

**AFRICA TOWARDS HOPE  
AND  
DIGNITY**

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**Rev. Dr. André Karamaga  
General Secretary – All Africa Conference of Churches**

## **1. Introduction**

On the basis of contemporary statistics which indicate that the centre of gravity of Christianity is gradually shifting to the African continent, and given the fact that Africa is often described as “an incurably religious continent”, we are faced with a dual dilemma. That in spite of intense inclination towards “God” the continent is full of shocking suffering and scandal of poverty which somehow contradicts the Love and presence of God . We therefore have to interrogate the depth of contradiction that shows on one hand the massive response to the call from the gospel for the fullness of life and on the other hand the abundance of misery. What is the content of the hope that the church preaches where is hopelessness . Why and how then should this continent which is full of believers seem to be "forgotten by God?" Does religion flourish best where there is misery? This would seem to be so, especially if we take into account the phenomenon of secularization faced by wealthy societies. However, this tempting logic seems to be wrong if we rightly observe the role of the growing church in the African continent and how faith remains a driving factor for resistance and survival through out tragic steps of the African journey.

The African spiritual experience takes shape in the context of a complex environment. This is an invitation for Africa towards our self-assessment of our hidden capacities for transforming our own reality and that of the world. We must move from outside oriented way of experiencing our spirituality towards a life centered style of relationship with God without compromise with whatever that is unacceptable . Jesus invited his disciples to the mountaintop to witness a very short lived contemplative moment with the ancestors of their faith (Abraham, Moses and Elijah) to reinforce hope . Immediately after this experience Peter requested Jesus if they could pitch a tent and prolong the experience. Peter wanted to escape from the world by embracing the wonderful experience of the transfiguration. But Jesus reminded his disciples that by this wonderful experience alone they cannot enrich their faith or even change the world. They have to go back and confront the conditions of the reality in which the people of God live.

## **2. The Right Time for Right Choices**

Today there is a growing phenomenon of young people leaving the continent in search of greener pastures in the western world .They leave en masse through the agony of sinking in the high seas of Northern Africa. It is as if there is no more hope for our young people in the continent because they do not see any possibility for a better life. Even in our Churches the songs of many choirs reflect a deep sense of alienation from the world .Most of the songs reflect the desire to leave the world and go to heaven because the world is seen as a place full of evil and suffering . On the other hand the reality of poverty in the midst of wealth in the continent reflects a shocking contradiction .Yet every one aspires for change and seek to improve his or her skills through education towards entrepreneurship and a dignified life . This can be witnessed in the growing number of associations especially of women engaged in capacity building initiatives for self reliance .They are not escaping from hardship but confronting the realities and contradictions of life with vitality and a profound sense of determination . More over we have witnessed a critical move through the signing of the New Partnership for Africa's Development ( NEPAD ) when many head of states in Africa recognized that the future of the continent cannot be better without good governance and real democratic dispensations . As we may remember they have shown commitment and their consent towards the peer review mechanism by exposing themselves to transparent assessment and mutual vulnerability without hiding their weaknesses but remaining focused on positive outcomes of this exercise , is a major milestone .

The current global financial crisis is a further indication that even those who appear to be rich and powerful ,who have been benefiting from economic globalization , remind us that it is not possible to live and prosper on speculation and injustice . And that power and wealth alone in the midst of poverty cannot guarantee the survival of humanity. More over ,the current global dynamic show very clearly that this is the right time to make the right choices for change especially in Africa .Indeed , in the book of Deuteronomy we have clear conditions for restoration and blessing which we need to take seriously if we want to reverse our situation on the basis of strong ground towards hope and dignity for our people and our beloved continent .

**“Today I am giving you a choice between good and evil , between LIFE AND DEATH . If you obey the commands of the Lord your God which I give you today . If you love him , obey him and keep all His laws and then you will prosper and become a Nation of many**

**people .....I am now giving you the choice between life and death ,between God’s blessings and God’s curse , and I will make heaven and earth to witness the choice you make . Choose Life . Love the Lord your God , obey him and be faithful to him , and then You and Your descendants will live long in the land that he promised to give to your ancestors , Abraham , Isaac , and Jacob”. ( Deuteronomy 30: 14-26 ) .**

In 1991 , the All Africa Conference of Churches produced a document entitled “ The Right Time for Change” which was prepared as a response to guide the emerging democratic movement. This culminated with the famous National Conferences especially in Francophone Africa that coincided with the introduction of multiparty system in the continent . Prior to this, the continent was dominated by military rule and successive coup d’état, The question which arose in the context of events sweeping the continent about the AACC ‘s call for change was then change for what because indeed there could be changes for good or for worse .

