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Voices for Peace
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Jesus Christ and the Philosophy of Peaceful Co-existence

By

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This paper recognizes that the quest for peace in the world today is one of the foremost concerns. This is more so for the African continent, which for a long time now has been a troubled region. It identifies some of the root causes of conflict on the continent and tries to come up with some recommendations in addressing this issue. It proposes the development of an ethos founded on the principles of Jesus on peace. But first the concepts of conflict, violence and peace are defined.

Conflict and Violence

According to Sithole Masipula (1992) conflict is of two kinds, active and latent. In active conflict violence is manifested while in latent conflict, there is absence of violence. For this paper, conflict is viewed as a serious disagreement or difference of opinion.

On the other hand, violence is when force is used due to a conflict. The intention of violence is usually to harm or kill the one whom violence is being unleashed against. Violence and conflict usually operate together. Thus, violence is a result of conflict. *Webster Comprehensive Dictionary* defines conflict as a struggle to resist or overcome, contest of opposing forces or powers, strife, battle, a state or condition of opposition and antagonisms, discord, class collision, painful tension set up by a clash between opposed and contradictory impulses in an individual. From this definition, conflicts may be of different kinds. They could be political, ideological, military, socio-economical or religious.

What are the Causes of Conflict?

Fight over Resources

In Africa, many conflicts are as a result of competition for resources. The competition may be geared towards winning as much or even more than others. This process has given birth to group identities such as ethnicity. Different groups have developed group identities in order to compete for national resources. The most vicious ethnic conflicts in Africa can be traced back to European colonialism. Before colonialism, Africans were conscious of their tribes but they understood that they depended on one another. This was evidenced in intermarriages and trade between the various communities. For example, the Luhya and the Kalenjin intermarried and intermingled during cultural occasions. But with colonialism, the African continent was subdivided into countries while the countries also were subdivided for administration purposes. This then ushered in the problem of resources.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity can be seen to have come into the fore as a result of history. Ethnic competition for national resources emerged in respect of land, political power, natural resources, social and economic power. This has led to political clashes, clashes related to land for settlement and pasture, leadership wrangles, individual and group freedoms. Classic examples are like the 1994 Rwandan Genocide and the 1992, 1997 and 2008 ethnic clashes in Kenya.

Injustice

Apart from ethnic competition another cause of conflict is injustice. Justice can be defined simply as giving to each other what is due to him or her. In Africa, justice has not been practised in the sharing of national resources: for example, social recognition, political power and land. African leaders distribute national resources to a few people from their community, and this leads to other communities feeling sidelined. This then results in conflict and violence.

Wrong Decision Making Processes

African leaders also cause conflict through decision-making procedures. They tend to rely on a few decision-makers and hardly involve others. This could be viewed as an avenue of coming up with decisions that favour the interests of a few. The aggrieved group may suppress their disappointment or decide to resist and this results in conflict.

Gender Based Conflicts

Gender violence could be viewed as an example of gender conflict, which is manifested in acts such as rape, incest and battering. Gender conflict could also be as a result of the socio-cultural environment which encourages male dominance over women. This is especially true in the African context because of the patriarchal ideological structures which have been put in place to ensure male dominance.

Conflicts in Traditional African Communities

Although we had stated earlier that most of the conflicts bedeviling the African continent can be explained historically, traditional African societies had conflicts. However, the kind of conflicts experienced by these societies were fewer. They revolved around water, farming and grazing rights. This partly can be attributed to the fact that these societies had an ethos to which all normal members of society subscribed.

Ethos can be defined as a characteristic spirit of a culture, era or community as manifested in its attitudes and aspirations. Members who did not subscribe to such ethos were regarded deviant and could be excommunicated from the rest of society. For example, among most African societies, the sanctity of life was upheld. According to Mugambi (2003), contemporary North Atlantic societies enjoy considerable social stability, which is attributable to the ethos to which all normal members are expected to conform. For example, an opposition party operates within the same ethos as the ruling party and the change of government does not affect the national ethos.

✓ Social stability is also sustainable in oriental societies through an ethos that derives strength from cultural and religious thought and practice. It seems that without an ethos, it is difficult for a society to

realize cohesiveness as well as stability. In contemporary Africa, there is no ethos which brings African nations together. The African continent has not achieved cohesion through internal processes of social togetherness. The African countries were arbitrarily subdivided at the Berlin Conference in 1884 – 1885. This has not yielded any sense of togetherness. In fact, it has been one of the causes of conflicts.

