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Elements of sustainable peace

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The question whether religion is a promoter of peace or conflict is a recurrent item on the agenda, both in high politics negotiations and in the local village talks. With no definite answer in sight, what is more obvious is that for peace to be systematic and sustainable, it needs to come from the ground up.

Elements of sustainable peace

Daniel Philpott

At least since the waning days of the Cold War, Africa has seen an especially intense wave of a phenomena that has taken place all over the world – the coming to an end of a civil war or a dictatorship and an emergent flurry of peace negotiations and politics dealing with the injustices committed during the war or authoritarian rule. This is high politics taking place at the national level, sometimes involving international personalities, often marked by lively debates and memorable media images. The South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission marks what first comes to mind when we think of truth commissions or transitional justice. There were also the truth commissions of Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Morocco.

There was the trial of Charles Taylor and of Thomas Lubanga, the International Criminal Court's (ICC) first conviction. The indictments of Omar Bashir, Joseph Kony, and Jean-Pierre Bemba loom large in the international public imagination. There has been the debate surrounding the ICC in general and its rather involved relationship with Africa in particular. The Arab Spring has raised the question of justice in Libya and in Egypt. There have been memorable peace processes: the Mozambique case and the role of the Community of Sant'Egidio, the Juba talks towards the Ugandan civil war, and the talks that ended the war in Sudan. We read of an African reaction force taking shape. There have been the interesting dogs that didn't bark, to use Sherlock Holmes' famous image – the truth commission in Congo that gained little attention, countries like Burundi and Uganda who are still talking about truth commissions, or Mozambique, which has enjoyed a remarkably stable piece since

October 1992 with neither a truth commission nor trials.

In this high politics, a concept has arisen that had little place in global politics a generation ago: reconciliation. Again, Africa reflects, and has strongly contributed to, a global trend. Again, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa was formative. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, maybe more than any other global figure except perhaps Pope John Paul II, put reconciliation on the map. South Africa was not the first transitional country to make reconciliation central, but it became a template for numerous other countries that held truth commissions, many of them indeed called truth and reconciliation commissions.

Real peace?

What happens, though, after the high politics – the klieg lights, the high-profile debates, and the international attention – has died down? Are African societies now reconciled? Has their social fabric been repaired? Does an embryonic peace settlement or democracy enjoy legitimacy? In country after country it is difficult to answer yes. Take Uganda, for instance. Is there peace in the wake of the North's civil war? Many people in that region have said that there is an absence of violence but there is no peace. Of course, as we know, the Juba talks were never concluded, so this is true in the formal sense of high politics. It is also true on the ground, though, where tensions from the war remain ripe. Not least, land disputes abound throughout the region.

History will not put us at ease either. Thoughtful analysts know that the war was not merely the evildoing of a bizarre army and its cultish leader, Joseph Kony,

but rather the manifestation of a tension between the North and the South that has beset Uganda from colonial times. Whether a peace agreement is signed or the Lord's Resistance Army leaders are captured or killed, tensions among the people will have to be addressed. Even if there should be another Ugandan truth commission, which is now being discussed in the Ugandan parliament, popular participation will be essential for its success.

A parallel story might be told about Congo, where the international community and several heads of states and rebel leaders concluded a peace agreement in 2003 and began to speak of a post-conflict environment. But we know that the environment has been anything but one of post-conflict. Numerous other post-violence African societies are discovering that social integration remains a long way off, if it is not on the verge of collapse. Where can these societies look for help? Although high politics remains indispensable, other sources of social repair deserve a closer look.

An agent of reconciliation?

Here enters the role of civil society, which has seen a global resurgence in the past few years, evinced in the Arab Spring, the global occupy movements, and other manifestations of popular awakening. Particularly important is religion, which plays an integral role in peacebuilding in Africa. In part this is because, according to a recent Pew Forum report, Sub-Saharan Africa is the most religious region in the world, while northern Africa is not far behind. Here again, Africa exemplifies a global trend especially intensively.

But religion has also played an important role in peace processes because

of the enterprising efforts of religious actors. In Rwanda, churches brought a stress on reconciliation and forgiveness to *gacaca* courts, shaping their character. In Uganda, Sudan, Sierra Leone, Mozambique, Morocco, Burundi, Congo, Kenya, Ghana, and other African countries, the religious have also advocated reconciliation and shaped national processes accordingly. Closely related to the role of religion, and sometimes blending with it, is the role of culture. During the same period, another fascinating and consequential development has been the adaptation of traditional tribal rituals of reconciliation to large-scale crimes committed in the context of modern nation-states.

Might religion now prove an agent of reconciliation after and beyond high political processes? More broadly, what role does culture play, including traditional tribal rituals and mechanisms for reintegration? Do religion and culture carry a promise for social integration that high political processes do not? Numerous controversies revolve around these central questions.

A force for peace or war?

First, it is not at all obvious that religion and culture are sources of peacebuilding. In the famous diagnosis of the late Samuel Huntington, the world-defining clash of civilizations would be fought between groups defined by religion. In some African countries, religion contributes to conflict as it does in Nigeria between Muslims and Christians (though one must remember that religion is mingled with other causes like economic resources and social status). In other countries, conflicts have their origins in part in spiritual forces, as with the Lord's Resistance Army. When is religion a force for peace rather than war?

Second, some would raise questions about whether religion is appropriately "public" for political processes. In the West, many regard religion as private, a matter of soulcraft, not statecraft, and best kept out of the public square. That view may well be less prevalent in Africa, but the appropriate roles and boundaries of religion and state are still an issue. Almost every religion, whether Christianity, Islam, or any other religion, represents only a portion of the population. Can a single religion contribute to social integration in a nation that consists of several religions?

Many of these problems will be faced by tribal rituals and other culturally based mechanisms. Both religion and culture often face a third issue, which is whether they reinforce traditional hierarchies at the expense of equality, for instance, gender equality. Perhaps they contribute to social integration and unity but in a way that falls short on inclusiveness.

A fourth issue is the role of religious and cultural communities themselves in war and dictatorship. If, for example, all or part of a religious community was complicit in a genocide or authoritarian rule, what role can it play in social integration in the aftermath of such an episode?

A fifth issue is simply that of effectiveness. Perhaps the influence of religion and culture are far more marginal than their scholars and practitioners imagine them to be. Perhaps all of their activity does not add up to much on a national scale.

A sixth issue is whether religious and culturally influenced notions of reconciliation resonate at the popular level. Or are they little known? Or perhaps viewed cynically, say as a mask for lack of justice. Perhaps reconciliation is simply the policy of leaders who do not

want to face accountability or difficult questions surrounding equality and establishing democracy.

What does reconciliation mean to ordinary Africans? Through what social and cultural practices do Africans reconstitute relationships beyond violence? What influence do they have? What can exemplary cases of reconciliation on the ground teach us? In short, what are the prospects for peace from the ground up? These are the questions that ought to be foremost on the agenda of scholars and activists who are forging the next generation of peacebuilding in Africa and elsewhere. It is essential that they be answered if peace from the ground up is going to be effective and just. Peace from the ground up, in turn, is essential to pursue, if peace, more broadly speaking, is going to be systematic and sustainable. 🌿



Participants in the conference Peace From the Ground Up enjoy the beautiful surroundings at Monkey Valley Conference Center outside Cape Town, during a break.