

Religion and peace in Sudan: inter-religious dialogue and peaceful co-existence *

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Article Excerpt

Religion has been misused to contribute to conflict in the Sudanese civil war. Many reasons; historically, colonial, religions, conflict and distances have caused little genuine dialogue between people of the Sudan, particularly people of the North with people from the South Sudan.

It is vital to promote inter-faith dialogue as part of the peace-building process. This paper identifies some of the root causes of the conflict and how they impact religious dialogue. The author conceptualizes dialogue in this context and reports on efforts at inter-faith dialogue by religious groups, including interviews with religious leaders.

The article relies on excerpts from renowned scholars in the field on inter-religious dialogue.

Introduction

The root causes of Sudan's civil war are complex, but religious and cultural differences among the country's population have become a part of the conflict. In the event of the current peace process there is dire need for Sudanese people to move beyond conflict and find avenues for peace-building. One approach could be through inter-faith dialogue between Muslims, Christians, and others from African traditional faiths. This would have instrumental impact on Sudan, particularly that much of the people place religion at the heart of their daily lives.

A better understanding of the root causes of the conflict, as discussed below, should help to reveal reasons for religious elements being part of the civil war. Furthermore, there have been important new efforts to promote inter-religious dialogue in Sudan, including initiatives at both governmental and community levels. These are described in the course of this paper with suggestions for future dialogue among Sudanese people.

Background

Sudan, is at the heart of Africa, covering an area of about one million square miles, with a population calculated at approximately 38 million (July 2003 estimates, www.Joshuaproject.net). It shares borders with nine countries: Central African Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Libya and



Uganda. The Nile river, which wanders more than 4,000 miles from the lakes of Central Africa to the Mediterranean, flows through it Sudan is considered amongst the most diversified nations in the world with more than 250 local tribes and languages. Its three main religions are Islam (approximately 70%), Christianity and African traditional religions which is approximately 30% (www.Joshuaproject.net).

Currently, Sudan is suffering from a political and cultural crisis due to its more than thirty years of civil war between successive regimes in the North and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), in the South. Although the war was not based on religious differences, the warring parties have used religion as part of its justification for conflict. The Islamist central Government of Sudan declared it a Jihad, or holy war in defense of Islam, while the other parties seek religious self-determination and secular government.

Chronology of Root Causes in Sudanese History which Impact on Religious Dialogue and Co-existence

Setting the conflict in Sudan has been on the ecumenical agenda for over three decades. The roots of the conflict lie in its history of slave trade during the 18th century prevalent under the Turco rule leaving its residual prejudice towards southerners and resentment of the South towards Northerners. The colonialist era where the divide-and-rule policy of the colonial rulers, manifested in the Closed District Ordinance Act of 1920, barring the freedom of movement between the Northern and Southern provinces of Sudan. under this act the British Colonists administered the South as a "Closed District", meaning that it was an isolated area and entry by any Northerners was highly restricted and prohibited by law. In 1922 Passport and Permit Ordinance Act allowed Northerners to go to the South with a passport or permit. Any social, economic or educational activities were provided only by western missionaries. The Closed District act made no room for Arabisation or Islam to prevail. Even the African Traditional religions were to a certain extent replaced by Christianity and English language became the lingua franca.

The unequal development policies between the North and the South gave rise to present disparities; religious rivalry, enforcement of cultural hegemony and racism. In August 1955 a civil war started with the South upheaval against official British colonial policies, which for several decades sought to keep northern and southern Sudan politically and socially separate. In January 1st 1956 Sudan gained its independence from UK. In 1962 the civil war continued in the south, led by the Anya Nya movement.

In 1969 Jaafar Numayri led the "May Revolution" military coup. In 1972 the Addis Ababa Peace Agreement between the government and the Anya Nya movement, allowed the south to become a self-governing region and the war stopped. Unfortunately, the failure of the government of Sudan to implement the spirit of the 1972 Addis Ababa Peace Accord gave rise to the present environment of total lack of faith and trust amongst the Southerners against the government in the North. In 1978 oil was discovered in southern western Sudan. Scrambling for control of these resources led to ethnic turmoil between tribes present in those areas, thus increasing war fronts. In September 1983 President Numayri announced that the



penal code had been revised in order to link it "organically and spiritually" with Sharia (Islamic Law). This was deeply resented both by Non-Muslims and Muslims preferring a secular government.

