

THE INFLUENCE OF THE CHURCH IN ENHANCING PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE AMONG AFRICAN COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

In today's age of globalization and rapid social change, the benefits and challenges of ethnic diversity are being experienced in many nations. Many refugees and emigrants move restlessly across different regions of the globe, either trying to escape wars in their regions or freeing poverty. Migratory movements add to ethnic and cultural diversity in many societies and help shape demographic, economic, political and social dynamics. That means that there is a great need for better understanding and communication among peoples from different races, communities and cultures. The migration can be internal or external and is a reflection of the rapidly changing economic, political, and cultural ties among countries and communities. Since these movements have created a multicultural society, ethnic cultures should be respected. Religion plays a crucial role as it adds to social cohesion and strengthens bonds among different ethnic groups. The Christian communities in Africa bond together in love and service which Jesus Christ brought about between groups (Jews and Gentiles). Jesus calls for love of enemies without expectation of reward. For the Catholic community, God created the human race as one and not a countless multitude of individuals. In order to give emotional, physical and financial support, the Catholic Church has formed different groups which reach out to people with different needs such as spiritual, psychological, financial and so on. Examples of such groups are peace and justice committees, small Christian communities, couples for Christ, singles for Christ, bible study groups and so forth. All these groups address the basic human needs of all human kind regardless of their religious affiliations. This approach encourages peaceful co-existence among different communities in Africa.

KEYWORDS: Ethnic and Cultural Diversity Demographic, Economic, Political and Social Dynamics

INTRODUCTION

Diversity is a fact of life. Globally, people are deluged with information about and images and interpretation of people unlike themselves. The globalization of the film and television industries and the impact of the World Wide Web, means that people from across the globe encounter one another as never before in history. The world's religions are also involved. Religions today imagine one another in doctrine, in principle and in theory. They also interact and engage one another in practice. In earthly terms, no religion, whatever its doctrine, may pretend that it is the only one succeeding¹. That means that the new environment of nearly instant communication enhances practical dimension of enduring one another and the capacity of a culture to forbear another culture with which it disagrees. As many refugees and emigrants move across different regions of the globe, they cause a lot of social, economic, political and demographic changes. Culture has become one of the most shared aspects of the society since the world has become a global village. Therefore, the need for better understanding and communication among people from different cultures is crucial.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY

It is important to allow each community within the society to keep its unique cultural identity in order to promote ethnic and racial diversity. This is well practised in Switzerland and in the United States of America. For example, Switzerland officially recognizes four languages: French, German, Italian and Romansh – that is, one language for each of its four major ethnic areas. Cultural pluralism is also practised in the USA. The belief of the Americans people in the rights of the individuals has led to a basic tolerance of cultural differences.

In Kenya, county governments are under a constitutional and legal obligation to promote national values including harmonious relations and respect for diversity by addressing the problem of exclusion, discrimination, and marginalization. Kenyan laws in their totality place duties of equality, non-discrimination, equity, fairness, transparency, accountability, diversity and meritocracy on the county governments; in addition, specific stipulations protect non – dominant groups, and minority groups that have been the subject of historical exclusion, dissemination, and marginalization. This means that these groups cannot be handled differently because of their characteristics such as language, religion, culture, national or social origin, gender, caste, birth, descent, or any other status. For example, the historic and long-term discrimination against persons with disabilities as a group has led to such people not to enjoy full equality with other people. In order to remedy this, the government has taken measures whose objectives is to achieve equality; they often do so by treating people with disabilities in a way that accords them some comparative advantages such as reserving two seats for them in the senate.¹

While some countries such as Kenya, have designed affirmative action programmes to ease past imbalances in social, educational and employment opportunities given to racial and ethnic communities, there are some countries that do not respect this requirement. They instead solve the problem by transferring the minority groups such as the refugees and internally displaced people (IDPS) to new territories. In extreme cases the minority population is expelled from the country; for example, the forceful removal of the Asian community from Uganda in 1972². Some nations result to subjugation that is, maintaining control over a group through force. For example, slavery, which can be found throughout history. In the absence of subjugation, segregation is practised. In the Middle East, for instance, Jews in Europe, were forced to live in walled – off communities called “ghettos”. In the United States, segregation was practised openly and legally until the 1960’s. As a result of earlier segregation policies, and housing restrictions, many American minority groups still tend to be concentrated into specific areas within cities. The apartheid in South Africa called for legal segregation of all groups within the country. Political and economic powers rested in the hands of the white minority, and was rigidly maintained through force. International opposition to apartheid helped to bring about the current dismantling of the system. The most extreme response to the existence of minority groups within a nation is extermination or genocide. Genocide has been attempted many times, and sometimes achieved, throughout history. For example, the massacre of more than one million Armenian by Turks, and the killing of thousands of Pakistanis by Indians during the 20th century; the killing of the Tutsis by Hutus in Rwanda in 1994; the Massacre of the Kikuyus in the Rift Valley Province in Kenya in

¹Green, W. S (2008), The ‘what’ and ‘why’ of Religious Toleration, in Religious Tolerance in World Religion edited by Jacob Neusues and Bruce Chilton. U.S.A: Templeton Foundation Press.

