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CHURCH LEADERSHIP IS CHALLENGED. A PERSPECTIVE ON CHRISTIAN AND AFRICAN VALUES

Samuel M. Kobia, Kenya/Switzerland

1. Moral Crisis as a Challenge to the Church[1]

Moral leadership is by far the most critical area where the church is expected to play a specific role. My contention is that even more than the political and economic crises, the moral crisis represents the greatest challenge in Africa – and indeed in the world in general. There are serious ethical questions both at the African and world level that we must be prepared to give leadership in addressing.

The so-called new international economic order, which is being expressed through globalisation, is but a global economic apartheid. Basically, it is a moral question even before it becomes an economic and a social question. The moral leadership of churches should also be discerned in the area of debt and structural adjustment programs. These are fertile grounds for breeding corruption. Debt cancellation alone is not enough. Alongside with the campaign for debt cancellation, the church must raise ethical questions about borrowing, lending, and spending. How responsible have we been in those three areas? The church must unmistakably state that structural adjustment policies and programs as well as debt servicing and repaying are unethical as long as they result in massive suffering of the people.

The moral leadership of the church is critical in fighting corruption. As noted above, corruption and graft exist in all countries of the world. In some countries of Europe procedures get through as so-called commissions, in others they may be considered as corruption. So, we cannot say that corruption only exists in the South. However, a society in which corruption and graft are institutionalised and generally accepted as a standard behaviour will hardly progress in anything. In many African and non-African countries the churches have an enormous responsibility. This is even more so, as many of the countries heavily infected by corruption boast of very high percentages of Christianity. There is no doubt that a drastic change in the ethical and moral climate in Africa is necessary for the continent to be in a position to utilise and allocate its resources justly and efficiently. I insist on the role of the churches in fighting corruption not only

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because it is simply Christian to do so. It is also African. From the traditional African point of view to talk of a corrupt leader was a contradiction in terms. A leader was a person whose moral integrity was unquestionable. FECCIWA, the Fellowship of Christian Councils and Churches in Western Africa, which organised this consultation to overcome corruption, should pioneer in *promoting an ethical code of leadership in Western Africa*.

2. Traditional African Rulers Were Held Accountable

The second area in which FECCIWA should feel challenged to provide leadership is in *promoting a culture of dignity and integrity in public life*. How can FECCIWA help West Africans to truly become custodians of African heritage? Part of that heritage, as we have already demonstrated, is a continuous demand for impeccable integrity of the leaders. As Prof. George Avittey reminds us, 'traditional African rulers were held accountable at all times'.[2] He goes on to cite the example of Mantse Obli Taki who was dethroned in 1918. Obli Taki was accused of a number of offences but the most serious of all was 'the selling of Ga land in the name of the Ga people without consulting the owners of the land and pledging the stool throne itself as security on a loan'.[3]

Here, it is worth mentioning another example, one that happened in the last century. In 1883, the Asante people dethroned their king Mensa Bensu for excessively taxing the people and the failure to account for the taxes collected.

In more recent times, 'Chief Barima Adu-Baah Kyere of Ghana and his supporters fled following assassination attempts on them. The dispute concerned accountability regarding the village's revenue.'[4] Also, we should not forget that when Jerry Rawlings came into power in 1983, he had people executed that were found guilty of major acts of corruption.

Each community in Africa had its own traditional way of dealing with corrupt leaders. Almost without exception the punishment was severe. In Senegal, the king had to resign and this was signaled by a distinct drumbeat. Following an elaborate and exhaustive public trial a Yoruba king was required to go into the inner corner of his palace and commit suicide. This shows how serious the issue of corruption was taken in the African indigenous governance.

In conclusion, I suggest we ask ourselves crucial questions: 'Where are the sites in which Africans buried the truths that made it possible for the leaders to live such dignified lives? Where is the crucible of the spirit that enabled our people to name and deal ruthlessly with "the intolerable" in our community – thereby sustaining hope

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for all the people? Whatever happened to the generosity of the spirit that characterised the qualities of an African leader?' It is by answering such questions that we will begin to deal in earnest with the issue of spirituality as a foundation of society.

While it is possible to find cases of how to deal with corrupt leaders in all parts of Africa, few places (if any) would rival Ghana in documented instances of dethronement of chiefs/kings on accounts of corruption. It would therefore come as no surprise that I make a strong proposal that FECCIWA take the lead in exploring ways of ecumenical responses to corruption in this region and beyond. You have a lot to build on.

My emphasis would be to facilitate the rebirth of the African values that girded the ethical dimensions of leadership and governance. Those, coupled with Christian principles and values that genuinely promote justice and ethical conduct in public life could provide a solid basis and ecumenical agenda for building a culture of life in dignity and integrity in Africa.

NOTES

1 The text is an extract of a speech of Samuel Kobia (at that time Director for Africa and now General Secretary of the World Council of Churches): 'A Crisis of Conscience. The Roots and Route of Corruption in Africa'. FECCIWA-Sub-regional Conference on 'Corruption, Peace and Development', Accra/Ghana November 2000. Also published in: Stückelberger, Christoph, *Continue Fighting Corruption. Experiences and Tasks of Churches and Development Agencies*, Berne: 2003, p. 38-41.

2 Ayittey, George, *Africa in Chaos*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998, p. 199.

3 *Ibidem.*

4 *Ghana Drum*, June 1994, p. 12.