

African Cancers: Ethnicity, Race, Culture and their Socio-Political effects – George Tabaan
The Root Causes of Conflict.

In many parts of the world today, we have witnessed sustained social conflicts in which ethnic, racial and cultural differences have played a pernicious role. Some of these have become large socio-political conflicts, for example between Jews and Palestinians in the Middle East, and between fundamentalist Hindus and Muslims in India. In Europe, the events in Northern Ireland, though usually interpreted as hostilities between Catholics and Protestants, have their origins in the opposition between natives and later settlers in their land.

Paul Nzachahaya has said that, “if there is one cancer that has raped Africa, it is ethnicity and race, or as others prefer to call it, tribalism. Instead of celebrating culture, culture has caused trauma and division in African societies”.¹ Africa is characterised by ethnic strife which often bursts into civil war. People are recovering from apartheid in South Africa, but race-related killings have not completely stopped. In Burundi and Rwanda the conflicts were between Hutus and Tutsis. The victims are millions and the fighting was related to ethnicity. The recent incidents in Kenya surrounding the election of December 2007 were violently along ethnic lines, with people killing each other. In Sudan we are witnessing conflict in Darfur between the Janjaweed and the Fur in which thousands of people have already lost their lives. Also consider the Abyei conflict between the Dinka Ngok and Misseriya.

In an attempt to find the causes of this kind of violence, most scholars agree that as long as people are enslaved by their own race, ethnicity, culture and social politics, violence will continue to increase. In struggles for political and economic power, where one group appears not to allow anybody or anything else to exist, there will be trouble. When members of one clan, tribe or race, feel that they are superior to others, and therefore feel they are entitled to a larger share of the national cake than others, perceived injustice and oppression breed violence. The struggle for

¹ Ethnicity, Race and Culture – Christian Perspective Bible Study series (published by the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES) and Pan-African Fellowship of Evangelical Students (PAFES) May 1998. From the Introduction written by Paul Nzachayayo of Rwanda.

political and economic power by individuals, tribes, institutions, nations or even across international borders has caused – and is causing – immense suffering to mankind.

In a book called *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*,² the author argues that when an ideology of ethnic purity takes over, others who happen to reside in that place are left with only two choices: either to migrate under varying degrees of duress, or to accept the status of second class citizens along with varying degrees of repressive deprivation of their rights. This kind of exclusion is not usually an end itself. It hides, and yet at the same time reveals, powerful desires to possess what others have.

Root Reasons for Ethnic Violence – the Scars of History

It is quite difficult to understand the root source of why there is so much blood shed when ethnic violence erupts. It becomes easier to trace when one puts events into their political and historical context. Context sheds light on the reasons for conflict.

1. History informs us that at various times different ethnic groups occupied a land or governed a nation. Somehow over time one class emerged from the ethnic group and began to dominate and oppress the others. That emergence is the beginning of endless and often violent struggles for power, if power is not shared. The oppressed fight back. The rulers of the time often manage to put in place exploitative and oppressive structures to keep themselves in power. They control the access to key political positions, the armed forces and both child and adult education. The oppressed feel abused, frustrated and helpless.
2. The coming of the colonial powers may have contributed a lot to worsening the situation through their policies of divide and rule plus indirect administration. They often taught some ethnic ruling class that they were born to rule. The people in that group succumbed to the temptation to believe it. When the colonialist tilted the scales in favour of a different ethnic majority elite (for their own interests) the former ruling class did not accept this

² Nicholas Wolterstorff *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm.B.Eerdmans) 1983. The Kuyper lectures for 1981 delivered at the Free University of Amsterdam.

shift in policy. It was against what they believed. The result was violence. Often people were killed. If leadership changed, the former power were often forced into exile.

3. When the oppressed ethnic group attempt to regain power by force, some people succumbed to a genocide ideology. It was seen as the final solution: the extermination of one particular ethnic group. No opponents of the existing regime could be left, in order to resolve the problem once and for all. A deadly dangerous ideology!

Learning from the events of the past, it can be seen that the root of these conflicts is a culture of self-centred greed that has developed over centuries. They were violent attempts to maintain one's position and wealth to the exclusion of all others. They were struggles by one side to exclude the other, and struggles by the other side trying not to be excluded. One group was aiming at maintaining the status quo while the other was trying to overthrow it and bring about change.

