CONFLICT MITIGATION AS A MECHANISM OF PROMOTING RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE FOR PEACEFUL SOCIAL COHESION IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Conflict arises naturally in all kinds of social settings. It is a natural normal part of life and when understood, it can become an opportunity to learn and develop. Africa faces multiple socio-economic, political and religious problems created by culture, secularism, post colonialism and human greed. There are also domestic sources of conflict such as ideology, personality, internal power struggles, and mistreatment of some classes of people such as the minorities. Every conflict possesses its own historical character. For example, when internal factors interact with external factors, the interaction is likely to cause conflict because of interest in different values and goals. In addition, the past has a significant bearing on the present. That is why, today, after thousands of years of human history, we continue to witness nations and communities waging devastating wars over conflicting ideologies, territorial pride, and perceived national interests; we continue to see communities torn apart over religious and ethnic differences. Religious intolerance is experienced in Nigeria, Sudan, Kenya, Uganda, Middle East, Ireland, Sri Lanka, Pakistan etc. People need to understand the main mechanisms by which conflict between individuals, groups and nations is normally controlled without violence. Religion plays a significant role in helping communities resolve differences, in advancing international human rights, in overcoming great injustices and in encouraging non-violent management of conflict. There are well-known faith based peacemaking personalities such as Martin Luther Junior King, Bishop Desmond Tutu, Bishop Korir, Mahatma Ghandi, Dalai Lama, Father Kaiser, Reverend Njoya, Bishop Muge, and The Catholic Clergy and so on.

KEYWORDS: Conflict, Mitigation, Social Cohesion, Communities

INTRODUCTION

What is Social Conflict?

Social conflict is a relationship between two or more parties who believe that they have incompatible goals. Interests tend to be central to people's thinking and action, forming the core of many of their attitudes, goals, and intentions. Before one party's interest can clash with those of others, these interests must be translated into aspirations, a behavioral representation of the things the party strives for or believes it must exceed. In other words, conflict exists when a party sees its own, and others aspirations as incompatible. Such perceived incompatibility depends on the extent to which the available alternatives seem capable of satisfying the aspirations of one party and another. When the available alternatives are compatible with these aspirations, no conflict is experienced. The poorer the perceived fit between the pool of available alternatives, and the aspirations of one party and another, the more severe the conflict.

State conflicts can be studied at two levels, namely, intra-state and inter-state. Intra-state conflict can manifest itself in a power struggle between two or more groups so as to advance their interests and goals. On the other hand, inter-

state conflict occurs due to competition between two or more states. States are interdependent since no state is self-sufficient. Interdependence in turn generates increased interactions, or close contacts among independent and sovereign states, but because states pursue different interests, integration can cause conflicts much as it can promote cooperation. That means, conflict arises naturally in all kinds of social, political, geographical and religious settings. On the global scale, nations struggle with one another both diplomatically and militarily[1]. With the increased globalization of the world's economy, people are becoming more dependent upon one another. This crowding adds to stress: packed freeways, crowded cubicles at work, small dormitory rooms, crowded parking lots, noise surrounding us at a greater and more persuasive level, and more people everywhere add to the sense of scarcity of space and privacy. This shows that there is no person who can claim to be satisfied with life and people should learn to accommodate some of these problems because they are part of life. That means that people should not become violent each time they feel frustrated because there are better ways of solving conflict.

The Nature of Conflict

The main causes of disharmony among people of all races is individual's excessive dissatisfaction with the world around him. The causes of conflicts among people are mainly poverty, religion, politics, ethnicity, social status, gender and environment. The basic ignorance of the value of these concepts makes human beings selfish and thus, selfishness eventually poisons them with desire and greed. When desire and greed are not fulfilled or satisfied, humans tend to be enraged and hateful.

Environmental problems affect the entire world today. Some of these are air pollution, global warming, acid rain, hazardous waste, ozone depletion, water pollution, overpopulation, deforestation and so on. The specter of outrageous transgression emerges in human beings in the form of materialistic wealth.

