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**“To Fast or not to Fast”: Religious Diversity and
Peaceful Coexistence in Ghana**

Vincent Assanful
Dept. of Religion and Human Values
University of Cape Coast
vassanful@ucc.edu.gh

Abstract

During the 2021 Ramadan fasting, a controversy arose in the Wesley Girls' High School, Cape Coast that brought to the fore the need to deepen the discussions on religious diversity and accommodation of different faiths in Ghanaian public schools. The disagreement stemmed from the fact that the school prevented a Muslim girl from engaging in the annual Muslim Ramadan fasting, with the excuse that it would affect the health of the child. The school, which was built by the Wesleyan Methodist Missionaries, had the support of the Methodist Church. The Muslim groupings in Ghana felt that the attempt to stop the Muslim girl from fasting was an infringement on her religious right to practise her religion. This paper discusses this dispute in the light of the religious pluralistic society of Ghana. The paper argues that the schools which were founded by the Christian Mission and are now fully run by the state should not be used as a proselytising tool to prevent children of other faiths from practising their faiths. The paper concludes that if this action of the school is allowed to fester, it could lead to disturbances that may threaten the religious diversity and peaceful co-existence that Ghana currently enjoys.

Keywords

Diversity, Ghana, mission, Ramadan-fasting, schools

Introduction

Ghana is a religiously pluralistic society with much cultural diversity. The constitution of Ghana in Article 21 (1c) guarantees all Ghanaians the freedom to practise any religion and to manifest such practice.⁷ The 2021 Population and Housing Census puts the religious population of Ghana as follows:

- i. Christianity 71.3 %
- ii. Islam 20%
- iii. African Traditional Religion 3.2%
- iv. Others 4.5%
- v. None 1.1%⁸

The religious demography shows that Ghana is a highly religious country. With the inception of Christianity in the fifteenth century in the then Gold Coast came the establishment of formal schools. The history of education in Ghana can be traced to the castle schools set up by the European merchants to train their mulatto children for employment as administrative assistants and soldiers.⁹ The involvement of the Christian missionaries in education changed the face of education in Ghana. Education became one of the means of proselytising. The European Christian Missionaries such as the Wesleyan Methodist Missionaries and the Basel Missionaries established schools in Cape Coast, Accra, Anomabo, Akropong, and some other places along the coast of Ghana. Among the mission schools established are Mfantsipim School and Wesley Girls' High School by the Methodist Church, Adisadel College by the Anglican Church, St Augustine College and St Peters by the Catholic Church, and Presbyterian Boys Secondary School by the Presbyterian Church. Islamic missions also joined in setting up schools to help train Muslim children. Among such missions are the Ghana Muslim Mission and the Ahmadiyya Muslim Mission.

⁷1992 constitution of Ghana

⁸ Ghana Statistical Service, "Population and Housing Census (Accra: GSS, 2022)

⁹C. K. Graham, *History of education in Ghana: From the earliest times to the declaration of independence* (London: Routledge, 1971).

The Ghana Muslim Mission has established basic and secondary schools across the country. The Ahmadiyya Muslim Mission also has several schools across the country providing formal education to many Muslim and non-Muslim students.

The main purpose of the mission schools was to serve as vehicles to attract and convert the indigenous people.¹⁰ The mission schools have become an avenue for many children from diverse backgrounds to access education in Ghana. Both Christian and Muslim children have gained admissions into these mission schools, as they have proven to be excellent educational institutions. These mission schools, though have been taken over by the state, still have their founding churches wielding a lot of influence on their administration. These schools are still run on the teachings and beliefs of the founding churches. It is the understanding of these schools that all students who are admitted are to abide by the code of religious ethics of the founding churches. Recently, there was some misunderstanding between administrators of these mission schools and some parents who felt that their children were being denied the right to practise their religions. This article discusses the recent incident of the decision by the Headmistress of Wesley Girls' High (WGHS) to prevent a Muslim girl from taking part in the 2021 Ramadan fast.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The article is mainly exploratory in nature. Exploratory research deals with research problems that are not clearly defined or understood. This type of research is conducted to have a better understanding of an existing problem but does not provide conclusive results. The main theory underpinning this paper is the theory of the 'dialogue of life'. The 'dialogue of life', according to Samwini¹¹:

entails coexisting peacefully with "the other" in spite of obvious religious differences. It also means being patient. In dialogue of life, people from different religious traditions live and interact

¹⁰Denis Cogneau and Alexander Moradi, "Borders that divide: Education and religion in Ghana and Togo since colonial times." *The Journal of Economic History*, 74 no. 3 (2014): 694-729.