Paul Tournier said that "Violence is a two edged sword".³ First there is *violence within* which has to do with inner conflicts. Our ego holds us to do anything we want to do to others. It follows our narrow and immediate self-interest. It makes us slaves to our own prejudice. We serve our own security, our own passions and, far more importantly, our own fears. As a result, we find ourselves locked into the logic of protecting our own place, property, position and so forth. Second there is *violence without*. This is our reaction to external social conflicts in society. Outer violence takes three forms: "Hot" violence, by which Tournier means guns, bombs, etc. "Cold" violence is the economic power to dominate or destroy those who lack it. And "Cool" violence which gives apparent legitimacy to both the "Hot" and "Cold", but may not take active roles. Connections are made across these distinctions and they impact on each other.

So at the very source of ethnic violence we find all sorts of inequalities. These have to do with economic, social and political life. They include inequalities in food, in shelter, in land, in

³ Paul Tournier [The Violence Within](#) (San Francisco: Harper & Row) 1978.

healthcare, in freedoms of thought and the spoken or written expression, in self-determination and in demands for equality between all people.

We must learn from history that it is our ego which drives us to do anything we want to do for our own immediate self interests. We become slaves to our own ideas. Individuals end up locked into a logic of doing what we do in order to protect our own ethnic interests, our own property, our own positions in society, and so forth.

As a Christian church, we can have a big role to play in bringing healing to our nation. We can help prevent such kinds of terrible violence. Healing occurs when the members of all communities recognise their own violence and repent, deliberately turning away from it. To the Christian this choice makes a lot of sense. Jesus our Saviour took our violence against Himself. He keeps it on Himself and does not try to pay us back for it. In the Christian gospel there is no place for human discrimination or exclusion. As Christians we are brought through repentance into an open and inclusive way of life where all others are both respected and welcome.

The Bible teaches us the basis of our unity as followers of Christ. Our unity in Christ is irrespective of colour, ethnicity and culture. Our unity in Christ overcomes any other divisions between us.⁴ Our unity guides our responses to all of the racial, ethnic, or cultural hostility of our day. As a whole Christian church we want to promote love for our neighbours in all of our social politics.⁵

Some examples from the scriptures

1. **Tribal conflict:** In Judges 12:1-6 we witness ethnic conflict between the Gileadites and the Ephraimites. Instead of thanking the Gileadites for fighting their common enemy (the Ammonites, verses 2-3), the Ephraimites fought against the Gileadites. Both groups were Jews. You have to search from scripture why they fought. There was a history

⁴ Galatians 3:28; Romans 15:7; Ephesians 1:3-6; Revelation 5:9-10.

⁵ Mark 12:28-31.

prestige for Ephraim, Joseph's second son. When they were overlooked the people of Ephraim were resentful and grumbled, 8:1-3. The result of this conflict was 42,000 people killed. This passage teaches us that one of the consequences of long-term, unresolved ethnic misunderstanding is bloodshed.

Tokunboh Adeyemo comments: "It is tragic that the Israelites, who should have been united against their common enemies, were at war with each other".⁶ He correctly goes on to warn that, "In Africa today, we need to work to avoid seeing nations divided on tribal lines, or believers being divided on regional lines, or in any other way. As believers, we have a common enemy, the devil, and if we stand united, we are better able to resist his attacks".

We may add that in Sudan our common enemies like under development, poverty, disease, poor education, etc. will only be defeated by the united efforts of all of the Sudanese people.

2. **Racial Conflict:** Exodus 1:1-22 gives us a picture of racial conflict between the Egyptians and the Jews. Notice how the Egyptian leadership treated the Jews, verses 12-14 and verse 22. The underlying reasons for this oppression included ignorance of the God of history, verse 8, and fear for their own safety, verses 9-10. These attitudes resulted in *oppression*, verse 11, cruel and unfair treatment; *ruthlessness*, verses 13-14, a willingness to hurt other people in order to get what is wanted; *bitterness*, verse 14, anger and disappointment because of perceived unfairness; and *murder*, verse 16, the crime of deliberately killing someone.⁷

This passage reflects to us some of the racial discrimination that can be manifested between Christian believers, among our churches, within our nation or throughout wider communities. But the challenge for followers of Jesus Christ is to use the Christian gospel to contribute towards racial harmony in every one of Sudan's communities. Jesus Himself said: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God", Matthew 5:9.

The first Christians learned: "Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of

⁶ *Africa Bible Commentary* (Nairobi: Word Alive) 2006, page 309.

