Introduction
Kenya is a country of religious pluralism. Indeed, the presence of some of the main world religions such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism and African Religion, expresses religious pluralism and diversity in the country. Followers of these religions have co-existed for eons and continue to co-exist peacefully and to tolerate each other. In spite of the religious pluralism and diversity, the country has not experienced any religious wars. In this pluralist
religious milieu, Christians and Muslims are the majority\(^1\). However, any discourse on the relations between Christians and Muslims has invariably tended to concentrate on the obvious and common narratives of suspicions, hatred and conflicts between the two faith communities. This ranges from Muslim state relations, spatial competition engendered by such mundane issues as education and political representation; constitutional debates and public preaching (*mihadhara*), to Islamophobia, and religious radicalism and extremism. This paper demonstrates the other perspective, which more often than not, is ignored in the discourse on Christian – Muslim relations. This perspective largely underscores the recognition and efforts towards religious pluralism and tolerance between Christians and Muslims in Kenya, amidst the ever growing threat of religious radicalism and extremism. It is shown that the ideals and teachings of Christianity and Islam form the fundamental basis for religious pluralism and tolerance between Christians and Muslims to foster dialogue between the two faith communities.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first section discusses the scriptural basis for religious pluralism and tolerance between Christians and Muslims by examining the Biblical verses and Qur’an verses. This is followed by the section that discusses the need for dialogue between Christians and Muslims and the challenges. The final section before the conclusion provides examples of ecumenism and dialogue between Christians and Muslims in Kenya.

**The Scriptural Basis of Religious Pluralism and Tolerance between Christians and Muslims**

The respective scriptures of Christianity and Islam recognize religious pluralism and tolerance. Biblical references express the Christian attitude towards people of other faiths or the non-Christians. In Luke 4:16-30, the people of Nazareth, the home town of Jesus refused to acknowledge his messiahship. Jesus challenged the congregation by noting that God is not only a God of Israel but equally a God of the Gentiles. The account of Jesus in these verses shows that God is a God of others and He is not limited and confined to a particular group of people.

\(^1\) Population data of Christians and Muslims depend on the sources. Christian sources portray a large number of Christian vis-à-vis Muslim and the converse is true. Oliana (a Catholic Christian), says that Muslims constitute 6% to 10% while Christians constitute 70% (Oliana 2010, 11-12). Oded citing Muslim sources give a Muslim population of 35% (Oded 2000, 11). The latest population census of 2009 put Christians at 80% to Muslims 10%).
The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) expresses the universality of the mission of Jesus to all nations. This teaches about inclusiveness, dissolving alienation and bridging the gaps between Christians and other people. The encounter of Jesus with Samaritans in Luke 9:51-56 shows that in spite of the hostile reception, Jesus’ attitude towards the Samaritans was not moved by revenge but tolerance. This should be the spirit of Christians when relating to non-Christians (Muslims).

The fundamental teachings of Christianity revolve around the concept of unconditional love, justice and tolerance as taught by Jesus Christ. This is underscored in the concept of the Church as a family of God. The principles of the church emphasize the need to avoid all forms of conflicts based on ethnicity, nationality and racial differences (Galatians 3:26, 28). And it is a basic Christian missionary duty to proclaim to all, the way of salvation in Jesus Christ: “You are all sons of God through faith in Jesus Christ….there is neither a Jew nor a Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Acts 2:38; 1Corinthians 1:17).

Christian principles expound on the principles of human rights, including: ideals of reconciliation, love, sympathy, forgiveness, justice, peace and compassion for fellow human beings even when they are aliens (Exodus 23:9; Leviticus 19:33-34; 1 Corinthians 1:15; 2 Corinthians 4:4).

In Christianity, the covenant between God and Abraham was for the benefit of all peoples, as the “nations” played a role in the salvation history. This is exemplified in the mission and teachings of Jesus in whose life respect for the faith and devotion of others was respected. Jesus demonstrated that no one is excluded from the Kingdom of God, whether sinners or righteous: a Samaritan, a Galilean, a Roman Centurion or a Judean Pharisee. All can enter the Kingdom of God when they turn to the Lord (Borrmans, 1990, 35). And therefore, united as a Church [community of Christians], it is the responsibility of Christians, to witness to all humanity about the Good news of the Kingdom of God.

