

Research Article

Reclaiming Compassion and Empathy: Interfaith Dialogue and the Remaking of Moral Solidarity After the Sewol Ferry Tragedy

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Abstract

The 2014 sinking of the Sewol ferry, which claimed 304 lives, most of them being high school students, marked not only a national tragedy but also a turning point in South Korea's modern history. Public outrage over the government's inadequate response and delayed investigation transformed the incident into a catalyst for nationwide protests, ultimately contributing to the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye. Amid this crisis, religion played a unique role in addressing public grief and offering moral and spiritual guidance through interfaith collaboration. This study explores how interfaith dialogue and cooperation, post-Sewol ferry tragedy, contributed to fostering communal solace, ethical reflection, and solidarity. A plethora of religious groups, as well as third-party organizations like the Korean Conference of Religions for Peace (KCRP), assisted in alleviating the distress and polarity through organizing group memorial services and spiritual care. Through a qualitative case study, I aimed to explore how religious cooperation can create a communal voice for ethical and moral reflection and healing, addressing a gap in existing research exploring the personal and collective experiences of individuals participating in interfaith dialogue. Employing a case study approach, I examine participants' perceptions and practices of religious pluralism through in-depth interviews, field observations, and thematic analysis. Shared themes identified related to empathy and understanding, and religious pluralism. By highlighting the convergence of national crisis and religion, these themes demonstrate the unique ability of interreligious dialogue and collaboration to respond to tragedies in ways that transcend theological differences.

Keywords: Empathy, Interfaith Dialogue, Pluralism, Social Healing, Sewol Ferry Tragedy.

Introduction

Currently, around half of the South Korean population has no religious affiliation, while the other half is divided between Buddhism, Protestant Christians, and Catholics. This is a change from a few decades past, when a majority of the population had no religious affiliation (Baker, 2019). The relatively recent rise in different religious nominations could have led to a lack of research regarding the specific dynamics of religious pluralism within South Korea. The lack of detailed, context-specific research on how interfaith dialogue may contribute to social cohesion, particularly in the aftermath of the Sewol ferry incident, presents a critical gap in the literature. To address these limitations, the present study seeks to explore the role of interfaith dialogue in fostering religious pluralism and peace in the wake of the Sewol ferry tragedy. By focusing on the experiences of those directly involved in interfaith efforts, this study aims to shed light on the ways in which religious communities have worked together to overcome societal polarization.

Understanding these dynamics in a South Korean context will offer new insights into how interfaith dialogue can function as a tool for social healing in deeply divided societies. As studies that rely on large-scale quantitative analysis risk overlooking the personal, transformative nature of interfaith dialogue, I conducted an in-depth qualitative analysis with a focus on the lived experiences and emotions of individuals.

Research Context

The Sewol ferry tragedy exemplified modern interreligious dialogue during a time of great division within Korea (Hwang, 2017). The Sewol ferry tragedy is notable for the political division it caused across society due to the nature of the tragedy, as it is considered to be a human-made tragedy stemming from factors like the government's delayed response in aiding ferry passengers and the bereaved, as well as the crew's

incompetence and irresponsibility in both the design of the ferry and the rescue. Additionally, the Sewol ferry interreligious efforts can also be considered to be quite successful, as there were many activities properly executed to help the bereaved and other citizens. While there was substantial research on the Sewol ferry and a lot of studies on interreligious dialogue, there weren't a lot of studies in Korea that connected the two topics.

This study aims to fill this critical gap in the study of interfaith dialogue and its role in fostering religious pluralism and peace by analyzing a series of notable interfaith dialogues that occurred following the tragic Sewol ferry disaster. By closely examining the implementation process and the aftermath of interfaith dialogues post-Sewol, this study will provide concrete examples of effective practices for organizing interfaith dialogues and their impact on fostering pluralism and peace. Given the scarcity of studies specifically analyzing the role of interfaith dialogue in the context of major events like the Sewol ferry disaster (Hwang, 2017), this research will contribute to the field by offering a detailed case study that illustrates how interfaith dialogue can be successfully implemented.

