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## The Gospel of Reconciliation in East Africa: Islam and Traditional Religion

My parents pioneered the proclamation of the gospel within a region of the Zanaki people of Tanzania where Christ had not been known before. Our South Mara home was at Bumangi eighteen miles inland from Lake Victoria's eastern shores. Slowly the Holy Spirit called forth a church, a fellowship of reconciliation, amidst much travail.

### Power and Clan

Confrontation with the powers was real, and especially with the powers of hierarchical authority and inter-clan division, which swirled around Wakuru, a young girl of about twelve who was one of the first believers in Christ. Her father had arranged for her to marry an old polygynous man from within her clan.

When Wakuru believed the gospel, she was confident that Jesus Christ wanted to free her from that kind of marriage, and so she refused to marry the man. This was unprecedented, for fathers had the authority to decide who their daughters should marry. Alas, her father had already received the dowry cattle. That meant the marriage arrangement was irrevocable. The confrontation between young Wakuru and the entire system of family and tribal custom shook the whole Zanaki edifice to its foundations. Never before had a twelve year old felt empowered to resist her father's will in such matters. The confrontation went on for months, with beatings and even chaining Wakuru within her mother's hut for many weeks. Finally the father acquiesced. Short of killing his daughter, there was nothing he could do to break her firm decision.

Then came another astounding upheaval which made the first confrontation only a side show. One of the first young men to believe in Christ, Nyakitumu Meso, approached Wakuru's parents asking to marry her. She was delighted with the proposal. Alas, her parents and clan elders were infuriated, for Wakuru was of the Basketmaker clan, and Nya-

kitumu of the Blacksmith clan. A taboo ran deep within the Zanaki matrix which was divided into these two clans; Basketmakers and Blacksmiths could never marry. In vain Nyakitumu explained the biblical revelation that all humanity come from one parent. Although over the centuries people have divided into clans and tribes, in Christ there is a new humanity that transcends race and tribe.

For months the discussions went on between Nyakitumu and Wakuru's parents, permeated with much prayer by the little emerging church at Bumangi. At last Wakutu's parents acquiesced, but with dire warnings that the marriage would be cursed and they would never have children. So Nyakitumu and Wakuru were married in the thatched roofed church house at Bumangi, the first Christian wedding within that region of the Zanaki people. While the church was filled with joy and song at the wedding celebration, the Zanaki elders united in cursing the couple so that they would never have children.

The Lord blessed Nyakitumu and Wakuru with thirteen children and in time their family replaced our family as the pastor couple at Bumangi; the home I first lived in was filled with the joyous laughter of the children of the Meso family. The clan leaders would shake their heads in astonishment commenting that the children of Christians are as numerous as goats. The marriage of this couple was an eternal memorial that in Christ there is, indeed, one new humanity. Many years later this couple had another first for the Zanaki people, their 50th wedding anniversary. In polygynous societies there are never wedding anniversary celebrations. So this anniversary was a celebration involving the whole community, with cattle killed for the feast, a packed church, several choirs, a couple dozen pastors coming, some from great distances, all to rejoice with the Meso family in this miracle of the grace of God. And Wakuru said with her face caressed in joy, "My husband never beat me even once; he just loved me all these years!"

### **Blessing Other Clans**

Any consideration of the gospel of reconciliation within the East African context begins with such small and powerfully revolutionary breakthroughs of the reconciling grace of Christ as demonstrated in the life of this couple. They were indeed called of Christ as ambassadors of the gospel of reconciliation among the Zanaki. Especially revolutionary was the discovery that in Christ inter-clan barriers are transformed, that Christ calls people to love and bless people of alien clans. Of course, hospitality for the guest has always been a core value in African societies; but in Christ the guest becomes family! That is what astounded the Zanaki people, Basketmaker and Blacksmith living together as husband and wife.

This is the theme that Father Vincent Donovan develops in his description of the gospel becoming indigenized among the Maasai of Tanzania (Donovan 1978). The Maasai are the traditional warrior society of East Africa, for they have institutionalized a theology of cattle raiding growing out of an ancient myth that all cattle on earth were originally God's gift to the Maasai. So much of their political energy goes into trying to retrieve their cattle that other clans possess; consequently, the boundaries between the Maasai lands and other societies have been notable as violent conflict zones for generations.

It is in that context that Donovan began an exploration of the biblical message with several Maasai hamlets. They began with Abraham, who was also a nomadic herdsman, and whose call to follow God meant that he was to become a blessing to all nations (surrounding tribes)! In time these discussions came to the astounding account of Christ who forgives his enemies as they put him on the cross. After some months of this amazing journey of discovery of the nature and call of God, Donovan and the hamlets discerned that the time was at hand to decide whether to commit to Christ. For several weeks Donovan did not visit the hamlets to give time for each to make an authentic decision.