In his landmark publication, *Hope in the Midst of Chaos*, Wheaton (2002) argues that the solution to the problem of conflict in Nicaragua is to be found at the 'base', the grassroots. The African continent needs to seek for a solution for peace in Africa and not look for solutions that come from outside. It is the contention of this paper that African people need to rethink and come up with a road map towards a process of self-discovery in which they will distinguish themselves as a people. The borders will become irrelevant and they will begin to think about themselves as one people. At this juncture, I propose that this process should be based on the principles of Jesus on peace. The core of this ethos should be community as opposed to an individual.

Why Jesus Christ's Philosophy?

But why should Africans formulate their ethos from the principles of Jesus on peace or Christian teaching? To answer this question some elaborations need to be done. According to Kamaara (2003) the church as a community of believers is numerically the major group of people in the continent of Africa. David Barret (1982) contends that Africa is the most Christian continent in the world with a population of 400 million Christians. He names Uganda, Zambia and Kenya as predominantly Christian countries with 84%, 83% and 82% respectively of the total population of the countries being Christians.

The church's influence can be realized from the grassroots, civil society to international levels. This then means that the church can be an effective and powerful influence in terms of civil thinking and acting. The church is privileged with meeting its members at least once a week. Paul Miller (1969) argues rightly that the church has the role to provide humanitarian ideals concerning human dignity, peace, unity among men and mutual responsibility. This perspective is reiterated by Ayanga (2002) when she states that religion has a transcendental reference point which

makes its demands on believers to become imperative. Religion therefore has a stronger basis for demanding peace than other institutions. Religion is an important institution whose contribution to the social system should not be ignored. In the absence of any other universally accepted legitimating institution, religion must be allowed to continue to play the role.

The Germany theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer hoped for a day when a church would emerge where discipleship means obedience to Christ's teachings alone and living for others, without seeking recognition or approval from anyone except Christ himself. African Christians have to courageously transcend artificial hegemonies and recover a different spirituality which will encourage tolerance. In contemporary Africa the church has not taken up this challenge because we have witnessed conflicts even in churches. The church is perceived as having the role of giving attention to moral and religious dimensions of secular issues.

An ethos based on Jesus' teaching on peace could help the African continent because although Christianity started within Aramaic culture, it has transcended its cultural borders. This cultural translatability has been its greatest strength throughout its history.

Before we discuss the principles of Jesus it is necessary to define the concept of peace.

Problematizing the Concept of Peace

The Hebrew term for peace is 'shalom' which means wellbeing, prosperity and integrity. Peace can also be linked to justice. It should not be seen to refer to only an absence of conflict or violence. According to the Vatican II "*Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World*", "Peace is an enterprise of justice. Peace results from harmony built into human society."

It is also true that peace cannot be obtained on earth unless personal values are safeguarded and human beings freely share with one another the riches of their inner spirits and talents. Interpreted within these parameters, peace then means that one is able to uphold and affirm human dignity and administration of justice. Peace means that conflicts are resolved without violence. It also means maintaining a good relationship with humanity. A peace-loving person is able to heal broken relationships

and reconcile people. Finally, it means the ability to bring back harmony where there is discord and hostility. Civil education based on the principles of Jesus can facilitate change against conflict and violence in Africa.

Jesus the Prince of Peace

The principles of Jesus Christ are found in his teachings, which are recorded in the New Testament. One of Jesus' names is the "The Prince of Peace". So why was Jesus given this attribute? A quick answer to this would be because he upheld peace. Throughout his teaching Jesus stressed on peace. From his teachings it was clear that the design for God for humanity was for all human kind to live in harmony. This pronouncement is well summed up in the last words to his disciples recorded in John 14:27:.

Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. I do not give you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid. RSV

Throughout his life on earth, Jesus upheld peace and encouraged people to live in peace. In Mathew 5:9, he is recorded reiterating the importance of being peace makers: "Blessed are the peace-makers for they shall be called sons of God".

