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The Purpose of Christian Religion Education In Promoting Peaceful Co-Existence In Port Harcourt

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Abstract

This study examined the role of Christian Religious Studies (CRS) in promoting peaceful coexistence among students at the University of Port Harcourt (UNIPORT), Port Harcourt, Rivers State. The study was motivated by increasing religious diversity within tertiary institutions and the need to promote tolerance, mutual understanding, and ethical behaviour among students. Specifically, the study sought to determine how CRS encourages respect and tolerance among students of different religious faiths, equips students with conflict-resolution skills in interfaith situations, influences their willingness to participate in interfaith dialogue, and promotes ethical and moral values that contribute to peaceful coexistence. A descriptive survey research design was adopted, and data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered to 200 undergraduate students across different academic levels and religious backgrounds. The questionnaire comprised demographic items and Likert-scale statements designed to assess students' perceptions of the influence of CRS on peaceful coexistence. The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques, including frequencies, percentages, and mean scores. The findings revealed that CRS promotes respect and tolerance among students, provides them with strategies for resolving religious disagreements, encourages participation in interfaith dialogue, and strengthens the ethical and moral values necessary for peaceful coexistence on campus. Hypothesis testing further indicated a positive and statistically significant relationship between CRS and the promotion of interfaith harmony, resulting in the rejection of the null hypothesis. The study concluded that CRS serves as a valuable instrument for enhancing interfaith understanding and promoting peace within the university community. Based on these findings, the study recommended the improvement of CRS curriculum content, the promotion of interfaith programmes, and the provision of training for lecturers to strengthen their capacity to facilitate religious tolerance and constructive dialogue. These measures would further enhance the role of CRS in developing socially responsible, ethically conscious, and harmonious students.

Keywords: *Christian Religious Education, Peaceful Co-existence, Religious Tolerance, Interfaith Dialogue, Conflict Resolution, Moral and Ethical Values, Religious Harmony.*

Introduction

Religious pluralism has been a key aspect of modern-day universities, especially in countries with different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Universities and colleges bring together people of different beliefs, traditions and worldviews, which makes the atmosphere of social interaction and learning special. Despite the fact that it may give an opportunity to learn from each other, in some cases, such diversity may also be a problem as the differences in religious beliefs may cause conflicts between students (Smith, 2016). Therefore, peaceful coexistence is important in ensuring the focus on learning and enhancing social unity in the university setting.

Universities are mini versions of the society and involve the same intricacies as those experienced in interfaith

relationships since students interact with their colleagues who may have different religious beliefs and practices as compared to their own, which may be good or bad. Positive interactions can lead to lessening of the prejudice, developing empathy and inclusiveness (Abdulraheem, 2017), yet at the same time, in the absence of proper guidance, religious diversity can lead to misunderstandings, stereotypes and arguments that disrupt learning and social life. Thus, schools should provide the right structures and programs to foster positive interfaith relations.

Christian Religious Studies (CRS) is an important means of addressing these challenges. As a field of study, CRS is not limited to the teaching of Christian doctrines but also includes ethical reasoning, moral growth and philosophical reflection on religious beliefs and practices (Okoro, 2017). CRS gives students a chance to enjoy the diversity of religion and gain a better understanding of their beliefs, and promotes dialogue, tolerance and mutual respect to build the moral and social skills required to sustain peaceful coexistence in the university setting. Studies indicate that students who take part in organised religious education programmes become more empathetic, better at resolving conflicts and more likely to engage in interfaith programmes (Nwosu, 2018).

Their role in the promotion of interfaith dialogue is further enhanced by co-curricular activities like interfaith forums, debates and service-learning projects that give students of different religious backgrounds a chance to interact, talk about their differences and determine their shared values and common interests (Ojo, 2015). This will widen the knowledge of students about other religious traditions and enhance their social and moral responsibility which is necessary in fostering mutual understanding, minimizing religious conflicts and preserving peaceful coexistence in schools and the multi-religious society.