Finally the day for decision was at hand. As Donovan met the hamlets one at a time he learned that for each hamlet the core issue in making the decision for or against Christ was whether they would abandon their traditional warrior culture and cultivate peacemaking with surrounding societies, such as the Kikuyu or Luo who had been rivals and enemies for many generations.

That was the core of the decision: Would the Masai love and bless their traditional enemies or continue their war-like ways? Would they lay aside their weapons and become a community of peace? Remarkably each hamlet had decided to become believers in Christ, except for one hamlet. They decided that the cost of following Christ was too high. They were explicit that they had decided to continue their warrior culture. Donovan describes going to the edge of the hamlet and, as Jesus commanded, made it clear that they had made their decision and he would not be returning to meet with them again. He left that hamlet that day with a heavy heart, knowing he would not return again. They had made their decision.

### **Peace within the Hamlet**

A core test of the commitment to Christ related to their traditional enemies as well as to their relationships within the hamlet, and especially men and women relations. Among the Maasai there was a taboo in regard to men and women eating together; that could never happen. Yet they knew that in Christ men and women have become a new humanity, a fel-

lowship of reconciliation. So the initiation of the communion fellowship in each hamlet represented in the most profound way the breaking of a taboo as men and women participated together in the communion fellowship of the covenant of Christ. As the beer jug was passed from person to person as each partook of this sign of Christ's blood of the covenant, some hands trembled at the awe of it all. In drinking from the same beer mug together, they were indeed participating in a new fellowship of reconciliation in which there is neither male nor female, but one new humanity.

Occasionally, when Donovan came to a hamlet to share the mass, elders would say to him that they were dealing with a broken relationship, and so for this week there would be no mass. He should depart and hopefully next week they would be ready for the mass. As he would approach a hamlet for the mass, typically an elder would pick up a tuft of grass and hand it to Donovan exclaiming, "The peace of Christ between you and me." Donovan would then pass the tuft on to another person, and the tuft would be handed from person to person until all had received the tuft. The passing of the grass as a sign of peace was preparatory to the peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation that the mass represented.

### **A Reconciliation Movement**

Reconciliation was also a central theme within the East Africa Revival Fellowship. Within the small emerging church at Bumangi there was a yearning for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, as was true of churches across East Africa. A small group would meet regularly in our little church for early morning prayer, beginning with the second rooster crow (4:00 a.m.). In concert with this prayer movement, the Lord moved indeed. Church services could go for many hours as people repented deeply and received the transforming infilling of the Holy Spirit. Even those who were not believers would refer to the convicting work of the Holy Spirit saying that the "fire of God is coming down."

The theme song of the revival filled the churches, "Glory, glory Jesus saves me, blessed be his holy name, for the cleansing blood has reached me, glory, glory to the Lamb!"

If the revival were to be described within a Scripture text it would be 1 John 1:7-9: "But if we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

The message of the Revival invited the personal confession of sin, receiving the transforming grace of forgiveness, and walking in daily fellowship with others who were living in the Way. Regular fellowship meetings

of those in the Way have characterized the movement. Reconciliation with God and one another through the blood of Christ was the central theme of the revival. For example, Festo Kivengere of Uganda shares how in the early days of the revival the Holy Spirit convicted him of his attitudes toward the white headmaster of a high school where he had once taught. So Festo rode his bicycle fifty miles to the home of the headmaster, to ask forgiveness. In racially charged colonial East Africa, that was absolutely remarkable (Kivengere 2008:171). It is not surprising that the Ugandan revivalists were nicknamed *Abalokole* (People on Fire).

### Love for the Enemy

In the 1950s the Mau Mau War for Kenyan independence erupted. Then later there were violent tensions between the Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda. Also in Uganda Christians suffered immensely under Idi Amin's rule. In these settings the revivalists were nicknamed, the People of the Lamb. Just as Christ, the Lamb of God forgives, so also the People of the Lamb were committed to being ambassadors of reconciliation as the people of the Lamb of God.

#### Kenya

Heshbon Mwangi of central Kenya shared his story with me. He was the headmaster of a school. One morning as he rode his bicycle to school he noticed that the villagers seemed subdued and at school the teachers were in a huddle by themselves. He did not know, although all were aware, that shortly the Mau Mau would attack him. Suddenly the Mau Mau warriors burst through the forest with knives and pistols as the teachers fled. As they beat and slashed Heshbon they shouted,

"Who is Jesus?"

"He answered, "Jesus is the Son of God and my Savior."