¹¹Nathan A. Samwini, "Dialogue of life" approach to interfaith peace in West Africa." *The Interfaith Observer* (2011)

in their everyday lives. Dialogue of life is a direct challenge to religious people, non-religious individuals, towns, and communities to accept one another no matter their differences in beliefs or practices.

Sintang, Baharuddin, and Khambali also argue that the dialogue of life is significant, as it helps to enhance mutual understanding and encourage people to be more graceful in the relationship with others.¹² The dialogue of life will be an important tool to deal with the threat of the seemingly religious intolerance that has been identified in the case under study.

Ramadan Fast

Fasting is an age-long practice that is found in all religions of the world. In Islam, fasting is observed during the holy month of Ramadan. It is a period Muslims refrain from eating, drinking, and having sexual intercourse from sunrise to sunset. The Ramadan fast lasts between 28 to 30 days.¹³ Ramadan, according to Awad,¹⁴

is the month of goodness and blessing during which Muslims become more inclined towards the worship of Allah. They pay greater attention to the recitation of the Qur'an, remembrance of Allah and seeking pardon for sins. Ramadan is distinguished from other months due to its many virtues.

The Ramadan fast is important to Muslims since it is one of the five pillars of Islam. Being a pillar means that the fasting is compulsory for every Muslim who has reached the age of puberty and is fit and well. Hossain¹⁵ has identified some benefits associated with the Ramadan fasting. These are:

¹² Suraya Sintang, Azizan Baharuddin and Khadijah Mohd Khambali, "Dialogue of life and its significance in inter-religious relation in Malaysia" 2 (December, 2012): 69-79

¹³ John. F. Trepanowski, and Richard. J. Bloomer, "The impact of religious fasting on human health" *Nutrition Journal* 9 no. 57 (November 2010): 1-9.

¹⁴ Abdul Karim Awad, "Fasting in Ramadan according to the Quran and the authentic Sunnah" (n.d).

¹⁵ Mohammed Zakir Hossain, "Fasting in Islam: Its excellence, benefits and use for sustainable development of the society." *Journal of Emerging Trends in Economics and Management Sciences*, 3no. 3 (January 2012): 184-190.

- (i) helps in drawing one closer to Allah
- (ii) helps in acquiring strong will and patience
- (iii) helps in striving for righteousness and sincerity
- (iv) helps in refinement of manners, especially those related to truthfulness and discharging trust.

One may argue that it is these perceived benefits of the Ramadan fasting that may have prompted the aggrieved parent to confront the authorities of the WGHS who had prevented his daughter from taking part in the 2021 Ramadan fasting.

Ramadan fasting and the response of WGHS

Muslims in Ghana joined their counterparts worldwide to observe the 2021 Ramadan fasting. The fasting started on Tuesday April 13, 2021 and ended on Wednesday May 12, 2021. As stated earlier, the Ramadan fasting is compulsory for all Muslims who have reached their puberty and are fit and healthy. What this means is that students in the Senior High Schools (SHS) in Ghana are legible to take part since most of them have reached the age of puberty. However, a case was reported that teenage girls at the Wesley Girls' High School (WGHS) were prevented by the school authorities from taking part in the fasting during the Ramadan.