Christians are supposed to share, accept and understand other faiths. According to the Second Vatican Council, Christians are supposed to engage in conversation with others. They are to “to be educated in the ecumenical spirit, and duly prepared for the fraternal dialogue with non-
Christians”. In addition, Christians should respect the personal faith of others (Borrmans, 1990, 34).

The Qur’an deals with general principles and guidelines regarding Christian and Muslim relations but not specific rules and regulations governing Christians and Muslims (Irfan, 2007, 34). There are numerous verses where the Qurán establishes the rule of the freedom of religion: “There is no compulsion in religion (Q. 2:256)” ; “Unto you your religion, unto me my religion” (Q. 109:6). This demonstrates that the Qur’an accepts the pluralism of religions and affirms the unity of faith but insists on sincere faith in God and works of righteousness (Q.2: 62; 3:69).

The teaching of the Qurán envisages Muslim encounter with Jews and Christians who are referred to as Ahl al-Kitab (the People of the Book). Positive references to the Ahl al-Kitab are: 2:62; 5:69; 3:55, 199; 5:82. The Qur’an calls for mutual recognition and acceptance of Christians and Jews. Muhammad regarded his message to be consonant with, and complementary to, that of the Torah and the Gospel. The Qur’an regards both the Torah and the Gospel as sources of guidance and light. This is clear from the Qur’an’s frequent reference to the witness of the People of the Book to its own truth and authenticity. The Qur’an assures the Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh), in the face of opposition from his own people: “If you are in doubt concerning that which we have sent to you, then enquire of those who have been reading the scriptures before you” (Q 10:94).

The Qur’an also directs its wavering followers to the people of earlier scriptures for knowledge and reassurance (Q. 16: 43). When during the initial period of his mission, Muhammad was maligned by his own people for declaring that hell is guarded by 19 angels, he found consolation in the fact that the People of the Book and the people of faith are certain of the truth of God’s revelation (Q.74:31). These references demonstrate the unity of faith and purpose, which according to the Qur’an should exist among the Christians and Muslims.

The Qur’an removes the two most important social barriers between Christians and Muslims. These were: dietary and marriage restrictions: says in this regard: “The food of the People of the Book is lawful for you and your food is lawful for them, and the chaste women of the People of
the Book [are lawful for you to marry]” (Qur’an 5:5). This verse allows unrestricted social intercourse between Muslims and Christians.

The ideal relation envisioned by the Qur’an between Muslims and Christians is not only one of accommodation and co-existence, but also of amity and mutual respect as demonstrated in the Qur’an (5:82-83, cf. 5:84-85). The Qur’an recognizes the good intentions of Christians even where it considers their actions to be in error (Q. 57: 27). This is a clear acknowledgement of tolerance and accommodation for Christians.

The teachings of the Qurán reach out to others through Da’wah (outreach or propagation). Muslims are supposed to invite all people to the path of Allah; this is emphatic particularly to Christians (Q. 3:64). People who do not pay attention to the message should be approached again (Q 5:108; 47:32). The responsibility of a Muslim is to present truth to the people and not to force them to accept it (Q. 39:41; 16:82,125; 24:54; 50:45)! Qurán guarantees non-Muslims that their religious sentiments will be given due respect and that their right to their faith should not be encroached upon (Q. 29:46; 6:108).

It is evident from the foregoing that the Bible and Qurán legislate for a religious pluralistic society in which Christians and Muslims communities could respectively live side by side in mutual acceptance and tolerance (Irfan 2007, 39). The ideals provided for Christianity and Islam has enabled Christians and Muslims to interact with one another over the years.

**The need and challenge for Religious Pluralism and Co-existence between Christians and Muslims**

The world has become a global village creating an atmosphere of interdependence between the different peoples and religions. People of different religions live side by side as a part of the global community sharing their worries, successes and challenges of poverty, hunger, threats of diseases such as HIV/AIDS pandemic, environment vagaries and terrorism. Under these circumstances, more than ever before, there is need for different religious communities to cultivate a culture of interreligious understanding, friendship and cooperation as they strive to live together in harmony.
The remarks of Pope Francis during his visit to Kenya in November 2015 underscore the need for interreligious co-existence and harmony, which is for the common good for all people of different religions (Karanja 2015). While admitting that there are challenges in bridging the rifts between different religions, the Pontiff nevertheless insisted that religions must have a meeting point if the world is to live in harmony. His remarks were quite succinct in this regard:

To be honest, this relationship is challenging; it makes demands of us. Yet ecumenical and interreligious dialogue is not a luxury. It is not something extra or optional, but essential, something which our world, wounded by conflict and division, increasingly needs,” (Karanja, 2015).