Since the end of the cold war, conflicts rose mostly within nations and not between nations. Some of those conflicts were not new but re-emerged after decades of silence, and most of them had both economic and cultural dimensions. Economic conflicts can be managed easily using a combination of economic growth and distribution of assets and income, thus creating a perspective of progress for everybody. However, cultural, social, ethnic and religious or sub-national conflicts last long because they are deeply rooted in society. Cultural conflicts outline generations and are less manageable than economic conflict because there is no way out by means of sharing or redistribution. Growing socio-economic rift is a major cause of discord among communities. Widespread poverty, illiteracy and ill-health are some of the reflections of such disparity in human kind. People cannot be happy in a society where the gap between the rich and the poor is extremely wide. Such a society experiences theft, burglary, enmity, murder, kidnapping, drug addiction, prostitution, flesh trading and organ trading.

Religion teaches us that there will be a day of justice and peace in the world which indicates, that peace is achievable. Religious conflict emerges when the definition of culture and religion are expressed in fanatic imaginations, speculations and superstitions. A lack of understanding of ones religion renders an individual to criticize other's religion. Religion and culture all over the world have remained a way of maintaining peaceful social life. Therefore, those who use religion to cause havoc lack proper understanding of their own religion. Religious phenomena and religious behaviour can better be understood by avoiding vague intuitive elements or unobservable subjective elements such as vague or shallow

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[1] Willmont, W.W. & Hocker, J.L. Interpersonal Conflict. New York: The McGraw Hill Co. Inc. 2001, p.2.

meaning of religious beliefs and practices.

Beliefs and Practices of World Religions

All religions which are found throughout the world strive in various ways to relieve the anxiety of the human heart by suggesting ways, teachings, and rules of life as well as sacred rites.[2] The main religious of the world are Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism. There are also traditional religious and atheism. All these religions have similarities and differences in their beliefs, practices and social order. Therefore, it is important for people to understand the diversity of religion so that each individual is accorded a dignified position within the social system as defined by these religions.

In order to understand how different religions operate, it is important to view some of their beliefs:

- **Christianity**

The Catholic community believes that God created the human race as one and not a multitude of individuals. No person should be considered less important than the other because all humans were created in the image of God. Catholic believers stress the value of participation in the church and its systems, and cohesion in all communities despite the larger societal background of the desperate struggles against exploitation, poverty, hopelessness and despair. Regardless of all the distance between us such as race, ethnicity, class, culture and so on, the catholic community understands the need for oneness in Christ. The oneness of God thus underlies the call for unity among all nations and communities which should be expressed in belief and practice as believers follow and obey the Ten Commandments. The Catholic Church believes in pluralism; since there is a variety of languages, cultures, philosophical world views, and nationalities, it is inevitable that diversity of religions should exist. The Catholic Church sees itself related to the other religions as if in a series of unities. That is, there is one people of God since religion draws its believers from all world nations. All the faithful scattered throughout the world are in communion with the rest in the Holy Spirit. Similarly, all nations are one community, and have one origin because God created all people and these people have a common destiny as they will all have one final end-God.

- **Islam**

Ibrahim Kalin (2008:239) explains that historically, the first Muslim community came into being within a diverse society where Jews, Christians, Pagans, Polytheists, Monotheists, fire-worshippers and others lived together across the Arabian Peninsula. In relation to the treatment of non-Muslims, Islam law grants certain rights (not all) to non-Muslims including freedom of religion, property, travel, education, and government employment. Forced conversion or economic discrimination is not in the interest of the state of communities. This socio-economic and legal framework has played a key role in the spread of Islam and facilitated the development of a culture of co-existence in Muslim societies. However, the Quran criticizes Jews and Christians and claims that as the two are heirs to the Legacy of Abraham, they are expected to uphold the principles of monotheism and accept the new revelation sent through prophet Muhammed – Abrahamic ecumenism of monotheistic religions.[3] This tension between the essential message of religious and the multiplicity of

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[2] William Reiser, J.J. Roman Catholic Understanding of Religious Tolerance in Modern Times, In Neusner, J. and Chilton, B. (Ed.), Religious Tolerance in World Religions. Pennsylvania: Templeton Foundation Press, p. 158.

[3] Kalin, I. Sources 0f Tolerance and Intolerance in Islam: The case of the people of the book, In Neusner, J. and Chilton, B. (Ed.), Religious Tolerance in World Religions. Pennsylvania: Templeton Foundation Press, 2008, p. 244.

socio-religious communities is real with theological and political consequences as is being experienced all over the world today.