"Can't you join us in the fight against the colonialists?"

"No, I belong to Jesus."

"Don't you know that Jesus is a white man?"

"No," said Heshbon. "He is the Son of God and my Savior. He will be yours too if you receive him."

"Kill him! Shoot him!" they shouted.

Heshbon responded, "Wait a bit. I have nothing against you. Only that I love Jesus!"

The attackers left him for dead. Students and teachers scattered. All thought Heshbon had been killed. For the rest of his life his face carried the deep scars from the knifings that day (Shenk 2008:130).

I asked Heshbon, "Why did you not keep a gun in your home for pro-

tection?"

He responded, "In our traditional religion when the covenant lamb has been slain and we have eaten its flesh in a covenant of peace, then all who have partaken of that lamb can never again do violence against one another. How much more so when we have partaken of the communion cup of the blood of Jesus the Lamb of God, can we never again do violence toward one for whom Christ has died."

Across the conflict areas of Kenya hundreds of the People of Lamb were martyred. When another of their number had laid down his life for Christ, the *Abalokole* across the region would fill buses and trucks and travel by the hundreds and even thousands filling the countryside with songs of joyous victory as they traveled to another celebration of one of their number counted worthy to lay down his or her life for their Savior.

This theme of reconciliation and forgiveness of the enemy was central to the *Abalokole* movement. This was an extremely difficult commitment in societies struggling with the colonial legacy and inter-tribal tensions. For example, in Kenya, only six years after independence in 1969, the country was at a political impasse, and on the verge of inter-tribal civil war. A number of the People of the Lamb were martyred for their refusal to participate in the political polarization or refusal to take oaths that bound them to ethnic and ancestral loyalties. Thousands of *Abalokole* from societies across Kenya met in the central highlands as a witness to the whole nation: we as believers in Jesus the Lamb of God will never do violence toward one another no matter what our tribal backgrounds might be. In Christ we are reconciled and we are committed to living in peace and committed to the peace of Kenya. That commitment salted the whole society with a more reconciling spirit (Smoker 1993:1-78, 284).

With this legacy, it is sobering that in the election impasse and violence that ensued in Kenya in 2007, there were insufficient voices calling for reconciliation. There were such voices and actions, but the churches on the whole seemed incapable of authentically transcending the tribal divides in Kenya, and especially the Kikuyu–Luo divide. I could, however, share accounts of heroic efforts at reconciliation, as for example a Luo bishop who hid a Kikuyu under his bed for some weeks. Had the bishop's actions been known within his Luo village, the bishop would most likely have been killed.

## Rwanda

In the late 1950s tensions between Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda produced violent clashes. In the midst of these developments many People of the Lamb laid down their lives in their demonstration of authentic reconciling love. The Kenyan Heshbon Mwangi wrote to his brothers and sisters

in Rwanda admonishing, “Keep a positive testimony, both in word and deed. Use only one weapon—that of Calvary’s love for all, particularly those who are persecuting you. Only one weapon, love!” (Adeney 1963:13).

During those dark days Hutu and Tutsi would commemorate their reconciliation with one another by sharing often in the communion cup and bread of our Lord’s body. This was not trivial. When one school headmaster was being beaten to death, he cried out, “I have done nothing wrong. I am not in any party because I am a saved man. I do not hate anybody. I am not afraid to die for I shall go to my Heavenly Home” (Adeney 1963:47).

But darker days were to come. Twenty years later (April 6, 1994), the President of Rwanda, Juvenal Habyarimana, was killed in a suspicious plane crash. That was the trigger to unleash a genocidal conflict between Hutu and Tutsi. The churches as a whole were tragically compromised sometimes actually abetting the conflict. However, a dramatic exception was the People of the Lamb, who were Hutu and Tutsi united in love and fellowship for one another. Because of the inter-tribal nature of the People of the Lamb, they were often referred to as the Party of Jesus, for they did not belong to any of the belligerent camps.

Immediately on the day that the Hutu-Tutsi genocide commenced, the perpetrators went to the home of the key leader of the People of the Lamb, Israel Havigumana, and they killed him and his wife. Thereafter across the country the Party of Jesus were especially targeted, and we estimate 50,000 were slain within several days of the onslaught. Remarkably when the genocide abated and tens of thousands had gathered in refugee camps, it was the People of the Lamb who had survived the genocide who conducted mass meetings for repentance within the camps. Their message of forgiveness and reconciliation in Christ could be heard for as a fellowship of reconciliation thousands of their numbers had laid down their lives for Jesus and the gospel of reconciliation that he offers.