In June 1989 the National Salvation Front took over Sudan through a bloodless military coup under the leadership of Omar AlBashir who declared the Sudan fully under the Islamic Shariah Law. El Bashir was only affirming the Shariah Law, which was introduced by Numayri in September 1983. In 1991 the penal code was based on Sharia and Islamic monetery and banking systems were introduced. "The government declared that South Sudanese were exempted from Sharia laws. However, the shortcoming of the declaration of exemption was that there was no substitute law for non-Muslims. Since there was no substitute Law, judges continued to use the available, which is Shariah Law" (Rev. Kutjok, in Brown, 1997).

In light of the above account of events, which have influenced the path of sustained dialogue in Sudan particularly between Northerners and Southerners and the misunderstanding of who the Sudan originally belongs to, creates confusion between the two main warring parties, and ultimately leads to conflict. The Southerners feel that the Northern Arab tribes have emigrated to Sudan from the Arab peninsula and the Northern Arab feel that the Southern African tribes have emigrated to South Sudan from neighboring countries. Each feel that the land belongs to them and it is their rightful duty to preserve its culture, religions and tradition in the way they feel appropriate. However, there are those who obtain more moderate "nationalistic" views and feel that Sudan has the capacity to accommodate all ethnic and religious backgrounds. Where these differences could dissolve in a relaxed manner through discourse and co-existence.

Dialogue and Co-existence and What They Stand for

Dialogue, amongst the most enlightening processes one can adopt in good spirit. Reverend Kutjok, presents us with a clear understanding of dialogue. He explains that "Dialogue is a process of restoration, reconciliation, and unity. It calls for repentance, forgiveness and understanding. To be useful and beneficial for the partners in dialogue, it must be based on common subjects for whom the partners are knowledgeable, and are committed to listen, learn, repent, forgive and change attitudes. Although dialogue could be carried on different subjects, and for different purposes, the aim is always the same: to arrive at a common understanding on a given subject or subjects. For the Sudanese and for their purpose, inter-religious dialogue needs to be a constructive, honest and sincere conversation between and among Christians and Muslims on how they can co-exist side by side, harmoniously, respecting the religious freedom of each other (Rev. Kutjok, in Brown, 1997)."

"Co-existence in any dialogue is a vital word which means peaceful existence, side by side of states, a people or one group of different cultures. When the two principles are put together, co-existence and dialogue people arrive to religious tolerance; tolerance is the practice of allowing religious freedom of worship" (Bishop Roric, in ElNager, 1993).



From an Islamic perspective, reaching out and interacting with other religions is a duty and a mission. It is an essential part of one's existence to communicate with followers of the holy books (ahl al-kitab). The Holy Quran is a dialogue in itself, communicating to us the differences between people's faiths (Islam, Christianity and Judaism) and deeds. There is a need for Muslims to accept these differences, not feel restrained or threatened. We should concentrate on what is essential to each one of us and do what is right and good.

"And for each one (of you) there is a point of view to which he/she is directed, therefore compete with each other in good deeds wherever you may be, Allah shall bring you all together" (2:148).

I strongly believe Islam gives high regard for dialogue. Unfortunately the essence of dialogue during interpretations of the Quranic scripts have not been genuinely developed. By contrasts, in the west, dialogue based on religious extracts has crystallized and are institutionalized into dignified establishments such as the World Council of Churches, which provides forum for religious interaction and communication.

In our world today we can hardly find a nation with a monolithic religion. We live in a world of many religions with multi-faith states. Therefore, dialogue is a natural and necessary component of one's existence. It is a civilized process which upholds respect for the values of others. It by no means intends to insult, disrespect or influence the others beliefs or ideologies.