On Monday April 26, 2021, an angry father of one of the girls stormed the school with the intention to withdraw his daughter from the school because the school authorities had prevented her from taking part in the Ramadan fasting. In a myjoyonline story by Richard Kojo Nyarko, the aggrieved parent is quoted to have said:

My daughter had admission to this school this year. In fact, for over a month, we had not heard from her. We became a bit apprehensive when some news portals reported that Muslims at Wesley Girls were not allowed to pray. I had a friend who teaches in the school and he debunked the story. Two days ago, I had a call from my daughter and she complained that they were not allowing her to fast. I know my daughter; she's been fasting right from the primary

school through to the Junior High School and so I became worried.¹⁶

The news of the action of the parent attempting to withdraw his daughter from WGHS sparked a lot of responses from interested stakeholders.

Responses of Stakeholders

Many stakeholders raised various issues with the action of the WGHS on their 'no fasting' policy. While some were in favour, others condemned the action as discriminatory and a sign of religious intolerance. The following sections present some of the various conflicting views on the impasse.

Response of Wesley Girls' High School Old Girls' Association

The school's decision to prevent their students from engaging in any form of fasting, according to the Wesley Girls' High School Old Girls' Association (WGHS OGA), was not to discriminate against any religion but was purely on health grounds. The Association said that the policy was put in place as a result of past experiences where some of the Muslim girls who took part in the fasting faced health challenges. The Association reiterated its unflinching support for the school:

OGA will continue to support the Headmistress, the Board and all authorities of the School to enforce rules and regulations that seek to serve the purpose of instilling discipline and supporting the holistic upbringing of students.¹⁷

Response of the Islamic Medical Association of Ghana

The position espoused by the Old Girls' Association that the policy of 'no fasting' was based on health grounds but not religion was challenged by the Islamic Medical Association of Ghana (IMAGH). The group in a statement said:

¹⁶Richard Kojo Nyarko, "Ramadan: Angry parent storms Wesley Girls' High School to withdraw daughter over fasting." Accessed January 9, 2023 <https://www.myjoyonline.com/ramadan-angry-parent-storms-wesley-girls-high-school-to-withdraw-daughter-over-fasting/>.

¹⁷WGHS OGA, "Press release by OGA on fasting in WGHS", accessed January 9, 2023, www.wghsoga.com/news/from-the-executive-desk/

This inaccurate assertion was made by these bodies in an attempt to justify the clear violations of the religious rights of Muslim students in Wesley Girls' High school. As far as IMAGH is concerned, those claims are unfounded and lack any firm bases in science and medicine. It is important to state that Islamic fasting is comparatively moderate and cannot be considered as starvation. There is a clear scientific distinction between fasting and starvation. At no point within the 12-16-hour period of fasting is the person deprived of any essential nutrient.¹⁸

The Association concluded that

Ghana is a secular state which must promote inclusiveness. Public or government-assisted schools which seek to promote one religion over the other pose a risk to all of us and our future. We need to be careful in taunting Muslims to build their own schools. This has the potential of deepening religious segregation and divisiveness.¹⁹

Response of the Ghana Education Service (GES)

The GES was among the first to comment on the impasse in the school. The GES, in a statement released to the press, instructed the WGHS to allow all Muslim students who are desirous of taking part in the Ramadan fasting to do so. The GES added that

The parents or any such student are also directed to write to the school indicating that the school is not to be held liable for any health condition of the student as a result of the fast. Staff, students and the general public are to take note.²⁰

¹⁸ IMAGH, "Re: Wesley Girls High School prevents a student from fasting", accessed January 9, 2023, www.Imgah.com/re-wesley-girls-high-school-prevents-student-from-fasting

¹⁹IMAGH, "Re: Wesley Girls' High School", para. 6

²⁰Ghana Education Service, "Re: Wesley Girl's High School prevents a student from fasting" (May 1, 2021).