There was also space for outside help. Church agencies such as Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) sent teams of trauma counselors to move through the camps hearing the trauma, listening, and counseling. At that time neighboring Burundi was also edging to the brink of a Hutu-Tutsi conflict as well. So MCC placed unobtrusive teams into potential conflict areas as a presence for peace. These teams of outsiders were ears and eyes and presence for peace. A sister agency to MCC, Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) does just that, placing teams of reconcilers into conflict areas such as Rwanda and Burundi. It is dangerous work, yet they seek to be the presence of Christ to stand between the adversaries, absorbing the violence and thereby bringing peace.

## Uganda

In 1971, General Idi Amin seized power in Uganda. He hijacked Islam, promising wealthy Arab nations that he would Islamize Uganda, which by the 1960s was mostly Christian. Half a million Ugandans died through his atrocities. The People of the Lamb prayed. Finally the leadership of the church respectfully confronted the President. As a consequence the Church of the Province of Uganda Archbishop, Janani Luwum, was martyred on February 16, 1977.

Over four thousand people ignored the police cordon and climbed the hill to the cathedral overlooking the city of Kampala. They could not bury their bishop for the authorities had taken the body to remote regions of northern Uganda. Nevertheless, the cathedral hillside overlooking the city filled with the triumphant songs of the People of the Lamb. The amazed city below heard their joyous song, "Glory, glory, Jesus saves me! Blessed be his holy name. The cleansing blood has reached me! Hallelujah to the Lamb!" (Kivengere 1977:80-83).

At the same time a team of keen young Christians were preparing dramas and song to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the coming of the gospel to Uganda. The churches were planning wondrous celebration events, and these young people were central to all those plans. They were killed around the same time that the archbishop was killed. Friends warned Bishop Festo Kivengere that his name was next on the list. So he and his wife and daughter set out across the hills by foot at night toward Rwanda. Some weeks later the Kivengeres were safely in London, and Festo went alone to a nearby cathedral. Alone with the Lord he struggled. The Lord said simply, "Festo, do you love Idi Amin."

"No, I hate that man," Festo responded.

"But I have died for Idi Amin."

The battle within Festo's soul raged. And finally in surrender he cried out, "Jesus, because of you, I do indeed love Idi Amin." Later Festo wrote a book about all of that, *I Love Idi Amin* (Kivengere 1977).

## Peace Themes in Traditional Religion

These commitments to reconciliation flow deep within the African soul. The gospel and the formation of the church fulfill a deep yearning and commitment to harmonious community building. Hand-shaking is just one expression of reconciliation themes deep within the traditional society. When meeting and leaving a friend, there is multiple hand-shaking. Even the child is remembered. An Asante proverb exclaims, "I am because we are; we are because I am!" The individual can only fully become a person within the context of community. On the other hand community cannot function without the lively engagement of the person.



For this reason in traditional cultures decisions were never made by voting. Rather the community leadership invested many hours in discussion and consensus building. When I was serving on church councils or university forums, we would discuss matters at length. If a consensus was not achieved, we would defer until further discussion could take place. The reason voting cannot work is that those who lose the vote will feel “defeated.” Defeat is not in harmony with community building.

In consensus no one is defeated. This is why a multi-party system is difficult for African political structures. The candidates in the one party system are selected through a process of consensus building by the recognized and respected decision makers. This means that the social structure must be hierarchical; that is true of all Bantu and Nilotic social systems in East Africa. (Somali systems are more egalitarian.) The chief is at the apex of the society. He is counseled by the elders. The chief and elders are roles that people acquire through discernment that is formed by wisdom and age and community building leadership qualities.

Each society (tribe or clan) has its own hierarchy with the chief presiding at the apex of the community. Decisions flow from the apex with his council of elders downward. The function of those at lower levels is to carry through with the decisions that come down from above. Each level of the hierarchy has its own decision making responsibilities but always in harmony with the counsel coming down from the wise ones above. The lower levels offer gifts to those above in gratitude for the wise counsel that they receive. Gifts move upward, wise counsel flows downward. There can therefore be no challenge to the higher levels of authority for that would disrupt the harmony. The flow of counsel downward and respect flowing upward must be protected in every way possible, for disruption distorts community, and distorted community disrupts the harmony of life (Mbiti 1971:61-66).

For example, the society will not tolerate a break in relationship between a father and a son. If there is a broken relationship the elders will intervene. They will meet with both father and son, determine what the issues are, what steps need to be taken to bring restoration of the relationship, and seek to effectuate a restoration of father-son harmony. If the father dies in a state of broken relationship with his son, that is the ultimate tragedy, for his wounded spirit may become malevolent and there is nothing more fearful than a malevolent ancestral spirit on the prowl.

