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WHO CRIES FOR AFRICA:

A PERSPECTIVE OF THIRD WORLD SUFFERING

Hazel Ayanga

Suffering in one form or another is common to all human beings. Indeed, it is common to the whole of nature. St Paul talks of the entire creation groaning.¹ Yet we are deeply aware that some parts of creation experience deeper and more prolonged suffering than others. This would appear to be the case with the so called third world² countries. Sometimes the suffering is so intense that the people of God must ask for how long?

There are many forms or manifestations of suffering both physical and psychological or spiritual. The word suffering encompasses a wide range of human experiences. The Bible uses different words to describe human suffering. These include agony, distress, hardship and oppression. All these forms are experienced in the two thirds world to a greater or lesser degree. They are experienced at both the individual levels. In this paper the examples will comprise both the personal and the communal levels. They will also be mainly from Africa to represent (other nations of) the global south.

In order to understand suffering it is necessary to understand the causes and how we respond to it particularly as people of faith. Indeed we ask ourselves where is God in all this! Various causes and explanations of suffering have been suggested. We look at some of these in Africa and in the global south as a whole.

POVERTY

In an apt description to poverty in Africa, Peter Kanyadago

The cries of the poor pierce the night as another loses their loved one in the hospital or at home because of incapacity to deal with preventable diseases³ What Kanyadago is saying is that poverty in Africa is the root of

¹ Romans 8:22

² In this paper I will use either the two thirds world or the Global South

³ Peter Kanyadago “Rich but Rendered Poor: A Christian Response to the Paradox of Poverty in Africa” in Kanyadago Peter (ed), The Cries of the Poor in Africa: Questions and Responses

all other forms of suffering. The two thirds world in general and Africa in particular have known long periods of poverty. Admittedly this poverty is relative to the West. In other words, African poverty is understood in contrast to the riches or the opulence of the West. Never the less, we cannot deny the fact that there are situations of abject poverty as well as distressing economic crises everywhere on the continent.

BAD CHOICES

The causes of this poverty are both local and international. It is caused by bad choices and irrelevant aping of the West by African leaders. First there is the need to educate the populace in areas relevant to Africa and to their own needs. But despite the fact that every post-independent country in Africa has emphasised the need for education, the continent still has unacceptable illiteracy rates. Resources are spent on education without seemingly achieving any substantive progress. One explanation for this situation is that the education provided is generally irrelevant to local needs. It is the kind of education that does not help the rural farmer to improve his/her yield. The point here is that African educators and politicians emphasise and pay attention to global issues at the expense of local needs and issues. Emmanuel Katongole⁴ gives an example of the celebration of the arrival of Microsoft Windows 98 in Uganda at a time when no more than 2% of the population had (neither seen) nor used a computer in their lives. Because of the irrelevance of the education offered, African countries will remain poor for many years to come.

URBANIZATION

On the other hand the rampant urbanization is also a cause of poverty in Africa. The rural poor, in search of what they perceive as greener pastures, move in droves to urban centres and towns. Instead they can only live in the slums thus exacerbating their poverty. Politicians pay a lot of attention to the cities thus creating the false impression that they are indeed greener pastures. Consequently, they spend millions of shillings on them at the expense of the rural poor and the slum dwellers. In Kenya for example, a lot of money and resources are being spend on the development of what is called the Nairobi Metropolitan yet millions of Kenyans are starving, some of them are already dead in areas where irrigation would alleviate the problem. Thus we see the suffering caused by poverty is clearly inflicted on the people by poor leadership and the making of bad choices.

Another cause of poverty in Africa and the global south is international in nature. Decisions made at the international level are not

⁴ Emmanuel Katongole. *Critical Essays in Christian Social Imagination*. Scranton, The University of Scranton Press, 2008, p.81

necessarily good for Africa. Since the days of the early missionary and colonist, Africa has been understood and described as the Dark Continent. This has not changed much in the 21st century, Africa is a continent that arouses pity in the West. It is also a continent that cannot make proper decisions for itself. Thus international bodies like the World Bank and the IMF hold meetings and put together packages of development that are “good” for Africa. Often this is in total disregard to what is relevant to the continent. The question of context is also totally ignored. It is assumed that what works in the West would surely work in Africa. In general, these development packages increase levels of poverty. Thus they increase the suffering on the continent. The structural adjustment programmes are a case in point. Where they seemed to work, the positive impact was only for a few. The rest continued to wallow in the sickness and poverty. Global markets and economies do not alleviate the poverty in Africa. The situation of the poor does not change. In Katongole’s words, “Their longing is not for so much for coca-cola as for clean drinking water, not so much to have MacDonalds or other fast-food joints, but to see their granaries full, and not perpetually empty”⁵.

The effects of globalization can be seen everywhere, yet in the main they do not seem to benefit Africa and her people. More corruption and widening of the gap between the rich and the poor are the order of the day. The already poor economies face further devastation. The peasant farmer has nothing to celebrate about globalization. The price of his produce constantly goes down as he literally has no say in decisions pertaining to prices. Another aspect of globalization includes such issues as global warming and water deficits.

All these issues as well as others like genocide, deforestation among others increase the poverty in Africa. Consequently, they increase the suffering.