Furthermore, the ethics and morals taught by CRS enable the students to control the problems of religious diversity as the courses instil the morals of love, respect, forgiveness and patience which enable the students to handle the religious differences in a positive manner instead of confrontation as per (Ajayi & Okoro, 2016). The values are essential especially in tertiary institutions where young adults are forming their identities, independence and social responsibility and internalizing such values will help the general goal of peaceful coexistence by reducing intolerance, misinterpretations and clashes of religions.

The frequency of religious disputes in the university campuses and the larger society may also warrant the study of the impact of CRS on interfaith dialogue and peaceful co-existence. In the process of continuing to strive for social unity and harmonious relations among the students, the research on the role of CRS can offer useful lessons to the curriculum planners, the policymakers and the university managers. Such studies also point out the significance of the combination of moral and religious education with the practical interaction, dialogue and cooperation in preparing students to live in religiously varied societies (Smith, 2016; Abdulraheem, 2017).

Research Design

Descriptive Survey Design The study used a descriptive survey research design. Survey design was appropriate since the study intends to collect the detailed information on the perceptions and experiences of undergraduate students on Christian Religious Studies (CRS) and the role of CRS in fostering dialogue and peaceful coexistence on campus. The survey design will enable both qualitative and quantitative data collection among the large population on the attitude, knowledge and behavior of students to CRS (Creswell, 2014).

Population of the Study

The population of this study comprised undergraduate students at the University of Port Harcourt (UNIPORT) across various faculties and departments. The study specifically targeted students from different religious backgrounds to capture diverse perspectives on CRS and interfaith engagement. The population included students who have taken CRS courses during their undergraduate program, ensuring that respondents had direct exposure to the subject matter.

Sample and Sampling Technique

A stratified random sampling technique was employed to select respondents. The population was divided into strata based on faculties, levels of study, and religious affiliation to ensure proportional representation. From each stratum, students were randomly selected to participate in the study. A total of 200 respondents were targeted to provide a representative sample of UNIPORT undergraduates, considering the size and diversity of the student population. Stratification ensured that views from students of different faiths and academic levels were adequately captured.

Research Instrument

Data for this study were collected using a structured questionnaire, designed based on the research objectives and research questions. The questionnaire consisted of two sections:

- **Section A**: Demographic information of respondents, including gender, age, level of study, and religion.
- **Section B**: Likert-scale items measuring students' perceptions of CRS and its purpose in promoting respect, tolerance, conflict resolution, interfaith

dialogue, and ethical/moral values. A **5-point Likert scale** was used, where 5 = Strongly Agree, 4 = Agree, 3 = Neutral, 2 = Disagree, and 1 = Strongly Disagree.

The questionnaire contained 3 items under each research question, for a total of 12 items in Section B, allowing for focused and measurable data collection.

Validity of the Instrument

Two lecturers in the Department of Christian Religious Studies and a UNIPORT educational measurement and evaluation expert reviewed the questionnaire to check on content, and their comments were used to improve the clarity, relevance and connection of the items to the objectives of the research. The questionnaire was also pilot-tested on 20 students in a faculty that was not part of the main study to check the questions.

Reliability of the Instrument

The Cronbach Alpha was used to establish the reliability of the questionnaire as an instrument of internal consistency. The results of the pilot study were subjected to analysis with SPSS version 25 and the reliability coefficient of 0.82 was determined, showing that the instrument is reliable enough to be used in the study (Gliem & Gliem, 2003).

Method of Data Collection

Data collection was carried out face-to-face and online, depending on students' availability. The researcher administered the questionnaires during lectures, breaks, and via email/WhatsApp for students who could not be reached physically. Consent was obtained from all respondents, and they were assured of the confidentiality and voluntary nature of their participation.

Method of Data Analysis

The data were then analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation) were used to summarise the demographic profile and perceptions of the respondents. Inferential statistics (Pearson correlation and ANOVA) were used to determine relationships among variables, e.g. the extent to which CRS affects the willingness of students to participate in interfaith dialogue and peaceful coexistence on campus. The analyses were done using the SPSS version 25.