Methodology

The collection of data happened through interviews with members of the KCRP, specifically members who participated in interreligious efforts post-Sewol, religious leaders, and members of the bereaved families. The interviews provided valuable contributions to the understanding of the connection between interreligious dialogue and social cohesion during a time of such tragedy, as the personal accounts unveiled the profound impacts the efforts had on the participants. Additional research was done through document analysis in order to identify progress made around this issue and observe any possible gaps or ambiguity, as well as develop hypotheses and interview questions.

Literature Review

Definition and Scope of Interfaith Dialogue

Interfaith dialogue and religious pluralism have been widely studied within contemporary religion, offering newfound insight into their various impacts (Ebrahimi, 2023). While many use interfaith dialogue and interreligious dialogue synonymously, within this paper, interfaith dialogue refers to intentional dialogue between different religious identities and traditions, often with the goal of working towards a shared goal or mutual understanding (Andrabi, 2020). Interfaith dialogue includes those who may be skeptical or disinterested in religion (Popovska *et al.*, 2009).

Interreligious dialogue, on the other hand, is a more academically grounded and often more inclusive term that refers to any form of engagement between individuals of different religious identities. Its focus expands beyond cooperation, as it also explores the ways people relate across religious differences. Another important feature of both interfaith and interreligious dialogue is that the dialogue does not seek to convert or change the beliefs of others, as the goal is to create respect for different beliefs and values (ICD, n.d.). In this section, I review prior studies focusing on the role of interfaith dialogue in promoting religious pluralism and peacebuilding (Olawoyin, 2015; Ebrahimi, 2023).

Philosophical Foundations

Philosopher John Hick's pluralistic hypothesis details how religious pluralism formed and is important by delineating the premise for "religious pluralism." In his seminal work, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, Hick states that the world is "religiously ambiguous," as the world does not necessarily associate with any religious or nonreligious interpretations over another. Hick contends that the universal nature of religion, with differences arising from distinct societal contexts, underscores the importance of understanding and learning from different faiths as they all pursue the same divine truth (Saad, 2011).

Interreligious dialogue ultimately births religious pluralism (Silk, 2007). Eva Sadia Saad, Assistant Professor in the Department of World Religions and Culture, University of Dhaka, defines religious pluralism as a "reconciliation of different beliefs" and peaceful co-existence of multi-religious communities. She highlights that religious pluralism goes beyond mere tolerance, encouraging the mitigation of religious differences through dialogue and debate: "The commonly accepted notion of religious tolerance of minorities is not necessarily the spirit of religious pluralism..." (p.90).

Interreligious dialogue and religious pluralism achieve what mere religious diversity lacks; although religious diversity refers to the coexistence of various religions, it alone is insufficient to ensure social

harmony. More expansive efforts like interfaith dialogue and pluralism are needed to achieve societal cohesion, which can bring peace (Hardy, 2019).

Interfaith Dialogue and Positive Peace

Theologian Paul Knitter supports this view, asserting that religious dialogue is crucial for countering societal harms such as violence and conflict in his work *One Earth Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility*. He suggests that interfaith dialogue and pluralism can foster better understanding and social harmony among different religious sects (D'Arcy, 2003). Such "positive peace" can be created and maintained through peacebuilding efforts, which include mediation and conflict resolution (Lemay Herbert, 2011). Professor Max Mueller, a renowned religious scholar, further extends this sentiment. He claimed that "to know one religion is to know none," and "mutual understanding through interfaith dialogue is the only solution to settle religious conflicts arising from the misunderstanding of other religions. All religions enrich their own faith by understanding their neighbors."

Role of Interfaith Dialogue in Times of Crisis

The importance and value of interfaith dialogue were especially exemplified in the notable 9/11 attack in the United States, which greatly heightened tension between religious groups and fostered Islamophobia (Amer and Bagasrah, 2013). The religious conflict, as well as the impact the 9/11 attack had on future religious interactions, was vividly detailed within the account of Ingrid Mattson, former president of the Islamic Society of North America. She discusses the extremely negative media and expression of emotion like rage and anger that shrouded the innocence of many Muslims in the American public's eyes. In order to counter the irrational Islamophobia and hate that was spreading, the National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT), was founded in 2006, along with many other interfaith initiatives like the World Council of Churches and the Muslim Public Affairs Council (Barnett, 2010).

