



# Healing the World - Working Together: Religion in Global Society

31.08.2005 | Kobia, Samuel

**Keynote Address by Rev. Dr. Samuel Kobia, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, at the International Conference of the International Council of Christians and Jews, Chicago, Illinois, U.S.A., July 24-27, 2005**

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Religion in Global Society

**Samuel Kobia**

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### Introduction

The International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ) has chosen a stately, if challenging, title for the overall theme of this conference in Chicago. Healing the world and working together is the role of religion in global society. Who could oppose such a grand call to mission? One can only agree heartily and associate oneself with it.

In fact, the theme of the upcoming WCC Assembly in Porto Alegre, Brazil captures the theological vision behind our topic today. The theme of the Assembly is in the form of a prayer: "God in your Grace, Transform the World". We start by addressing God in the firm conviction that the world is not as it should be, and that it can and must be changed. The brokenness of the world is a theological conclusion. The world is not the way God wants it to be. The current situation of global, militarized, socio-economic-ecological injustice is a sin. The state of our world is a religious question. It has to do with God's own will for the world. The prayer of our assembly theme calls us as religious people to a common discernment of the threats to life that afflict our world and to see that we are called to respond together to those threats as a fundamental part of our religious vocation.

The call to live out of a vision of hope in response to God's transformative love is a religious imperative for responding to globalized injustice. Everything is changing, yet injustice is often perceived as unchangeable. To see in the current despair and disdain the seeds of hope and transformation is our religious vocation. This vision of justice makes us so restless and dissatisfied that all that we do bends our imaginations towards yearning for the world that God wants.

The very nature of this religious vision is one of unity within a common humanity and a common future. However, the nature of globalized injustice fragments and destroys community. Religious communities are not immune to these same forces of fragmentation and division. We in fact are usually perfect mirrors of the division and conflicts in the global community. In order to break through this role of religion as a reflection of the world's brokenness...we need each other. We need to form new alliances for life that defy the division and conflicts that are a product of globalized injustice in all its many forms. Coming together for the mending of the world is not simply wise and necessary, it is an essential part of our religious vocation and God-given vision for a transformed world.

## **A world longing for healing**

The world, indeed all of creation, is longing for healing. Throughout the world, throughout history, and even more so today, people are longing for a life with dignity in just and sustainable communities. And not only people but the whole of creation seem to cry out for relief, consolation, healing. Confronted with a serious environmental crisis, we cannot but listen with pain to the groaning of creation as St. Paul expressed it in the eighth chapter of his letter to the Romans. The increasing incidences of tropical storms and changing rainfall patterns with torrential floods on the one hand, and terrible droughts on the other, have become death-and-life issues, especially for poor people. Small island states are most vulnerable to the consequences of global warming, a process that has its roots in the over-consumption and energy-intensive lifestyles of affluent people and societies whose CO2 emissions are largely responsible for the so-called "greenhouse effect". All responsible scientists today agree that climate change is causing and will increasingly cause enormous damage to the environment and human life. This has an influence on health and psychological stability... and generally on the quality of life. Its impact will be heaviest in the countries in the South. In the Pacific this is already a reality, as the WCC came to learn from the stories of the people from that region during the World Council's Central Committee meeting in February 2005. Climate change creates new forms of injustice. Creation is indeed groaning, and the failure of the richest in this world to intervene meaningfully and radically to aid in the restoration of the environment is a source of discouragement and even despair to many.

Our world is crying - as it has often done in the past - for an end to war and conflict. This perennial cry for healing is a constant reminder of the state of our life together on this planet. If there is anything that remains the same from generation to generation, from one end of the world to the other, it is that this world is the scene of injustice and war; coupled with this are the perpetual longings of people for peace and justice. Today, more than ever, we are acutely aware of the reign of war and injustice, because we live in an ever-shrinking global village. Thanks to advanced information technology nowadays, we can see from one end of the village to the other. We read in the newspapers about our village, we see our village on TV, and with breaking news we witness events as they are actually happening; and what we see is exceedingly depressing. Lately we have also become ever more aware of our interdependence: that which happens at one end of the village is likely to influence the other end. A war in Africa will have repercussions in Europe, and vice versa. Limited wars are no longer confined to one particular place. Human beings are all closely interrelated.

