

World Council of Churches  
COMMISSION ON FAITH AND ORDER

*Faith and Order Plenary Commission  
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
28 July - 6 August 2004*

**Ethnic Identity, National Identity and the Search for Unity "Receive one another as Christ has received you to the glory of God (Romans 15:7)"**

by Archbishop Makarios of Kenya and Irinoupolis

"Ὑπερ τῆς εἰρήνης τοῦ σύμπαντος κόσμου .... καὶ τῆς τῶν πάντων ενῶσεως τοῦ Κυρίου δεηθῶμεν."

"For peace in the whole world .....and for the unity of all, let us pray to the Lord."

*(From the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom)*

**The Dilemma of Human Conflict**

Despite our great intellectual, cultural and technological progress, the twentieth century - in conjunction with the opening years of the twenty first century - has simultaneously proven to be the most violent and brutal age in the history of humanity in terms of victims of armed conflicts. Wars, of course affect the whole fabric of society and cause irreparable physical and emotional damage. What is most shocking about these conflicts, however, is that it is not the soldiers or warriors who become the main victims it is rather the most fragile sectors of society - children and women - who are rendered the chief sufferers of these armed conflicts. In a recent publication by the former Minister of Education of Mozambique and researcher on human rights issues for the United Nations, Mrs. Garca Machel explains the following sobering though horrific fact:

‘Thousands of children are killed every year as a direct result of fighting - from bullets, knife wounds, bombs and landmines. But many more children die from malnutrition and disease heightened by armed conflict. Wars - many of them in the world's most impoverished regions - disrupt food supplies and destroy crops and agricultural infrastructure. They wreck water and sanitation systems along with health services. And wars displace whole populations tearing families and communities apart.’<sup>1</sup>

The Church, which through the teachings of Jesus Christ has been ordained to aspire to become history's voice of conscience, is obliged to ask the most fundamental questions -

- What causes armed conflict?
- To what can we attribute this unceasing and destructive human propensity towards violence?
- What kind of Church praxis is necessary in the search and fostering of global human unity, peace and harmony.

While Marxists and Neo-Marxists may interpret armed conflict in terms of a necessary economic or class struggle, and while such an explanation may be tenable in some cases (e.g. the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, the Maoist revolution in China, the Cuban Revolution and more recently in Africa the Mozambiquian civil war), nevertheless it does not satisfactorily explain the vast plurality of history's situations of conflict. It seems an irrefutable fact that the majority of such devastating military conflicts are due to another cluster of inter-related

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<sup>1</sup> G. Machel, *The Impact of War on Children: A Review of Progress Since the 1996 United Nations Report on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*, (London, Hurst & Company, 2001), p. 66.

factors. We may call this cluster the *phyletistic personality syndrome*.<sup>2</sup> It is a phenomenon which pits humans against humans in the most violent of confrontations in the name of "ethnic cleansing," "racial supremacy" and "cultural exclusivism." This phenomenon accounts for the majority of mass human conflict and manifests itself in a variety of closely related and at times inter-changeable guises:

- *nationalism / fanatical patriotism* - an obsessive sense of national superiority over other nations and a belief in the nation's inherent and pre-determined glorious future destiny (e.g. the genocidal and expansionist policies and praxis of the Third Reich; Mussolini's vision of a revived Roman Empire which included parts of Africa, the imperial aspirations of Japan in Asia and the Pacific in the 1930's and 1940's);
- *ethnocentrism* - a zealous sense of tribal or racial intolerance to other tribes or races amplified by a perceived self-righteous authority to eliminate the "lesser tribe." Such ethnocentric attitudes result in barbaric "ethnic cleansings" (e.g. the genocide of the Armenians in Turkey, the Nazi "final solution" for the Jewish people, the Rwanda tribal genocide; the racial policies and practices of the Apartheid regime of South Africa, the tribal clashes in Kenya during the 1990's, the present conflicts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo); or,
- *culturo-ideological exclusivism* - a sense in which one's cultural values and norms are absolutised in such a manner that a particular way of life is enshrined as superior to all others and must therefore be adopted by others (e.g. the Tamil reaction to the perceived "Sinhalisation" processes of the Sri Lankan state; the enforced "Arabisation" of South Sudan, the "democratization" of Iraq) etc..