Response of the Methodist Church Ghana

The Methodist Church Ghana is the founding church of WGHS. Though the church no longer manages the school since the state took over the running of the school, it still has a controlling influence over the school. The Church has a strong say in who should become the Headmistress of the school. The school follows the Methodist Church's liturgy in its religious activities. The decision by the GES in directing the school to allow Muslim students to observe the Ramadan fasting did not go unnoticed by the Methodist Church Ghana. The Church, in a press release on May 4, 2021, vehemently disagreed with the directives given by the GES to the authorities of WGHS to allow Muslim students to observe the Ramadan fasting. The Church stated in the press release that:

The school rule in question is a long-standing one which is also non-religious and various renowned Muslim ladies in Ghana have passed through the school adhering to such a rule. The policies of the school over the 186 years of its existence have resulted in Wesley Girls High School being the school of Choice, Excellence and Achievements and the Church remains in **full support**(emphasis theirs) of these policies. The Methodist Church Ghana cannot accede to the unilateral directive issued by the Ghana Education Service and insists that the Ghana Education Service respects the long-standing partnership between the Government and Mission Schools.²¹

Response of the Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference and Christian Council of Ghana

In a joint communiqué, the Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference (GCBC) and the Christian Council of Ghana (CCG) agreed with the position taken by the Methodist Church Ghana on the fasting impasse at WGHS. The two Christian bodies in their joint communiqué signed by

²¹Methodist Church Ghana, "The Methodist Church Ghana responds to Ghana Education Service. RE: Wesley Girls' High School prevent a student from fasting" (May 4, 2021).

Rev. Fr. Lazarus Anondee and Rev. Dr. Cyril Fayosey after their annual meeting on Wednesday May 5, 2021 stated:

We, leadership of the CCG and GCBC, have followed with keen interest the discussion about the authorities of Wesley Girls' High School, who allegedly prevented a student from fasting in the on-going Ramadan. We have discussed the issue prayerfully and have studied the various press statement that some stakeholders have released on the matter. We wish to endorse the position of the Methodist Church Ghana, which they succinctly outlined in their May 4, 2021 Press release, and reiterate that the decision of the Wesley Girls' High School authorities on fasting is purely in the interest of the students. The leadership of CCG and GCBC, therefore, wish to state that we take strong exception to the directives the Ghana Education Service issued in their press release on May 1, 2021 (CCG and GCBC, 2021).²²

Responses of Muslim Groupings in Ghana

The positions of the WGHS, WGHA OGA, Methodist Church Ghana, GCBC, CCG, and the GES on the impasse were roundly condemned by Muslim groupings in Ghana. The Islamic Learning Centre described the action of the school in preventing Muslim girls from taking part in the fasting as 'unenlightening'. The founder of the Centre, Sheikh Muhammad Mustapha, in a post on Ghanaweb, described the directive for parents to write to the school absolving the school of any blame if the child suffered any harm in the course of fasting as tantamount to asking Muslim students to apply for permission to practise their religion.²³ Another Muslim cleric, Sheikh Aremeyaw Shaibu, also commenting on the impasse accused the big churches of ganging up against Muslims in Ghana. He said:

In Presbyterian Boys' Secondary School (PRESEC)
which is one of the best schools in this country, we

²²GCBC & CCG, "Communique issued by the Christian Council of Ghana (CCG) and the Ghana Catholic Bishop's Conference (GCBC) on Wednesday May 5, 2021."

²³Ghanaweb, "Wesley Girls no fasting policy is 'unenlightening-Islamic Learning Centre', accessed January 9, 2023.

<https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Wesley-Girls-no-fasting-policy-is-unenlightening-Islamic-Learning-Center-1253386>

have Muslim students there. They have a patron in the school who caters for their needs in matters of discipline. They pray in the school, they fast and do everything. These practices have never reduced the academic ranking of PRESEC. My worry is the ganging up by these big Christian organisations, the Ghana Catholic Bishops Conference and the Christian Council not taking a step back to look at this dispassionately but rather endorsing this.²⁴

The National Chief Imam, Sheikh Nuhu Sharabutu, is quoted by his spokesperson, Sheikh Aremeyaw Shaibu, as being unhappy with the brouhaha at WGHS over the fasting. Sheikh Aremeyaw said in an interview with Joynews:

Anytime Chief Imam hears this he feels disappointed, he feels worried, and when he calls and talks to me, he's like 'these are the people that hail praises on me, they show me great respect anytime, but my grandchildren are in their schools, and my grandchildren are not treated well'.²⁵

The Ghana National Association of Muslim Teachers (GNAMT) added their voice to the impasse. The group stated in a press release:

Ghana National Association of Muslim Teachers has observed with keen interest this phenomenon of consistent abuse of Muslim students in the various Christian Mission Schools, and it is instructive to submit that the discrimination is chiefly about the coercion of Muslims into church services while proscribing them from offering Salaat on campus. The refusal of the management of Wesley Girls' SHS to allow Muslims to fast during Ramadan is only the newest twist to the

²⁴Modern Ghana, Wesley Girls' brouhaha: Sheikh Aremeyaw accuses big churches of ganging up against Muslims in Ghana accessed January 9, 2023, <https://www.modernghana.com/news/1080004/wesley-girls-brouhaha-sheikh-aremeyaw-accuses.html>

²⁵Myjoyonline, "Chief Imam disappointed with Wesley Girls' refusal to let students fast – Sheikh Aremeyaw" Accessed January 10, 2023, <https://www.myjoyonline.com/chief-imam-disappointed-with-wesley-girls-refusal-to-let-students-fast-sheikh-aremeyaw/>

myriad of the discriminatory acts against Muslims on Senior High School campuses.²⁶

The Muslim caucus in the Ghana's Parliament also issued a statement describing the communique issued by the CCG and GCBC as disappointing. The statement stated, in part:

The Muslim Caucus in Parliament of Ghana ... have received with extreme disappointment the Communiqué issued by the Catholic Bishops' Conference and the Christian Council of Ghana dated 5th May 2021. The Communiqué endorsed the stand of the Methodist Church Ghana to prevent Muslim students at WESLEY GIRLS HIGH SCHOOL from fasting in the holy month of Ramadan ... We state that if fasting, one of the key pillars of Islam, could be treated by the Methodist Church Ghana, the Christian Council of Ghana and the Catholic Bishops' Conference in such a cavalier and flippant manner on the basis of unscientific, spurious and trumped-up reasons then our constitutional values of freedom of religion, religious diversity and tolerance are at stake and in great peril ... Moreover, we find it unacceptable for any religious group to hide behind the veil of majority or religious traditions to unleash tyranny and intolerance on the faith and cardinal doctrine of other faiths. If the disingenuous and dangerous argument of majority and religious tradition is allowed to hold sway, our country will be riven apart in our regions, districts, schools, neighbourhoods, markets, businesses, state institutions, among others. It must be stated that such dangerous arguments belong to a bygone era and have no place in a modern democracy like ours.²⁷

²⁶GNAMT, "Discrimination against Muslim students in Christian mission schools in Ghana" (May 8, 2021)

²⁷3news.com, "Communique by Catholic Bishops, Christian Council disappointing-Muslim caucus." Accessed May 11, 2021 <https://3news.com/communique-by-catholic-bishops-christian-council-disappointing-muslim-caucus/>.

A group of Muslim professionals also waded into the controversy. The group observed in a press statement that the issue at Wesley Girls' High School goes beyond the ban on fasting and goes to the heart of a policy of Islamophobia and intolerance in Christian mission schools which needs to be addressed to preserve religious harmony in Ghana. They described the health reasons given by the school to ban fasting by the students as untenable. They argued that if health risk was a major concern, it would have been reported in all other schools where Muslim students were allowed to take part in the Ramadan fast. They backed their position by saying that "majority of practising Muslims encourage their children to begin half-day fasts around age nine and most Muslims are fully fasting by the time they enter Junior High School." The group alleged that the real motive behind the directive was not health but bigotry and unwillingness to accommodate any other religion. They argued further:

For the avoidance of doubt, these policies include compulsory Christian worship by all students and denying Muslim students the right to fast and pray - never mind the disingenuous denial that the policy is targeted at Muslims. It is intriguing that a Church could be boasting that its school's tradition of excellence is built on a rigid regime of oppression, discrimination and spiritual asphyxiation of its students of minority faiths based on bigotry.²⁸

Muntaka Mubarak, a member of the Muslim caucus in Ghana's Parliament, in a news item reported by Ghanaweb, also called on the GES to enforce its rules to ensure that students in Senior High Schools suffer no discrimination due to their religion. He stated further:

We are worried about the sheer disregard to the concerns of others. The statement they have issued has really sent a shock to us, and we believe that GES has to enforce the rules because failure to enforce the rules mean everybody will have to do

²⁸Ghana Guardian, "Choose between togetherness or bigotry and apartheid- Muslim Professionals warns" accessed January 10, 2023 <https://ghanaguardian.com/choose-between-togetherness-or-bigotry-and-apartheid-muslim-professionals-warns>

his own thing and I do not think that will auger well for the co-existence and unity of us as a country. If GES fails, they will be setting a bad precedent. I can bet you most of the Islamic schools will join to have sharia as their rules. I think that GES must stand its grounds and enforce its rules.²⁹

Another Muslim group, the Coalition of Muslim Organisations, called for the dismissal of the Headmistress of WGHS over her decision to disallow Muslim students from fasting. The group said the action of the school shows:

sheer hatred, ignorance, prejudice and intolerance on the part of the Headmistress of Wesley SHS, Kay Opong Ankomah and her administration where they barred Muslim students from prayers, meetings and even the on-going Ramadan Fasting. Wesley Girls has ignored the 1992 Constitution Article 21(c) which states that 'All persons shall have freedom to practice any religion and to manifest such practice'.³⁰

Discussion

The Christian-Muslim dialogue has been an important topic for discussion in Ghana. Because Christianity and Islam are the two largest religions in Ghana, any seemingly conflict or potential conflict between the adherents of these two religions raises concerns for national security and cohesion. The constitution of Ghana guarantees the freedom of each Ghanaian to belong and manifest any religion of their choice. The Ghanaian being very religious has taken his or her religion wherever he or she goes. In Ghanaian public and private schools, religion has become one main tool of socialising the students into the society. However, like in some other societies in the world, the 'misuse' and 'misunderstanding' of

²⁹Ghanaweb. (May 6, 2021). "Wesley Girls, Muslim students' impasse: Enforce your rules - Muntaka to GES." Accessed January 10, 2023 <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Wesley-Girls-Muslim-students-impasse-Enforce-your-rules-Muntaka-to-GES-1252777>.

³⁰Myjoyonline.com. "Sanction Wesley Girls Headmistress for not allowing Muslim students to fast." Accessed January 10, 2023 <https://www.myjoyonline.com/sanction-wesley-girls-headmistress-for-not-allowing-muslim-students-to-fast-group-to-education-minister/>.

religion has been a source of conflict in Ghana.³¹The missionaries used education as a proselytising tool and established a lot of schools in their operational areas. Though these schools have been taken over by the state, the establishing churches still have some controlling influence on them. It is this controlling influence that has come under scrutiny with the fasting controversy at WGHS. The President of Ghana, Nana Addo Dankwa Akuffo-Addo, in his 2021 Eid-ul-Fitr message, called on Ghanaians not to reduce the secondary schools to ideological and religious fighting grounds. He rather tasked all stakeholders to work hard to preserve the enviable inter-religious coexistence to sustain the peace and social cohesion of the nation.³²

The controversy at WGHS has the potential to lead to inter-religious conflicts if not well managed. It is the reason why the statement from the office of the National Chief Imam is seen as more conciliatory and worth noting. The Chief Imam cautioned the Muslim community to be careful and not generalise the issue as it could lead to religious divisions. The Chief Imam, through his spokes person, Sheikh Aremeyaw, told Citi News that:

The Chief Imam has called for immediate consultations between the Christian and Muslim leaders. And we are hopeful that we will settle the issue amicably. We are employing the empathetic engagement to resolve this issue.³³

The comments of the Chief Imam seem to have doused the flame of passion that greeted the action of the school and the reaction of both Christian and Muslim leaders. The statement of the Chief sits well with the 'dialogue of life' theory which enjoins people of different religious persuasions to co-exist with each other in spite of the obvious religious differences.