Dialogue and Co-existence in Sudan is Exemplified in Various Occasions

In every day life Sudanese Christians and Muslims interact and live along side each other at various places of work, education, health, celebrations, support in funerals etc. In some parts of Sudan co-existence is in the form of inter-marriages between Christians and Muslims. "There are cases in the Southern Sudan and the Nuba Mountains where Christian young men married Muslim girls. When such marriages happen, relationships between the two families are built, and friendly communications established". According to the African Rights, July 1995, it was resolved that "intermarriage between Muslims and Christians is permitted, and anyone who preaches or agitates to prohibit it shall be disciplined"(African Rights, July 1995, p.200, in Brown, 1997).

In light of the changing Sudanese political front, of which one is hopeful for more religious co-existence, the Sudan Inter-Religious Council (SIRC) is an independent NGO established as a result of the International People's Friendship in collaboration with the Sudan Council of Churches (SCC) in 2000. Its general assembly is comprised of 46 members, half Muslim (representing the different Muslim sects) and half Christian (representing the different denominations). The SIRC's main purpose is to establish and strengthen co-existence and religious tolerance. It tends to deal with practical problems in an effort to improve respect for the different religious communities. On March 2004 i* has officially launched its program under the slogan of "No compulsion, in Religions" (La Ikrah fy al deen). Furthermore, the



1998 constitution clearly stipulates religious freedom for all Sudanese. According to this constitution, the Advisory Council for Human Rights under the leadership of the Minister of Justice works to promote these rights" in the constitution. In this regard two very well funded conferences on Inter-religious dialogue were organized in Sudan, one in 1993 and the other in 1994, with more than forty countries participating. In spite of the success of these conferences in bringing together such a large crowd, there was skepticism about the outcome of the conference. Some national and international participants claimed that the conference was mainly conducted to counteract international propaganda which blames Sudan for denying the Christians their religious freedom. There is some truth in that especially that most of the papers presented were about Islam rather than engaging in religious dialogue. Moreover, the paper prepared by the SCC was prevented from being presented on the grounds that it reflected views of religious intolerance and discrimination against Southern Sudanese. This mishap led almost to the walk out by the Church leaders. Although the paper was eventually presented at the end after a long discussion, copies were not circulated to the delegates (interview with Rev. Dingyi, Catholic Church 2004).

At a more community oriented level there are several other examples of dialogue and coexistence among the Sudanese community. The SCC organized a two week youth program where both Christian and Muslim youth lived together. The main purpose of this program was to bring these groups together under one roof and learn about each other. The program aimed at sowing the seeds of peaceful co-existence by teaching them about both faiths, the similarities that exist between them and the unity it calls for, for all human kind. No one is to be superior over the other.

It is true to say that there was hostility and a great deal of apprehension among the youth. But in spite of the initial hostility and mistrust, their differences un-raveled in an almost natural manner. Instead they focused on what was common: sports, music, fashion, etc.

In an interview with Father Filo Theos, head of the Sudanese Coptic Church who is a well respected member of society, yet very humble, he gave a moving account of the church's efforts to bridge misunderstandings about Islam. They do this through their preaching in their churches, about Islam and the Culture of Muslim people. Father Filo Theos has published many publications on Christian views of Muslim society and Muslim views of Christianity and culture. This is meant to correct any mis-information about the other's religion. The Coptic groups have been present in Sudan for many years; they enjoy a reasonably rich socioeconomic status and speak Arabic language. Their relation with rest of Sudanese is that of good spirit. Their participation in the country is more of economic activity rather than in politics.

Sudanese women have also been active agents in promoting dialogue and solidarity particularly between Northern and Southern Sudanese sisters. Inspite of the patriarchal systems which tend to dominate most of Sudanese men's thinking and behavior, creating out of the woman a weaker person who can only carry out her God given reproductive role, Sudanese women have managed to make their stance in more than one occasion towards the



emancipation of social tendencies to pursue power. That there is more to life than communicating through guns and rifles. Still more needs to be done.