The Pontiff’s remarks capture need for interreligious harmony between Christians and Muslims, the two predominant religious communities in Kenya. This calls for dialogue between Christians and Muslims, albeit with challenges. The challenges do not ignore the various efforts towards dialogue as observed later in this paper. But suffice it to say that, the global war on terror against radical and extremist groups that are associated with Islam and Muslims such as Al-Qaida and Al-Shabab poses the greatest challenge not only to Christian – Muslim tolerance and co-existence in Kenya but also interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims.

Terrorism has exacerbated the polarization of Christians and Muslims by putting Islam and Muslims on the spot as the various terror attacks mostly target Christians. The terrorists associate themselves with the Muslim faith and use the Qur’an text to justify attacks on Christians.\(^2\) This has led Christians to associate Islam with terrorism with some posing serious questions about the purported “peaceful” nature of Islam. For example: “If the Prophet Muhammad was sent to mankind to preach mercy as Muslims claim, why is there so much violence associated with Muslims and Islam” (Kariuki and Lubanga 2014, 6)?

Though the Muslim community has been blamed for terrorism, its members have equally been victims of terror attacks with some have died in the terror attacks (Sunday Nation 2014, 2).\(^3\) In addition, Muslims residing in areas where they are a minority are looked upon with suspicion and sometimes subjected to discrimination and profiling by Christians. For example, in the wake

\(^2\) Some Qur’an texts used to legitimate violence and aggression towards Christians are: chapters 22: 39; 66:9; 2:190

\(^3\) The grenade attack in a mosque in Eastleigh, Nairobi in May 2014, for example led to death of 2 people and injury of the local Member of Parliament. The other attack in a bus in the city of Mombasa killed 4 people.
of Westgate Mall\textsuperscript{4} terrorist attack, members of the Somali community had to bear all sorts of harassment and discrimination such as insults, and being forcibly removed from public service vehicles (Ayman 2015, 11).

Terrorism has led to a rising anti-Islamic rhetoric among Christians and “raised the tempo for the hostile climate towards Muslims” in Kenya (Ayman 2015, 1). Consequently, the fault lines between Christians and Muslims have widened (Kagwanja 2014, 21). Arguments by Muslims that “terrorists are not Muslims”\textsuperscript{5} or “terrorism is the work of the devil” (Kemei and Obuya 2013, 11)\textsuperscript{6}, have done little to absolve Muslims and Islam from blame as the attacks are committed by members who allegedly bear Muslim names and invoke the name of Allah. This has brought an unfair blanket condemnation of Islam and Muslims in Kenya as many Christians do not distinguish the acts of an individual Muslim from those of the community and religion.

The threat of terrorism poses the greatest challenge to Christian – Muslim co-existence in Kenya. The future of this co-existence will be determined by the way the Christians and Muslims will forge a working relation to handle terrorism. And there is light at the end of the tunnel as demonstrated by the heroic act of Muslims in the face of an attack by Al-Shabab gunmen on a Mandera bound passenger bus on 21 December 2015 (Munuhe 2015, 6). The Muslim passengers shared their religious attire with Christians to disguise them as Muslims and they also mingled to make it difficult for the terrorists to isolate Christians from Muslims, like it had been the practice in the past.\textsuperscript{7}

Examples of Efforts towards Ecumenism and Dialogue

To a larger extent, Christians and Muslims in Kenya live harmoniously in a spirit of tolerance and cooperation. Undoubtedly they live side by side, interacting with one another as they eke out a living. They invite and celebrate in each other’s festivals such as Christmas, Easter, Iddul Fitr

\textsuperscript{4}The attack in Nairobi on 21 September 2013, in which Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility, led to the death of 70 people.

\textsuperscript{5}This has become a mantra in any forum where there is a discourse on radicalism and extremism, touching on Muslims and Islam. For example, during the “Scientific Conference on “Radicalism, Islam and World Peace” held at the University of Nairobi, 15 March 2015, the statement was repeated by various Muslim speakers.