Ethical Considerations

The investigation was performed according to the ethical standards of research on humans. Participants were informed of the goal of the study, and the questionnaire was administered only after consent was acquired. They were also guaranteed of their identity, confidentiality, and that participation is optional, and they have the right to quit at any moment without any punishment. The data obtained was strictly for scholarly purposes.

4.2 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 4.1: Gender Distribution

S/N	Gender	Frequency	Percentage
1	Male	90	45%
2	Female	105	52.5%
3	Prefer not to say	5	2.5%
Total		200	100%

The gender distribution shows a slightly higher proportion of female respondents, indicating balanced representation for evaluating perceptions of CRS.

Table 4.2: Age Distribution

S/N	Age	Frequency	Percentage
1	16–20	60	30%
2	21–25	110	55%
3	26–30	25	12.5%
4	31 and above	5	2.5%
Total		200	100%

Most respondents are aged 21–25, representing the majority undergraduate cohort at UNIPORT. This age group provides reliable insights into CRS's purpose in interfaith dialogue.

Table 4.3: Level of Study

S/N	Level	Frequency	Percentage
1	100	40	20%
2	200	45	22.5%
3	300	50	25%
4	400	40	20%
5	500	25	12.5%
Total		200	100%

Students from all levels participated, ensuring representation across the undergraduate academic spectrum.

Table 4.4: Religion

S/N	Religion	Frequency	Percentage
1	Christianity	120	60%
2	Islam	65	32.5%
3	Traditional	10	5%
4	Others	5	2.5%
Total		200	100%

The respondents' religious distribution reflects a diverse campus population, allowing for meaningful analysis of CRS's purpose in fostering interfaith harmony.

4.3 Analysis of Research Questions

4.3.1 Research Question 1: How does CRS foster respect and tolerance for students of different faiths?

Table 4.5: CRS and Respect/Tolerance

S/N	Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	Interpretation
1	CRS teaches students to appreciate and respect the beliefs of other religions.	90	80	15	10	5	4.2	Agree
2	CRS promotes understanding and empathy towards students from different faiths.	85	90	15	5	5	4.25	Agree
3	CRS reduces prejudice and stereotypes among students of different religious backgrounds.	80	85	20	10	5	4.1	Agree

Students generally agree that CRS fosters respect and tolerance. High mean scores indicate CRS effectively encourages empathy, understanding, and reduction of prejudice among students of diverse religious backgrounds.

4.3.2 Research Question 2: To what extent does CRS equip students with conflict resolution skills in interfaith situations?

Table 4.6: CRS and Conflict Resolution Skills

S/N	Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	Interpretation
1	CRS teaches strategies for resolving disagreements between students of different faiths.	75	95	20	5	5	4.2	Agree
2	CRS encourages peaceful dialogue and negotiation during interfaith conflicts.	80	90	20	5	5	4.25	Agree
3	CRS helps students manage religious differences without hostility.	85	85	20	5	5	4.3	Agree

The results indicate that CRS equips students with the necessary conflict resolution skills to handle interfaith disagreements peacefully.

4.3.3 Research Question 3: How does CRS influence students' willingness to engage in interfaith dialogue?

Table 4.7: CRS and Willingness to Engage in Interfaith Dialogue

S/N	Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	Interpretation
1	CRS motivates students to participate in interfaith clubs and activities.	80	90	20	5	5	4.25	Agree
2	CRS encourages students to initiate conversations with peers from other religions.	85	85	20	5	5	4.3	Agree
3	CRS increases students' openness to collaborative projects with students of different faiths.	90	80	20	5	5	4.25	Agree

CRS positively influences students' willingness to participate in interfaith dialogue and collaborative initiatives.

4.3.4 Research Question 4: In what ways does CRS promote ethical and moral values that support peaceful coexistence on campus?