### Fractured Peace

The system has its challenges, and especially so in modern society where mobility and the modern nation state pushes societies to develop structures that are inter-clan. The traditional hierarchies only function

well in a mono-clan situation. The hierarchies are dependent on the favor of the ancestors. Therefore, change is anathematized for deviations from the way of the ancestors will invite their revenge. A further complication is the enormous restraints on personal freedom and initiative that the system demands, as Wakuru's experience demonstrates.

In traditional societies one hierarchy may develop relations with another hierarchy, but each must maintain its internal integrity. The modern nation state with elected leaders from different clans does not look kindly on that kind of system. Furthermore, a grass roots electorate destabilizes the system, for authority in a grass roots electorate can challenge the authority of those in the hierarchy above. Add to that the fact that each society has its own myths of origin. For example, the Wakiroba of East Africa believe they have originated from the leopard and the Kikuyu myth has the primal Kikuyu couple originating from the fig tree. So humanities are divided each with its own origin—what a brew of inter-clan rivalry that mythical concoction creates! Recall the account of the impasse over the inter-clan wedding of Wakuru and Nyakitumu described above.

Even in these modern times these traditional systems and myths tug powerfully at societies all across Africa. This is at the root of the Kenyan election impasse in 2007. Here was a modern nation state doing quite well, an apparent bastion of stability. It was exceedingly corrupt with gifts flowing upward through the system to the wise decision makers above and wisdom emanating from the wise leaders holding power within the apex of the hierarchy. Then it appeared that the presidential candidate from a non-Bantu Nilotic society had won the presidential election. The Bantu societies of Kenya did not have the societal mechanisms to cope with such an upending of hierarchical control. It was unfathomable that a Nilotic could become president. Kenya moved to the precipice of disintegration.

Only an authority from outside with ample hierarchical credibility (former general secretary of the United Nations), only he with his team of advisers could muster the credibility to intervene. Through the force of moral authority Kofi Annan brought about a semblance of restoration, which in the end consisted of the creation of two parallel hierarchical authorities. The same development has unfolded in Zimbabwe, with two parallel hierarchies functioning side by side. Election results proved meaningless in the light of hierarchical realities. And of course the Rwandan genocide of 1994 was a look behind the curtain at the hell that these ethnic-centered systems can sometimes create.

### **Jesus Inaugurates an Authentic Revolution**

Imagine the revolution the gospel brings when Jesus Christ walks across the path of these traditional worldviews and invites, "Come, follow

me!" When a people say, "yes" to that call, the hierarchy is upended. The chief becomes servant (Phil 2:5-9). When the gospel first came to Uganda, the chiefs were astounded by Jesus who washed the feet of his disciples. The unthinkable happened. A number of chiefs went into the fields and began to labor side by side with their slaves; some freed their slaves (Anderson 1977:27, 28). That is the spirit with which Julius Nyerere ruled, the first president of Tanzania and a devout Catholic. When government dignitaries would visit him when he was at his home in rural Butiama, he would invite them to join him in the field digging side by side with the villagers, or at harvest time helping with the harvest. Government business would wait until the afternoon after the morning's work in the fields was completed.

The church is the only authentic inter-clan community. Islam is a competitor with the church for the formation of inter-clan community. However, the Islamic liability is that Islamization requires Arabization, for the Qur'an and the required ritual prayers are in Arabic. The consequent pull toward Arabization serves to nurture people away from their indigenous culture in order to become truly faithful participants in the universal Muslim nation. Quite to the contrary, across the African continent the first book published in the languages of most societies has been the gospel and other Scripture portions (Sanneh 1989:211-214). Genesis and Matthew were the first to be available. Imagine the joy of discovering that God in Christ is incarnate within the language and ethos of the local society. It is not surprising that joyful dance characterizes many African congregations as they join in worship using local idiom and language. And that is the genius of the church; it is both indigenous and local while also universal. For example, the Lord's Table is celebrated in local idiom with bread from local grains, yet the table is also a statement of participation in the fellowship of the universal church.

When the Mennonite Church in Tanzania was on the verge of a major split dividing the church along tribal lines, the political authorities in Tanzania were appalled. They well knew that the church is the most authentic inter-clan community. If the church breaks along tribal lines, the nation could not survive. So the Muslim President Mwinyi met with the Mennonite bishops and told them that as president he was commanding them to preserve the unity of the church. "Follow your Bible and be the church," he commanded.

