

## *Justice, Mercy and Peace: A Christian Approach to Sustainable Reconciliation*

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### **Abstract**

Over the past centuries, societies and nations across the globe have often suffered some form of social, political, ethnic, racial or religious violent conflict, from Chile to Afghanistan, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Nigeria, Uganda to South Africa; from United States of America to United Kingdom, Belgium and France; from Sri Lanka to Tibet and the Philippines. It is often a very difficult task to heal the wounds and divisions of societies torn apart by sustained violent conflict. Yet the challenge of peaceful coexistence is fundamental not only to the survival, but also to the development of every society and nation. Peaceful coexistence presupposes justice, requires mercy and builds on sustainable reconciliation. This paper has therefore for its objective to propose a Christian approach to sustainable reconciliation as one that integrates justice, mercy and peace. The study first elaborates an understanding of justice, mercy and peace that is based on the Biblical perspective, the social teachings of the Catholic Church and the fundamentals of human rights. It further examines the relationship of justice, mercy and peace for establishing a sustainable reconciliation among peoples and nations. The paper concludes by recommending a conversion of hearts, a transformation of perception and attitudes and a change in structures as concrete measures towards building sustainable reconciliation among peoples, nations and the global world for a flourishing humanity.

Keywords: Justice, mercy, peace, human rights, sustainable reconciliation, Christian approach

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## **INTRODUCTION**

All over the world, from Europe to southern Africa, from Central America to Indo-China, political, social, economic, religious and ethnic problems have led people to an experience of violent conflicts and divisions. The option of using violence to settle conflicts has failed because violence provokes violence and sets in motion uncontrollable forces of hatred and destruction. National, regional and global security is increasingly coming under threat with the escalation of violent conflicts that militate against peaceful coexistence and development. In the face of this challenge, sustainable reconciliation is assuming a dimension of global imperative as people become more aware that problems of human relations, at any level, cannot be resolved by recourse to conflict strategy but rather by transcending the divisions and cultivating a culture of reconciliation. Sustainable reconciliation is indeed a prerequisite for peaceful coexistence which is fundamental not only to the survival, but also to the development of every society and nation. Individuals, societies and governments are therefore challenged to be architect of sustainable reconciliation. According to Tutu (2003):

“There is no handy roadmap for reconciliation... no short cut or simple prescription for healing the wounds and divisions of a society in the aftermath of sustained violence. Creating trust and understanding between former enemies is a supremely difficult challenge. It is, however, an essential one to address in the process of building a lasting peace.”

The objective of this study is therefore to propose a Christian approach to sustainable reconciliation as one that integrates justice, mercy and peace. In the first phase, the paper examines the issue of justice, mercy and peace from Biblical perspective and its interpretation in the context of Social Teachings of the Catholic Church. It further investigates the relationship of justice, mercy and peace for establishing a sustainable reconciliation among peoples and nations. It recognises the moral dimension of division in human relationship. In conclusion, the paper therefore advocates a conversion of hearts and a transformation of perception and attitudes which would led to new forms of mutual trust and reconciliation; as well as a change in structures that nurture imbalance of power, instability and oppression as a form of concrete measures towards building sustainable reconciliation among peoples, nations and the global world for a flourishing humanity.

### **A Christian approach to Justice, Mercy and Peace**

Christian approach to the issues of justice, mercy and peace is fundamentally rooted in the biblical perspective. The Bible does not indulge in conceptual and abstract definitions of what justice, mercy and peace stand for. It takes a pragmatic rather than theoretical approach to the issues involved in justice, mercy and peace. It is an ontological approach that builds on the biblical understanding of the being of the human person and on the rightful covenant relationship between God, the human person and the community/society.