In the case of the NRCAT, they emphasized that all members share a "conviction that all individuals are created in the image of God and are therefore endowed with basic dignity" and they share the ethical principle that "People of faith are called to compassion—to not only care when people are degraded or hurt but to take action: to stand for, and with, those who are abused, oppressed and among the most vulnerable" (NRCAT). While there were evaluations that such interfaith initiatives were, in the end, ineffective in improving public opinion and knowledge of the Muslim faith, Mattson believed there was more meaning in the movement beyond its actual impact (Bail, 2016). Mattson argues that the initiative achieved its purpose as it was able to approach interfaith dialogue in a principled manner, welcoming and reflecting on each faith community's dignity while avoiding taking any political or social stance. Additionally, instead of only allowing so-called religious "representatives" to participate in such discussion, the NRCAT welcomed all individuals who identified themselves as believers of a certain religion, taking the dialogue beyond large communities and reaching and moving each individual in a unique, inclusive movement (Mattson, 2024).

Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative case study approach allows for a rich, contextualized understanding of the personal experiences and reflections of religious leaders and participants in interfaith efforts (Creswell and Poth, 2017). By analyzing a historically significant case of the Sewol ferry incident (Jeon *et al.*, 2022), the study seeks to offer valuable insights into how interfaith dialogue can facilitate social healing and foster solidarity in the face of national tragedy, which is especially significant as few studies bridge the link between the Sewol ferry tragedy and interfaith dialogue. Through research, I was able to find credible and involved religious figures and organizations who directly participated in interreligious efforts after the Sewol ferry tragedy, which is why we thought a more qualitative approach would be fitting. We also acknowledged that there is a restricted number of people who are well-informed on interreligious dialogue or have participated in some form of interreligious interaction themselves, which is why we refrained from large-scale data collection such as general surveys or polls. We conducted our case study research under the research question: "How has interfaith dialogue following the Sewol ferry tragedy contributed to fostering religious pluralism, healing, and social cohesion in a time of great polarization?"

Data Collection

Interviews

The information was collected through four interviews that were conducted in person and through the online platform Zoom. The interview questions were set in a semi-structured format, with a set of five questions and an addition of follow-up questions when needed.

Participant Selection

The selection of interviewees happened through the screening of a number of national interfaith dialogue organizations or individuals who openly supported or participated in interfaith dialogue following the Sewol ferry accident. The screening was done through the reading of articles that covered interfaith dialogue or interfaith messages.

“The selection was based on purposive sampling, which targeted individuals who had direct experience with interfaith dialogue post-Sewol ferry incident. Inclusion criteria required participants to have actively engaged in interfaith activities- leadership positions, representatives of different communities involved, and directly involved in organizing interfaith or religious activities (related to Sewol).

Out of the four interviewees, there were three male interviewees and one female interviewee. All four interviewees were middle-aged in their 50s.

Table 1. Overview of interview participants and their religious and organizational roles in post-Sewol interfaith efforts.

No.	Interviewee identifier (description)	Selection rationale (rationale for selecting the interviewee/relation to Sewol)	Religious affiliation
1	Representative of the KCRP	Led post-tragedy interfaith dialogues and events	Buddhism
2	Local pastor	Organized post-tragedy religious memorial services at the site of the tragedy, continues to hold monthly memorial services for the bereaved at his church located in Ansan.	Christian Gospel Church
3	Senior pastor	Led post-tragedy memorial services and prayers	Christian Presbyterian Church
4	Bereaved family member	Memorial caretaker; active participant in a variety of religious memorial services held by different religions and denominations.	Christian Presbyterian Church

Religions

A total of four participants were selected for in-depth interviews, representing a range of religious backgrounds including Christianity (Presbyterian, Gospel), Buddhism, and secular perspectives. The participants ranged in age from 50 to 60 years. Three were male and one was female. These demographic factors ensured a diverse set of experiences that provided a comprehensive (rationale). The length of the interviews ranged from 30 minutes to an hour.