### **The Cross within the African Context**

The Lord's Table (Eucharist) is a powerful ritual of reconciliation. The communion table is a remarkable fulfillment of the deepest yearnings for reconciliation within the traditional African societies. I was impressed by

this when teaching at Kenyatta University College in the 1970s. For their research assignment students were required to interview their grandparents asking the question, "How did your society work at restoring peace in times of conflict?" So I acquired seventy research papers on conflict resolution from societies across Kenya. These papers were case studies of a variety of conflict scenarios, such as father-son, husband-wife, neighbors in a land dispute, warriors fighting over a girl, or full-scale inter-clan war. I wrote a book based upon these research findings, *Justice, Peace, and Reconciliation in Africa*.

A central theme in all these studies was a commitment to restorative justice rather than retributive justice (the exception was the witch, who was destroyed, perhaps by placing the witch in a hive of bees). The elders would meet, hear the complaints, and then pass judgment on steps to be taken to restore the broken relationship. Then in every case study, the reconciliation and peace was always consummated through the sacrifice of an innocent animal. In one case study the sacrifice was a virgin girl. In every case the sacrifice had to represent the best that the protagonists could offer—the victim had to be perfect.

The Samburu tribe of Kenya is an example. If there was violent conflict between warriors, the elders would meet, hear the complaints, and pronounce judgment on steps to be taken for restoration. Then a perfect one-year-old white bull was selected and slain. The blood was caught in a container and sprinkled on the warriors and their weapons which were placed side by side forming an elongated gate. The warriors would pass from the arena of conflict to that of peace by bending over and walking through the elongated gate of peace that their weapons had formed. Then they would cook the flesh of the bull and feast together, sharing meat with one another. They would make white bracelets from the skin of the bull and place these bracelets on the arms of the warriors. All who received this bracelet of peace could never again fight another warrior who had that bracelet (Shenk 2008:64-68).

As I worked through these reconciliation themes, I discovered the French anthropologist/theologian Rene Girard. His research has led to his insistence that in traditional religions everywhere the sacrifice of the innocent victim is always required for the effectuation of covenants of peace in situations of conflict. So the East African sacrifices for reconciliation are really participants in a universal phenomenon. Girard has concluded that the innocent victim absorbs the hostility of the protagonists, and dies thereby breaking the cycle of retributive justice and violence. He believes this reality points to a universal truth paradigm, namely Jesus, the Lamb of God, who is the best heaven and humanity could offer. Jesus, as the innocent victim, absorbs the violence on the cross, forgives, and dies thereby

breaking the cycle of violence (Girard 1977:1-67; 250-273).

Ah! That is exactly what Heshbon Mwangi shared with me when I asked why he did not violently protect himself and his family during the Mau Mau wars. He pointed out that in the traditional Kikuyu religion the covenant of reconciliation was effectuated through the sacrifice of a lamb—how much more so do we need to love the one for whom Christ, the Lamb of God, has died. He somberly reflected, “When we have taken the communion of the blood of the covenant of the Lamb of God, we can never do violence against another for whom Christ has died.”

The communion of the Lord is the table of peace; “My peace I give to you!” Jesus exclaimed. But he also made it clear that his peace is not the same as the peace that the world offers. In fact, that covenant of peace that the Mau Mau practiced was the covenant that bound fellow Kikuyu into the bonds of peace, but that peace was also an oath to violent conflict against the British colonialist and all who were their allies. In 2007 when Kenya stood at the abyss of inter-tribal war after a disputed election, it is reported that covenant oathings were reinstated in different locations across the country. These were ethnic covenants, binding the participants to a fellowship of violence if need be against all who would challenge the hierarchical claims to power by the governing authorities who were Bantu (Kikuyu) dominated. These fearsome oaths were rooted in the authority and power of the ancestors.

It is noteworthy that after the Kofi Annan peace accords were implemented, several Christian congregations with their leaders went to every location across the country where it was known that such oathings had taken place. In the name of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, they prayerfully broke the power of these oaths thereby freeing those who had participated in these oaths so that they could join the peace-making process without fear of retribution from the ancestral powers. The covenant blood of Christ frees from the powers of death and speaks life and forgiveness and reconciliation.

Sometimes the presence of a team from outside can be a gift in the reconciliation process, as Kofi Annan’s presence demonstrated. In Kenya, while the atrocities were still raging, Mennonite church leaders encouraged the trusted Eastern Mennonite Mission’s (EMM) representative for Africa to come and facilitate reconciliation conversations. It is amazing that at risk to life because travel was so dangerous, leaders from across the Mennonite Church convened under the chairpersonship of the EMM Africa representative. It was an emotive gathering for all had deep grievances and their congregations and families were terrified. Yet as they talked, they kept coming back to this question: Will our ethnic identity or our commitment to Christ and the church as a community of reconciliation

be pre-eminent? It was a terribly hard question. When they first met, for some the ethnic pull prevailed. But they kept returning to this question: Will we embrace Jesus and his way of peace? In the end all decided to stand firm in Christ regardless of what the cost might be, including possible death.

