

## Preface: Interreligious Dialogue in the Context of South Africa

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The international discourse on interreligious dialogue has been shaped by analyses done in the Global North. Recognising this, acknowledged experts in the field of interreligious relations—such as Anna Halafoff, Younus Mirza, Anne Hege Grung, or Hans Gustafson—have deplored the deficit of voices from the Global South. Another concern relates to the fact that the majority of academic work is done from a Western and often Christian perspective, which has led to a plea formulated by Paul Hedges, for example, to “decolonise” religious studies. The articles in this issue cannot overcome these concerns on their own, but they might contribute to addressing them in part by presenting analyses of South African colleagues, i.e., scholars from the Global South, in the area of interreligious dialogue. The fact that half of the contributions stem from authors with a Muslim background can be seen as a countermeasure to a dominance of Christian voices in the academic field of interreligious dialogue. These authors’ voices offer new perspectives and open up new debates, directed towards a broadening of how religious studies or education is normatively and exclusively framed. These perspectives also assist in disrupting the predominant “Christian” lens through which religious traditions are interpreted.

Notably, the South African context is characterised as a specific one in the Global South, so the analyses and results cannot be generalised for other parts of the southern hemisphere. Nevertheless, the contributions in this issue might show the specificities of interreligious dialogue in one particular southern context, and, from that angle, commonalities with questions raised in the Global North could also be defined.

There are special contextual factors that relate specifically to interreligious dialogue in South Africa. Without being able to cover this aspect in depth and in detail, we would like to emphasise that in considering contemporary questions on interreligious dialogue it should also be taken into account that, until 1990, the Christian National politics of apartheid dominated all spheres of society, with the effect that most interactions between

people of different cultures and religions were hindered. Nonetheless, despite the entrenchment of segregated living and being, some religious communities managed to engage with mutual regard—a regard which was probably strengthened by the obvious indignity and injustice of apartheid. Although on the level of general politics this kind of domination has been overcome, some societal, political, cultural and religious boundaries remain. While much has been done to undo structural divisions, such as desegregating the education system, discarding racially defined residential areas, and opening all public spaces to all people, South Africans continue to struggle with crossing over via dialogue, or otherwise, and entering into the lived realities of others. There are several reasons for what can be understood as a preference to interact only with what is familiar and known. Among these is a recognition that despite all the political shifts which have accompanied the country's transition to a democracy, little has changed for the majority of South Africans.

Extreme dichotomies of social realities between historically advantaged and historically disadvantaged communities persist, making it impossible for this divide to be crossed. Knowledge about others remains trapped in (mis)perceptions and stereotypes, with seemingly limited efforts to break out of these moulds. Interreligious dialogue in South Africa is not exempt from these broader constraints and remains connected to questions of political, social, and economic power. South Africa thus presents a context which has experienced major shifts in the overall political frame and societal dynamics, thereby forming a relevant analytical background for our theme.

The contributions to this issue show a multidisciplinary composition, offering insights from various disciplines. Theological analyses concern the need for the decolonisation of South African Christianity (Dion Forster), the Muslim community and interreligious dialogue in South Africa (Rashed Omar), and the implications of Pentecostal theological thinking for interreligious dialogue (Peter White). The contributions from the field of education and dialogue raise questions about Muslim-based schools in South Africa (Nuraan Davids), of the possibilities and impossibilities of interreligious engagement (Yusef Waghid) and of interreligious relationships from a human rights in higher education perspective (Marilyn Naidoo). The relevance of religion for migrants in Cape Town is shown in its relation to family language planning by a sociolinguistic approach (Christine Anthonissen). Finally, the relevance of interreligious coexistence in South Africa, going further than just engaging in dialogue with one another, is taken up as a general question with reference to South African examples (Bernard Lategan).

The contributions to this issue emphasise the need to focus not only on the possibilities but also on the limits of interreligious dialogue in South

Africa. It is not easy to answer questions on whether and how these results can shed light on discourses located in the Global North, and we are sure they cannot be generalised. Yet we do hope these articles will be taken up in further discourses on interreligious *dialogue* on a global level and thus perhaps contribute to the inclusions of perspectives from one part of the Global South, namely South Africa. The contributions of this special issue grew out of a symposium at the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Studies (STIAS) in March 2022.<sup>1</sup> We are grateful for this opportunity to help lay the foundation of an academic and practice-oriented discourse on interreligious dialogue in South Africa.

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1. As a fellow at the “Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study” (STIAS), Wallenberg Research Centre at Stellenbosch University, in Stellenbosch, South Africa, in the first three months of 2022, Wolfram Weisse was able to organise this symposium, “Limits of Religious Plurality.” We hereby extend our sincere thanks for the extraordinary support STIAS gave towards organising and financing the symposium.