The first interviewee I contacted was a male representative of the Korean Religious Peace Conference (KCRP) in his 50s, who works both nationally and internationally to facilitate and mediate interfaith dialogue. He directly participated in fostering interfaith dialogue at the site of the Sewol ferry tragedy after it occurred, and has previous experience as the mediator of interfaith dialogue, including talks between Shiite and Sunni leaders and more. The interview was conducted over an hour through a field visit to the KCRP office. The second interviewee was a male pastor at a gospel church located in Ansan province near the site of the accident, as well as the Sewol ferry memorial building. He contributed to holding memorials and prayers for the bereaved after the tragedy. The interview was conducted over a phone call and lasted for 20 minutes, which was conducted after he received the set of questions beforehand through a text message.

The third interview was with another male pastor who also contributed to hosting memorials following the tragedy. Unlike the second interviewee, the third interviewee was a pastor of a Presbyterian church, which is another denomination under Christianity. The interview was also conducted over a phone call that lasted for 20 minutes, and the interviewee was sent the protocol questions beforehand. The final interviewee was a bereaved family member in her 40s who lost her son, who was a part of the high school class on the Sewol ferry. The interview was conducted through a field visit to the Danwon High School 4.16 memorial classroom, which is a memorial building run by the municipal government, meant to preserve the belongings and memories of the students who lost their lives during the Sewol ferry tragedy. The interviewee was a caretaker of the facility.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed and interpreted through Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis model, where I identified themes across interviews and observations. I began with inductive semantic coding, which uses familiarization, which involves the transcription of interviews that were conducted through the audio transcription program Notta. From there, I identified and highlighted any repeated key phrases or words mentioned throughout the transcribed text and assigned "codes" to the aforementioned key phrases. We then examined the codes for any patterns or commonalities, combining related codes into general themes that pertain to the research question. The generated themes were then re-examined, revisiting data to validate themes and checking for coherence or any lost nuance and appropriately modifying as needed. Finally, I defined each theme to reflect the supporting interviews.

Findings

Field Observation

I visited both the KCRP Office and the Danwon High School 4.16 memorial classroom to conduct interviews. When visiting the KCRP office, I noticed that there were numerous awards and recognitions from different religious groups for the mediation work of the KCRP. Additionally, there were plaques and certificates from different interreligious conferences, reflecting his experiences. While the representative was a Buddhist himself, his religion was not easily identifiable, as he had religious objects of different religions in his office, such as a cross, which created a more welcoming environment for different religions.

During the visit to the memorial classroom, I interviewed a bereaved family member who is now a caretaker of the facility. The classroom is located in a memorial building run by the municipal government, meant to preserve the belongings and memories of the students who lost their lives during the Sewol ferry tragedy. I noticed that there were few to no religious objects, books, and more. Instead, there was a notably large number of letters, notes, and texts hung up on the walls, the ceiling, and desks from the bereaved, fellow students, and visitors to the memorial. The sheer number of letters and words of love, support, and grief from such a large number of people portrayed how Koreans were able to come together in their sorrow for this tragedy, which was an indicator of the social cohesion and empathy that was part of the research question formulated.



Figure 1. Photos taken from researcher site visit of a memorial "classroom with memories" of Sewol ferry victims".

Thematic Observations

Before diving into specific themes, this section presents key findings from interview data. Two central categories emerged from qualitative analysis: Empathy and Understanding, and Religious Pluralism and Tensions. These themes reflect the nuanced ways interfaith dialogue functioned after the Sewol ferry disaster, both as a tool of emotional solidarity and a mirror of societal divisions. The findings suggest that while shared grief and ritual opened up space for collective healing, tensions around marginalized groups and perceptions of religion exposed the fragility of pluralism. The subsections that follow provide a detailed breakdown of these themes.

Theme: Empathy and Understanding as Foundations for Interfaith Solidarity Dialogue as a Personal Response to Isolation and Grief

Following the Sewol ferry tragedy, empathy and understanding emerged as practices of solidarity and presence, not simply moral sentiments. Empathy, based on interviews with the bereaved family members and interfaith actors, was revealed to be more than emotional resonance, but an active, reciprocal action that acknowledges and affirms grief within a community. Empathy is essentially grown through shared experiences and embodied through shared mourning, which differs from religious pluralism, which is most commonly associated with doctrinal tolerance and peaceful coexistence. Understanding also took on a new definition, as it was not about mutual belief systems, but a relational comprehension of pain as people react and respond to the human aspects of trauma beyond religious differences. The Sewol ferry tragedy, therefore, transformed understanding into a vulnerable and action-based engagement with the emotions and experiences of those impacted.