²National cohesion and Integration commission (2012). Consultative draft on the minimum standards and principles for recruitment to ensure inclusiveness and diversity at the county level. Nairobi:KMA Center.

1992, 1997, 2008 and so on.

Culture Shapes Human Behaviour

Culture plays an important role in shaping our attitudes and interests, which in turn directs our personality needs. For example, among the important personality needs are, the need for status, security, affection, independence, and for competence. Needs are not abstract, disembodied realities. They are particular frustrations or hopes that cause people joy or anguish. Needs are relative to people in their social and cultural situations. They grow accustomed to certain life expectations that govern what they hope for and what makes them unhappy. Culture is to a given people as personality is to a person. Our learned shared perceptions, or subjective culture contains the categories, plans and rules people employ to interpret and act purposefully in it. Subjective culture serves as a highly selective screen between the individual and the outside world that directs the organization of the psyche, which in turn has a profound effect upon the ways people look at things, behave politically, make decisions, order priorities, organize their lives and how they think. All people believe that their ways of thinking about and doing things are the best ways and they learn to evaluate other ways of thinking about and doing things that differ from theirs as unusual, wrong, or inferior (Kimmel, 2006:629). Your subjective culture gives meaning and intention to your acts and your understanding of the acts of others. That means that culture shapes the needs of people as it provides them with ideas and tools to meet the full range of their needs. In cross-cultural perspective, an overall process of conflict and its solution is not separable from complex systems of meaning that prescribe rules about mutual interaction, verbal interpretation, and management of expectations. However, no culture is completely successful in satisfying all the needs of its people and that is why every society has unresolved tensions. Groups within society struggle with each other over scarce resources and use culture against one another. Moreover, cultural attitudes profoundly influence individual attitudes toward violence. The interdependence of the actions, thoughts, and behaviour patterns of the individual, the family, the school, the workplace, and the community affects the nature of the conflict. The acceptance of the situations invested in cultural and social diversity leads to greater tolerance and harmony throughout the nation.

Religious perspectives affords individuals the opportunity to evaluate their patterns of the past, to recognize choice in their future lifestyles, and to adapt peaceful negotiation strategies and communication techniques for self-improvement, the betterment of others, and those of society. It encourages strength of character in every individual, an understanding of human differences to diffuse conflict, and a realization that new or untried coping skills may become the core of life-long learning. By learning to listen to others, hearing the message being conveyed, appreciating various points of views, and isolating the issues at hand, individuals can move effectively, adjust to routine or everyday situations, using a higher level of understanding, tolerance, and critical thinking. Rather than remain in set behaviour patterns that inhibit personal growth, inspire manipulation, and encourage loss of control and self-esteem, individuals need to find their level of comfort that promotes the worth of self in relation to family, friends and society. They need to build strong communication skills and coping strategies for a peaceful and healthier future. By understanding the influences of the past on their behaviour patterns, they can identify those patterns that need to be strengthened, preserved, or changed in a world of rich diversity and opportunity³.

³ Thomas, W.L. (1995). *Sociology: The study of Human Relationships*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

⁴ Lincoln, 2002 *Conflict Resolution Communication Patterns: Promoting Peaceful Schools*. Maryland and London: The Scarecrow Press, inc.

Society brings people together in friendship and cooperation only to make them intimate enemies. Humans are sociable and antagonistic at the same time. The various valued aspects such as personality, physique, intelligence, and wealth are unevenly distributed. People have resentments, tensions, stress, and fears of various sorts.⁴ These elements give daily life its emotional tone. Therefore, in order to solve cultural differences effectively, the organization and human resource policies should address areas where disputes may arise such as management of human resources, working conditions, organizational development, and social environment. The policies should provide guidelines in the daily running of the organizations at all levels as to address problems early before they degenerate to disputes within groups and between groups.