The state of injustice and war is paradoxical: it is both normal and abnormal because it has come to be so common in our lives, and yet deep down in our hearts we refuse to accept it as the norm.

It is there and yet we cannot resign ourselves to it, nor can we be fully reconciled to it. In dealing with this reality we operate with different visions. We neither believe nor accept that it is God's will for so many people to suffer so much; shanty-town dwellers, asylum seekers, the hungry, the wretched of the earth. Down through the ages, as well as in the contemporary world, human beings have wished there could be a way of ending wars without triggering yet another conflict. There is a longing for an ingenuous way of peacefully ending war once and for all. In 1934 at an ecumenical gathering, the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was visualizing someone who would call for peace in such a way that the world would listen. He thought that the church could be that instrument. After all the church was united in one faith in Christ Jesus, whom Christians recognize as the peace of the world. Should not the church be able to speak out with one voice against war?

The world has become one big marketplace; at any rate, the liberal economy tries to make it so. The Western ideal of an enterprising, prompt, dexterous, healthy young person not bound by anything has been launched and relaunched. Questions about meaning, truth or moral commitment are silenced. And yet, in spite of all these efforts, we see that for many, life has lost meaning and clear direction. There is a longing for healing, but it is often inarticulate and difficult to decipher. Even in the midst of plenty, people feel empty. The great philosophical discourses and designs of the past seem to have lost the capacity to provide healing.

Deep inside us there is a feeling, an awareness that something is seriously wrong and something is badly needed. We fathom, although vaguely, and often only as swift flashes of realization, the need for a radically different lifestyle, for a new system of values that overcomes the growth and consumer-oriented materialist values which subordinate being and relationships to having and using. We are, in strange contradiction with our own selves, witnesses to the failure of the modern imagination. As we look upon the bloodstained map of today's world, there is much reason for despair. In spite of ourselves and our actual acts and deeds, and in spite of our politics and our economics, it is our hope and vision that there will be a healing tomorrow. The feelings, the dreams, the hopes for healing are deeply rooted in us. Walter Bruggeman could not have put this vision more succinctly and strongly when he said, "We shall fund, feed, nurture, nourish a counter-imagination of the world".<sup>1</sup> We are called to embrace and internalize this vision.

There is a longing for healing. If nothing else, this brings us together from our different visions and religious traditions. We see it in the many interreligious initiatives concerned with world peace, and with religions as peacemakers. Religions are solicited to foster peace as an alternative to the use of religion to fuel conflicts. Interreligious organizations have been created to foster co-operation for global good among people of the world's religions, seeking to promote the realization of each religious tradition's potential for peace-building, engaging religious communities in co-operation around issues of shared moral concerns.

## **Interreligious initiatives on ethics of change**

We come across interreligious initiatives to support the work of the UN. There are attempts to establish institutions, similar to the UN, where representatives of world religions address conflicts, where religious sentiments are involved. There are visions of religions setting up interreligious emergency teams ready to intervene whenever a crisis unfolds.

There are multifaith initiatives to articulate and formulate declarations on global ethics, human responsibilities, guidelines for interreligious interaction and commitments, highlighting the importance of ethical values. The celebration of the UN Year of Dialogue among Civilizations intended to provide an opportunity to emphasize that the present globalization process does not only encompass economic, financial and technological aspects, but also bring a renewed focus on human, cultural, spiritual dimensions and on the interdependence of humankind and its rich

diversity.

Other interreligious initiatives are expressed in conjunction with societal and global issues: injustice, material poverty, violence and environmental destruction. Religions are requested not to shirk their responsibility towards the planet on whose life our lives depend. Alliances are called for between faith and the economy, issue-oriented institutions and social movements on the subjects of poverty, ecology, economy and sustainable development, etc.