### **The Church's Challenge Ahead**

If the Church believes and perceives itself to be the earthly instrument of the Divine Prince of Peace it inevitably faces certain serious and problematic challenges in the present age of conflict. To begin with we must explain to ourselves why such conflict exists. How does the Judeo-Christian tradition understand the origins of this violent phenomenon? Secondly, and surely more importantly, what can the Church contribute in the human search for unity, solidarity, peace and harmony? In other words how can the Church implement the Pauline injunction to "receive one another as Christ has received you..." (*Romans 15:7*) in a manner that would affect global trends in the face of present fanatical ethnic and national identity tendencies acting to the very contrary?

### **The Babel Event and the Subsequent Rise of Nationalism and Ethnocentrism**

In order to better understand the phenomenon of ethnic and national identities and hence cast some light upon the search for human unity, it is necessary for the Church to ask - what is the biblical and theological explanation(s) for humanity's propensity towards tribalism and nationalism? The existence of a positive *ethnicity* - though not *nationalism* - that is the existence of ethnic identity by the occurrence of a multiplicity of human tribes who were eventually the descendants of the sons of Noah (Japheth, Ham and Shem) living in God-appointed territorial boundaries appears to have been ordained by God after the Tower of Babel event, even though it is mentioned previously in the narrative sequence of primeval history in the *Book of Genesis* (*Gen. 10*).<sup>3</sup> However in this biblical record of a complete Table of Nations we do not see any traces of violent or fanatical nationalism - as yet!<sup>4</sup>

In the period immediately preceding the Tower of Babel Event we are informed that all people on earth were of one race and spoke one language (*Genesis 11.1*). The diversification of

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<sup>2</sup> From the Greek term *phili* meaning tribe or race.

<sup>3</sup> It appears logical that the account of *Genesis 10* concerning the birth of ethnic identities in terms of the three fathers of the nations (Japheth, ham and Shem) and the already existent multiplicity of languages preserves an oral tradition which is quite independent from the account of the confusion of languages in *Genesis 11*. Consequently from a narrative and chronological perspective, *Genesis 11: 1-9* is to be read before *Genesis 10*.

<sup>4</sup> Noah's curse of Canaan the son of Ham is not to be read as necessarily leading to conflict between the sons of Canaan and the sons of Shem and Japheth.

human languages in accordance to the various lineages of Noah's descendants,<sup>5</sup> and hence varying cultures and ethnic barriers, must in the first place be understood, according to the *Genesis* 11 account, as a consequence of human sin incurred during the building of the Tower of Babel, specifically that of:

- rebellion or disobedience against God's ordinances to populate the entire earth by mass migrations of the descendants of Noah's sons eastward to the Land of Shinar (Tigris - Euphrates basin, namely Babylonia) and stubbornly remaining there,<sup>6</sup>
- anthropocentric ambition of "making a name for one's self" and hence gaining glory through the building of a human empire and culture independent of the will and assistance of God,
- pride in the power of a human capacity which is unaided by the grace and will of God. That is an unsanctified anthropocentrism.

Indeed if we exegete this event with the lenses of a Church Patristic perspective we may describe it as an attempt for *theosis* (divinization), namely growing "in the image and likeness of God" without the divinizing grace / energy of God.

The resultant phenomenon of racial diversity and linguistic multiplicity was therefore not God's original intention. Indeed, as mentioned above, *Genesis* 11 reports that prior to the "confusion of tongues" and the scattering of the people "all over the earth" - the human inhabitants of the earth were all "one people" -the postdiluvial descendants of Noah - and spoke "one language," "used the same words" and lived in one region:

At first, the people **of the whole world had only one language** and used the same words. As they wandered about in the East, they came to a plain in the Land of Shinar and settled there... They said, "Now let's build a city with a tower that reaches the sky, so that-we can make a name for ourselves and not be scattered all over the earth." Then the LORD came down to see the city and the tower which those men had built, and He said, "Now then, **these are all one people and they speak one language**, this is just the beginning of what they are going to do. Soon they will be able to do anything they want! Let us go down and mix up their language so that they will not understand one another." So the LORD scattered them all over the earth, and they stopped building the city ... there the LORD mixed up the language of all the people, and from there He scattered them all over the earth. [*Gen.* 11.1-9]

Can we say therefore that God is responsible for the existing nationalism in the world, through His action resulting in the confusion of human languages? No! God's actions in the Tower of Babel event was punitive and pedagogical. It was intended to:

- re-populate the entire earth,
- prevent a worse future human catastrophe than that wrought by anthropocentric pride at Babel, and
- to point out the dire consequences of what was already inherent and dysfunctional in human nature, namely the logical and inevitable conclusion of the divisive and destructive force of human pride - even though they were one people and spoke one language.