\textsuperscript{6}This was a response by Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims (SUPKEM) condemning the Westgate Mall terror attack.

\textsuperscript{7}In a similar attack in Mandera, on 23 November 2014, 28 Nairobi bound passengers mainly Christians were killed when the gunmen isolated them from Muslims.
and *Iddul adha*\(^8\) and even hold interreligious prayers\(^9\). And in their day-to-day life, ordinary Christians and Muslims are concerned about their socio-economic survival than their religious differences. In that context, they cooperate in a myriad of socio-economic and political activities that are meant to bring change and development to their respective communities. An example of such kind of inter religious cooperation is shown in a letter of Al-Haj Seif Mohamed Seif, which congratulated the Catholic nuns of Little Sisters for running a home for the poor, including Muslims without discrimination. The initiative of Muslim imams of Coast Province who intended to form a "joint Muslim-Christian alliance to fight for the dignity and rights of all Kenyans" (Maina 2009, 99) is a clear demonstration that Christians and Muslims could unite and cooperate in tackling various challenges affecting their communities.

The relations between Christian and Muslims in Kenya have been characterized by tolerance and peaceful co-existence as manifested in various efforts towards ecumenism and dialogue between the two communities. A few examples underline the ecumenical spirit and dialogue that has characterized Christian – Muslim co-existence. During Christian and Islamic festivals such as Christmas and *Iddul al-Fitr*, leaders sometimes publish and send mutual greetings of good will. For example in 1983, the late Manasses Kuria the Archbishop of the Anglican Church in Kenya (ACK) sent *Iddul al-Fitr* greetings to Muslims (Oded 2000, 110).

There are also instances of cooperation when Christians and Muslims join forces for a common cause. This was evident in 1994, when in solidarity Christians and Muslims came together to oppose legalizing of abortion and contraceptives that were advocated for by the 1994 United Nations Population Development Conference in Cairo, Egypt (Maina 2009, 98). Following on the heels of the Cairo Conference, in August 1995, Christians and Muslims jointly opposed the introduction of Family Life Education in schools. In a joint ceremony, the head of the Catholic Church in Kenya, Cardinal Maurice Otunga and Sheikh Ali Shee, the Imam of the Nairobi Jamia Mosque, led Christian and Muslim youths in burning books on sex education, condoms and other

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\(^8\) Muslim organizations such as the Respect Dialogue Foundation under the chairmanship of Fatih Akdogan, has in the past organized *Iftar Dinner* that incorporates interfaith seminars and workshops. An example of such a seminar was held on 29 May 2012 at the Intercontinental Hotel, Nairobi. The Foundation also organizes sessions for sharing of meals with Christians in educational institutions during *Iddul al-Fitr* and *Iddul –adha* as a mode of interfaith dialogue between Muslims and Christians.

\(^9\) For example on 23 November 2015, interreligious prayers were held at Tudor Pastoral Centre, Mombasa before a caravan of pilgrims embarked on a trip to Nairobi to meet Pope Francis during his visit to Kenya, November 25 – 27, 2015 (Robert, 2015).
contraceptive devices at Uhuru Park, a public park, in Nairobi (Maina 2009, 98). The two cases were unprecedented in the history of interfaith relations in Kenya, in the late eighties and early nineties when belligerency and war mongering characterized the relations between Christians and Muslims.

In the past, Christian and Muslim leaders have joined forces to prevent what could have escalated into violent conflicts between Christian and Muslim youths. This was the case in December 2000, when a confrontation broke out between Christians and Muslims in Nairobi South “B” Estate. The conflict left a trail of destruction of property and injuries when two churches and a mosque were burnt and many slum dwellers left homeless. It took the intervention of religious leaders, both Christians and Muslims, to calm the warring groups and to restore peace in the area (Maina 2003, 177).

Another example of cooperation between Christians and Muslims is evident in the constitutional review process that gave birth to a new constitution that was promulgated in 2010. During the process, the Muslim Consultative Forum joined “Ufungamano Initiative”10 and other stakeholders to form the People’s Commission of Kenya, which eventually became part of the constitutional review team that spearheaded the reform process (Maina 2009, 99).

