

# The Role of Religion During and After the Civil War in Sierra Leone

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## Abstract

Civil wars in Africa are renowned for their strong religious elements, with religion being used for different purposes and in different capacities. Sierra Leone's civil war (1991-2002), known also as the "rebel war," had significant religious dimensions. The warring factions used religion for their gain. Beyond that, Muslim and Christian groups provided relief supplies for war victims and, through interfaith cooperation, succeeded in brokering peace between the government and the rebels. This article will present an account of the roles religion played in the Sierra Leonean civil war: as instigator, justifier, and eventually reconciler. In so doing, I will argue against singular modalities of religion, which fail to illustrate the permeation of religion in African society and the sphere of capabilities of religious leaders and organizations in war-torn states.

Sierra Leone's civil war (1991-2002) commonly referred to as the "rebel war," attracted great international attention. Its suggested causes, its cultural, political, and sociological dynamics and impacts are well documented.<sup>1</sup> The product of library and field research undertaken in 2002, 2005 and 2006 in Sierra Leone,<sup>2</sup> this paper discusses the functionalist role of religion and the contributions made by religious groups during and after the war.<sup>3</sup> It takes into consideration the role religion played within the warring groups, on the battlefield, in the restoration of peace, and in the healing, rehabilitation and reconstruction processes after the war.

The civil war in Sierra Leone, like many African wars, had significant religious elements, both because religious ideas, rituals and institutions played an active

role during and after the war, and because the war produced important socio-religious changes, which deserve to be studied contextually.<sup>4</sup>

Religious elements have played a role in many African conflicts “ever since pre-colonial times, just as European colonialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries gave rise to resistance movements that were partly inspired by religion – either by traditional religions or by Islam” (Møller 2006:6).<sup>5</sup>

Postcolonial civil wars in Africa, like previous civil wars and anti-colonial resistance, are believed to have religious elements.<sup>6</sup> The Sudanese civil war, among other contributory factors, has generally been considered as a war between the dominant and more developed Muslim North and the less developed Southern region that is predominated by African traditional religions and Christianity (Hasan 2002: 22).<sup>7</sup>

Rwanda is among the most Christian countries in Africa, but in the 1994 genocide, many Christians participated in violence, transforming church buildings and properties into slaughtering grounds (Longman 2010). In Somalia, the moderate Sufi Islamic sect is in a continuing war with the *Shabab* of the *Wahhabi* Islamic sect. Intermittently, the war between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria continues.

The Human Rights watch report, “The New Racism: The Political Manipulation of Ethnicity in Cote d’Ivoire,” which describes atrocities perpetuated during presidential and parliamentary elections in October and December 2000, states that after the elections in late 2000 in Cote d’Ivoire, government security forces started “targeting civilians solely and explicitly on the basis of their religion, ethnic group, or national origin.” The majority of victims were from the dominant Muslim North of the country.

In African postcolonial civil wars, religion has been used for different purposes and in different capacities. Some individuals or groups use religion during war for protection and supremacy. In times of atrocity and violence wanting the best, devout and non-devout people are known for turning to religion for help in their worldly struggles. War has compelled some warring factions to turn to a higher power for approval and supremacy – a phenomenon that is evident in many religions (Schmidt-Leukel 2004).

Diverse groups have appropriated elements of religion in various ways in their struggle to survive and overcome the mayhem and horrors of war. During the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970) fought between the Igbo people and the Nigerian federation, it was reported that some Igbo people resorted to traditional sacrifices and solicited the help of sacred specialists to influence the course and outcome of the war in their favour. Disappointingly, the war did not end in their favour; the federal government won and the secessionists surrendered.

Kastfelt (2005: 8-21) under the theme “Religion, rationality and war”<sup>8</sup> has argued that most of the leaders of the warring factions during the Liberian

civil war claimed to have been in direct communication with God and other supernatural forces that gave them supernatural powers. He noted that some Liberians held the belief that the late Liberian head of state, Samuel K. Doe, during the early stages of the Liberian civil war, was impervious to bullets, and had the power to disappear in the face of danger through the help of some West African sacred specialists (2005: 11). This belief of Doe's supernatural prowess and imperviousness was also held by many Sierra Leoneans. In my view, a plausible explanation is yet to be given as to how Doe lost his supernatural power and was eventually captured and executed.