A bereaved family member reflects on how simply being heard by others in interfaith spaces brought solace amidst deep societal alienation:

"The very act of listening to us-that in itself shows their heart toward us, the victims' families. That kind of gesture brings tremendous comfort. Without it, we're isolated. We victims are isolated. We can't go out into the world. Even now, we're still unable to step fully outside; we're just living within this small circle. But thanks to the solidarity and support that allows us to live within that circle, those things are very much needed. Having someone to listen to us, someone to share with-that's something we really need."

This quote illustrates that empathy, as experienced by bereaved families, is more than a passive emotion but a shared act that combats isolation, enacted through interfaith listening and presence rather than merely felt. Interfaith dialogue is also a kind of presence, one in which people who have been touched by the tragedy know they are seen, heard, and not alone. This emotional bond acts as the basis for recovery and opens an emotional space in which social integration can slowly be reestablished.

Shared Suffering as a Catalyst for Connection

Another powerful example comes from the KCRP representative, who recounts an interreligious medical relief effort in a war-torn region where Shia, Sunni, and Christian families initially refused to speak to one another. However, when confronted with their children's suffering and imminent death, they found common ground.

"These children had no tomorrow... The moment those two [parents] spoke was when their children were taken into surgery. They held hands and prayed."

Despite deep religious and political divides, a shared goal, which was saving their children's lives, created an unexpected space for empathy. While physical proximity alone lacked the power to facilitate empathy and understanding, shared vulnerability did. The act of praying together reflects a ritual of reconciliation, reframing interfaith engagement as a lived, transformative process rather than a theoretical ideal. This anecdote, although drawn from a global example, echoes the Korean context post-Sewol, where interfaith rituals and mutual mourning provided similar moments of unity amongst division and fragmentation.

Theme: Religious Pluralism and Tensions

Reframing Religious Practices Beyond Denominational Boundaries on a Personal Level

A recurrent theme across interviews was tension and the importance of religious pluralism. While Korea's religious landscape includes major religions (such as Protestantism and Buddhism) and less mainstream sects and folk beliefs, the tragedy exposed both opportunities for cooperation and tensions within this diversity.

This theme looks at the intricacies, hurdles, and possibilities of religious pluralism that came to light after the Sewol ferry disaster, as shown through talks between different faiths.

Interfaith dialogues aimed to reframe religious practices beyond denominational boundaries. As the local pastor noted:

“Because we are not confined to the framework of Protestant worship, and we can appropriate rites and rituals from various religious fields, and we can imagine things that are a bit outside of that framework.”

Religious lines were blurred during shared grief and collective mourning, which allowed for ritual borrowing and shared religious thinking. This suggests a functional pluralism that can occur when different religious communities and sects collaborate to create healing spaces that transcend doctrinal differences. This adaptation aligns with the broader goal of interfaith dialogue as a means of communal solidarity, particularly during times of division and crisis.

Religious Tensions and the Need for Interfaith Dialogue Post-Sewol

Although interfaith dialogue places great emphasis on unity, the interviews reflected existing stigmatization of minority religious groups, as the bereaved family member acknowledged that:

“...Anyway, I've seen religious groups like the Salvation Sect and Shincheonji. I don't know much about them, but in the case of the Salvation Sect, the captain of the Sewol was Yoo Byung-eon. They're the Salvation Sect. So the perception isn't very good for us. Why? Because I lost my child due to the Sewol ferry disaster. And when we talk about those religious groups, they're not like, you know, regular religious groups.”

The negative societal perception of the Salvation Sect due to its supposed connections to the Sewol ferry company complicates attempts to foster religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue. This example demonstrates that interfaith dialogue may not be sufficient to break down deep-rooted prejudices or mistrust, especially when certain religious groups have societal stigma. Thus, the quote underscores two important dimensions of religious tension; first, the formation of societal stigma and distrust towards religions other than one's own, and second, the broader challenge of reconciling doctrinal differences and shared difficult history within a pluralistic society.