NATURAL DISASTERS

Africa is the home of many recurrent natural disasters. Of these, floods and drought are the major ones. Because of changes in the climate of the world, dry seasons seem to increase every year. In Kenya for example, many parts of the country have not seen rain for a minimum of four months. Others have not seen for two to three years. Crops have withered, and both man and animals are in grave danger of starvation. In parts of Turkana, only wild fruits are available and even these are diminishing.

DISEASE

As indicated earlier, poverty goes hand in hand with disease and sickness. Thus the suffering caused by disease becomes an extra burden to

⁵ Kanyandogo op cit p.62-63

those already weighed down by poverty. Malaria, tuberculosis and more recently HIV and AIDS have caused untold suffering to the poor. Malaria is as preventable as tuberculosis. Yet these two kill more people on the continent than does HIV and AIDS. They continue to die out of ignorance and poverty. Very often, they cannot access the few hospitals and medical centres that may be near them (Near-might mean an hour or more away). They die of typhoid, dysentery and cholera because of lack of clean drinking water and emergency medical care.

In spite of the dangers posed by these other diseases, HIV and AIDS has succeeded in almost paralysing the African Continent. It is estimated that 30% of the adult population in Africa is infected with the virus. These statistics coupled with the psychological and racial warfare against Africa make the very mention of the disease taboo among the people. The West has insisted on the African Continent as the origin of HIV and AIDS. The disease has increasingly been painted as an African problem. In Africa itself it has become a disease of the poor. Is it any wonder that for many African peoples HIV and AIDS as a curse? The fact that it was introduced to the Continent as a disease shrouded in mystery, and that there is no known cure for it entrenched this belief. With it has come a sense of cynicism and self hatred. The victims of HIV and AIDS are blamed for their conditions. At the global level, Africa as blamed for the poverty and disease which it harbours.

From the above descriptions it would appear that the suffering in the global south in human induced. In this perspective, it can be understood as a result of sin and oppression. Believers must therefore work hard to destroy the structures that make this possible. In many ways the church has failed to do this by accepting some of the sources of poverty as natural. Indeed in some cases the church has adapted some of those structures as her own. Believers have failed to be a beacon of light in dark world of pain and suffering. On the other hand we must acknowledge the efforts made by branches of the church to alleviate the suffering. Right from the missionary era to the present, Faith Based organizations have contributed immensely in poverty reduction and in providing education in areas where even governments themselves do not go.

But we do know that not all the suffering is human induced. And even when it is, the question still lingers on. Why does God allow the strong to oppress the poor and suffering of the earth? This is a question that must linger on at the back of our minds whenever we come face to face with suffering.

Suffering arouses in the human beings feelings of ‘aloneness’ and being forsaken. This feeling is sometimes seen on the faces of African peoples. They are alone and God has indeed forsaken them. This feeling is neither new nor sinful. Indeed did Christ not die on the cross with a cry of godforsakenness? His cry “my God, my God, why have you forsaken me” shows the sense of abandonment that He must have had at that particular moment. In Africa as in the rest of the two thirds world, we can take comfort in the fact that we are sharing in the suffering of Jesus even when it seems

senseless. Understood from this perspective, God is present in every situation.

Nevertheless, we must still accept that it is difficult to see God in what we perceive as suffering without reason. Suffering as characterized by the cross as well as Job's suffering does indeed appear like it has no explanation. Indeed we are not given adequate explanation for Job's suffering, except his renewed vitality and complete dependence on God. Suffering somehow makes him resilient. The cross only makes sense as a tool for salvation. Otherwise we would have myriads of question regarding its meaning. From Job's experience and even the suffering on the cross however, another question arises, who is ultimately responsible for suffering. If we say it's the evil one, then indeed we are questioning the sovereignty of God. In Job's story Satan asks for permission from God. This implies that Satan can do nothing which is out of God's will. So God would appear to be ultimately responsible for the suffering in the Global South and indeed everywhere else. We can still get comfort even out of this situation that whatever the case, God is in control and indeed He will not let us fall off the precipice

But what does this view do to our belief in the goodness of God. How can a good God allow Africans to suffer so much almost without respite?

Suffering is therefore not just a physical and experiential challenge. It is a major theological challenge for scholars as well as believers in Christ. It is a challenge which we have to grapple with as there are no clear cut answers to the questions it raises.

CONCLUSION

We may be forced to conclude that suffering is indeed a mystery. It is a question that many religions grapple with. The Christian in particular must accept the fact that all the explanations we have tried to give help us to accept suffering, but they are altogether unsatisfactory in answering the question of why.

In the two thirds world (as indeed elsewhere) so much of the suffering is due to human nature and the sin that is inherent in us. However, a lot of the suffering that we must endure is inexplicable. This is why we must indeed take refuge in the sovereignty of God. From a theocentric theology we can only but accept by faith that God allows suffering, but He alone also knows the reasons why we must suffer.

Yet in the words of Boonyakial⁶ we need not be afraid of complaining, sometimes loudly. Faith may not give us an explanation for suffering, but faith gives us hope in the knowledge that in the end all will be well. For some situations in life, we shall find no satisfactory answer. This would appear to be the case in much of Africa's suffering. Indeed for the believer, this must

⁶ Boonyakial. "Suffering" in William Dyness, Voli-Matti Karkkainen (eds) Global Dictionary of Theology. Downers: Intervarsity Press, 2008, p.857-863

be a journey of faith, that does not necessarily give satisfactory explanations of suffering. But a faith that believes that darkness comes before the dawn.