

# **Interreligious Praxis for Africa`S Liberation**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This presentation argues that Africa`s liberation and development depend, to a large extent, on various religions working together. Africa is a home to a number of major religions such as African Religion, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Judaism and these religions can make a significant contribution in the realization of God`s reign in Africa. Issues relating to respect for human life, quest for justice, moral regeneration, peace making, respect for creation, gender and development have been singled out, among many others, as the most pressing and relevant ones posing challenges and offering opportunities for the African continent. The underlying principle is that orthopraxis should take priority over orthodoxy, although we are well aware that practice and theory feed each other in a circular movement. We have to make the path as we walk.

Since the beginnings of humanity , people had been aware that they were not homogeneous in terms of their faith or religious beliefs and practices ( Lochhead, 1988 : 5 )For example , Christians have been aware of Judaism since Christianity regarded itself as the fulfilment of Judaism . Christians have been aware of the existence of Islam during the seventh century CE when it made its appearance in the Middle East and for centuries they had been aware of the existence of most of the Eastern religious traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism .

Geographic locations had been responsible for the lack of physical contact among the world religions . However , gone are the days of such isolation . Modern technology and science have made it possible for contacts of all sorts . Travel has become easier and affordable . The media , both print and electronic have shrunk the world to an extent that , today we can talk of the world as a “ global village “ . Major institutions and organisations for example , can be visited on their websites and access to internet makes communications that much easier . As Race ( 1993 : 1 ) aptly states , the days of religious and cultural isolation are over . Religions jostle with one another in a market-place of possibilities and this reality brings with it an increasing awareness of serious theological issues involved that the ecumenical Church has to grapple with .

We do not only have a plurality of religions, but also other pluralities in terms of languages and cultures . Religion of a people cannot be regarded as separate from their language and culture . In fact , religion and culture of a people should be held in a creative tension since both mutually influence and affect each other . Indeed , as Mol ( 1976 ) rightly contends , arguing for the central thesis of his book , religion sacrilises new thought patterns and behaviour whilst it desacrilises outdated ones . Religion has a way of adapting itself in a critical manner to new situations and has the capacity to function under different circumstances . The nature and function of religion so understood , say a lot about the future of religion in human affairs . As Greeley ( 1969 ) sees it , religion will

not lose its adherents, nor is religion likely to lose its influence and he guarantees us that the sacred will not be replaced by the secular. Of late, Peter Berger(1999) has observed that there has been a resurgent of religion globally contrary to the belief that the modern world would be secularised. Berger(1999:2) states, "My point is that the assumption that we live in a secularized world is false. The world today...is furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever". He argues that even in western Europe secularisation seems to have been entrenched, people are not so much against religion as against the institutionalised religion such as the temple, synagogue, shrine, mosque and church.

Mbiti (1991) has done quite a lot in this area :

Christianity was first introduced to Africa in Egypt in 42 CE by St Mark. By the beginning of the seventh century, Christianity had penetrated one-third of the continent, covering northern Africa, Morocco, the Nile Valley, Sudan and Ethiopia. Islam came to Arabia during the seventh century. African Religion did not have predominance in Ethiopia since Judaism had been predominant in Ethiopia, especially among the Falasha people BCE, and that Christianity had been introduced into Ethiopia since the fourth century CE. Hinduism, Sikhism and Jainism had been strong, mainly among Indians in the continent. Bahaism which started in Persia in 1863 by Bahauallah, was introduced to Africa in 1911.

### **What implications does this reality of religious plurality have on praxis?**

The existence of religions is intrinsically a realisation of humans' connection to and dependence on a life force/supreme being and this life force/supreme being is regarded as the epitome of all goodness and love. Religious believers therefore, through all kinds of mediations, mediators and ritual aspire to be as good and loving as this life force/supreme being is. For the purpose of this presentation I will call this life force/supreme being, God. All the religions that exist in Africa as mentioned above have this common basis and therefore interreligious praxis should be possible' differing and even opposing doctrines notwithstanding.

**\* Respect for human life :** The sanctity of human life is a given in all religions. There is something in all humans, regardless of their demonic tendencies at times, that is divine. It could be called God's spirit or God's image, but something godly is always present in all people. Therefore there are no super-humans and sub-humans and men and women have equal worth and so do children and the disabled. Many democracies, the United Nations including the African Charter have respect for human dignity entrenched in their Constitutions. Humans are equal regardless of race, sex, religion, political affiliation or country of origin. The Bible has many references to the sanctity of human life in particular, the creation stories in Genesis 1&2 and the tenets of the Rule of God announced in the New Testament.

**\* Quest for socioeconomic justice :** Since God is all loving, anything that goes against this attribute is considered as unjust, not only against humans but also against God who is present in us. The Old Testament prophets such as Isaiah and Amos spoke

against exploitation of the poor by the rich and the powerful and Jesus continued in this tradition and the Church as a whole. Those in authority such as kings, priests and parents act on behalf of God and are ultimately accountable to God for their actions. The poor and the least privileged need protection against the powerful who may use their power to further impoverish them in order to amass more power and wealth.

Creating egalitarian and communalitarian communities and societies is an imperative for all religions. "Do unto others as you would them do to you" is not particularly a Christian virtue; it is a universal one. All African countries have been liberated from their former colonial rulers with Ghana having been the first to be liberated in the late fifties and South Africa being the last in 1994. These countries are still reeling from the impact of slavery and colonialism and as such, socioeconomic upliftment of their citizens remains a pipe dream. The rich countries in the North led by the United States of America and the financial institutions like the WB, IMF and WTO are making bad matters worse by their policies and practices that work against Africa's efforts to redeem itself from abject poverty into which they have been thrown. The twin to poverty is disease and as we know, the arrival of HIV/AIDS has put Africa on a precipice to oblivion. NEPAD as African Union's socioeconomic arm should attack these injustices built into some of the international agreements imposed on Africa.

