

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON RELIGION, PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT

Topic

***CAN THE EAST AFRICAN REGION EXPERIENCE
IMPROVEMENT IN THE QUALITY OF PEOPLE'S
LIVES, WITHOUT THE REALIZATION OF PEACE,
AND WHAT SHALL THE ROLE OF RELGION BE ?***

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GREETINGS:

In the Name of the Risen Lord : Jesus Christ and on behalf of John Paul II Justice and Peace Centre, I greet you all with His Words: “ Peace be with you” Jn.20,19

First of all, I wish to convey my gratitude to Rev. Dr. Fred Sheldon Mwesigwa, Chair of the Organising Committee for preparing such a meaningful International Conference on Religion for Peace and Development. I thank you also for inviting us to participate in this important conference.

INTRODUCTION:

We are living in a critical time in the history of many of our countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Burundi’s national and presidential elections will take place in May this year. Rwanda’s presidential election is scheduled for later this year in August. Sudan held national elections in April, setting the stage for the much anticipated 2011 referendum. Kenya maintains a power-sharing arrangement while edging towards national presidential elections in 2012. To date the fighting in Eastern Congo, one of the largest and richest countries in Africa has left more that 4.5 million people dead and displaced millions more. Uganda is also preparing for national and presidential elections in 2011, amidst growing concerns of violence and political intimidation.

Moreover, people in these nations still lack the capacity to participate in the decisions pertaining to the development of their nations. They are always at the mercy of the political leaders who rarely think in terms of the common good and the well being of all citizens. Since the majority of East Africans are strong believers in God, religion needs to be more instrumental in fostering development and pace.

The topic under discussion is : “Can the East African region experience improvement in the quality of people’s lives, without the realization of peace, and what shall the role of religion be” ? The areas under discussion are:

1. Context of the Great Lakes Region.
2. Understanding of Religion, Peace and Development.
3. Brief history of the role of Religion in promoting Peace and Development
4. Faith doing Justice, Integral Development and Peace in this Region
5. Some Proposals to focus on (Participation, Responsible Leadership, Role of women in society and Churches, Care for Environment)
6. Questions for reflection

1. THE CONTEXT OF THE GREAT LAKES REGION

The vast majority of people in many sub-Saharan African nations, and in the Great Lakes Region, are deeply connected to the practice and major tenets of one or the other of the world’s two largest religions: Christianity and Islam.

Despite the dominance of Christianity and Islam, Traditional African Religious beliefs and practices are alive and coexist with Islam and Christianity. Christianity and Islam also coexist with each other, and relatively few see evidence of widespread anti-Muslim or anti-Christian hostility.

While the number of Muslims living between the Saharan desert and the Cape of Good Hope has increased from 110 million in 1990 to approximately 234 million in 2010, the members of Christian Churches have grown even faster, soaring from about 170 million to 470 million in the same period. While Sub-Saharan Africa has about twice as many Christians as Muslims, on the African continent as a whole the two faiths are roughly balanced with some 400 million to 500 million followers each. However, “According to some analysts, most people in Africa rank unemployment, crime and corruption as bigger problems than religious conflicts”¹

In the Great Lakes Region, we have experienced, during the last four decades, both some improvement in the quality of people’s lives and also impoverishment or diminishment in people’s lives due to violent conflicts in Uganda and most neighbouring countries as well as serious injustices of different kinds.

In a region so blessed with abundant human, natural, mineral and spiritual resources, people have been impoverished and marginalised to a life of dire poverty, violence, internally displaced people (IDP), domestic violence and undignified living in the slums of our cities and villages.

An important question: How can families and people in this region enjoy peace without social justice, that is without having all their basic needs met?

*“If you want Peace, work for Justice”.*²

2.UNDERSTANDING OF RELIGION, PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT.

What kind of Religion are we talking about?

In both academic and popular venues, there is a tendency to present religion as a simple, undifferentiated phenomenon. We live in an increasingly pluralistic society. At the same time the diversity of understanding and living each one’s faith in both Christian and Muslim communities reveals a great wealth for mutual enrichment.

Religion is defined “*as the external, social, institutional expression of our faith in God*”³

B. Lonergan defines *religious faith as “knowledge born of religious love”*⁴

*Hollenbach says that: “Religious beliefs and loyalties are facts that energize the commitment of civil society for they give people common values, effective motivation and cognitive reasons for active participation in public life”*⁵

A religious pluralistic community does not share a common vision of wellbeing or common good. Therefore a culture of dialogue in mutual listening and respect is becoming imperative today for harmonious living and promoting the common good.