Nevertheless, even in this resultant new human Fall, the freshly diversified global situation provides humans with the freedom of choice, either:

- to seek to identify with a wise and blessed sense of ethnic affiliation, as described in *Genesis* 10, into a positive theocentric direction, or,
- to degenerate their new differences it into a full blown and demonic anthropocentric nationalism, ethnocentrism and tribal pride.

The cumulative record of human history suggests that we have taken the latter anthropocentric socio-political path.

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<sup>5</sup> For example the descendants of Shem would operate within the linguistic sphere of "Shemitic" (Semitic) languages - Akkadian (Babylonian and Assyrian), Aramaic, Syriac, Ugaritic, Phoenician, Hebrew, Moabite, Arabic, Ethiopic etc.; *vide*, M.F. Unger, *The New Unger's Bible Handbook*, (Chicago, Moody Press, 1998) p. 42.

<sup>6</sup> This ordinance is already proclaimed to Adam and obeyed by the sons of Noah immediately upon leaving the Ark (*Gen.* 9:19).

## The Church and the Search for Human Unity

The step from ethnic identity to fanatical ethnocentrism and from national identity to obsessive nationalism which characterizes to a substantial degree the face of the current geopolitical reality and its resultant violent conflicts,<sup>7</sup> must therefore be understood from a theological and biblical prism as a fallen and corrupt human state, as a spiritually dysfunctional circumstance and must rightly be condemned by the Church. God gave the inhabitants of the Land of Shinar a choice between national identity and nationalism. Humans chose the latter. Consequently, this free choice taken by fallen humanity, represents the very opposite in the search for the path towards human unity.

How then can the Church assist in the search for the path of human unity? Can the Church be effective? In this process towards human unity the Church, that is the theocentric community of God in Christ, is energized and assisted by several spiritual and theological factors:

- *The unifying and transforming work of the Holy Spirit:* In terms of our present discussion, concerning the search for human unity, a Byzantine *kontakion* which is chanted on the Orthodox Sunday of Pentecost is theologically most illuminating in terms of the post-Tower of Babel potential for a unified human condition initiated by Christ and confirmed by the Holy Spirit:

"When He came down and confused all the languages the Most High split the world into nations, when the tongues of fire to them He distributed, He called the world into unity, reasons then we glorify the All Holy Spirit."

Here the Pentecost Event in the Upper Room in Jerusalem is seen as God's reversal and undoing of the punitive measures taken at Babel. Through the "tongues of fire" and the speaking in various human tongues" the potential for the linguistic re-unification of humanity is again made possible through the unifying operations of the Holy Spirit. Among other works the Holy Spirit possesses a creative force to transform and renew. The Pentecost Event transformed the disciples into bold witnesses for Christ by renewing their hearts and mind. This transforming "baptism of the Holy Spirit" is capable of transfiguring human hearts and making enemies friends and brothers. The Church needs therefore in its search for human unity to consistently experience the empowering anointing of the apostolic Pentecost and become a faithful instrument of the Holy Spirit in action, the very same Holy Spirit at work in Jesus Christ.

- *The unifying force of the Eucharist:* The initial celebration of the Lord's Supper was inaugurated not as an individual institution but within a communal setting, that is within the prototypical messianic or ecclesial community presided by Jesus and membered by His disciples. It is a new and united community dedicated to loving and serving one another as well as "giving thanks" to Him who established it. The partaking of the holy Body and Blood of Christ by the ecclesial community therefore becomes a source of growth in the image and likeness of Christ and the ultimate bond of spiritual and social unity, for it neither discriminates against gender, class or wealth in its sanctifying energy. In this way we are ready to "receive one another as Christ received us."
- *The eradication of "phyletism" within the Church:* Unfortunately the Church itself is often guilty of promoting nationalism at the expense of its "catholicism." We therefore speak, for example, of the *Church of England*, the *Church of Scotland*, the *Russian Orthodox Church* etc. Often the Church has involved itself in national wars, in the blessing of weapons before battle, and what is even worse encouraging war and nationalism in the Name of Jesus Christ! While some nationalistic church leaders may be well intentioned in their nationalism, in reality