## Justice

The English word justice is derived from the Latin term *jus*, meaning right or law. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the just person as one who typically “does what is morally right” and is disposed to “giving everyone his or her due”. The concept justice may however differ according to some cultural underpinnings. In the long history of Western culture, philosophers have considered the concept justice both as a moral virtue of character and as a desirable quality of political society, and have sought to indicate how it applies to ethical and social decision-making ([www.iep.utm.edu/just/](http://www.iep.utm.edu/just/)). Plato discussed justice as a virtue establishing rational order, with each part performing its own proper role. For Aristotle, justice refers to what is lawful and fair, where fairness involves equitable distribution. The modern philosophers like Hobbes and Rousseau considered justice in terms of social contract of the mutual agreement of everyone concerned ([www.iep.utm.edu/just/](http://www.iep.utm.edu/just/)). The social contract theory of justice has continued to influence contemporary philosophers like John Rawls. All such philosophical theories of justice underscore the fact that justice can be understood in terms of respecting persons as free, rational agents in political, social and economic interactions.

From the Christian perspective, two basic ideas define the concept of justice.

(a) The image of God: Every human being is created in the image of God (Gen 1:26); called to be in relation with God (Gen. 1:16), with one another (Gen 2:28; 3:9-11) and with the rest of creation (Gen 1:28; 2:15). The image of God emphasizes some fundamental realities about the human person. According to Rick Warren: Like God, we are spiritual being – our spirits are immortal and will outlast our earthly bodies; we are intellectual we can think, reason and solve problems, like God we are relational – we can give and receive love, and we have a moral consciousness, we can discern right from wrong, which makes us accountable to God (Warren, 2002: 171-172). Creation in the image of God is the Christian basis of human dignity and its teachings on the fundamental human rights with regards to the political, social, economic, religious and cultural order. It is the foundation of the Christian defence of the intrinsic and inalienable fundamental human rights expressed in philosophical language. The non-respect or violation of basic human rights is therefore considered as injustice.

(b) Covenant relationship: Justice also refers to maintaining the rightful covenant relationship which binds humanity to their creator God and to one another. God made a covenant with humanity in the person of Noah (Gen. 9:1-17) and with the chosen people of Israel in Ex 19 -20). This covenant relationship imposes obligations - the commandments (Ex 20), which form the basis of the rightly relationship between God and the human person (Ex 20:1-11); as well as human relation in society (Ex 20:12-17). To maintain the rightful covenant relationship in human community is to practice justice in the biblical sense.

This ontological and divine dignity of the human person and the practice of rightful covenant relation are central to the regulation of justice in human community. Hence, justice goes beyond giving one one’s rights to include treating every person, even the

most vulnerable according to his/her God given dignity as a child of God in relationship. It is from this understanding of justice that prophets like Isaiah and Amos cried out against the false religion and injustice of their time.

“Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble yourself? Is it to bow down the head like bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Why do you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, to break every yoke? Is it not to share your break with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him and not to hide yourself from your own kin? (Is 58: 5-7)

I hate, I despise your festivals, and take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them... But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Am 5:21-24).”

The prophet Jeremiah also spoke out against the oppressive rulers of his time who trampled the powerless and the underprivileged often represented by the stranger, the orphan and the widow (Jer 22:3-4). In the New Testament, Jesus criticized the Scribes and the Pharisees because they neglected to promote justice, mercy and faith, while paying meticulous attention to the issue of tithe collection (Mat 23:23). He called his disciples to “seek first the kingdom of God and its justice (Mat 6:33).

## **Mercy**

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy” (Mat 5:7).

According to *Theopedia: An Encyclopaedia of Biblical Christianity*, mercy is “experienced and exercised by a person who has another person in his power, or under his authority, or from whom no kindness can be claimed” ([www.theopedia.com/mercy](http://www.theopedia.com/mercy)). From the biblical perspective, mercy is primarily a divine initiative and act. It is rooted in God from whom it may be acquired as a Christian virtue and exercised in relation to fellow human beings (Matt 5:7; Jm 2:13). Mercy is an attitude of the mind and heart which animates human relations in society. Although justice is highest principle of every reasonable social order (Herr, 1991), yet legalist justice without mercy can lead to tyranny, hatred and destruction of the opponent. Mercy enlarges the heart and transcends justice to offer forgiveness, reconciliation and a new relationship. In the Gospel of John 8:1-11, the Scribes and the Pharisees presented to Jesus a woman caught in adultery and wanted to know Jesus’ stance with regards to enforcing the stipulated legal demand of justice. Jesus chose to follow a different logic: “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (Jn 8:7). And to the guilty woman, he said: “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now do not sin again” (Jn 8:11). If justice is the foundation of social order, mercy is the soul and the life wire of human relations. The unforgiving servant of the Gospel of Matthew 18:23-35 was called wicked and condemned to greater punishment because he refused to forgive and cancel a small debt from his fellow servant, after his master had cancelled his own incalculable debt. Justice without mercy strangles the offender and destroys relationship. It is Christian

mercy and forgiveness that transforms the human hearts and leads to reconciliation based on a new relationship of mutual trust (Quadragesimo Anno, 137).