⁷ *four definitions* all from *Macmillan School Dictionary* (Oxford: Macmillan Education) 2004.

righteousness”, James 3:18. They believed: “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and gave to us the ministry of reconciliation”, 2 Corinthians 5:17-18.⁸

3. Political Conflict: 1 Samuel 18:1-16 describes the political conflict between a king and his potential successor. A strong relationship between David and Saul had developed because David was successful doing whatever Saul sent him to do, see 1 Samuel 16:14-23; 17:17-18:2. He gave David high rank in the army which pleased everybody, including Saul’s own supporters, 18:5.

Later Saul became angry and developed an attitude of hatred, enough to try and kill David, 19:1. This change came about because he thought that David’s next step was going to be to seize the kingdom for himself, 18:8. Saul’s jealousy of David’s success and popularity led to fear of losing everything he had. That was the reason Saul kept a jealous eye on his one-time appreciated servant, 16:22; 18:9.

Political rivalry is a major issue in Africa. In Sudan it is contributing to the destruction of our nation. God placed David in Saul’s royal palace so “he would learn what it was like to serve a king who was not kind. He would learn how to handle success as a subordinate. He would learn how not to be corrupted by the court. He would learn to preserve his own anointing while working with someone whose heart had turned away from the Lord”.⁹ God is giving some Christians in Sudan similar opportunities today. Pray for Christian salt and light to be an influence for good. Be ready to do what God calls you to do. Let other people learn about Jesus simply by watching your life.¹⁰

Sadly, the Christian church is not exempt from these evil realities herself, but she is still expected, in response to the Christian gospel, to be an instrument of peace. Christians are to be people of peace, Ephesians 2:13-14.

⁸ Please read and study these verses in their biblical context to understand the full implications.

⁹ Africa Bible Commentary (Nairobi: Word Alive) 2006, page 354. 1&2 Samuel commentary by Gbile Akanni and Nupanga Weanzana.

¹⁰ Consider Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:13-16; and also consider 1 Peter 2:11-17.

The Church and ethnic conflicts

The Christian church as an institution should not support any ethnic activities or participate in promoting ethnicity.¹¹ Neither should the church be involved in any politics that is contradictory to truth of the Scripture. The church must not identify herself alongside any violent and brutal regime. If it ever does, it is not in a position to be a voice speaking for the voiceless. The church should probably not identify herself closely with any government regime because governments can change their tune in attempts to keep power. The Christian church should always address the issues of social inequality and must speak out against any oppression in society – not just defending the interests of her own tribe or ethnic group. Well informed Christians who are genuine disciples of Jesus Christ may be the social and spiritual conscience of any nation, including Sudan.

On an individual level, each Christian has to face the challenge of how they manage their dual identity in a time of crisis. We are Christians *and* we are human beings. Two forces will be in play. On one hand there will be ethnic ideology, promoted by politicians. On the other hand there is love, respect and unity among all people of whatever background, promoted by the Christian gospel.

When political violence begins to erupt, (or preferably during the build up, in order to help prevent violence if possible), Christians will have to respond according to the categories of outer violence described earlier. Around them some fellow people will react with “Hot” violence, taking up machetes, spears, guns, grenades and bombs, as has happened in Kenya, Rwanda, and Sudan’s Abyei, Darfur and elsewhere. Other people will react with “Cold” violence, exercising their power in tacit but less public support of those practically involved in “Hot” violence. A third section of people will react with “Cool” violence. By saying and doing little or nothing, they apparently legitimise both the “Hot” and “Cold” violence. We need to be committed Christians who do not support any of the Hot or Cold violence, but are prepared to say and do what is necessary

¹¹ Of course, it is legitimate to celebrate the diversity of God-given cultures, but not to the detriment of any.

to ensure Christian love, respect and unity are distinctly heard and seen. If some of us are misunderstood, rejected or even killed because we belong to what I am going to call the “Active but Cool” category, then that is a price which has to be paid.¹²

Conclusion

Paul Nzachahaya said that experiencing violence can be a failure to share power and resources and a failure to recognise that we are naturally violent in ourselves.¹³ Not only have we to fear violence from others but we should also be afraid of violence from within ourselves. It is underneath the skin of us all and might break out at any moment. If it does it will ravage all that one holds dear.

The failure of Christians to appreciate that our faith is not about personal salvation *abstracted from social realities* also contributes to violence. Liberation from outer violence cannot be achieved without addressing the inner violence we all have. An example of inner violence coming out is when we are on the defensive, a victim of circumstances, but we fall into the temptation of pointing to others as the source of this violence, and then we demand drastic measures – often violent themselves – to punish the offenders. Jesus said, “turn the other cheek”, Matthew 5:38-39.