Exchanges between religious leaders and political and economic leaders are sought to improve the state of the world, creating global partnerships of business, political, intellectual, religious and other leaders of society to define and discuss key issues on the global agenda. Through dialogue with political leaders, religious leaders are invited to bring the moral authority of religion to help solve problems dividing communities and nations. Promoting peace, reconciliation and human progress are goals we all share.

The voice of religious people has been requested by both business and politics. The reasons may vary from a self-serving interest to get religion, as it were, justifying this or that particular action, to a genuine interest in developing a dialogue with religion on issues of common concern. There are many in the UN leadership who express a wish that the UN may become a body which relates not only to the different member states but to civil society, religions included.<sup>2</sup>

A Conference on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace was recently organized at the UN headquarters under a tripartite partnership among governments, the United Nations system and civil society representing religious non-governmental organizations. It aimed at enhancing interfaith cooperation, promoting the culture of peace and dialogue among civilizations, as well as translating shared values into practical action. The organizers of the conference drew inspiration from the United Nations Millennium Declaration and the recent efforts to promote interfaith cooperation at the international, inter-regional, regional and national levels. It recommended a High Level Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly in September 2005 to recognize that dialogues among civilizations, cultures and religions constitute vital contributions towards the promotion of a just and sustainable peace, and to identify new ways to address interreligious, intercultural and intercivilizational issues and concerns, including the opportunity and mechanism for religious leaders to speak, interact and respond more clearly and quickly in times of violence, crises and conflict.<sup>3</sup>

What all this demonstrates is that there is a serious longing for healing, and that there are genuine expectations that the religions together could find a way of responding to this human need. But isn't there something missing in the title of this conference? Or, to put it differently, there is something implied in the very word "healing" that I think should be highlighted.

## **Interrelatedness of healing and peace**

The case with healing is as it is with peace. Neither healing nor peace comes by itself. The call for peace is not enough. The world has changed since Bonhoeffer envisioned churches together for peace. It is not enough merely to extinguish war, and peace alone is not enough. Peace and justice must embrace each other, but to do so other interlinked threats to life must also be addressed: the debt crisis, the environmental crisis, the denigration of people, the plight of migrants, human trafficking, disease. The Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation process initiated by the World Council of Churches did not want to refer to justice, peace and environment as three separate issues. They need to be seen and addressed as integral aspects of one reality. There is an inescapable and obligatory interconnectedness. Our world is one cloth, a seamless garment. To tear the thread of any one strand inevitably affects all of them together and shreds the whole cloth. Although it has almost become a slogan, there is nevertheless no way around the fact

that there can be no peace without justice, no justice without peace, no peace or justice without vastly altered attitudes towards nature. I believe that our frequent use of the word peace or shalom should be tempered by the words of the prophet Jeremiah: “They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace” (Jer. 6:14). I learned from a recently published book on the African Christian –Jewish dialogue that shalom is not only “wholeness” but its roots can also mean “to pay one’s debts”. In order to attain the blissful condition of shalom, wholeness, one must pay one’s debts.<sup>4</sup> And with respect to the longer commitment from our respective faiths, shalom and wholeness (or ubuntu as Africans would put it) must include payment of one's debt to the other.

Our dreams about peace or shalom are not all the same. Our understanding of peace may vary, depending on where we stand in relation to a conflict, what our perspective is like, from where we come to the conflict. Nowhere is this truer than in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a conflict which for so many years has caused so much suffering among both peoples and where each party to the conflict sees itself as a victim.