## **Peace**

The English term peace, in Greek *Irene*, in Latin *pax*, in Hebrew *shalom* and in Igbo *udo*, is a concept that lends itself to different definitions. The authoritative Oxford English Dictionary defines peace as: (a) freedom from, or cessation from civil commotion and disorder... (b) freedom from disturbance or perturbation... (c) freedom from quarrels or dissensions between individuals. The central idea running through is that peace connotes an absence of antagonistic conflict. It is a negative concept of peace. The Greek term *Irene* has also a strong sense of negative peace as an absence of conflict or a new state of social relations following hostilities (<http://hawaii.edu/powerkills/TJP.CHAP3.HTM>). In Ancient Rome, *pax* is a legal relation based on a pact. It is a state of relations free of conflicts.

On the other hand, *Shalom*, the Hebrew word for peace is better understood in the context of covenant relationship that binds the people of Israel with God and with one another. *Shalom* signifies an existential state of serenity, calmness and social harmony (<http://hawaii.edu/powerkills/TJP.CHAP3.HTM>). In the New Testament, peace could connote the absence of conflict, health of mind and body as well as social harmony. Peace is above all a divine gift that enables one live in serenity and harmony.

“Peace I leave with you, it is my own peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not be worried or upset; do not be afraid (Jn 14:27).”

“Glory to God in the highest heaven and peace on earth to men of goodwill (Lk 2:14).”

The Christian religion emphasizes the divine origin of authentic peace and challenges the receiver to share it with others and work for peace.

“Whatever house you enter, first say, peace to this house! And if anyone is there who shares peace, your peace will rest on that person, if not, it will return to you” (Lk 10:5-6).

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Lk 5:9).

This is an active concept of peace. It is peace that has its root in God but is actualized in the context of human relations by people who consciously work for it (Galtung, 1996). According to the Vatican II document: *Gaudium et Spes*:

“Peace is not merely the absence of war. Nor can it be reduced solely to the maintenance of a balance of power between enemies. Nor is it brought about by dictatorship. Instead, it is rightly and appropriately called “an enterprise of justice” (Is 32:7). Peace results from the harmony built into human society by its divine Founder, and actualized by men as they thirst of justice” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 78).

Indeed, four basic factors characterise the Christian concept of peace which runs through the Catholic Social Teaching on economic, political and social matters.

(a). Peace is a work of justice. It presupposes a just order and is distorted in a situation of inequalities and unbalanced power relationship (*Pacem in Terris*, 167).

(b). Peace is a task to be achieved. This takes in the sense of peace building and peace construction between individuals, societies, nations and the global community. Authentic peace implies creative struggle to transform unjust social structures and convert hardened hearts (*Gaudium et Spes*, 78). It is the work of human beings in social relations to build peace

(c). Peace requires education. Since peace is a task to be accomplished, it requires conscientious education to a culture of peace (*Gaudium et Spes*, 78). As noted by Gumut, (2006), “peace education concerns itself with human and social dimensions of peace. It introduces the concept of human dignity and human rights with specific reference to such values as economic equity, political participation, ecological balance and particularly the formative principles fundamental to international human rights standards” (Gumut, 2006:165).

(d). Peace is the fruit of love born out of Christ the Prince of peace. As noted by Gremillion, (1995), peace is the expression of true fraternity among men, a fraternity given by Christ, the prince of peace, in reconciling all men with the Father. Human solidarity cannot truly take place unless it is done in Christ, who gives the peace that the world cannot give

### **Justice, Mercy and Peace for a Sustainable Reconciliation**

The challenge of peaceful coexistence is fundamental not only to the survival, but also to a progressive development of every society, nation and the global community. But peaceful existence presupposes justice, requires mercy and builds on sustainable reconciliation. The Christian religion bears a strong message of reconciliation of humanity with God and with one another.