Our understanding of a peace-maker is one who is craving for peace all the time. If people understood peace and committed to making peace, there would be an effort on their part to be instruments of peace. Jesus advocated for non-violence. This is clearly illustrated when he was arrested and one of his disciples cut off the soldier's ear. Jesus rebuked him and healed the ear (Luke 22: 50–51). In Gal: 3:26–28, Paul writes:

*In Christ Jesus you are all children of God. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, there is neither slave, nor **free people**, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

One of the causes of conflict is the fact of belonging to a particular ethnic group, nation, identity, class, gender or race. But to Christ this was not paramount because God sees none of these differences but sees all human beings as equal.

Christ called his disciples to a superior life where their families were not prioritized. The disciples were called to fellowship, sisterhood and brotherhood beyond the boundaries of family, ethnic belonging, political affiliation or economic status. The African peoples need to look beyond these artificial barriers and consider themselves a superior large family of Africans if conflicts have to be contained.

The gospel proposes that whoever receives Jesus receives the right and authority to become God's son or daughter. This is recorded in John 1:11–13:

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave the power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of flesh, nor of the will of human beings, but of God.

Jesus thought that the greatest commandment is love of God and recommended that one loves their neighbour the way one loves oneself. Love for oneself in equal measure for others calls for selflessness in addressing issues affecting other people. The concern for the needs and feeling of other people above one's own is motivated by the principle of love, loyalty, respect, forgiveness, justice and trust in God. These principles can be used to foster peace for Africa.

The love that Jesus propagated is not limited to family members or those who are good to us. It should extend to the entire human race. This is unconditional love. It transcends conflict and allows for reconciliation.

Jesus and Forgiveness

Forgiveness is the first and foremost stages in conflict resolution. Peacemaking involves restructuring relationships. It involves reconciling the warring parties and groups. Jesus taught reconciliation at four levels: reconciliation with God, self, neighbours and the human community and finally with nature. In Mathew 5:23–25, reconciliation with neighbours is a pre-requisite for reconciliation with God. This conditionality is repeated in the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:12–15. Reconciliation involves identifying and dealing with the root causes of the conflict and eventually coming up with lasting solutions. It is against this backdrop that Jesus taught forgiveness.

A Christian is expected to forgive seventy times seven times in a day. This shows that Jesus acknowledges that to err is human. One was bound to make mistakes but where such was the case one needed to ask for forgiveness. He stressed that human beings needed to ask God to forgive them when they sinned. Forgiveness is one of the highest cherished principles in Christ's teachings. He stressed that in all circumstances the offence notwithstanding, the offended should accept when the offender asks for forgiveness. He contended that everybody was obliged to forgive since they also needed forgiveness from God over their own multitudes of sin. Jesus even prayed for those who crucified him and forgave them. This philosophy, in my understanding, can enhance reconciliation where there is conflict.

Jesus and Justice

Jesus was an epitome of justice. He treated all the people he interacted with equally. He taught by example. He mingled and shared a table with tax collectors, religious leaders and listened to prostitutes and lepers to the shock of most of the people at that time such as the Pharisees (Luke 7:36–39). He fed the people spiritually but was also sensitive to their physical needs. He provided food to the multitude in Mathew 25. He revealed that the church was called to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick and afflicted, and to comfort the victims of injustices. He condemned the social injustices of his time as recorded in Luke 11:37 – 54.

Jesus interacted freely with non-Jews and offered them the free gift of the Kingdom of God just as he did to the Jews. Clear examples are the case of Samaritan women in John 4:1–26 and the healing of the Centurion's servant in Matthew 12:1–3. He also commanded that the gospel be preached in all nations (Matthew 28:19–20, Luke 24:47). In essence Jesus advocated for a universal brotherhood which did not consider ethnicity, colour or national boundaries.

Jesus revealed that God is just and treats everybody in the same way. Jesus further taught that if an individual feels that what has been done to them is unjust, they should not worry as God would ensure that justice is done. He taught that God will punish the unjust appropriately

and that justice would prevail eventually. Trust in God makes peace and reconciliation possible. Therefore, love, respect, justice and forgiveness are principles from Jesus' philosophy on peace which can enhance a peaceful co-existence of the African peoples.

In conclusion, I should say that the culture of peace can be built on ethos drawn from the teaching of Jesus on peace if we do the following:

- love others like ourselves.
- all get involved in peacemaking on a day-to-day basis out of our love for others.
- ensure that justice prevails in all our dealings.
- appreciate forgiveness and reconciliation at both individual and national levels.
- respect humanity.
- embrace non-violent means of pursuing peace and justice

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