## **Jewish-Christian dialogue and the WCC**

The WCC was among the first, if not the first, major international non-state organization to recognize the State of Israel. It did so at its inaugural Assembly in Amsterdam, Holland, in 1948. That was in the context of recognizing the disorder of humankind in the face of God’s design for the world. A prayer says it in the following words: “Your design is the glory of a world reconciled to you and signed by the harmonies in all creation. We wait in hope for it still.” The WCC recognized the State of Israel in the context of a conviction that “to the Jews our God has bound us in a special solidarity linking our destinies together in His design. We call upon all our churches to make this concern their own”.<sup>5</sup> Although it is true that these words, dense with theological significance, were put in the chapter on a Christian approach to Jews, which did include the call to mission, they nevertheless put on record the inextricable link between Jews and Christians and indicated the need for Christians to seek with Jews reconciliation and healing of memories. The famous call to the WCC member churches remain a motto, which is still valid: “We call upon all the churches we represent to denounce anti-Semitism, no matter what its origin, as absolutely irreconcilable with the profession and practice of the Christian faith. Anti-Semitism is sin against God and man.”

The dialogue between Jews and Christians, as it has been furthered by the WCC, has taken the need for reconciliation very seriously indeed. Neither peace nor healing comes by easily. We know that peace is costly. We know that reconciliation is necessary before we can talk about healing. There is no shortcut. The goal of reconciliation, to bring about healing and wholeness to the fractured human community, may well be the greatest challenge that faces the religious traditions today. This is according to the WCC international conference on mission and evangelism, which was recently held in Athens. God has sent us into a fragmented and broken world. We are as Christians united in the belief that we are “called together in Christ to be reconciling and healing communities” knowing that all true healing comes from God.<sup>6</sup> The fact that the Jewish people have suffered so much at Christian lands throughout history has made Christians painfully aware that the latter alone cannot decide on the proper day or time for healing to begin. The same would go for Africa. The world cannot decide when Africans should be gracious enough to magnanimously forgive the world centuries of humiliation, denigration, abuse, slave-trade and apartheid. It is still difficult for many of us difficult to read verses in our holy scriptures deprecating Africans. But we know that we must find a way that allows us to unlearn and to meet the other not as a racist but as a fellow human being. I have earlier hinted to the series of meetings between African Christians and Jews, now recorded in the book “Worlds of Memory and Wisdom - Encounters of Jews and African Christians” published at the same time in English, French and Hebrew. The book records a discussion on how we are to deal with our memories; whether one can allow oneself to forget in

order to live; whether this would be the same as forgetting the crime which was committed. Is forgetting an act of humiliation in regard to those who died and those who survived and who want to know who killed their parent, child, relative or friend? How does one safeguard the memory while at the same time allowing room for pardon and forgiveness?

There is a risk with excessive retention of memory, where the past conditions the present. We come across it often in many of our discourses when we label today's events using metaphors from yesterday. One must be wary of simplistic metaphors, dividing the world into good or evil in too facile a way. One must realize that there may come a time when one allows oneself to consciously discontinue remembering. One must realize that there is a relationship between memory and idolatry. When one becomes a slave to one's memory, there is a risk of becoming idolatrous. This is a challenge also in peace-building: In the pursuit of peace, there is a danger in becoming overwhelmed by wrath and anger. Anger can become idolatry, when you lose sight of the living the face of the other. Is there a place for silence or the healing of memory through forgiveness and a letting go?

These questions, highlighted in a unique dialogue between Jews remembering the Holocaust and Africans remembering Rwanda, tell us something of the particular contribution Africans and Jews make to the Jewish-Christian dialogue. These dialogues teach us something about the risk of too easily falling into the categories of healing, forgetting the need for costly reconciliation. Reconciliation is an act that is necessary not only as an event of the past but as something that Jews and Christians need to embrace, in order not to fall prey to a simplistic use of metaphors.