This time around, the change we are seeking must be grounded on the non negotiable values of human dignity which is the epitome of human rights . The time has now come for us in the continent to make the right choices . It is a matter of life and death for whichever choice we make defines our fate and to some extent is irreversible .And in our case , during and after the post independence crisis , leadership of the continent had not time to make either right or wrong choices because in essence they were living the reality of colonial heritage .

Africa has largely been a victim of choices made on her behalf without the consent of her own people .The fact that we are consumers of ideologies and even theologies conceived in other contexts robs us of our own capacities to make choices that are relevant to our own reality as Africans . Biblically speaking we have to confess and repent for having allowed others to reflect for us and to make choices for us as if God has not given us relevant brains like every one else created in His image . The Church has a duty to enable people to reach the degree of autonomy that is imperative for making the right choices in order to reclaim their dignity and live in hope .In making right choices at the right time we must face our current deep challenges and deal with them under the inspiration of our values enriched by the inclusiveness of the Gospel .

### **3. The Challenge of Ethnicity**

For example we know that ethnicity has been exploited by the colonial system of control of resources through manipulation of peoples identity with the logic of divide and rule . In some parts of Africa there is even confusion as to what may be termed as a “tribe” in the original sense or what was initially just a dialect of a certain ethnic group and which for inexplicable reasons was later declared to be a “tribe”. There are many examples of communities with different dialects which had a common identity under a particular authority. During the nineties when most countries in sub-Saharan Africa embraced multi party system there were still a weak institutions with no legal instruments that guarantee stability in times of transition . Moreover power politics manipulated ethnicity through monopoly of state resources .

The Churches in Africa are called to deepen the values of nationhood by promoting dialogue that enhances peaceful co-existence among people . Again we are reminded by St Paul when he said that as Christians we are neither Jew nor Gentiles , neither male nor female i.e. we all share one common humanity in Christ . The message of Paul is that our identity as human beings is ultimately spiritual i.e. we are created not in the image and likeness of our tribes but ultimately in the image and likeness of God. More over from the biblical story of the tower of Babel we experience the conflicting paradoxes of a global human project which suppresses diversity instead of celebrating it. However in the New Testament the Pentecostal event among the disciples affirms that diversity of identities within the community as an expression of difference is a manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit. Our common humanity as a people is informed by the diversities of our cultures, traditions, religious conviction and heritages. For this reason ethnic identity as such is a God given reality .

### **4. Where are we now ?**

There is an adage that when you ask an African where he is heading to, he starts by telling you where he is coming from. In this spirit, it is necessary to build our reflection on the vivid memory of the long journey which we have covered. Without going very far, into the past of our history in which we have experienced the dehumanization of slavery, and colonialism let us

limit ourselves to our recent situations which has been exceptionally rich in events. We started the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the total occupation of our countries by colonial powers and we reached the end of that century with more awareness of our problems and challenges. The decision made by young Africans in the Pan African Congress held in Manchester, England in 1945 to liberate the continent from colonial powers has been achieved in less than 50 years precisely in 1994 with the election of Nelson Mandela as the President of South Africa – the last colony submitted to apartheid. We can now identify negative forces which are taking advantage of the confusion of globalization to keep us under their domination. We recognize that it is during the same century, that the sons and daughters of our continent struggled as in a dream against colonial powers until our countries regained their independence in the sixties. Even if there is a lot still to be done to gain our real and total freedom, no one can convince us that we are unable to achieve anything. On the contrary, just like the fathers and mothers of our independence, we should carry on the struggle by taking advantage of today's advanced means of communication which give us the possibility for better mobilization of our people.

You understand that I have chosen to be optimistic by recalling that we have covered a long distance, from slavery, from colonialism and from the ideology of apartheid. It is not wrong to say that we have travelled from dream to reality, although this does not mean that I am not fully aware that there are vital challenges still. We can say that we are coming from the dark night and we are stepping into the light of daytime. However, we are reminded of the platonic adage of a people chained for years inside a cage and they arise out of it into daylight. They find the heat of the sun too scorching for their eyes to visualize reality. There is a great temptation, just like the Israelites having been liberated from Egypt, to become nostalgic and imagine that it is more safe to go back to the land of oppression than face the challenges of being free from bondage. That is why some of our people expose their lives to death trying to escape from the continent without fearing whatever may be waiting for them during the trip or up on arrival at unknown place. We cannot enjoy the light of the day because we are now in a free market of everything which is like a big forest in which we are lost. We are like the people of Israel who were told to sing a song of hope in a hostile environment when they finally said: "**How can we sing a song to the Lord in a foreign land?" (Ps 137 :4)**