At present in Sudan we remain struggling with our internal divisions, and consequent physical and spiritual wounds. Healing can occur only when members of the Christian community recognise our own violence and repent from it. It is when we surrender to and comply with the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ that we as Christians are brought to repentance. We enter an open and inclusive way of life. Other kinds of people are both respected and welcome. If we want to stride ahead with life we have to forgive others and love those who have shot at us, or who put land mines to hurt us. You have to love and forgive the men you know killed your father, your

¹² 1 Peter 2:12. The following verses, 13-17, can be summarised as: “Fear God; love the saints; and respectfully honour everyone else”. Read this chapter to the last part of verse 20, and then glance onwards to see it is Jesus whose example we are called to follow.

¹³ Ethnicity, Race and Culture – Christian Perspective Bible Study series (published by the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES) and Pan-African Fellowship of Evangelical Students (PAFES) May 1998. From the Introduction written by Paul Nzachayayo of Rwanda.

mother, your friend, etc. Pray for their salvation, don't pay for their elimination! The Bible says, "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay", says the Lord", Romans 12:19.

Antoine Rutayisire shared in his testimony that he lost his father when he was only five. Then, in 1983, he was fired from his job as a university lecturer on the grounds of ethnic equilibrium. But it was only when he gave up all the anger and violence inside him that he became completely healed. He testified that he was released and healed from the inside out and he no longer felt the gripping pang of bitterness whenever one of the old enemies was mentioned in his presence.¹⁴

In Sudan we have a lot we can learn from the experiences and the testimonies from other nations, and from people within our own country, those who have lived through horrific ethnic violence. What happened in other nations could happen to us at any time. What happened in one state of Sudan could also happen in other states. We have an ethnic, racial and tribal time bomb planted and ticking in our nation. It needs to be controlled and defused to prevent destructive explosions. The Christian church, our national leaders and local community workers all have big roles to play in preventing such violence from erupting. Jesus has set *Christians (His people)* free from slavery to our ethnicity, culture and race.

We must use all means by the grace and the power of God. We can pray intercessory prayers. We can present appropriate study workshops and conferences. We can teach and we can learn.

May God increase our love for our nation and for all of the Sudanese people, every one created in the image of God. GOD LOVES SUDAN AND ALL THE PEOPLE IN SUDAN. We Christians must love God deeply enough to do the same.

¹⁴ Peace and Reconciliation a topical Bible Study guide (Kenya: Fellowship of Christian University Students, FOCUS) undated, pages 4 and 6.

Discussion guide

Using this chapter and Scriptures quoted:

1. "Perceived injustice and oppression breed violence".

Share examples from within your area of Sudan.

Include how the dispute began – what the roots were – if you can.

2. How can a Christian deal with "violence within and violence without" him or herself?

Consider the words of Jesus in Matthew 12:33-37; Matthew 15:16-20;

Matthew 5:8-10. And the words of Paul in Philippians 4:6-7; Colossians 3:1-3.

Since our heart drives our life-choices, how must we cultivate a Christian thinking heart?

3. "Our unity (in Christ) guides our responses to all of the racial, ethnic, or cultural hostility of our day".

Explain *from Scripture* how this can be true, and should be true in our lives.

Why does it not always work in practice? What can be done about this?

4. Share how a Christian understanding of the devil's role in ethnic, racial and cultural divides can help Christians unite as one people.

Consider 1 Peter 5:8-11.

Does this view of a common enemy also help one nation (Sudan) made up of many people groups (tribes) to unite?

5. Describe how tribalism or racism could have been behind the disagreements in Acts 6:1-7.

What did the early Christians do to tackle the problem?

What does it mean to be "known to be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom", verse 3.

How important are these qualities today?

6. "God is giving some Christians in Sudan similar opportunities today".

Think of places people could live and work in today's Sudan that would make them like the young David working in King Saul's service.

How should Christians help one another live in this type of work? Hebrews 10:23-25.

7. How do you think the church in Sudan can "be the social and spiritual conscience" of Sudan?

Consider 1 Peter 3:11-21, (containing at least eight verbs telling us how to live).

8. What role does genuine Christian forgiveness have to play in promoting harmony among all peoples of Sudan?

Which passages from Scripture would you use in developing an appropriate seminar on “forgiveness as the basis for reconciliation”?

9. Why do Christians sometimes fail to appreciate that “our faith is not about personal salvation *abstracted from social realities*”?

List the dangers of this under-developed Christianity.

Consider the command, and the life, of Jesus, John 20:21.