

Concepts and Methods of Conflict Resolution and Peace-Building

Abstract

The need for conflict resolution in our society is crucial. It is imperative because no two people perceive a particular thing exactly in the same way. Efforts to curb conflict and crisis-situations have often times been unsuccessful; occasioned not only by the complex nature of humanity, but also by the methods and means employed by those on mediation. It is the position of this paper that a factor that has not received sufficient attention in this regard is the culture, tradition and biblical frameworks or paradigms determining our understanding of conflicts, their causes and appropriate tools for reconciliation. This paper will locate and explore these necessary basic tools and frameworks on peace initiatives and conflict resolutions as the symbolical rites of procedure. It will argue that all of them have to be taken seriously if we really have to move from rhetorics and good intentions to sustainable behaviour change that leads to solid reconciliation and peace that will finally lead to decreased rates of conflict situations and socio-political rascalities

Introduction

Desmond Tutu, the Anglican Archbishop emeritus of South Africa, is reported to have commented from within the situation of social revolution in South Africa that “without reconciliation, there is no future” (Wustenberg, 1998:5). This assertion by the astute cleric and winner of this Noble Peace Prize underscores the universal desire of all nations for peace and conflict resolution.

Any initiative for reconciliation and conflict resolution rests upon the conviction that present relationships are flawed, and that wrongs or injustices have been committed; but that these flaws, wrongs and injustices should be addressed by establishing other kinds of relationships rather than by revenge or separation. Inadequate consensus about what wrong was done in the past and which future relationships to promote might however, be a big obstacle. How would people for instance be motivated to ask for forgiveness when they believe that, according to the norms and values of their community, what they did was not wrong? Shriver (1995) pointed out that “... alleged wrongdoers are wary of being told that someone ‘forgives’

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them. Immediately they sense that they are being subjected to some moral assessment, and they may not consent to it” (p. 7). Such disagreements, one may argue, are to a great extent based on the diverse and opposing tools and moral landscapes within which the values and norms are embodied. Partly influenced by Kammer (1988), one considers the following elements as dominant tools in a moral landscape in the process of reconciliation and conflict resolution in a crisis-torn society like ours. These are:

- Story sharing of the experiences of the conflict (more precisely experiences of trauma, bereavement, separation and socio-economic inequalities);
- Views of the conflict, its history and its causes;
- Identifications and loyalties;
- Views of oneself and of “the other” (i.e. one’s adversary);
- Norms for interaction, and interpretations of values such as “peace and reconciliation.

We shall return later to explain these points in some details.

It should be observed that in all civilized societies of the world today, there is growing resort to the peaceful settlement of disputes. The image of violence presented by the media is not, as such, a true reflection of the dominant method of settling conflict situation. There is an enormous amount of peaceful and non-violent settlement of disputes taking place at various levels and in many communities all over the world especially in Africa. Many groups and individuals are involved in this process of peace initiatives including Non-Government Organizations and Faith-based groups

In Nigeria, inter and intra communal, ethno-religious and political conflicts and wars, including the endless battle between militants and Federal Government/multinational companies in the Delta region, present an

endless ugly phenomenon that had provoked the sympathy and engagement of some clergymen/religious leaders in a bid to find solutions for resolution and transformation of the conflict situations. They tend to offer free dispute resolution services.

It is the intention of this paper to offer some recipes to those on mediation that they may find reasons to do a critical appraisal of their performances. The suggestions may equally serve as resources for capacity building for further engagement in the provision of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) scheme, and as symbolical rites of procedure.

Delineating Some Basic Terms/Concepts

Before commenting on the tools, methods, structures and procedures for non-violent transformation of conflict, it will serve our purpose well to begin by clarifying some basic terms and concepts:

Conflict: Conflict was originally used to mean “strike at another, to fight with an enemy or to do battle with an opposing force”. Today it equally means to be antagonistic towards others or to be in sharp disagreement with others. The ability to successfully manage conflict within oneself and between persons reduces antagonism, disagreement and hatred.

How a person manages his inner conflicts has a great impact on how he lives and relates with others. A person, who manages inner conflicts well, tends to transfer his ability and emotional strength to his associates. This is why one advocates that it is very important for those on mediation to learn how to manage their inner conflicts in a positive way before they try to help manage others' conflicts.

Conflict Resolution

Miller (2003) posits that conflict resolution is “a variety of approaches aimed at terminating conflicts through the constructive solving of problems, distinct from management or transformation of conflict” (p. 8). For Mial and Wood House (2001), by conflict resolution, it is expected that the deep rooted sources of conflict are addressed and resolved, and behaviour is no longer violent, nor are attitude hostile any longer, while structure of the conflict has been changed. In the understanding of Mitchel and Banks (1996), conflict resolution refers to:

an outcome in which the issues in an existing conflict are satisfactorily dealt with through a solution that is mutually acceptable to the parties, self sustaining in the long run and productive of a new, positive relationship between parties that were previously hostile adversaries; and process or procedure by which such an outcome is achieved (p. 21).