At the heart of this profound sense of alienation and estrangement of the African soul is the question of authenticity. In most cases, our way of life and even thought processes succumb to

political, Cultural and spiritual reassignment of the western mode of being. How can we find a language of expressing our innermost sense of identity in God when such expressions do not correspond to our own symbols and cosmology. The divisiveness of colonial Christianity and its fragmenting effect on our psyche is a problem that we must face and confront spiritually. Moreover we ought to embrace the Biblical notion of God who is named through ancestral encounters and heritage. In our context the names of God are also attributes of God which signify our cosmology and ethical concerns for the well being of humanity.

Nzambe, Leza, Mungu, Nkulu, Ngai, Andriamanitra, Imana, Modimo, 'Kikwembn etc., the God of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob, the God of Jesus Christ. From our African religious background, which is similar to the fundamental doctrine of christianity it is not possible for believers in one God to compete or to fight in the name of that God. That is tantamount to reducing that God to an idol which needs to be protected by its creatures:

**"There is one body and one Spirit just as there is one hope to which God has called you. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism; there is one God and Father of all mankind, who is Lord of all, works through all, and is in all." (Eph. 4: 4-6)**

In a deep sense we are therefore confronted by two concerns: The intrinsic value of African Spirituality and western Christianity, the hermeneutical peculiarity of African cosmology and ethics in relation to western Christian theology. For example, the type of revelation being acclaimed in western theology relates to the powerful notion of original sin which necessitates the coming of Jesus into this world to rescue humanity from eternal damnation. You will recall that from earlier anthropology, the African was perceived to be at the lowest end of the chain of modernity. And that certain belief system in our communities were considered to be backward if not evil. In a sense then the coming of Jesus reinforces the grand project of rescuing Africans from their own self i.e. the collective memory and identity of a people is mutilated and replaced with a new template. Let me give an Illustration of this phenomenon using information technology embodied in the computer. If for example you change the motherboard of the computer or interfere with the basic gadgets that constitute its functions, then you redefine the content and capacity of the entire computer. Obviously a computer has no soul and it can be programmed to deliver information according to the instructions fed into it. Moreover, the key issue here is that there is need for radical re-interpretation of the message of christianity within

our African reality and context. For example the God who loves all his children equally would not have made such exclusive provisions for the salvation of only a small fragment of humankind while condemning the vast majority to poverty and marginalization. The hegemony of power and authoritarian system imposed in the name of Jesus must be rejected. In the present day pluralistic African society each community ought to be evangelized on the basis of its own uniqueness values and authenticity.

We are from the night of colonialism, we can not enter in the daylight of freedom and rejoice in Hope if we do not accept to go through a metanoia, a deep conversion from the scandal of divisions we have inherited. Concerning the vivid memory on which we have to build our Hope, our metanoia would not consist in turning to another God as if we can believe that there is more than one God. There is one Unique God and other deities are idols.

We are called upon, therefore, to turn to the God of all times, le Nkulu Nkulu (the Greatest) as the Zulu people of South Africa call him. A God who had helped our ancestors to make this continent a continent of abundance without the help of technical assistance and of humanitarian aid, a continent in which the children of Israel came in search of food and water. (Gen.42). We have to turn to this marvelous God whom the Kikuyu of Kenya call Ngai or Mulungu (the link of everything), a God who made our continent, a continent in which security prevailed without the help of peace keepers, a continent on which the Son of God could find refuge at the crucial time when a babies' genocide organized by King Herod took place (Mt. 2: 16-18). From time immemorial, our people have had extraordinary relational experiences with this God to whom we have to turn. Slavery and colonialism which have disorganized and traumatized us so deeply are mere short steps in comparison with the numerous centuries of independence and self-determination which our continent has experienced.

The night of slavery and colonialism plunged us into a crisis which touched all areas of our existence including our dignity. Nevertheless, Andriamanitra, as the Malagasy call Him, the God who created everything has not abandoned us in spite of our resignation and of the sin which we committed by allowing others to think on our behalf as if we have not been given brains like theirs. Through Jesus Christ, He became present in our suffering, up to the heart of genocide which was perpetrated on our continent and which is the most eloquent expression of our crisis and of the crisis of the whole human community. This is where we are coming from, from the

immemorial relationship with God through the night of slavery and colonialism towards the day of freedom after having paid the very high price of genocide .The dawn of a new Africa is not without its burdens of debts with a multitude of creditors whose landing has been a curse rather than a resource. In fact a colossal of monies being lend to Africa finds its way back to the western Banks .