In March 1996 the establishment of the Women's Action Group (WAG) took place. The WAG first began with a group of about 30 Sudanese women Christians and Muslims. It aimed at bringing together women from different ethnic backgrounds and faiths to know each other, to befriend one another and to build sisterhood among one another. Led by Dr. Lilian C. Harris a renowned scholar and, at the time, first lady of British embassy in Khartoum, the group helped these women build bridges and "promote mutual venting of negative emotions: feelings of anger, pain, confusion, aloneness, helplessness which arise from war, displacement, social prejudices, religious dogma and cultural transitions. It was felt that if each side could listen attentively to accept and begin to understand the agony and disempowerment of the other, then true mutual healing and group reconciliation would begin" (Harris, in Brown 1997).

Dr. Craig shared with us her experience during an all-day Listening Sensitivity Workshop where the women told their stories and listened carefully to the painful stories of other women. There were tears. There was amazement. And in the end there was joy. Discussions concentrated as well on social issues such as health, displacement, identity crisis and education. Within the group considerable expertise was found in these areas and others.

Following the successful listening seminar, it was decided to hold a dialogue workshop to involve women from outside the WAG. This first dialogue workshop was held in October 1996 at Ahfad University for Women under the theme "The differences which Unite us," a statement which has since become the WAG motto. Some fifty women attended a half-day programme which included role-plays depicting loss, exercises in defining the words which divide us (Jihad, human rights, peace, Arab, etc.), and group work to identify first what we dislike most about "the other side" and finally what all Sudanese women have in common (ibid, 1997)".

In a more recent endeavor, exhibiting women's solidarity, different women's groups have developed a consolidated appeal in light of the Machakos Peace Protocol in July 2002, expressing their support for the protocol which mainstreams peace in Sudan. They strongly appealed to both the warring factions, Government of Sudan (GOS) and Sudan Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA) that women's rights need to be at the center of their peace agenda. Furthermore, in December 2003 a group of eight Sudanese women from North and South (these women decided that there should be no such thing as from North and South, they are simply women from Sudan) were officially represented under the Sudanese Women Empowerment for Peace (SUWEP) umbrella at the Naivasha peace negotiations. This was the first official women delegation to be coming from the North to attend the negotiations. During that time they spoke of the importance of having women effectively participate in the ongoing negotiations to always remind them that women issues and protection of human rights should not be considered a minor or secondary issue. Upon return, the groups were not all that pleased with the outcome of their meetings and decided that more lobbying and advocacy for protection and promotion of human rights is needed.



Critical Views on the Causal Factors

Inspite of the accounted sincere efforts by and Sudanese community, still there exists mixed feelings towards the notion of engaging in sincere dialogue and whether it will lead to peaceful and respectful co-existence. Countless episodes throughout the Sudanese history and particularly at the political front have developed this uneasiness in relations. Most prominent, being the politicization of Islam and implementation of Sharia in Sudan has caused much anxiety and mistrust among many Sudanese particularly Christians. Within the recent-past environment of overtly emphasized Islamic rule, and here I regard it as past environment, since some positive changes at the political front are taking place, still many of the Christians would rather substitute the motion of inter-religious dialogue to self-determination where they can live in their space and freely exercise their faith and inherent cultures.

As a result of this context, it is understandable that many Christian Sudanese are influenced in their thinking by the experience of religious tension, conflicts, displacement and discrimination. So where would dialogue fit into this world. For Muslims, there are also divided views on dialogue. There are those who sincerely feel that the Christians from the south are discriminated against and marginalized on ethnic and religious grounds. These groups express their sympathy and advocate dialogue. They are aware of the tense situation which exists especially where religion is at stake and will in the long run break up the state and alienate groups of citizens. But another group of Muslims strongly feel that Sudan is and must remain an Islamic country, with one language Arabic and one religion, Islam. Everything should be Islamic and governed by Sharia law. This group consider Christians not qualified for a dialogue (interview with Rev. Dingyi, Catholic Church 2004).

However, the bulk of Sudanese society, Christians and Muslims are tired of living under tensions and conflicts based on religion. As I have stated, I strongly believe that religion is not the main source of the Sudanese conflict, but just one of the elements of war which has been so badly co-opted by either side to serve interests of individuals or groups.