¹ “Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life” Article.. P.2. April 2010.

² John Paul II. New year’s Message on Peace. 1990

³ McBrien Richard. “Catholicism”. p.1254 .Winston press. Minneapolis. 1981

⁴ Lonergan Bernard. “Dimensions of Meaning” .in F.,E.Crowe,, 252-267, New York. Herder.1967

⁵ Hollenbach David. “the Global Face of Public Faith: Political, Human rights and Christian Ethos”. P. . Georgetown University Press. Washington,D.C. 2003. p.112.

All religious communities face a fundamental challenge: How to relate their distinctive visions of the good human life with the growing awareness that all persons are linked in a web of global interdependence.?

In this interdependent world, the need for a clear vision of the common good for the whole human race is evident. And yet, religious and cultural pluralism means that there is not agreement about the meaning of a global common good.

How can our religious beliefs contribute to the understanding and promotion of a more just, reconciled and peaceful society?

I would like to define briefly the following three terms:

*By Justice: I mean Social Justice (distributive, commutative and restorative).

All this in the context of Biblical Justice by which I mean: right relationships with God, myself, neighbour and Creation.

*By Peace: I mean: Total wellbeing: harmonious relations: *Shalom*.

*By Development: I mean: Integral Human Development (not just economic growth)

2. A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN PROMOTING PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE REGION.

“Can the East African region experience improvement in the quality of people’s lives , without the realization of peace, and what shall the role of Religion be ?” (Question of this conference)

Religion’s role is to be understood in the context of today’s conflicts with the examples of :Sudan, Congo, Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda. I will argue that, despite too many examples and evidence of conflicts and ethnic tensions, Christian Faith has the potential and aim of promoting Human Dignity, Human Rights, Common Good, Integral Development and care for the Environment.

“ It is the case that many of the conflicts in the region and the world today that have religious dimensions are not simply clashes between faiths. Religion is rather a flag that serves as a rallying point for other political or ethnic purposes”. “ When high walls are constructed on the basis of religion , the religious communities involved can effectively be properly called: “fundamentalists”⁶

Yet the phenomenon of fundamentalism is not “fundamental” to all strongly professed religious convictions.

How can Religion , in a pluralistic global society, contribute to Justice, Peace and Development?. We have outstanding examples of religious leaders such as : Ghandi, M.L. King, Ar. Desmond Tutu and political leaders like Nyerere, K.Anan Mandela and B.Obama, who, motivated by their faith, fostered a more just and peaceful society.

During apartheid era in South Africa, Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s chairmanship of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is the culmination of his long role in seeking peaceful path to a truly common justice in that country.

⁶ Hollenbach David. ‘The Common Good and Christian Ethics’,. Cambridge University Press.2002. p.24

In our Region, the contribution of religious leaders like Archbishop Munzihirwa of Bukavu, Bishop Kataliko of Butembo, Archbishop. J. B. Odama in Uganda and others have been very instrumental in the process of peace building in the region.

History tells us that in east Africa, religion has contributed greatly to enhancing authentic human development for all. However, it is equally obvious that religions still contribute to causing tensions, mistrust, violence and even deaths.

All faiths: Christian, Muslims, Buddhists and others, have often contributed to antagonise individuals and communities. Religion has also been quite often used by leaders for cultural and political purposes. Today, the challenge we face is: How can predominantly Christian Countries like Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, Kenya, etc. fall into serious conflicts, wars and even genocides? Is the ethnic blood stronger than the Christian Baptism waters?

We need to seriously ponder the question posed by Cardinal Echezarai, former head of the Pontifical Council of Justice and Peace. When he visited Rwanda, soon after the tragic events of 1994, he addressed the assembled Church leaders: *“Are you saying that the blood of tribalism is deeper than the waters of baptism”?* One of the leaders present honestly answered: *“yes, it is”*. This is one of the hard questions we need to grapple with.

In a controversial article: *“The Clash of Civilisations”* in *“Foreign Affairs”*, Samuel Huntington affirms that the conflicts in the world’s politics will be driven by clash of civilization and cultures rather than by ideologies and economics.

*“By civilization and cultures he means: communities distinguished from each other by history, language, culture, tradition and most important, religion”*⁷

The sociologist Jose Casanova describes different models for the public presence of religion in our time:

- a. decline of religion in the world
- b. privatization of religion in modern society
- c. the functional differentiation of the role of religion from other spheres of human activity.