In all this, one understands conflict resolution to imply that conflict is bad hence it is something that should not be encouraged. It also assumes that conflict is a short term phenomenon that can be “resolved” permanently through mediation or other intervention processes. Best (2005) putting these ideas together, concludes that:

...in principle, conflict resolution connotes a sense of finality, where the parties to a conflict are mutually satisfied with the outcome of a settlement and the conflict is resolved in a true sense of it. Some conflicts, especially those over resources, are permanently resolvable (p. 94).

From the point of view of needs, a conflict is resolved when the basic needs of parties involved have been met with necessary “satisfiers”, and their fears have been allayed. Others “like those over values”, according to

Best (2005), may be “non-resolvable and can at best be transformed, regulated or managed” (p. 95).

Conflict Management: Conflict management seen in the right perspective, correctly assumes that conflicts are long term process that often cannot be quickly resolved. The notion of “management” suggests that people can be directed or controlled as though they are physical objects. In addition, the notion of management indicates that the goal is the reduction or control of volatility more than dealing with the real source of the problem. This view is aptly supported by Best (2005) as he sees conflict management as, “the process of reducing the negative and destructive capacity through a number of measures and by working with and through the parties involved in that conflict” (p. 95). He equally opines that the term is sometimes used synonymously with the term, conflict regulation. By extension, the term covers other areas of handling “conflicts positively at different levels, including those efforts made to prevent conflict by being proactive” (Best, 2005:95). The concept equally includes such other terms like conflict limitation, containment and litigation. It may also include “conflict prevention”. Burton (1990) uses this phrase ‘conflict prevention’ to connote “containment of conflict through steps introduced to promote conditions in which collaborative and valued relationships control the behaviour of conflict parties” (p. 57). In summary, conflict management seeks in the main, to indicate the fact that conflict is inevitable, and that not all conflicts are resolvable. Therefore, what those on mediation would do is to ‘manage’ and regulate them.

Mediation: This is seen and described as the voluntary, informal, non-binding process undertaken by an external party that fosters the settlement of

differences or demands between directly interested parties. Miall et al (1999) support this description by seeing mediation as, “the intervention of a third party; it is a voluntary process in which the parties retain control over the outcome (pure mediation), although it may include positive and negative inducements (mediation with muscle)” (p. 22).

Mediation, therefore, is understood and taken as assistance by a third party (mediator) where the parties to a conflict admit that they are both committed to solving, but in which the mediator manages a negotiation process, but does not impose a solution on the parties. It is purely a voluntary process. Mediation is a common skill that many people have, but which they hardly realize they do. Simply put, the role of a mediator is to create the enabling environment for the parties to carry out dialogue sessions leading to the resolution of a pending conflict. He works on communication between parties. He is simply a reconciler.

Symbolic Procedures/Tools towards Peace Initiatives

All conflict has a resolution. However, not all conflict resolution is successful. It depends at times on the procedure(s) and/or styles employed. For conflict resolution to really take place, and be successful, both parties need to have the sense that the procedural style is fair, satisfactory and in their best interest. We intend to sketch few steps that would create reconciliatory atmosphere towards resolution of conflicts.

The Beginning: Ritual Dialogue Procedure – Drawing an analogy from a South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission Scene in October 1986 in the town Pearl near Cape Town, Wustenberg (2002) described the proceedings in the following abridged form:

... a candle was lit in the sight of all who were present. After the members of the commission took their places, the chairperson signaled with his hand that all in the hall should stand. The victims and perpetrators were then ushered in. Good morning everyone! I welcome you all very warmly... (p. 31).

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The above extract of a dialogue in South Africa is a pointer to how a reconciliatory dialogue could begin. It recognized the place of ritual – the parties (victims and perpetrators) entered, the public was called on to stand, a candle was lit, a moment of silence was observed probably to reflect on the “victims” of apartheid, and thus history was dealt with within the framework of a dialogue. By the entry of the “victims and perpetrators” which resembled a procession, a separate and even “holy” space was created. The ritual helped to relax tensions and created a space in which it was possible to tell one’s own story, and “let go” of the past.

It is possible to compare the framework of dialogue, which began with the greeting to a rite of initiation. The participants now belong to those who have been chosen to present their concerns. The call to tell their story was usually preceded by a personal enquiry after the “victims” good health or an expression of appreciation that the persons concerned had undertaken pains and inconveniences to come and tell their story for reconciliation and peace. This helped to loosen their tongues, so that telling the stories flowed easily from that.

This ritualized framework canalized anger and impotence and enabled the people to tell their stories and so tell the truth. In many cases, plea for forgiveness ensued. We see from this that the ritual procedure with which things began opened up the political dimension of reconciliation. We strongly recommend that the procedure be adopted by those on mediation

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especially the religious leaders (ecumenical groups) who crave for peace initiatives. It is a workable formular.