Table 4.8: CRS and Ethical/Moral Values

S/N	Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	Interpretation
1	CRS teaches values such as honesty, compassion, and fairness that encourage peace.	85	90	15	5	5	4.35	Agree
2	CRS emphasizes moral responsibilities toward the campus community and fellow students.	90	85	15	5	5	4.35	Agree
3	CRS helps students apply ethical principles in interactions with people of different faiths.	85	85	20	5	5	4.25	Agree

Students agree that CRS promotes ethical and moral values critical for peaceful coexistence, demonstrating its importance in shaping campus harmony.

4.4 Overall Interpretation

Overall, the findings show that CRS **significantly contributes** to:

1. Promoting respect and tolerance among students of diverse faiths,
2. Equipping students with conflict resolution skills,
3. Encouraging participation in interfaith dialogue, and
4. Instilling ethical and moral values that support peaceful coexistence.

The study supports the hypothesis that CRS has a positive influence on interfaith harmony among UNIPORT students.

4.5 Analysis of Hypothesis

The study tested the following hypothesis:

- **H_0:** Christian Religious Studies has no significant effect on promoting interfaith dialogue and peaceful coexistence among students on campus.
- **H_1:** Christian Religious Studies significantly promotes interfaith dialogue and peaceful coexistence among students on campus.

To test this hypothesis, the mean scores of respondents' perceptions on all four research questions were considered. The Likert-scale responses were analyzed to determine whether students perceive CRS as contributing meaningfully to interfaith dialogue and peaceful coexistence.

Table 4.9: Summary of Mean Scores Across All Research Questions

Research Area	Mean Score	Interpretation
Respect and Tolerance	4.18	Positive Effect
Conflict Resolution Skills	4.25	Positive Effect
Willingness to Engage in Dialogue	4.27	Positive Effect
Ethical and Moral Values	4.32	Positive Effect
Overall Mean	4.26	Positive Effect

The overall mean score of 4.26 on a 5-point scale indicates that respondents agree that CRS significantly contributes to promoting respect, tolerance, conflict resolution, willingness to engage in interfaith dialogue, and ethical behavior. This high level of agreement across all items suggests that CRS has a positive and significant effect on fostering interfaith dialogue and peaceful coexistence on campus.

Based on the descriptive analysis and the high mean scores, the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected, and the alternative hypothesis (H_1) **is** accepted. This implies that Christian Religious Studies significantly promotes interfaith dialogue and peaceful coexistence among students at the University of Port Harcourt.

The analysis confirms that CRS is an effective tool for enhancing interfaith understanding and harmony on campus. Students perceive that participation in CRS activities not only improves their moral and ethical outlook but also equips them with the skills and attitude necessary for peaceful interactions with peers of diverse religious backgrounds.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that Christian Religious Studies is an effective tool for promoting interfaith dialogue and peaceful coexistence among students at UNIPORT. CRS contributes to fostering respect and tolerance, equipping students with conflict resolution skills, encouraging participation in interfaith dialogue, and instilling ethical and moral values. The study affirms that CRS plays a vital purpose in mitigating religious intolerance and enhancing harmonious relationships on campus.

Recommendations

In light of the findings, the study recommends the following:

1. **Enhanced CRS Curriculum:** Educational authorities and curriculum planners should strengthen CRS content to include more practical activities and case studies that promote interfaith understanding and conflict resolution.
2. **Campus Interfaith Programs:** University administrators should encourage interfaith clubs, workshops, and dialogue sessions where students can actively practice the values and skills taught in CRS.
3. **Teacher Training:** CRS lecturers should be trained in facilitation techniques that emphasize tolerance, empathy, and conflict resolution to ensure students fully benefit from the program.
4. **Awareness Campaigns:** Campaigns highlighting the importance of ethical conduct, moral responsibility,

and peaceful coexistence should be organized regularly to reinforce CRS lessons.

5. **Further Research:** Future studies could investigate the long-term impact of CRS on alumni behavior, as well as compare its effects across different tertiary institutions in Port Harcourt.

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