Casanova argues persuasively that religion is not declining and being privatised. Religion can promote a sense of ultimate meaning and salvation that includes hope in all our political, economic and intellectual activities.⁸

We need to consider how Christian faith might relate to public life and communities. The social teaching of the Church present the following themes relating faith with public life:

- d. the dignity of the human person and human rights
- e. the importance of commitment and solidarity in sharing common resources and services.
- f. the religious significance of all human activities.⁹

The Churches need to understand the dialogic and solidarity dimension in their relations between faith, culture and public life. Among the challenges Religion face today are the following ones: How to develop a global ethic to be the foundation of a pluralistic society?

⁷ Huntington Samuel. *“The Clash of Civilizations”* in *“Foreign affairs”*, p.24. Cambridge U.Press 1997.

⁸ Casanova Jose. *“Public Religion in the modern world”*,. Chicago Press. 1994, p.6-7

⁹ Vatican Council II. Constitution : *Gaudium et Spes*.

Does human dignity and rights offer sufficient foundation for a global ethics seeking the integral human development of all citizens? Can we move towards a common core of ethical values in a religious and cultural pluralism? Who can own such core ethics? What are the basic goods people have a right to and who is to provide them? What social and institutional arrangements are needed?

4. FAITH DOING JUSTICE, INTEGRAL DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE

4.1. JESUS CHRIST IS OUR JUSTICE, OUR WAY TO INTEGRAL DEVELOPMENT AND OUR PEACE.

“I came that they might have Life and have it to the full”. Jn.10:10

The final Message of the second Catholic Synod of Bishops from Africa which took place in Rome in October 2009 ,reminds us that the Church is at the service of Justice, Reconciliation and Peace.¹⁰

“God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself”(2 Cor.5:19)

“ For He is the Peace among us and has made the two races into one” Eph.2:13-1

Only true Faith in Christ leads us to see and treat each other as members of the same God’s Family and therefore to address the different cultural, economic and political challenges seeking integral human development for all.

Looking at the Churches all over the world and in East Africa in particular, we can observe disturbing injustices within our own Christian communities. And even more disturbing is the practice of cover up and secrecy which prevents us from living in the truth and from doing justice to the victims who have their dignity and rights violated. Vulnerable people have their dreams for integral development shattered by social injustices and by the Church’s silence in confronting evil and playing her prophetic role. Our Christian Faith leads to recognise our mistakes and to go much further in doing compassionate justice to both offenders and victims of abuses.

4.2. HOW CAN RELIGION DO MORE JUSTICE AND BRING INTEGRAL HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE ?

Political leaders often fail to recognise the role that Religious peace makers can play in building trust and fostering justice, reconciliation and participation.¹¹ They often want religious leaders contribution and service to society not to go beyond religious celebrations. However, Christian Churches have a mandate and responsibility to promote a more just, integrally developed and peaceful society and they still remain committed to promoting the integral development of every one. As prophets, covering up injustices diminishes the very credibility of our faith. Our faith often remains “external” rather than life giving and transformative to building the Kingdom of God on earth. Every abuse and lack of transparency from religious leaders means the

¹⁰ Second Synod for Africa. Final Message of the Bishops to the People of God. P.12. Paulines. Nairobi. 2009

¹¹. Aquiline Tarino. ‘The role of religion in peace building’. AFER, vol51, nr.4, p.386. Eldoret.2009

fracturing of faith, trust and the erosion of hope in a God of love and a church of compassion and communion.

*“Placing so much power, privilege and authority on the religious leaders makes it easy for abuses of all kinds to occur. Time has come for the laity of the church to play a decisive role in the management of the church and in holding their pastors to account.”*¹² The reality of modern culture is that there is a strong movement which holds that religion and politics should occupy radically differentiated spheres in which religious and private convictions do not exert themselves within the public square.

The question remains : what kind of religion?

As mentioned earlier, Bernard Lonergan defines *religious faith as knowledge born of religious love*. This kind of faith occurs when the love of God floods our hearts so that we can embrace values that are not only vital, but also social, cultural, personal and transcendental. This is the kind of religion that we should promote. I believe our world needs this kind of religion and faith. *“The measure of the true value of any religion is to what extent it promotes the justice, peace and happiness of humankind and projects the ideal of love. The religion we need in the world of today is not the one that tends to totalize and swallow everyone in the blaze of dogmatism or strict uniformity”*¹³ Authentic religion promotes compassionate justice and inter-religious dialogue. We need the courage of truth, the witness of holiness and prophetic action driven by the Spirit of love. Peace, in Christian teaching is the fruit of an order shaped by values of justice, truth, freedom and love. According to the Islamic teachings, peace comes through submission to Allah in Islam. Islam also aims at helping all live in peace-love.¹⁴

5. PROPOSITIONS

Allow me to point out FOUR areas where we can focus our joint efforts:

5.1. PARTICIPATION OF CIVIC SOCIETY IN DECISION MAKING

Both in the Church and State, we need to foster closer participation of civic society to include all the talents and potential in building a better world.