The issue of the churches calling for divestment from companies that profit from conflict in Israel and Palestine, must be seen in this light. I know that this issue has been received as something utterly disturbing by many Jews. There is a risk and perhaps a temptation to fall into readily available metaphors, comparing the WCC Central Committee minute on divestment with a call for boycott of Jewish goods and Jewish persons as in Germany in the 1930s. I understand that one is tempted to look upon the minute as something directed against the very existence of the State of Israel. But the minute is explicit. The churches are to examine whether they are economically linked to illegal activities in occupied territories, beyond the internationally recognized borders of Israel. There may be those who fear that the minute on divestment is an act of antisemitism directed against all Jews. We can only re-state what we always have stated, "antisemitism is a sin against God and man (that is, the human person)" and that our member churches are to repudiate antisemitism and all forms of teaching of contempt. I would like to echo what my predecessor, Emilio Castro, once wrote to member churches: "There is a special obligation for Christians to make sure that antisemitism is combated wherever it appears...The Christian churches are still committed to look into their own traditions, where teachings of contempt for Jews and Judaism proved a spawning ground for the evil of antisemitism. This is why I appeal to Christians in countries where the spectre of antisemitism again haunts the Jewish people, not to fail in their resolve to take action against these acts of racism and to be available in human solidarity."<sup>7</sup>

Our concern is peace and justice for both Israelis and Palestinians. This is our vision and our prayer and our hope. We have in the last months come across Israeli Jews and Palestinian Christians and Muslims who have dared to go beyond their own communities in bold moves and prophetic action. They go beyond just talking about peace, they go beyond just loving peace, they fulfil the words of the Psalm, they "seek peace, and pursue it" (Psalm 34:9). In a certain way, they are making sure that reconciliation precedes our eagerness for healing. It is a long and arduous road.

It would be tragic for those who are suffering if the WCC minute on divestment is not recognized for precisely what it says and exactly what it is. It would also be a denial of our larger commitment from our respective faiths, as I have already mentioned, to attaining shalom, wholeness, including

the payment of one's debts to others. Thus, on this delicate issue, I would like to do what I can to provide a safe space for listening to each other, and for discussing how and where we need to go. We cannot accept the impasse, if there is one, as the end of a renewal of the relationship between Jews and Christians that Rabbi James Rudin once called "the miracle of the 20th century." The WCC knows that all has not yet been achieved, but we have come a long way.

The WCC has helped to advance the dialogue beyond the traditional scene of Jewish-Christian relations. Inviting Asian Christians to a dialogue with Jews opened up other agendas than the ones that so far had set the stage for the conversations: questions of the meaning of being a minority in a religiously plural world have enriched our conversation. Inviting African Christians to dialogue with Jews has not only provided the common reflection I have already alluded to: what are we to do with our experiences and memories of violence? Africa's specific contribution is the philosophy of ubuntu which, by embracing everything which makes us human, also emphasizes the link between the individual and the collective. Ubuntu provided the spiritual basis for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa. It underlines the fact that, for reconciliation to be meaningful, it has to be costly because it involves restoring the sense of common humanity lost in actions of violence. It has also, through exposing Jewish understandings of the Hebrew scriptures, contributed to a necessary reaffirmation of African tradition and religion that Africans need in order to embrace with dignity and pride their destiny and future. The ongoing conversation between the ICCJ and the WCC helps us to assess our Christian self-understanding. The findings in Jewish-Christian dialogue are of vital importance for Christianity in a religiously plural world. These achievements are to be continued and expanded while we seek ways of together contributing to a just peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

## **The imperative of working together**

This brings me to the final section in my address, on religions together in a global society. When we are on the way to reconciliation, addressing the hurts we have suffered, we will become aware of the truth of the ecumenical principle: That which we can do together, we should not do separately. At the heart of every culture lies a religion or a set of beliefs. These beliefs shape the values, relationships and actions of that particular culture. These beliefs have the power to unite and inspire, but also have the power to divide and destroy.

All religions speak to the human longing for meaning and hope and, therefore, place us in a unique position to encourage mutual understanding within and outside of our communities. The information age has brought the world's religious diversity into our homes and communities and paved the way for all religions to reconsider how they relate to one another.

In his encyclical "Redemptoris Missio," the late Pope John Paul II showed just how broad a vista interfaith dialogue envisions. The guidelines on interfaith dialogue and ecumenical considerations for dialogue with people of other religions developed by the World Council of Churches have enabled us to take significant steps in promoting better understanding and creating cooperation among diverse cultures and religions, while accepting and acknowledging our differences.