- **Judaism**

Judaism accommodates other religions especially Christianity and Islam. For the rabbis, tolerance means to coexist with and benefit from the presence of non-Israelites in the Israelite's socioeconomic sphere to the extent of accommodating the other's religious practices. Within classical Judaism, there is no theological tolerance since that would mean giving credence to religious ideas known from the perspective of Torah to be incorrect.[4] The Judaism law only allows a striking level of social tolerance and acceptance of the other in order to interact in harmony.

Hinduism

Hinduism respects the beliefs and practices of other religions which it links together under the umbrella term of "all faiths." The religion believes that the existence and persistence of other religions are a natural fact and other religions should not be seen as errors, accidents, or the consequence of evil, but instead, as a constructive part of reality that comprises a morally productive society. Mohandas Gandhi is a good example of how Hindus express tolerance of other religions. Gandhi believed that everyone, regardless of his/her religious beliefs, deserves God's salvation. He rejected the teaching that salvation was available only through Christianity and regarded the pursuit of converts as a form of spiritual imperialism, a violation of his own belief in the equality of all faiths. He embraced the ethical claims of Christ as he read the Bible and attended Christian services while he was a young lawyer in South Africa. But he still embraced the Hindu faith of his birth. In his acceptance of all people, Gandhi said the following: "If I have read the Bible correctly, I know many men who have never heard the name of Jesus Christ or have even rejected the official interpretation of Christianity who will, probably, if Jesus came in our midst today in the flesh, be owned by Him more than many of us."[5] Jesus, as Gandhi observed, called human beings not to a new religion but a new life.

- **Buddhism**

The religion respects and accepts existence of other religions. Buddhism coexists with and assimilates indigenous religious traditions. It regards other religions as putting forth at least partially, true understanding of reality. Since Buddhism respects other religious practices, there are very few wars of conquest, forced conversion, campaigns, or policies of persecution in their regions as experienced in Islam. Since all religions preach respect of humans and a harmonious coexistence and acceptance of all people and their cultural settings, the promotion of religious tolerance and respect for diversity by faith leaders should be encouraged in order to prevent violence among nations and communities. As has been explained, there is no religion that preaches violence or hatred of other human beings.

FUNDAMENTALISM

- **Religion as a Negative Force for Peace**

Religion has usually been used to launch crusades to oppress and conquer, to justify violence and war for many

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[4] Avery-Peck, A.J. Tolerance of Idols and Idol worshippers in early Rabbinic Law: The case of Mishnah Tractate Avodah Zarah, In Neusner, J. and Chilton, B. (Ed.), Religious Tolerance in World Religions. Pennsylvania: Templeton Foundation Press, 2008, p. 233.
[5] Ellsberg, R. All Saints: Daily Reflections of Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for Our Time. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co. 2001, p.53.

years. Fundamentalism is not unique to any one religious tradition although recent global attention has focused on the rise of extremist Islamist groups. Fundamentalist movement was first used in the 1920s by conservative evangelical Protestants in the United States who sought to protect their faith from evolutionists. Fundamentalist movements can now be found across all world's major faith traditions and are often a factor in intra-religious conflicts within traditions. For example, terrorism today has become world news: from the massacre of thousands of people in Nigeria by Boko Haram, the attacks and massacre of civilians in Paris, the abduction of 276 girls by Boko Haram, the school children massacre in Pakistan, the beheading of 21 Egyptian Christians and 35 Ethiopian Christians by Islamic state militants, the coffee shop siege in Sydney, the execution of civilians in Mandera and 148 Garissa University students by Al-Shabaab militants, and very many others.[6]

While the world thinks of Islam-phobic way today, and doubt if Islam is a religion of peace, every religion has had its share of violence. For instance, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda is a militant movement of Christian extremism, the LRA has been accused of wide-spread murder, abduction, mutilation, child-sex slavery, and enlisting child soldiers; countries such as Myanmar and Burma have suffered under Buddhism aggression which is spurred by fundamental monks, and the presence of anti-Islamic nationalistic movements have also led to the persecution of Muslims and boycotting Muslim services and businesses.[7]

Islam is not the only religion with fundamentalists. A great number of Muslims do not condone the barbaric acts of terrorism. Terrorists represent no religion, and the killing of innocent people is terrorism whether the killer is Muslim, Christian or atheist. Fundamentalist movements become dangerous to human relations when they use religion to justify violence and take on extremist militant agenda. While fundamentalism may appear a purely irrational and extremist reaction to modernization, the problems of global economic and power disparities, marginalization, and environmental and cultural degradation contribute to the appeal of extreme religious responses and therefore need to be addressed. Mitigating against extremist fundamentalism requires both engaged effort from more moderate members of the same faith to open dialogue, reduce intra-religious conflict, and constructively manage perceived threats from modernization, as well as secular approaches that can address underlying economic, social, and political problems.