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<sup>7</sup> The breakdown of Yugoslavia and the U.S.S.R. into national groupings and the resultant conflicts which ensued is a contemporary case in point. On the other hand the union of European states suggests an optimistic trend in the geopolitical search for human unity. How far it succeeds depends upon the degree of its anthropocentric - theocentric spectrum.

they serve the very opposite of the work of the Holy Spirit and the teachings of Christ. For in doing so they are encouraging a fallen and corrupt state of humanity. It is interesting that in a period of heightened nationalism a pan-Orthodox Synod held in Constantinople in 1872 unambiguously condemned philetistist (church) nationalism as a heresy. In his commentary on this synod an eminent Orthodox canon lawyer Grigorios Papatomas explains that, "the Church should not be confused with the destiny of a single nation or a single race..."<sup>8</sup> This voice must be seriously heeded by the modern Church if it is to be effective in promoting human unity.

- *The people of God theology - "the New Israel of God"*: In Pauline theological terms we may say that nationalism is the direct consequence of a "fleshly" anthropocentric disposition rather than a spiritual and creative theocentric human orientation. In accordance to Pauline vocabulary nationalism remains in the realm of the "flesh" (Σάρξ) rather than the "spirit" (Πνεῦμα) as a manifestation of certain principles at work in the "present evil age," by the "god of the present age." For according to St. Paul in his letter to the Galatians there is "no longer Greek nor Jew" (Gal. 3:28) but only the oneness, peace and blessedness that derives from membership in the new "Israel of God" - the community of God's people or *ecclesia*: "To those who will follow this principle (of oneness) peace be upon ... the Israel of God." (Gal. 6:16). This unity however can only be perceived, appropriated and accomplished in a theocentric manner, by those who are reconciled *in Christ*. It can only be made manifest by those who bring forth the "fruits of the Spirit." It is in this way that *we may receive one another as Christ receives us (Romans 15:7)* and hence aspire towards authentic human unity. As we all well know the history of humankind is littered with the failed scraps of torn anthropocentric peace treaties, international accords and ceasefire agreements.

If the Church is therefore to accomplish the task of human unity it must place into practice its God-appointed *charismata*. To do so it cannot remain within a safe and secure ethnic ghetto. It is appointed to take seriously Christ's great commission for His Church - the global evangelization and baptism of all nations. This global evangelization mission of the Church bearing the message of unconditional love and forgiveness will eventually enable humans to "Receive one another as Christ received us."

## Conclusion

Ethnic identity, national identity and territorial integrity are not in themselves evil. As we have seen they were ordained by God (*Genesis 10*). They must however be based upon a theocentric basis rather than an anthropocentric pride as evidenced by the stubborn inhabitants of the Land of Shinar. Unfortunately the anthropocentric consequences of the Tower of Babel remain even today. Hence the gap between ethnic identity and national identity on the one hand and ethnocentrism and nationalism on the other is continuously transgressed and confused. The results are inevitably violent - "ethnic cleansings," "genocides" and "imperialism." The search for human unity from an anthropocentric perspective has failed and is characterized by ineffective peace treaties. The path for authentic human unity rests heavily upon the shoulders of the modern Church. In this quest the Church has failed in the past because it has often itself fallen into phyletistic and nationalistic tendencies. More than ever in history there is a call now for the Church to act. In this it is more than sufficiently and willingly assisted and energized by the synergetic actions of God the Holy Trinity, through the unconditional love of God the Father, the unifying fellowship of the Holy Spirit and the authentic bonds of Christ's Holy Eucharist.

It is fitting that these concluding remarks should end by the voice of Eugeniy Petrovskiy who eloquently summarises our present discussion:

'Who is Jesus Christ for us? ... A tribal leader whose authority should facilitate national unification, or God, who saves us from malediction and death? For the believing mind the

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<sup>8</sup> s Cited in H. Bos and J. Forest (eds.) *For the Peace From Above: An Orthodox Resource Book on War, Peace and Nationalism* (Syndesmos, 1999) p. 11.

answer is self-evident, and those for whom Christianity is merely an ideology prefer, as Dostoyevsky said, to stay with their own "truth" rather than with Christ.<sup>9</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> G. Machel, *The Impact of War on Children: A Review of Progress Since the 1996 United Nations Report on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*, (London, Hurst & Company, 2001), p. 66.

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<sup>9</sup> Cited in H. Bos and J. Forest (eds.) *op. cit.* p. 90.

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