Reclaiming the Core Values of Religion Amid Perceived Violence

One striking tension that emerges in post-Sewol interfaith dialogue is the dissonance between religion's peaceful ideals and its association with violence or conflict in practice. A KCRP representative reflects:

“Religion is not inherently violent, but it has become associated with violence in how it appears. The ultimate goal [of interfaith dialogue] is to recover religion's original and essential values.”

This quote shows a key difference between the essence of religion and how it plays out in history or politics. While religion is often entangled in violence, either because of institutions or political interpretations and manipulation, its core ideas are still about peace, kindness, and respect. In this view, talks between faiths aren't just to stop conflicts; they're about bringing back what's good in religion. The quote links back to the bigger picture of how religion affects social conflicts. It also implies that fostering pluralism involves not only tolerating diverse beliefs but also actively working to restore public trust in religion as a force for good.

Synthesis and Implication

These findings indicate that religious pluralism in post-Sewol Korea encompasses both possibility and tension. Shared rituals and practices of mourning create spaces for empathy and solidarity, but the ongoing exclusion of marginalized groups like the Salvation Sect indicates the vulnerability of pluralism in times of national trauma. Dialogue thereby plays two roles, as it both heals and reveals. It fosters mutual understanding but also unveils the social hierarchies embedded in public perceptions of religion.

Conclusion and Final Discussion

This study examined the role of interfaith dialogue in the aftermath of the Sewol ferry disaster, focusing on its capacity to foster religious pluralism, communal healing, and social reconciliation. Two primary themes emerged from the analysis: *Faith as a Space for Healing* and *Wariness in Religious Recognition*. The first theme revealed how interfaith rituals and collective mourning helped bridge doctrinal divides by offering bereaved families a spiritual escape to help process trauma. In contrast, the second theme exposed

persistent distrust toward minority sects like the Salvation Sect, suggesting that interfaith dialogue, while impactful in many respects, has limitations in confronting deep-rooted societal stigmas, especially when religious groups are associated with national scandal or tragedy.

By centering on the Sewol context, this study contributes a nuanced case study to the limited body of literature on interfaith dialogue in East Asian settings and, more broadly, in post-crisis contexts. It expands on the pluralist theology of John Hick, who argued for the equal acknowledgment of all religious paths, by demonstrating how this ideal struggles in practice when confronted with public narratives of blame and social exclusion. It also engages Peter Berger's theory of the "sacred canopy," extending his notion that religion functions as a meaning-making structure by showing how that canopy can fracture in times of national trauma, especially when some groups are excluded from the "canopy".

In a more practical sense, this study offers insights for faith-based NGOs, educators, and dialogue facilitators. It shows that while post-disaster interfaith efforts, such as those seen after 9/11, can help foster national unity and empathy, their ability to shift public opinion about stigmatized or marginal groups is limited. Future interfaith initiatives must attempt to go beyond symbolic gestures of unity to engage directly with media narratives and historical grievances through discussion. Dialogue facilitators should incorporate critical reflection on religious bias and also guide the creation of a more open-minded and receptive mindset that can understand and embrace both religious similarities and differences, which can ultimately lead to respect for other religions.

Academically, this study adds nuance to existing theories of religious pluralism by illustrating how pluralism functions not only as a theological or philosophical value but as a lived and contested practice. It also highlights the importance of contextualizing interfaith efforts within different sociopolitical environments, challenging assumptions about dialogue's universal efficacy.

However, this study is limited by its focus on a single case and a small set of interviews. Future research could look into how interfaith dialogue is utilized in the wake of other national tragedies across different cultural contexts, such as 9/11 in the U.S., the 2004 tsunami in Southeast Asia, or the Christchurch Mosque shootings in New Zealand. Additionally, more in-depth research on how minority religious groups view interfaith engagement could reshape existing understanding of inclusion, representation, and power in pluralistic environments.

In conclusion, while interfaith dialogue offers a meaningful path toward reconciliation and shared humanity, its effectiveness is neither guaranteed nor universal. It must be intentionally designed to address not only theological differences, but also the emotional, historical, and political forces that shape how communities grieve, and who they blame.

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