**\* Moral regeneration and reconstruction :** With Africa getting its freedom from colonialism, its leaders' integrity was put to a test and many of them were found wanting as corruption in high places became cancerous. The little material resources that were left behind by the colonising rulers after they had pillaged Africa, was mostly abused by the indigenous leaders for self-aggrandizement, with very few exceptions. Autocratic regimes at best and totalitarian ones at worst became the order of the day with life presidencies becoming the norm. Wars of liberation had left most countries devastated and in ruins and the work of reconstruction became almost impossible to achieve. Loans from the international financiers had many devious strings attached including the structural adjustment programme. Each and every religion has its value system which is passed from one generation to the next. The norms, values, traditions and customs are assimilated by succeeding generations in adapted forms to suit their milieu and contexts as well as their changed world-views. The religious identity of each people is shaped by these value systems and in matters of moral formations and nation building, they come handy in supporting and containing their ethical behaviour. Theology in Africa should not shirk its responsibility of infusing values of morality into our political leaders. I believe that the national councils of churches and the All Africa Conference of Churches must take the lead in this regard. It is worth mentioning that in the last ten years, there have been laudable improvements and the African Union should be supported in its endeavour to monitor its countries through its African Parliament and the Peer Review Mechanism.

**\* Peace making and development :** After independence, many of the colonial boundaries became one of the sources of conflict and conflict. Countries went to war against each other as they claimed their pre-colonial lands. One other source of conflict was ethnic clashes that were politically motivated and could be traced back to the days of colonisation. Obviously in a situation of faction fights and territorial wars there cannot be any development. Peace is a prerequisite to development and tenets of justice should

be observed. Religions have been and are being used to make and maintain peace and to create harmony. But unfortunately, religions would also be used to sanction “just” wars. Judaism would speak of a “holy war”, Islam would speak of a “Jihad” and Christianity of a “militia Christi” and so forth. Various religions could stop this type of warmongering and sectionalisation of peace making and work together to create a world without conflict and strife. In my view, universalisation of the peace effort is not beyond reach and it is not utopian. Only if politicians could stop using religion to fuel strives and conflicts in pursuit of self-interest and self-aggrandizement, and only if religious leaders would refuse to be coopted into such war efforts, Africa would rise from its ashes. It is encouraging that peace efforts in the Great Lakes Region, the DRC, Liberia, and elsewhere are bearing good fruit and of utmost importance is that Sudan’s two decades of war against itself would at last be stopped. The world is full of role models in peace making such as Martin Luther King(Jnr), Mahatma Ghandi and Nelson Mandela. Jesus said that among the blessed would be the peace makers(Matt 5:9)

**\* Respect for God’s creation and the environment :** Religions teach the interconnectedness of humans and nature. African religion as well as religions of indigenous peoples in the world are the closest to nature to such an extent that the West regarded them as animistic. But Christianity if well understood as an Asian religion (and not Western religion) is not different from other Asian religions with the high premium it places on creation and thus on its stewardship( Gen 1&2). Our mortality reminds us that part of us belongs to the earth and to the earth we shall return. Stewardship of nature and creation as a whole is taught by all religions. Religions should therefore collaborate in fighting against people who exploit this finite planet in the name of economic growth and creation of wealth.

The world conference on sustainable development(WSSD) held in Johannesburg in August 2002 and the World’s Parks conference held in Durban in 2003 share one major concern namely, that disasterous consequences await us if we do not do something radical in the conservation of the environment. Only the earth so far is the planet that gives and sustains human life and those of other species. Climatic conditions that have been changing for the worse over the last fifty years or so, the warnings about the depletion of the ozone layer and the possible disappearance of small islands in the future, are indicative of the apocalypse that awaits us if we do not clean our act. If the tsunami carnage does not shake us out of our complacency, then nothing will.

**\* Gender justice and equity :** Africa is a patriarchal continent. Even in those countries like Nigeria, Malawi and South Africa where we find matrilineal clans, power is still wielded by men. Anthropologists and sociologists warn us that there are no matriarchal communities in the world. Thus, religion, theology and culture have been and in some instances, are still male dominated. African women theologians rose to the challenge when in 1989 they came together to found “The Circle of Concerned African Women in Theology”, under the capable leadership of Mercy Amba Oduyoye and others.(Oduyoye&Kanyoro, 2001) Their theology would interrogate and interact with religion especially Christianity, African Religion, Islam, and African culture. Of course several churches and national ecumenical organisations including the All Africa Conference of Churches have established gender desks and offices in the quest for equality between the

sexes. Many churches have accepted that women also can be ordained for example. On the political and corporate scenes women are being given prominent positions, although a lot can still be done in this regard. In South Africa women in government comprised one-third in the past ten years and since last year they comprise almost 50%. Equity legislation has been passed and all organisations and government have targets to meet and the monitoring thereof is very strict.

Africa's religious and cultural plurality should be taken advantage of in the liberation and development of the continent. Africa is indeed religious to the core and our fundamental values are so common that dogmatic statements and beliefs should take the back seat if they continue to become hurdles and obstacles in the realization of God's rule in Africa. Religion and theology must play a critical and prophetic role in the continent if endeavours of the African Union are to bear good fruit.

Africa, let us arise and unite!

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