Then after the violence began to subside, the Kenya Mennonite Church convened trauma healing and reconciliation seminars in various locations within the church constituencies. One of the resources was the book, *Justice, Reconciliation and Peace in Africa*, based on the Kenyatta University College students' research. These seminars were well received, and helped to further strengthen the commitment of the church to the calling of Christ to be communities of healing and hope.

Peacemaking is hard work. A Kenyan team of reconcilers discovered that when they began to engage the protagonists in apartheid South Africa as the country was beginning the tumultuous journey toward post-apartheid nationhood. That narrative merits a separate tome. But let me just say that a multi-racial and multi-ethnic Kenyan reconciliation team linked up with brothers and sisters committed to reconciliation in South Africa. In unobtrusive yet dramatically creative ways they intervened as peacemakers when South Africa was at the brink of cataclysm. A key player was a university professor, Washington Oumu. Prayer and action permeated the effort. A crucial component was safaris to the game parks that the reconciliation team arranged. They would take a dozen protagonists and decision makers at a time to enjoy the elephants together! And then around the campfire in the evening each would share his story; they learned to know each other not as the enemy, but as fellow human beings. The whole effort was permeated with a climatic prayer gathering of thousands in Cape Town; that was the night that key decision-makers finally made the enormously difficult choice to have free and open elections (Cassidy 1995:141-214).

### **The Peace of Islam and the Peace of the Gospel**

The Muslim community is also much concerned about peace. In fact Islam means peace. It is noteworthy that the Muslim community's commitment to peace is significantly formed by a meta-narrative that takes the Islamic commitment to peace in very different directions than is true of the New Testament church. For twelve years in Mecca in seventh century Arabia, Muhammad called on the warring and fractious polytheistic clans of Arabia to unite as a people of peace under the authority of God. His preaching had minimal effect. However, when he heeded the invitation to come to Medina, all of that changed. His migration to Medina is the *Hijrah*, and this event enabled Muhammad to gain the mechanisms

of political and military power. With those instruments of power he was able to defeat his foes and establish and extend the peace of Islam (*Dar al Islam*) throughout Arabia. Within eight years of the *Hijrah*, Muhammad entered Mecca leading 10,000 soldiers in triumphal victory over the forces opposed to the peace of Islam.

At the height of his popularity, after Jesus had miraculously fed 5,000 men plus women and children by breaking several loaves of bread and a couple fish, the Galileans demanded that he become their king. Like Muhammad, they would have had an army to lead. These were the Zealot freedom fighters against the polytheistic Roman occupiers. Jesus rejected that invitation, instead setting his face to go to Jerusalem where he knew he would meet the cross. In this decision, Jesus chooses a direction for the establishment and extension of the peace of God that goes in the opposite direction than that represented by the *Hijrah*. His colt ride into Jerusalem just before his crucifixion says it well in the words of the Prophet Zechariah

See, your king comes to you,  
 Righteous and having salvation,  
 Gentle and riding on a donkey  
 On a colt the foal of a donkey  
 I will take away the chariots from Ephraim  
 And the war horses from Jerusalem,  
 And the battle bow will be broken.  
 He will proclaim peace to the nations.  
 His rule will extend from sea to sea  
 And from the River to the ends of the earth!  
 (Zech 9:9-10)

This peace that Zechariah proclaims is effectuated in Jesus on the cross. As all the violence and hate and rebellion of the world crash into Jesus on the cross, he cries out in forgiveness. In his forgiveness the cycle of violence and retribution is broken, and we are healed and forgiven. In Jesus God has taken our place. Our sins are forgiven indeed.

In the wake of the *Hijrah* and Muhammad's triumph in battle against superior Meccan forces, the Qur'an's assessment is that Jesus the Messiah could not be crucified. There is no space for the cross in a *Hirjah* formed theology wherein peace needs the assistance of military and political power. Hence Islam denies the crucifixion. Muslims believe that Jesus was whisked to heaven bodily; he never died, he was never crucified.

The peace of the cross in Christian experience is a rich tapestry. I will comment on only two dimensions: forgiveness and reconciliation. Foun-

dational to authentic personal peace is the reality of forgiveness of sin. Jesus has taken our place; we are forgiven indeed. By denying the cross, Islam has forfeited the assurance of forgiveness. In the cross we are also reconciled to God and to one another. Jesus absorbs the violence, and forgives. The cycle of retribution is broken. We are reconciled. Again by denying the cross, it is difficult for Islam to grasp the possibilities of reconciliation. In the absence of the cross, Islam is inclined to rely on retributive justice more so than restorative justice.