It is a rope around our neck which might also tie "up our children and the children of our children, if realism and reason do not prevail over selfishness and a short memory because the chain of debts reminds us of the chain of slavery and our creditors are not willing to admit that they owe us more than we owe them. They know, at least that we know because the night has been replaced by the new day. We have also said that the night of slavery and colonialism has plunged us into a deep crisis. We are stepping into the day light bearing the scars of the crisis which is manifesting itself in all areas of our lives. This crisis has been so deep that we can no longer sink lower. We can, either, keep turning at the bottom of the abyss, or we can accept to climb out of it.

African governments are under two kinds of pressure to democratize. First, a range of opposition forces are harnessing their energies in a variety of actions which are becoming ever more forceful. Second, there is a rather more problematic orchestration of political conditionality by foreign governments and agencies urging Africa to seek better 'governance' and more respects for human rights. The genuineness of these pressures is to be questioned but they cannot be ignored. But it is the internal pressures which mainly preoccupy African regimes, challenging their legitimacy and sometimes their very survival. The demand for democracy has now struck a chord deep in society. Two decades of political silence is being broken by a period of activism which is spreading across the continent as the power and exuberance of politics is discovered by new generations.

There is also considerable significance in the fact that calls for democratization from official bodies have intensified in response to the increasing marginalization of Africa from the world economic order. Not only are attention and resources being diverted to Eastern Europe, but protectionism and inter-North trade is on the increase. Africa's needs are now receiving scant attention, forcing the realization on Africa's leaders that a new path must be struck which necessarily includes the participation rather than suppression of the masses. A proverbial wind of

change is sweeping across the continent, removing dictators from office and providing scope for popular opinion to surface for the first time for decades.

There are also signs that Africa's leaders cannot face an increasingly unhelpful world economic order without the support of their own peoples. Hence the promptings for popular participation in development and decision-making and a new emphasis self-reliance.

As the former general Secretary of the AU, Dr Salim Salim once said “for no matter how many political parties an African state may have, it will not change the price of coffee, cocoa, cotton, sisal or copper.” Nor will it reduce external dependency or provide more consultation over the price of the commodities or interest rates in the world market. It will also not stop the injustice of the south subsidizing the rich of the north. Isn't it time to link the demands for democratization of the African societies to the democratization of the of the international system .

For more than thirty years, we have been struggling with God who has been trying to pull us out of the abyss at a time when we seem to be eager to sink even deeper. However, we know where we are and God knows that we know because we are continuously crying to Him. We can no longer accuse the colonizer who is taking advantage of us and is still looting our resources. When we waste our time worshipping ethnic belonging or our denominations instead of putting to use the light of the new day in order to rebuild cohesion and communion, our sense of responsibility becomes questionable because we know where we are and God knows that we know, because we are continuously crying to Him.

Our turning to God means that we should seize all the opportunities for starting afresh, which He continuously puts within our grasp. I don't know whether it is out of naivety ;or out of exaggerated optimism, but I am convinced that the Africans' fruit is ripe, that 'we have learnt a lot from our suffering and from the long way we have covered, that we have had enough of extreme misery and that we have enough human and material resources, that we can, at last take off and come out of our crisis.

All this requires, however, that we should turn to the living God who has never stopped trying to get us out of the abyss.

## **5. Where are we heading to ?**

In order to embrace the light which cannot be consumed we must turn away from the idols of ethnicity, dis-unity, violence and the spirit of resignation among us. We must be committed to initiate a number of processes that are aimed at deepening the values of dignity and hope for the continent. The opposite would mean that we shall remain forever entangled in confusion, turning around in circles and getting deeper into the abyss of poverty and marginalization.

I have the deep feeling that as we entered into the 21<sup>st</sup> century the greatest challenge is how to live in dignity and with hope in God as far as moral and spiritual values are concerned. No single honest people can claim to be above the others. In fact, we all have reasons to be ashamed together ! Indeed, each continent came to the end of the 20th century with a genocide on its records. All our societies are functioning on the basis of violence and the exploitation of the poor. It is only at the organizational level of this violence or of this exploitation that differences can be seen. The right to life for many groups of people is violated by powers which project themselves as defending champions of human rights. This violation of the right to life for many groups of people has been used as a pretext by the violators in many poor countries, especially in Africa to the extent that life itself as well as elementary laws of morality have been despised.