Unity of Religious Communities towards Humanitarian Crisis

All nations in the world unite in response to any natural or humanitarian crisis. For example, to the cries of victims of a catastrophic, 7.8 magnitude earthquake that devastated Nepal on 25th April, 2015, these groups provided emergency shelter, food, clean water, medical care and met other urgent needs for victims of the terrible disaster that caused loss of life, destruction of houses and property, displacement of families and psychological torture. These groups did not expect any rewards but were working according to Jesus teaching, ministering to those who were suffering and reaching out with care and love. Today, there is a multinational force of troops from Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon and Benin to fight the Boko Haram terrorist group that has caused a lot of destruction and loss of human life in Nigeria and the neighboring countries. The African Union backed the creation of a multi-national force in January 2015 saying that Boko Haram required a collective effective and decisive response because it was not a Nigerian problem but a global one that was interfering with people's religious beliefs. The USA government supported the force and pledged to give five million dollars to the task force.⁵ There have been regional and international cooperation and support towards this goal showing that human beings set aside their social differences in order to help one another in times of problems.

The following are examples of some humanitarian crisis that have brought the global village together:

- The Ebola outbreak was a stark reminder to the international community of just how under resourced health systems are in parts of the world, especially in West Africa. As of April 2015, more than 1,300 foreign medical personnel alone had been deployed to Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea to support the response (World Health organization, April , 2015)
- The Congo hostilities between government forces and rebel groups in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo in 2008 that led to over 1.5 million people displaced and seek shelter in the neighboring countries.
- East Africa in 2011, more than 13 million people in Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, and republic of South Sudan were left in need of food, water, and emergency health because of one of the worst droughts in 25 years.
- Conflict in Syria – this has triggered the World's largest humanitarian crisis since World War II (1939 – 1945); 12.2 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, 7.6 million of whom are internally displaced.

⁵ Dayton and Fraser (1900:119) Dayton, R, E. and Archer, A, D. (1990). Planning Strategies for World Evangelization. California: Marc.

- Typhoon Haiyan – this typhoon tore a path of destruction over 100 miles wide through the central Philippines on 8th November 2013. It brought torrential rain, winds of over 170 mph and a storm surge of up to 25 feet that devastated coastal areas. Over 14 million people were affected including five million who had their homes damaged or destroyed. Over 6000 people lost their lives.
- Asian Tsunami – the Asian Tsunami of December 26, 2004 killed over 230,000 people in fourteen countries inundating coastal communities, with waves up to 30 meters high. Indonesia was the hardest hit country followed by SriLanka, India and Thailand.⁶

This response of all kinds of religious groups regardless of their cultural or religious affiliations plays a crucial role as it adds to social cohesion and strengthens bounds among different communities not only in Africa but also in the world. The Christian communities in Africa bond together in love and service thus practising the teachings of Jesus Christ. That means that sexism, racism, tribalism and classism are of human social making. The Christians goal should be integral to human liberation so that the relationship of people everywhere is enhanced. This requires an acceptance of persons and communities by one another and the elimination of a society based on the exploitation of one class by another (Parvey, 1983).

The Catholic Church and Evangelization

The Catholic Church is unique in the way it reaches the communities through evangelization. The Catholic communities understand that in order to live the Christian faith, one must witness it in the daily lives of the community where he/she lives. With the formation of small Christian communities, the church's work is well coordinated because within these groups, there are faithful's who are members of the mother church such as justice and peace committees, couples for Christ, singles for Christ, liturgy, bible study groups and so forth. These groups address the issues that affect the Catholic Church. The church in turn directs or coordinates how the needy in society should be taken care of, that is, in educational matters, food, shelter, clothing, psychological wellbeing, and spiritual wellbeing. The sick are treated and if too weak to take care of themselves, they are taken to children's homes or old people's homes where they are given all the care required of a human being. This makes them feel wanted and loved. This assistance is in line with the teachings of Jesus Christ, about charity.. ...you are lacking one thing, go sell what you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come and follow me'. The Catholic Church understands that the sense of community is carried on in church through religious life and that evangelization is an encounter that happens when one person interacts with another. This interaction helps individuals to share their fears, sorrows, anger and happiness. As they do this, they support one another physically, psychologically, spiritually and even financially. This type of evangelization keeps the church community united.

CONCLUSIONS

Globally, the internet and other technologies have advanced communication with culturally different people resulting in a more multicultural perspective across special interest groups such as business men/women, politicians and religious people. That means that there is a great need to re-examine cultural biases so that instead of accepting the dominant cultural values, and beliefs, people should discover each cultural group's unique explanations of their behaviour

⁶Boko Haram Crisis (2015). U.S.A t.Retrieved from Internet-3/9/2015

and meaning. Religion plays a great role in uniting people regardless of their religious affiliation. This unity is well expressed any time there is a humanitarian crisis as all nations respond to the needs of the people affected. The Catholic Church is unique in the way it reaches all communities with love and compassion through small Christian Communities and individually.

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