We need in the Churches closer cooperation that goes beyond coexistence in parallel worlds, to conjoint efforts to promote a more just, peaceful and integrally developed society. Changes and transformation rarely come from the top leaders, but from the communities and a more informed, motivated and engaged civic society, through an authentic civic-ethics education at all levels. Our Centre is engaged in this area of ethics-civic education and has presented, through the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda (IRCU), a Petition to Parliament requesting them to integrate Civic education in the national Education Curriculum. This will enable all citizens, motivated also by their faith, to engage in building a more just and reconciled society.

¹² Stan Chu Ilo. “Sexual abuse and the fracturing of faith and religion”. Catholic Information Service Africa. (CISA). April 2010

¹³ Stan Chu Ilo. “Sexual abuse and the fracturing of faith and religion”. CISA. April .2010

¹⁴ Text Book on Civic/Ethics education for teachers, published by John Paul II Justice and Peace centre.. April 2010.

5.2. RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP TO PROMOTE SOCIAL JUSTICE AND THE COMMON GOOD

We are having a serious leadership crisis the world over. Religious, political and economic leaders are often losing credibility by the day in many countries. Without authentic faith and ethical values being deepened in our leaders, there is little hope of leaders working for the common good rather than for their own selfish interests. In such a time as this, religious and political leaders must deliver a leadership of participation, service and accountability.

5.3. THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN JUSTICE AND PEACE BUILDING

The prominence of women in the Old and especially in the New Testament witnessing and services to the Church communities speaks out very eloquently. (Lk.24,1-12,22-24). Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the other women are the first and most courageous witnesses to the Risen Lord. St Paul also speaks of the help given by women, such as Priscilla and others in the early Christian communities.¹⁵ The second African Synod also affirms the principle that the irreplaceable role of women in decision making and services to the community must be ensured in the Church, as they are the back bone in the local Christian communities¹⁶.

5.4. FAITH CARING FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

The global society and the Churches are becoming more aware of the urgency to attend to the dramatic degradation of mother Earth. Scientific evidence, like the “*Inconvenient Truth*”, show the urgency of the joint and urgent task.

However our leaders, gathered in Copenhagen in Dec.09 fell far short of their responsibility to tackle this urgent need of a global commitment to reduce the rapid climate changes taking place and which affect especially the developing nations. Pope Benedict XVI, in his New Year message on Peace, affirmed that : “ If your want Peace , care for the Earth”.¹⁷

Environmental Justice is part and parcel of our Christian faith.

CONCLUSION

“Can the East African region experience improvement in the quality of people’s lives without the realization of Peace and what shall be the role of Religion be”?

If our focus remains: to improve the quality of people’s lives in this region, then all political, cultural and in particular religious leaders must become prophetic witnesses and active promoters of compassionate justice for all, especially the most vulnerable, abused and marginalised. In the spirit of the Gospel, religious leaders need to grow into a participatory leadership, remaining close to the people with the mind and heart of the Good Shepherd. Jn.10.

¹⁵ Navituro Bernardette. “The role of women in peace building and reconciliation in the Ameen Countries”. AFER, vol.51, n.3, p.279. 2009

¹⁶ Second Synod for Africa. Final Message of the Bishops to the People of God.. nr.25. 2009

¹⁷ 2010 New Year Message of Pope Benedict XVI. www.zenit.org

Society needs leaders and religious leaders, especially today, who are prophetic, humble enough to listen , courageous and working together for compassionate justice, integral development and authentic peace. The very relevance and impact of religious faith depends on this. Shall we be able to read the signs of the times with audacity?

Shall we be free enough to be lead by the Spirit of the Risen Lord ? Shall we be passionate for Christ and passionate for humanity where we live?

Thanks for your attention. I wish you a fruitful discussion.

6. SOME QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How can Religion foster integral development and peace in today's society ?
2. How can we grow into communities that live a faith doing justice and building peace?
3. How can the Christian Churches contribute to promote leaders of integrity for the common good ?

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