Ahmed Haile is a Somali follower of Jesus Christ who has worked extensively in peace-making efforts within the Somali milieu. He teaches peace studies at Daystar University in Nairobi. His perception is that the pre-Islamic traditional themes have peacemaking themes that are especially helpful in the current cycles of retributive violence which seems unstoppable in the Somali context. He bypasses the Islamic retributive systems enshrined in Islamic *Shari'ah* and builds instead upon the pre-Islamic traditional themes of covenant (*her*) as he works as mediator and counselor for leaders seeking to find ways through the impasse. The traditional approaches to peace-making are based upon restorative justice; he feels that Islamic systems are more inclined to retributive justice. The champions of Islamic law have been quite peripheral to the peacemaking process; in fact, the Islamists seem to complicate the peace process.

Ahmed feels that there are remarkable commonalities between Old Testament restorative peacemaking and the traditional systems. He views the communion table within Christian experience as being foreshadowed by the *her* system which effectuates both intra-clan and inter-clan covenants of peace. Ahmed considers it as not coincidental that the peacemaking efforts in Islamic Somalia have quite consistently looked to Christians such as Ahmed or the UNO appointed peace envoy, Bethel Kiplegat, and others to help show the way forward. He feels that there are significant convergences between traditional covenant making and biblical commitments to restorative justice (Haile 2005:256-261).

### Concluding Comments

Recently eight Anabaptists were invited to a dialogue with Iranian Muslim theologians in Qom, Iran. After my presentation on the peace of Jesus, I was presented with this question: "Why do you put the cross so central in your presentation on the peace of Jesus. You know that we Muslims do not believe in the crucifixion, so put the cross as an insignificant side issue that we disagree about, but let's dialogue about core issues."

I responded, "If we remove the cross, we have robbed the gospel of peace of its soul." As I see it the genius of peace-making in Africa is a recovery and an embrace of the cross as the soul of the gospel. And it



is obvious that the traditional religious heritage of Africans has been a preparation for their believing and embracing of the gospel of peace and reconciliation.

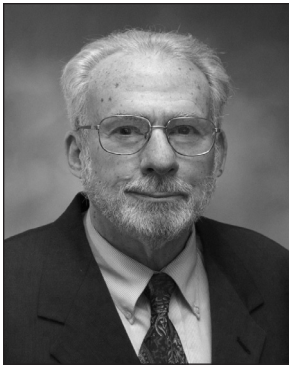
Recently I preached in a refugee congregation in Omdurman, Sudan. About 150 were present, mostly widows and orphans from the wars in the Nuba Mountains and Darfur—most from Muslim background. I shared, “In Jesus God has entered your experience fully. Jesus was a refugee, most of his childhood boy friends were killed, he was unjustly accused, tortured and killed, as has happened to your husbands. God raised him from the dead. He therefore has not only participated fully in all that you have experienced, but in his resurrection power through his Holy Spirit Jesus is empowering you to forgive your enemies as he forgave, and to triumph over the injustice and suffering that you have experienced. Jesus invites you and empowers you to forgive and to serve joyously in his kingdom of righteousness and peace and love that he is bringing to pass right here in this church.”

After that sermon, these widowed and in most cases molested women, went into the courtyard in the midst of that refugee camp and with songs of joy and yodeling they danced with joy as they sang praises to Jesus their healer and redeemer. I did not know the language, but there was one word I did know, *Yesuuous*. Every song was permeated with joyous praise to Jesus who has not and will never abandon them and who is their healer!

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David has lived in East Africa much of his life, where his parents were pioneer missionaries with Eastern Mennonite Missions. He and his wife, Grace, invested sixteen years in Somalia and Kenya with a special focus on educational work within Muslim contexts. He has also served in international global church networking and missions, most recently as academic dean at the Lithuania Christian College. At present he is Global Consultant with Eastern Mennonite Missions

His interest in relevant Christian presence, peacemaking, and witness in a world of religious pluralism, and especially among Muslims, has taken him into more than 100 countries, usually as a presenter in seminars or in dialogical engagements with Muslims. A recent engagement was a formal dialogue with theologians in Qom, Iran. He has authored or edited seventeen books or booklets and written numerous articles on themes related to the gospel and peacemaking in a pluralist world. He has taught in a variety of universities and seminaries in the USA and internationally. Recently he was invited to present lectures in a Shanghai university on inter-civilizational peacemaking. He is a pastor, preacher, church planter, and teacher; he holds a doctorate in religious studies education with course work in anthropology from New York University.