“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message to us” (2Cor 5:18-19).

The Christian message of reconciliation is often marred and eclipsed by the reality of human hardness of heart, greed and selfishness; by unjust social and economic structures; by imbalance of power relations and disregard for human dignity which in turn engender disharmony and violent conflicts. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the world suffered the tragic experience of two world wars led by the European super powers. For more than three centuries, the African continent has been torn apart by the devastating experiences of slavery, colonisation, economic, political, ethnic and religious conflicts. In the second half of the 1960s, Nigeria was engulfed in a genocidal civil war, the scars of which continue to hunt its diverse peoples and deter efforts to nation building.

The question is: how could societies torn apart by sustained violent conflict overcome their apathy to experience an authentic peaceful coexistence in the sense of genuine social harmony (shalom) that is not merely an absence of antagonism? The question boils down to the relation of justice, mercy and peace for social harmony and sustainable reconciliation. Justice has been established as the foundation and highest principle of every reasonable social order. The truth of this principle can never be denied or neglected in human interaction. There can be no genuine peace without justice. But the question still remains: could a social order regulated solely on the principles of justice go far enough to establish genuine sustainable reconciliation in society? Has human experience not shown that disputes regarding the meaning and application of justice have often led societies to sustained violence and counter violence which escalates mistrust and ruin relationship? The Christian religion advocates therefore an integration of justice, mercy and peace for a sustainable reconciliation. According to Herr (1991:88), “justice can control whatever causes social conflict but it cannot force people together. Every community, every society, needs a common bond. The communication and integrative force is love”. Mercy acknowledges justice but transcends it to meet the enemy with a forgiving heart that opens up to the other.

“But I say to you that listen, love your enemy, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you... Do to others what you would like them do unto you” (Lk 6:27-31).

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should love one another” (Jn 13:34).

Love, in the *agape* sense of Christian charity, is one thing that cannot hurt another person even the worst enemy. Mercy, the forgiveness based on Christian charity, has the revolutionary power to overcome all barriers and to seek entirely new ways of doing things and new ways of authentic sustainable relationship.

“Admittedly, no vicarious charity can substitute for justice which is due as an obligation and is wrongfully denied. Yet even supposing that everyone should finally receive all that is due to him, the wildest field for charity will always remain open. For justice alone can, if faithfully observed, remove the causes of social conflict but can never bring about union of minds and hearts” (*Quadragesimo Anno*, 137).

Christian mercy does not condone injustice or unjust order but transcends the spirit of revenge and the search for the destruction of the opponent. Justice and mercy are two basic and indispensable principles which must work together for amending and healing the hurts and divisions of societies torn apart by sustained violent conflict. The Christian triad of justice, mercy and peace are indeed the foundation, soul and favourable condition for true sustainable reconciliation of human relations.

“Mercy and faithfulness have met, justice and peace have embraced. Faithfulness shall look down from earth and justice shall spring up from heaven” (Ps 85: 10-11).

When the work of justice, mercy and peace are not coordinated, the result is a scene of unilateral relations that offer no meeting point for sustainable reconciliation. But a proper integration of justice, mercy and peace would yield a harvest of genuine sustainable reconciliation in human relations. True peace and sustainable reconciliation between peoples, nations and the global community are born out of mutual trust rather being imposed.

## **CONCLUSION**

The thrust of study has been to advocate on an integration of justice, mercy and peace for a sustainable reconciliation. The paper has taken a Christian perspective in understanding the triad principles of justice, mercy and peace. It emphasized justice as the foundation of social order and mercy as the soul and life wire of harmonious human relations. Taken in isolation, efforts to build a peaceful coexistence would remain elusive. The paper therefore recommends an integration of justice and mercy which would entail a transformation of unjust structures that nurture imbalance of power, instability and oppression; as well as a conversion of hearts and a change of perception and attitude that is translated in concrete measures towards building sustainable reconciliation among peoples, nations and the global community for a flourishing humanity.



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