In an interview with Dr. Zien AlAbdeen executive member of SIRC and director of Sudanese Council of Religious Co-existence, he views that the root causes of conflict and religious unrest are due to the colonial past. How that era has portrayed a negative image about the Arabs in the North and about Islam. Another reason is the leadership of the SPLA whereby they claim their war is based on religious discrimination only so as to secure more funds and finances for the war from Western and Christian sympathizers.

On the other hand, Rev. Dingiy, suggests that the root causes of conflict is marginalization of the Southerners based on religion and ethnic differences which has built up immense fear, suspicions and mis-trust. "We are even suspicious about the appointments of the Southerners in this government, we feel they have become "Muslimised" and do not represent the causes of our people". We as church leaders preach to Christians that they must strongly adhere to their faith, we never preach about Islam since we do not mix religion with politics" (ibid, 2004) He goes on to speak about the religious tolerance in Sudan, "There is and there is not, religious tolerance, in the sense that we are free to celebrate and express our religious festivals



in our homes, streets and places of worship, but it takes a bureaucratically long time to get a permit for building a church" (ibid, 2004) add to that Christian Sudanese have very limited air time to broadcast programs about Christian faith or Christian traditions. It only occurs on festive occasions. This can be comprehended in light of the government controlled media predominantly North Arab Muslims.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Sudan is hopefully embarking onto a new phase, which is that of producing a peace agreement between Sudan Government and the SPLA. As has been reflected previously, many issues have contributed to the initiation and escalation of the civil war ranging from prejudice and stereotype to precious resource discovery in South Western Sudan. Therefore, to sustain peace a lot of ground work needs to be prepared to unify the spirit of dialogue in-order to tackle all or most of the crucial issues which emphasise separation and mis-trust. Here I recommend a bonding multi-faceted program. Part of this program has been previously suggested by Cardinal Gabriel Wacko of the Sudanese Catholic Church and I have recently added to it my own thoughts: Some of these recommendations are:

Dialogue should require radical change and honesty in our approach
to problems.

To listen and hear one another as equals with dignity.

Religious leaders must tackle unjust structures or laws that discriminate among people. Religious leaders must preach about issues of co-existence and respect for Others. Create awareness about different religious rituals and celebrate them. Revise the educational curriculum which strengthens prejudice against Sudanese Minorities and/or does not give them enough regard.

Creating awareness in the public about existing situations of religious intolerance and the need for on-going dialogue and freedom of religious rights.

Organize fora to teach people about their history, the different tribes in all parts of Sudan, the significance of the different traditions.

Organize fora to enable Muslims and Christians to understand and even challenge one another's understanding of issues such as, the meaning of freedom of religion, role of religion in politics, how to reconcile diverse religious views. We are hopeful, that SIRC and other community related efforts will provide that fora for genuinely promoting co-existence.

To conclude on the concept and essence of religious co-existence I. quote Professor Wadi Z. Haddad's prayer which reads:

"Almighty and gracious God,
You have created, of one blood,
All men and women to dwell on this earth,
And you have appointed us, each and all,
To be your agents.... On this earth,
That we may endeavour to be good and faithful stewards.



You have created us with hearts and minds,
With which to know you and love you,
And to know and love each other as brothers and sisters,
And care for one another as members of the people of God.

We have multiplied and filled the earth as you commanded
And have become peoples of different languages, races, colours and religious communities.
You intended this to be a means of knowing each other,
And to compete, as in a race, in good works,
Vying with each other only in righteousness and piety;
Instead, and here we confess,
We have used our differences, any differences,
To dominate each other,
To obtain and hoard more than our share of your bounty.
We have tried to grow in power,
And the more powerful we become,
The more tyrannical and brutal we have become in treating others.

Indeed we have made a mess of things.
And unless we relent and turn to you, to your guidance,
And wake from our heedlessness ...
We will surely perish, in this world and in the next.

We beseech you to enlighten our hearts and minds anew,
That we may expand our communications with others'
And be your instruments
In building bridges between individuals, societies and nations,
in furthering the pursuit for peace and good will and to you be
the praise and the glory,
Forever and ever Amen"

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