesis 1: 26-29	-
Cain and Abel	S. 5: 27-32	Genesis 4: 1-16	Matthew 23: 29-39

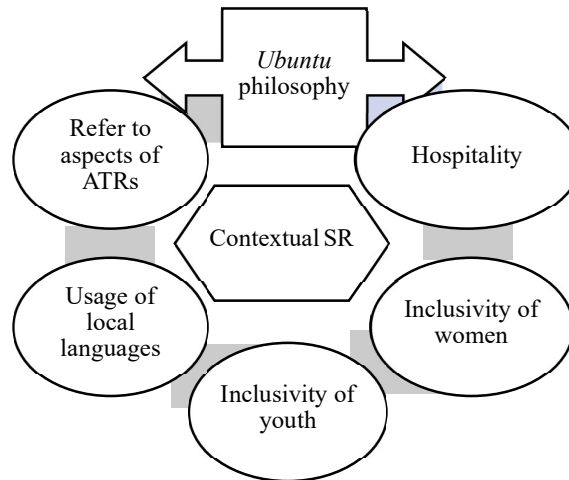
The passages were derived from the scriptural text packs provided by the SR Rose Castle Foundation. Each text has both the English translation and the passages in the original languages (Arabic, Hebrew, and Greek) (<http://www.scripturalreasoning.org/text-packs.html>). The discussions around these texts were enriching and enlightening. Participants were free to ask relevant questions related to the texts. The topic on fasting was especially relevant

because it was discussed during the Islamic fasting period in the month of Ramadhan (2023). Participants have noted how beneficial the contextual SR discussions have been, and therefore more Muslims and Christians have been invited to join the subsequent SR discussions.

There are other places where SR model has been adopted for inter-religious conversations in Africa. The Sanneh Institute (TSI) in Ghana initiated a forum dubbed “Christian-Muslim Scriptural Sharing” (CMSS). This forum follows the SR ethos and has engaged Muslims and Christians in scriptural conversations in four different sessions. The first session was held on 9th February 2023, where the scriptural conversations were based on creation in the Qur’an and the Bible. The second session was on 4<sup>th</sup> May 2023 under the theme: Noah- Sin and judgement. The third session was on 31<sup>st</sup> August 2023 under the theme: The Law- Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. The fourth session was on 30<sup>th</sup> November 2023 with the theme: Jesus, Son of Mary. All the sessions were held from 10am to 3pm and included sharing a meal together in the spirit of offering African hospitality. The sessions have elicited positive remarks from both Muslims and Christians. According to one of the key organisers, the successful sessions demonstrated the potential of the SR model to “foster mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence” (Amo-Nyampong, 2023).

### **Some Practicalities of Contextual SR Model**

SR is a structured model of inter-religious communication and therefore needs good planning and implementation. These recommendations can be altered according to specific contexts as we note that African communities are rich in diversity and communication aspects. Prior to providing the recommendations, we provide a diagrammatic expression (Figure 1) of the interconnectedness of the essential elements included in the contextual SR model in African contexts.



**Figure 1**  
**Interconnectedness of Fundamental Elements in Contextual SR**

Figure 1 shows the importance of leveraging *Ubuntu* philosophy as a fundamental aspect of the contextual SR model, and as a key to the interconnection of the other elements and virtues. Hospitality is an essential element of *Ubuntu* to leverage in offering religious hospitality to each other. The issue of inclusivity is emphasized because of the traditional denigration of women and youth in many African contexts, yet they are deemed to play significant roles in peacebuilding. ATRs cannot be ignored since they have been inculcated into Islam and Christianity. The scriptural texts of these religions have been translated into various African languages; thus, the contextual SR model will use passages from the vernacular scriptures.

The starting point for implementation of the model is raising awareness and educating people about the theory and practice of SR. It has been noted in this paper that most people think of *mihadhara* as the more popular approach to inter-religious approaches. We recommend therefore that both Muslims and Christians should be made aware of the SR as a different and alternative approach to inter-religious encounters. After raising awareness, people will be invited to voluntarily participate in any forthcoming sessions that will be announced appropriately. The venues for the different sessions should be conducive and



comfortable to all participants involved. Prior preparations should be made so that the sessions flow efficiently. These preparations include availing the specific passages from the Qur'an, Old Testament, and New Testament in both English/Kiswahili and the respective original languages (Arabic, Hebrew, and Greek). We acknowledge that many Christians or Muslims may not be very conversant with the original languages, Hebrew/Greek and Arabic respectively. It is recommended that the one leading such a group would be able to refer to the necessary hermeneutical tools for a comprehensive understanding of the passages. These are some of the pertinent preparation steps necessary for a contextual SR session. There are other guidelines that ought to be presented to the participants. These guidelines are provided in a brochure (available from the authors) which provides more details about the model.

### **Conclusion**

The contextual SR model suggested herein is relevant for the African contexts that already have a prevailing *Ubuntu* philosophy. The SR theory and practice has its historical beginnings in non-African contexts, yet this paper has shown how it can be contextualised within the *Ubuntu* philosophical underpinnings. The quest for scriptural basis for textual reasoning and inter-religious dialogues in both the Qur'an and the Bible revealed that these texts uphold inter-religious conversations. The relevant examples of inter-religious engagements and SR practice show the applicability of the contextual SR in more regions within the continent of Africa.

The inclusion of women and the youth in the contextual SR practice is noteworthy as they are significant members of the African communities at large. Often, they have been ignored in peacebuilding efforts, and yet their relatively high population in Africa requires their ardent participation. This proposed inclusivity makes the contextual SR unique in application as it also recognises the need to include the vernacular scriptural passages. Ultimately, the call to participate in contextual SR sessions is for better understanding of the

religious ‘Other’ in a fast-growing global village with more inter-religious encounters. SR does not call for a consensus of religious tenets. SR offers opportunities to agree to disagree by listening actively to one another. It is not about competition or supersessionism. Neither is SR about relativism or absolutism. It is about understanding the ‘Other’ based on their respective religious texts. Such an approach enhances peacebuilding and amicable coexistence.

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