

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES “RECONCILIATION” MAKE?

Peter Henriot

“Well, at least the headlines might have a more peaceful tone to them!”

That’s one comment I heard a few days ago from someone who, like many of us, was trying to come to some understanding of the meaning of the “reconciliation” between two political heavyweights here in Zambia. And to be sure, we can be grateful that there might be fewer headlines screaming at us that “X Calls Z a Idiotic Fool,” and “Z Says X is criminally Irresponsible,” and “X and Z Square Off in Public,” etc., etc.

Colourful as the headlines might be – and possibly helpful for the sales of newspapers! – such exchanges surely do not advance a mature and workable democracy in Zambia. They reveal a level of political interaction that is non-constructive, indeed, even destructive. Political personalities are able to avoid real engagement with substantive issues by attacking their opponents in a reckless manner.

Such exchanges, of course, are not localised only in Zambia or in other parts of Africa. Politics in recent months in the USA have also demonstrated many vitriolic exchanges among Presidential candidates. And the comments last week of President Bush while addressing the Israeli Parliament – comparing those who challenge his disastrous war policy to appeasers of Hitler – are indeed as shameful as they are inane!

But what can be said about this “reconciliation” at high levels here in Zambia? Much has already been spoken and written about this event. It’s not my place to judge personal motives or poke holes in partisan statements. So I’d like to add here only two reflections, one political and the other theological.

POLITICAL SENSE

This recent and on-going act of reconciliation should be evaluated not only in terms of what it does for the individuals involved but also in terms of what it does for the wider community, the people of Zambia. Personal visits and private words may ease the tensions of someone who has recently suffered serious illness and may calm the anger of someone who has felt beleaguered by a persistent opponent.

But the true test of the value – indeed, the validity – of any such reconciliation will finally be seen in what difference it makes in the lives of ordinary Zambians, two-thirds of who now live below the poverty line in one of the richest countries in Africa. In other words, will this reconciliation of politicians promote a politics of social justice?

Of the many social justice issues facing Zambia today, two are outstanding: (1) governance and (2) poverty.

Take the issue of governance. The National Constitutional Conference (NCC) is now diligently working away but in the context of serious differences that still remain about its composition and its mandate. Prominent actors from churches, civil society and political parties are voluntarily “outside” the halls of Mulungushi International Conference Centre on express grounds of disagreement with the Act that constituted the NCC. Of course, we are repeatedly told that the Act is law and nobody or nothing will change that!

But could this new spirit of reconciliation be utilised to address some of the questions around the composition and mandate of the NCC? For instance, what logical reason can be given for the presence of six members from each registered political party (even if they only might have six members as a whole!), when only three places were offered to each Church “mother body” that have literally millions of members?

Or could a clarification be made as to the precise status of the Mung’omba Draft Constitution – drawn up after almost three years of intensive study, expert consultations and nationwide hearings? And is there a biased pressure from Government against submitting the work of the NCC to a public Referendum, something that would be a necessity if the Bill of Rights is to be up-dated?

In the past few weeks, I’ve had a chance to be part of several workshops on the new Constitution, and the Bill of Rights has been a constant focus of interest. This has been especially true of desires to see included in the new Bill the Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ESCR), and the rights of women, children, the elderly and the differently-abled. Maybe it’s only the sort of audiences that I’ve been with, but certainly there seems to be a growing demand among Zambians that this nation should not be obliged to remain with the incomplete Bill of Rights that the British colonial powers wrote back in 1963!

So, let’s hear where the newly reconciled leaders now stand on burning issues like constitutional reform, both in terms of content and process.

The second concern, of course, is the social scene of impoverishment in Zambia. The political issue of whether or not reconciled individuals attend parties at State House is not as important as the socio-economic and ethical issue of whether or not hunger is avoided, clean water is available, teachers are paid and the sick are taken care of (hopefully, within Zambia itself!).

Indications are that Zambia may not be on track for meeting many of the 2015 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Funds for fulfilling the good objectives of the Fifth National Development Plan (FNDP) might or might not be available. The gap between rich and poor – possibly a growing gap -- continues to be morally unacceptable. Recent JCTR Basic Needs Baskets (BNB), both urban and rural, reveal distressingly serious household food security situations.

Would it not make a great contribution to dealing with the current poverty challenges in Zambia if “reconciliation” could be translated into real actions to improve the lives of the majority poor in this country?

THEOLOGICAL SENSE

It is a bit disconcerting to sound theological analysis to have secular events such as the recent reconciliation read in terms of God’s intervention in Zambia’s political history. I for one do strongly believe in God’s actions in practical history, but I am slow to assign the name of God to exciting events whose outcome we have yet to see. Calls for national prayer celebrations? OK, but let such calls not be politically motivated or partisanly planned.

Why is it that political events favourable to certain political interests should always be interpreted as God’s intervening actions? It makes good theological sense to recall that the scriptural validation of prophetic words or actions in the Old Testament was the true benefit of the people, not the claims of individuals.

At the JCTR we have just recently completed a study of reconciliation with particular focus on “inculturation” – gaining an appreciation of some African aspects of reconciliation such as community involvement and symbolic and ritual expressions. What struck me is that true African reconciliation involves not simply two individuals who have been in conflict, but the entire community that has been hurt. That, of course, is also a very Christian feature to be taken into consideration in acts of genuine reconciliation.

It seems to me that a good theological stance would reinforce a good political position of expecting that the current focus on reconciliation will benefit all the people of Zambia. This would mean dealing forthrightly with the immediately pressing needs of governance and poverty issues.

Let’s see what benefits will occur in the days ahead because of this well-publicised “reconciliation.”

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