After Westgate Mall terrorist attack, Christian and Muslim leaders in Mombasa issued a joint statement denouncing Al-Shabaab’s ideology and tactics as heretical teachings not based on Islam or Christianity. They denounced the Islamist group, saying the wanton killing of civilians cannot be justified under Islam or any other religion (The East African, 8 September 2012). The leaders, who represented the Council of Islamic Preachers of Kenya (CIPK), SUPKEM and Kenya National Inter-religious Network, spoke on 22 September 2013, a day after the Westgate attack (Maina 2014, 21). This act of condemnation from both Christian and Muslim leadership eased the rising tensions between Christians and Muslims.

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10 This was a forum of religious organizations and churches comprising the Anglican Church of Kenya, Hindu Council of Kenya, Kenya Episcopal Conference, Methodist Church in Kenya, national Council of Churches in Kenya, Organization of African Instituted Churches, Presbyterian Church of East Africa, Seventh Day Adventist and Salvation Army.
Pope Francis’ visit in Kenya between 25 and 27 November 2015 demonstrated a rare occasion of cooperation between Christians and Muslims. This was evident from pilgrim caravans organized by Christians and Muslims from Mombasa and Western Kenya to attend the Papal Eucharistic mass in Nairobi (Kagonya 2015, 6). During the Pontiff’s visit, leaders from other denominations and religions including Muslims had a meeting with Pope Francis where issues of religious dialogue and peaceful co-existence among religions were emphasized (Karanja 2015, 10). Speaking during the same event, the national chairman of SUPKEM, Prof Abdulghafur El-Busaidy emphasized the role of religious leaders in promoting peaceful co-existence between religions: “As religious leaders, we have a duty to promote justice, rightfulness, love, truthfulness, faithfulness and hopefulness” (Karanja 2015, 10).

Another area of cooperation between Christians and Muslims is through conferences, seminars and workshops on interfaith dialogue. There is also another level of interaction where mainly Christian students taking courses on Islam and interfaith relations in colleges and universities make occasional visits to mosques to learn more on Islam. This is an academic exercise and approach to issues of interfaith relations between Christians and Muslims because the ideas and recommendations in such forums are hardly implemented. However, in this connection, St Paul’s University, Limuru has a gone a notch higher from the usual academic discourse and established a Centre for Christian Muslim relations in Eastleigh (CCMRE). The objective of this venture was “to enable the teachers and students taking courses on Islam and Christian Muslim relations to engage and experience Christian – Muslim relations in a lived, local context” (Peter, Wandera & Jansen 2013, 3).

**Conclusion**

This paper has examined the perspective on religious pluralism and tolerance between Christians and Muslims in Kenya. It has discussed the fundamental basis of religious pluralism in the Bible

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11 For example, “The Gulen Movement Interfaith Dialogue for Peaceful Co-existence Seminar”, held on 29 May 2012 at the Intercontinental Hotel; a conference on “Muslim – Christian Relations in East Africa: Contemporary Challenges and Perspectives for the Future” held at Tangaza University College on 10 May 2014; Scientific Conference on “Radicalism, Islam and World Peace” held at University of Nairobi, 15 March 2015 etc.

12 In the past few years, students of Tangaza University College have occasionally visited Madina Centre along Mbagathi Road and a mosque in South “C” estate. These visits are normally an eye opener as the students experience the mosque ambience and discuss issues of Islam and interfaith relations with a panel of Muslim resource persons.
and Qur’an. This is a pointer that Christianity and Islam envisaged a religious pluralistic milieu and hence gave room for it. The paper has also underlined the need and challenge for religious pluralism and co-existence between Christians and Muslims. It is argued that terrorism poses the greatest challenge to the harmony and peaceful co-existence of the two communities. This challenge makes dialogue sine qua non of religious pluralism and tolerance as the two communities tackle terrorism. Finally the paper draws examples of interfaith dialogue and cooperation between Christians and Muslims. The examples demonstrate that in spite of their differences, Christians and Muslims have co-existed in harmony and have worked together for the common good and that they could forge a common front when their interests are threatened.

It is noted that one the ways of promoting interreligious harmony and tolerance is through dialogue in conferences, workshops and seminars. But the challenge is how recommendations and findings from such forums could be implemented to create more awareness and understanding among communities. As academicians, we may need to come from the cocoon of ivory towers of academic discourse and engage in diapraxis to affect our communities on the need for harmony and peaceful co-existence between religions. It is only when the ordinary person understands the need for respecting religious pluralism and tolerance that theory will be transformed into practice.

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