Muslim-Christian Coexistence in Ethiopia [An Overview]

By Pasteus Zarihun Degu

Ethiopia is a multi-ethnic nation endowed with diversified culture, language, faith, religion and rich history. Religion is important in the lives of the majority of the world's population. At most individual level, people’s lives are guided by their religious beliefs and values.

In Ethiopia, the Christian and Muslim religions have been living in peaceful co-existence for centuries and this has become a living witness for the rest of the world. The crucial rational behind the symbol of our co-existence is that religion remains not just only part of Ethiopians’ life but it is the strongest infrastructure of its culture. Christianity in Ethiopia dates to the 1st century AD, and this long tradition makes Ethiopia unique among sub-Saharan African countries. The first Muslim contingent, during the inception of Islam, came to Ethiopia in the 7th century in 615 AD.

When Prophet Mohammed saw the persecution to which his followers were subjected to in Mecca, he told them to find safe haven in northern Ethiopia/Abyssinia, where they would “find a king there who does not wrong anyone.” That was the first hijira (migration) in Islam's history. They were received by the king of Ethiopia, who Arabic tradition has named As-hamalbnAb-jar, he settled them in Negash, Tigray Region. As history puts it, Prophet Mohammed instructed his followers who came to Ethiopia to respect and protect Ethiopia as well as live in peace with Ethiopian Christians.

Historically, the social significance of religion is played out through religious communities and institutions and to a great extent determines their nature and functioning. Religious leaders play a vital role in promoting peace, tolerance and understanding. They are often seen as the keepers of collective identity, history and memories. As such, religions can help to shape community responses to different threats, expose social injustice and create conditions for healing the wounds.

The legitimacy and credibility of religious leaders with their charismatic power are greatly enhanced when they act jointly across denominational and faith divides. When faith communities build their capacities, they can turn threats into opportunities to strengthen relationships, preserve valuable resources, and make their lives a testimony to the love and power of God.

Qualities such as charisma, compassion, understanding, stewardship, and forgiveness can be cited as key attributes that help to explain why religious leaders are able to succeed. This has a positive impact on mitigating, managing or handling various problems. They harbor several key attributes essential to positive community relationship, allowing them to concentrate their efforts in areas where they will be more effective. They can achieve greater success if combined with similar secular and government efforts.

It was a major step for the different prominent religious organs to join hand and hearts to work together on national peace and development issues. Religious organs are most effective
instruments to bring change at the grass root level. Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia (IRCE) was established with six prominent members. These are:-

1. ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX TEWAHDO CHURCH
2. ETHIOPIAN MUSLIM AFFAIRS SUPREME COUNCIL;
3. ETHIOPIAN CATHOLIC CHURCH;
4. ETHIOPIAN EVANGELICAL CHURCHES FELLOWSHIP;
5. THE ETHIOPIAN SEVENTH DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH;
6. ETHIOPIAN EVANGELICAL CHURCHMEKANE YESUS

With the aim of harnessing the social, moral, and spiritual assets of religious communities to prevent violent conflict and build peace and development. The Council is engaged in strengthening and expanding inter-faith structures to promote dialogue and share activities among faith communities building on the positive relationship between and among different religions in Ethiopia.

Moreover, the Council works in cooperation with the government, non-government and the civil society to respect and implement the religious and faith freedom as enshrined in the constitution, Article 11/1995 which states that state and religion are separate, ‘there shall be no state religion’; ‘The state shall not interfere in religious matters and religion shall not interfere in state affairs’. According to Article 27/1995, every citizen has a right to freedom of religion, belief and opinion. We are in a state where all religions and religious practices, peoples, nations and nationalities are equally recognized by the state in Ethiopia.

Religious tolerance is important in our day-to-day activities understanding that tolerance is respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our cultures, our forms of expressions and ways being human. Therefore, tolerance is harmony in difference. As long as incompatibilities exist, we have to enter into an agreement that solve our central problem, and accept each other’s continued existence as parties and cease all violent action against each other. We have to be able to experience as a diverse society to pass through a reconciliation process from a divided past into a shared future. This is a long-term process that takes time and energy with no quick fix. This should be inclusive, broad and deep process that involves a coming to terms demanding changes in our attitude, emotion, aspiration, feelings and even beliefs.

Although conflict is a normal part of life, providing numerous opportunities for growth through improved understanding and insight, there is a tendency to view conflict as a negative experience caused by abnormally different circumstances. Religious tolerance is the condition of respecting or permitting others’ religious beliefs and practices which disagree with one’s own.

For individuals, religious tolerance generally means an attitude of respecting towards other people’s religions. It does not mean that one views other religions as equally true; merely that others have the right to hold and practice their beliefs. At least five contexts of religious tolerance can be distinguished and that includes civil, ecclesiastical, polemical, divine, and social. In this respect there are three positive cultural values. These are freedom, tolerance and diversity. Religious tolerance does not require us to accept all regions as equal; to avoid to criticize actions
motivated by religion that harm others; and lastly to avoid comparing beliefs of different religions with each other & with scientific findings.

Opening the door for religious dialogue and exercising religious tolerance will move us to have a guarantee for peace and development. As one writer puts it, religious tolerance does not require a tolerance of the intolerant religious extremists who pose a threat to democracy. Every religion has to pay a particular attention to the golden rule that binds different faiths together for a common good. ‘In everything, treat others as you would want them to treat you.’ This plainly indicates that mutual understanding and coexistence play a significant role in nation’s branding. This has to be advocated extensively and share experience with countries in Africa and beyond.

Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia is envisioned to see developed Ethiopia with religious freedom and equality based on peace, love, tolerance and mutual benefit. To achieve this, the Council has its structure up to the grass root with direct access to every church and mosque at local levels. This creates conducive atmosphere and fertile ground to address any issue/disagreement efficiently and effectively. This is a huge task and needs resources and commitment to carry the Council’s mission to the end. The Council is ready and willing to work in partnership and cooperation with any Local and international agencies for the prevalence of peace and development in Ethiopia and the world at large.

Media plays an important role in documenting and disseminating well-balanced information to create awareness of the community especially on contested common issues and promote mutual respect and peaceful co-existence in this regard. It has developed such a culture whereby both Christians and Muslims cooperatively build mosques and churches together and celebrate religious holidays as brothers and sisters in common. Ethiopia has a very good reputation in peaceful co-existence between Muslims and Christians that contributed to the nation’s independence.

The Council believes in advancing peace education and training by utilizing the capacity of religious communities and faith-based groups in Ethiopia. In doing so, all peace-loving forces, religious leaders and higher academic institutions are well come to stand beside this Council to bring sustainable peace and development.

Finally, let me conclude my speech by one of wise sayings:- Mahatma Ghandi, “The need of the moment is not one religion, but mutual respect and tolerance of the devotees of the different religions”.

Thank you and God bless Ethiopia!

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