If religious intolerance has initiated conflict throughout history, interfaith dialogue is today serving as a foundation on which to ease tensions and promote peaceful co-existence, even in areas plagued by conflict. Globalization poses new challenges to all communities. There are compelling reasons to seek understanding between faith traditions. The complexity of globalization calls for cooperation and work together toward common responses, while not papering over differences between religions. While affirming that the interreligious movement is here to stay, I hasten to add that interreligious dialogue that does not strive to lead the world beyond the dialogue may be denying its religious essence and also the greatest commandment in both the Hebrew Testament and the Greek, to love God and neighbor.

We need today a commitment among people of faith that our religious traditions be not abused to betray their innermost holy principles. We need to make sure that our religious traditions are not used to breed contempt and death. We are aware that our different religious traditions are complex and that we human beings, as people of faith, are sometimes naive, sometimes noble, sometimes crude, sometimes subtle, sometimes cruel, sometimes suffused with an over-powering gentleness and love, sometimes world-affirming, sometimes negating the world, sometimes inward-looking, sometimes universalistic and missionary-minded, sometimes shallow, sometimes profound. It is not easy to streamline one religious tradition, let alone different traditions. But we need to find, in the midst of our diversity, a possibility of affirming the other, of not allowing ourselves, in our religious traditions, to spend most of our time thinking about ourselves, explaining the social world within our communities, and not taking seriously the other, the outsider. There must no longer be walls separating us over against the world outside our religious community. Those outside must no longer be seen as objects.

## Conclusion

Usually our religious formation has taken place in isolation from other communities, or against or in opposition, whether consciously or unconsciously. We must therefore, in order to safeguard that our religious traditions be not abused, look for ways of reconciliation, where there is a new experience of the other, also in our confessional teaching and self-understanding. When we contribute to creating space for the other, we open our minds to another world-view and another view of ourselves where we are not alone, but one among many. Psalm 87 is in this respect a beacon for us. Its Jewish author goes out of his/her way in providing space for the other. Zion is the home of all, including the enemies of Israel. Africa, too, has a home in Zion. Let me quote the Psalm:

1. *On the holy mount stands the city he founded;*
2. *the LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob.*
3. *Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God. Selah*
4. *Among those who know me I mention Rahab and Babylon; Philistia too, and Tyre, with Ethiopia—"This one was born there," they say.*
5. *And of Zion it shall be said, "This one and that one were born in it"; for the Most High himself will establish it.*
6. *The LORD records, as he registers the peoples, "This one was born there." Selah*
7. *Singers and dancers alike say, "All my springs are in you."*

In this beautiful passage the psalmist sings a song in praise of Zion as the center of worship for the world. The citizens of Zion include the Babylonians, the Philistines, the Phoenicians (Tyre), the (Africans) Ethiopians and the Egyptians (Rahab). The certainty of the edict is assured by God's registering all of them in his census of the nations as "born in Zion".

It is our experience that interreligious dialogue can enable us to discover the other in a new way, and it is in this way that the theme of this conference may enable us to be used for healing, while working together in a global society.

## Notes

1. Walter Bruggeman: *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Post-modern Imagination*. (London, SCM Press, 1993) 20.
2. Aide-mémoire: Reflections on international and global multifaith initiatives, *Current Dialogue* no. 39/ 2001.
3. [http://www.interfaithconference.com/outcome\\_document.pdf](http://www.interfaithconference.com/outcome_document.pdf)
4. *Worlds of Memory and Wisdom – Encounters of Jews and African Christians*. Ed. Jean



Halpérin and Hans Ucko (Geneva, WCC 2005) 131.

5. WCC Amsterdam 22.8-4.9 1948 Report of Committee IV "Concerns of the Churches" chapter 3,"The Christian Approach to the Jews".
6. A letter from Athens to the Christian churches, networks and communities in connection with the CWME commission meeting 19 May 2005.
7. Letter of General Secretary Emilio Castro to member churches in Europe, spring 1990.