- **Religion as a Positive Force for Peace**

Religion plays a significant role in helping communities resolve differences and overcome great injustices in order to maintain harmonious co-existence among different races and communities. People of all nations proclaim not only their readiness but also their longing for peace in the world. We all know that wars and conflicts threaten peace and security of everybody. Since violence and war is a social invention, it can be solved and managed through peace intervention programmes. Faith-based peace-making is often associated with well-known personalities such as Mahatma Gandhi, Reverend Martin Luther King Junior, Bishop Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela, Pope John Paul II, Pope Francis, Dalai Lama and so on. Less recognized examples have also played a great role in encouraging co-existence of different religious groups. For example, the dedicated co-existence work of Jewish and Muslim religious leaders in the Middle East through years of violence, the courageous witness of Vietnamese Buddhists against the US -Vietnam War, the active leadership of Catholic Clergy in the people power movement in the Philippines and so forth. In Kenya, Christianity has played a great role in enhancing respect of human rights and justice. Religious leaders such as Father Kaiser, and Bishop Alexander Muge

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[6] Okumu, P. Truth about Al-Shabaab and the war on Christians. In the Shepherd May, 2015, p. 5.
[7] Kariuki, C. Terrorists twist religion to suit their needs. In Daily Nation 18th February, 2015, p. 13.

have sacrificed their lives in order to achieve this goal. Other religious leaders such as Bishop Cornelius Korir, Reverend Timothy Njoya and the whole of the Catholic Clergy and communities continue to work tirelessly preaching the importance of peaceful co-existence among communities.

Christians have demonstrated the power of perseverance during the attacks of Christians all over the world. They have learned that you do not respond to spiritual battles with physical weapons but with love and prayer and assistance of those affected by war such as the refugees. This places Christians in a very powerful position – the position of turning the other cheek. The Christians have realized that the Christian faith is under attack and threat, but despite these threats, Jesus Christ, the Founder of Christianity declared that even the gates of hell shall never prevail against the church. Therefore, the vital issue today during these attacks is the power and strength of unity of the Christian faith irrespective of denominational affiliations. We are all children of the same Father – we have one Savior, one Spirit.

CONCLUSIONS

Globally, people are frustrated by many factors such as inequality, materialism, stress, overwork and social pressure. Consequently, some people are succumbing to negative emotions such as revenge, intolerance, hatred, and so forth. These negative emotions result in aggression at an individual level, and violence, disharmony, and terrorism at the collective level. The recent terrorist attacks in various parts of the world by Islamic Religious extremists have brought to the fore the necessity of religious tolerance and peace in society and the whole world. No excuse justifies the use of violence as no religion teaches violence to humans, animals, and the environment. That is why all nations in the world are engaged in finding a workable solution to this menace. However, the culture of peace requires that conflict be resolved in a non-violent manner without fuelling hatred and suspicion. In addition, social conflict can only be minimized when the social fabric is based on justice, and power and wealth are used for the benefit of all groups of human kind.

Religious actions should be used to help prevent deadly conflict by countering the negative use of religion to fuel conflict, and instead promote cooperation, tolerance and respect for human dignity. Most religious teachings include teachings on forgiveness, reconciliation or managing relations with former enemies. Faith networks, churches, temples, and mosques should be at play to promote tolerance, and cooperative values within their communities, and to build interfaith connections and open dialogue with the secular world. They should also lift up teachings, leaders, and institutions that provide resources for constructive conflict management in their own culture. Similarly, all religions should combine efforts in order to reduce the power of religious terrorists and strengthen positive religious beliefs and values, leadership and social networks as modes of prevention of conflict, and reconciliation incase of any misunderstanding between or among communities or religious groups.

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