The tone of press releases by the Methodist Church Ghana, corroborated by the Christian Council of Ghana and the Ghana Catholic Bishop's Conference in their joint press release, was not

³¹Nora Kofognotera Nonterria, "The Challenges of Interfaith Relations in Ghana." In: *Pathways for Interreligious Dialogue in the Twenty-First Century. Pathways for Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue*, eds V. Latinovic, G. Mannion, P.C. Phan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 197-211.

³²Ghana News Agency. (May 13, 2021). "Let's sustain the religious tolerance that has served us well." <https://www.gna.org.gh/1.20741257>. Accessed 13/05/2021.

³³Citinewsroom.com, "Stay calm as we resolve Wesley Girls' fasting impasse." Accessed January 10, 2023 <https://citinewsroom.com/2021/05/be-calm-as-we-resolve-wesley-girls-fasting-impasse-chief-imam-to-muslims/>.

conciliatory. Commenting on a similar incident involving Christians and Muslims in secondary schools, Azumah stated:

We have to be careful not to sleep-walk down the path of the West. In most Western countries, there is an obsession with individual rights which makes perfect sense in individualistic and increasingly hedonistic societies. In Africa we need to be just as concerned about community or corporate rights as we are about individual rights. Do Muslims and Christians as communities have rights, and if they do, how does the Ghanaian constitution guarantee these? Individual students may well be within their constitutional rights to insist on not being compelled to participate in a worship service of another religion.³⁴

The Ghana National Education Campaign Coalition, a civil society group championing the right to quality basic education for all children in Ghana, added its voice to the call for a peaceful resolution to the impasse. The group said in a statement:

We believe that each party in their respective viewpoints do wish the best for the child concerned. But this can only be done in the midst of calm. History has shown that, whenever decisions were made out of turbulence, other problems were given birth. There is the need for all stakeholders to seek guiding interpretations to the provisions in the 1992 Constitution.³⁵

The Coalition further expressed a concern that the Wesley Girls' High School did not heed to the directive of the GES to allow the girl continue with the fasting. This, they believe, will set a bad precedence for other schools to disregard similar directives from the supervisory body. This call is important as it helped to cool

³⁴ John Azumah, "A case for inter-religious schooling in Ghana." *Graphic online*, January 10, 2023

<https://www.graphic.com.gh/features/opinion/a-case-for-inter-religious-schooling-in-ghana-john-azumah-phd.html>

³⁵Ghana News Agency, "Wesley Girls Muslim student's fasting impasse: GNECC urges calm." January 10, 2023 <https://www.gna.org.gh/1.20693296>.

down the tension that was building as a result of comments of the various religious groupings.

The National Peace Council of Ghana was established by an Act of Parliament, Act 818, 2011. The Council was established to promote peace. Article 2 of the Act gives the object of the Council "to facilitate and develop mechanisms for conflict prevention, management and to build sustainable peace in the country".³⁶ Going by the mandate of the Council, it was appropriate that they waded into the WGHS fasting brouhaha. In a press statement, the Council called 'on all Ghanaians, particularly, those who have been affected in any way by the events at the Wesley Girls' High School, to exercise the greatest restraint and circumspection in their comments and pronouncements on the matter'.³⁷ The Council went on to appeal to the leadership of the Christian and Muslim communities to urge their followers to remain calm as efforts to build on the time-tested peaceful co-existence among Christians and Muslims are made by the relevant authorities and organisations. This call by the Council was important to help ease the tension that the action of the school authorities backed by the Christian groupings caused.

In the heat of the impasse, some people suggested that if the Muslims would not bow to the dictates of the Christian mission schools, they should build their own schools since Muslim children have been attending Christian schools and following all their practices without any challenge. Azumah, responding to the same claim in the previous conflict, admonished:

It is simplistic to argue in favour of the status quo on the basis that Muslim students have in the past decades attended Christian schools and participated in worship services without any complaints. Similarly, the argument that if Muslims don't want to participate in Christian worship, they shouldn't enroll in Christian schools is also unrealistic. For instance, in some places a Christian school may be the only school in the area or within walking distance. But more

³⁶National Peace Council Act, Act 818, Article 2 (2011)