Our globalized world is inherently conflictive. The competitive logic of the market and the confrontational logic of power politics are manifestations of a culture that considers the rule of winning and losing to be a "law of nature" from which there is no escape. The process of globalization has greatly increased this potential for conflict. It has led not only to a massive concentration but also to a diffusion of power rendering many of the traditional forms of control and legitimization ineffective. In addition, globalization has extended the range of economic, financial and media power to the whole world, thus multiplying the points of potential conflict. A violent manifestation of these conflicts is not inevitable; but any exercise of power which lacks legitimacy is in danger of provoking violent responses from those affected, especially those who have nothing more to lose. Intrinsic to current demands for democracy is the need for government and the state to reflect the will of the people and not be a substitute for the will of the people. Although the state in Africa has almost developed into a coercive instrument, it is generally accepted that the state will remain an important institution. The state must retain an

important defensive role against external economic exploitation, but it must also facilitate and intervene in the internal structures of the economy. It must also lead in the provision of public services and social welfare.

The overblown post-colonial state has, however, become a serious obstacle to development since one of its main functions is to satisfy the interests of a self-serving, parasitic bureaucracy. Hierarchism and complex procedures of delegating responsibility have made the system prone to corrupt practices. In multi-ethnic countries, the state becomes the site for serious ethnic conflict as different groups try to bolster the privileges and positions of their own. As resources dwindle so the state apparatuses become less efficient and civil servants lose their commitment to public duty.

There can be no hope of transformation without a serious assault on the power of the bureaucracy. It is now well understood that development cannot come from above but must find its momentum from below. While there are ample examples of economic growth being achieved by coercion from the state or from a strong capitalist class, this does not benefit the people as a whole, nor is the achievement sustainable in the long run. Indeed one of the severest lessons of the Marxist legacy is that state-centered growth may build the productive forces over the short term, but it cannot build an all-round economic system which will expand steadily and evenly, serving the people as a whole. Development is about extending the all-round capacities of the people and building resources in an integrated manner. It is a total process.

## **6. Conclusion**

The task of theological reflection is to try to discern the plan of God in historical situations.

Our reflections so far might well incline us to feel that the scale is heavily weighted towards the side of dis-grace as an expression of African reality. But is that really true? How does theology know that what appears as dis-grace in terms of social analysis is also dis-grace in theological terms? This question compels us to consider new ways of theological reading or interpretation of the African reality. The issue is a complex one calling for extended treatment, and reflection.

To begin with there are not two separate realities: one the object of sociological/ political consideration and the other the object of theology. Reality is one. Hence the church and the

world do not have two different ends or goals. The eschatological goal of the world is also the eschatological goal of the church. So we can conclude that grace and dis-grace are dimensions of one and the same reality; they are not isolated dimensions immured within confines of the church.

Christian awareness has always adverted to the universality of liberating grace. The one God we believe in is a God of love for all human beings. (1 Tim. 4:10). In the life of every human being he shows up love, goodness, hope, and a future offering infinite fulfillment to the human heart. This, then, is the pristine sense of God. He is the mysterious, all-embracing reality who offers fulfillment and complete meaningfulness to human existence. The New Testament is filled with expressions that convey the experience of God's love and his indiscriminate offering to all:

**"For he wants all men to be saved and come to know the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). The universality of human decadence finds its counterweight in the universality of God's 'salvific offering (Rom. 3:23-26).**

As all died in Adam, so all can receive life in Christ (Rom. 5:12-21). Light is shed on the meaning of all history in the journey of the resurrected Jesus Christ. He is the personal mirror reflecting the collective destiny of humankind and the cosmos (Eph. 3:9; Col. 1:26). All that exists in heaven and earth has been placed under one head, as it were, taking on meaning in the light of what happened to Jesus (Eph. 1:10). Thus meaningfulness and salvation are ensured for reality as a whole.

The good news is precisely this affirmation of God's offer of salvation. All are lovable in God's eyes and hence all can reach him. However, they do not reach him by some magical step or some merely physical mechanism. Salvation is a human reality, and so it is realized within the horizon of human freedom. God's love does not do violence to the latter, Instead it invites a loving response from human beings.. Hope and dignity of Africa are in God and AACC's role to mobilize Churches to discover them through dedication to God under His guidance.