³⁷National Peace Council, "Statement of the National Peace Council Regarding Wesley Girls' Senior High School and a Student Prevented from Fasting." Accessed January 10, 2023, <https://www.peacecouncil.gov.gh2021/05/05/press-release-statement-of-the-national-peace-council-regarding-wesley-girls-senior-high-school-and-a-student-prevented-from-fasting>

importantly, with the computerized system of placements into SSS, the choices wards and parents have, are limited.³⁸

This position of Azumah is important if the controversy generated by the action of the Headmistress of WGHS is to be resolved. Since WGHS cannot close its doors to Muslim girls from applying to the school, it will be important if examples from other schools are looked at and seen whether they can be replicated there. A story posted on Graphic Online could be seen as a testament of inter-religious schooling in Ghana. The writer, Enoch Darfor Frimpong, shared his experience as a Christian student in an Islamic school, TI Ahmadiyya School in Kumasi. The school, founded by the Ahmadiyya Mission Ghana, in 1950, has a liberal arrangement for all students to practise their various religious beliefs on campus, without infringing on anyone's beliefs. Frimpong stated his experience as a Christian student in an Islamic school:

Unlike in Christian mission schools, where it is compulsory for all students to be present at all school gatherings, including Sunday church services, where non-Christians are obliged to attend, the situation is different in AMASS. It is not compulsory for non-Muslims to attend Friday Islamic prayers or fast during the month of Ramadan. What actually happened during our time was that, there was an arrangement for classes to close early on Friday's at 10:40 a.m. to enable Muslim students to prepare to either go to pray at the Mosque on the school's premises or go to town to any other Mosque of their choice to pray. The four periods of 40 minutes each, which was missed on Fridays because of the early 10:40 a.m. closure time, was incorporated into the periods of Monday to Thursday. Thus, instead of closing at 1:30 p.m., which was the norm in many secondary schools, we rather closed at 2:10 p.m., because of the additional 40 minutes that needed to be covered.³⁹

³⁸Azumah, "A case for inter-religious" para 3

³⁹ Enoch Darfor Frimpong, "Christian in Islamic school versus Muslim in mission school." Accessed January 10, 2023

According to Frimpong, the morning assembly at TI Ahmadiyya reflected religious tolerance as the school rotated the reading of the Quran and Bible during the morning assemblies. He said further:

We recited the Al Fatiha (Islamic prayer) and the Lord's Prayer (Christian) in turns either before the messages and announcements at the assembly or immediately before we depart for our various classrooms. When a Muslim preached on Monday, quoting from the Quran, a Christian preached on Tuesday, quoting from the Bible.⁴⁰

The example from TI Ahmadiyya in Kumasi could be adopted by the GES as a policy to guide the religious lives of the public Senior High Schools in Ghana. The model of TI Ahmadiyya Senior High School in Kumasi can also help in appreciating the religious diversity of Ghana and help in promoting peaceful co-existence among all religions in the country. This practice of alternating the reading of the Quran and Bible at the morning assemblies finds space in the 'dialogue of life' which, as a Samwini puts it, "generates peaceful co-existence and enables people to promote spiritual and cultural values, which are found in the distinct outlook of followers of the other religions."⁴¹

Conclusion

Ghana, as earlier articulated, is a religiously diverse society. The religious diversity is seen in all aspects of the Ghanaian society. The article has argued that in formulating policies for the various secondary schools, this diversity should be taken into consideration. As the President of Ghana admonished, secondary schools should not be used as religious and ideological battle grounds.

The call for peace fits well in the theory of 'dialogue of life' which enjoins all persons of various religious faiths to see each other as friends and agree to sit round the table to dialogue. This approach to solving the current impasse will ensure the peaceful coexistence and respect for one another. The article concludes that

<https://www.graphic.com.gh/features/opinion/christian-in-islamic-school-vs-muslim-in-mission-school.html>.

⁴⁰ Frimpong, "Christian in Islamic school" para 24

⁴¹ Samwini, 'Dialogue of life', para 8.

the issue must be handled with care so as not to disturb and threaten the religious diversity and peaceful co-existence that Ghana currently enjoys.