It appears that African leaders make claims of possessing supernatural powers during times of violence and unrest as a strategy to discourage and prevent opponents from pursuing them, especially in a continent where the power of the supernatural is feared and held in high esteem. How effective or ineffective the supernatural is in African civil war is still debatable.

Some groups in the name of religion have fanned the flames of conflict and have perpetuated awful atrocities.<sup>9</sup> This is what Kastfelt (2005: 8) refers to as "Religion and the legitimization of war." This is when religious ideas and establishments are used in validating civil war and the use of violence. A case in point is the determination of Sudan's Islamic government to exterminate what they called *dhimmi*s ("second-class citizens"/"infidels") - the African Religionists, Christians in Southern Sudan and their sympathizers - through a jihad (Sidahmed 2002: 83-96; Kastfelt 2005: 16, 39-40, 56-57). The year 1992 was officially declared "as the year of Jihad in Kordofan to liberate it from the infidels" (Sidahmed 2002: 88). On 27 April 1992, six pro-government religious leaders issued a *fatwa* ("religious decree") legalising jihad in southern Kordofan and Southern Sudan. "Subsequently, jihad committees were created all over the country to enhance the jihad in Kordofan" (Sidahmed 2002: 87). Following the declaration of jihad in Kordofan, the Sudanese government launched its greatest military offensive against the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and the people in the South. Despite the deployment of a Sudanese government force of about 45,000 soldiers and *mujahidin*, the government did not succeed in dislodging a relatively tiny SPLA force from their position on the Nuba hills.

Similarly, in Rwanda, churches, especially the Catholic Church, in many cases supported the perpetrators of atrocities during the genocide era.<sup>10</sup> One of the "examples in the 1990s (sic) of the legitimising role of religion is the Rwanda genocide in 1994 in which we saw both an intellectual and an institutional use of religion-intellectually, by using particular religious ideas as a way of justifying political action, and institutionally through a close alliance between churches and the agents of the genocide" (Kastfelt 2005: 16). The Holy Spirit Movement of Alice Lakewena and the Lord's Resistance Army of Joseph Kony in northern Uganda in the 1980s and 1990s, were "perceived as prophetic spirit movements,

as armies of God fighting the evils of this world; and both were rooted in local religious traditions which were renewed in the face of war and upheaval” (Kastfelt 2005: 12-13).

Contemporary civil wars in Africa have resuscitated old stereotypes of Africa and her peoples. African wars have caused some of the warring countries to be classified as “losers” or “failures.” The continent is being portrayed as steeped in superstition and tribal warfare the nature of which does not fit conventional models of warfare and social conflict (Kastfelt 2005: 1-2). Richards (1996) calls this type of portrayal the “New Barbarism thesis” and argues for a deviation from this line of interpretation and stereotyping.

In what follows, I will provide a brief socio-history of Sierra Leone; and will discuss theories about the origin of the war, the religious dimensions of the war as portrayed by the warring factions, and the roles played by religious groups during and after the war.

## Sierra Leone: An Overview

Sierra Leone, located in West Africa, is bounded on the North by the republic of Guinea, on the South by Liberia, and on the West and South/West by the Atlantic Ocean. It occupies a total area of 27,925 miles and is fairly circular in shape: the distance from north to south is 210 miles, and from west to east is approximately 204 miles (Alie 1990: 1).

Sierra Leone became an independent state within the British Commonwealth on 27 April 1961 and subsequently attained republican status on 19 April 1971. The capital city is Freetown and there are four national administrative divisions: the Eastern, Northern, and Southern Provinces, and the Western Area. There are at least seventeen ethnic groups in the country.

As a former British colony, Sierra Leone retains English as the official language although it is used primarily by the literate minority, while Krio is spoken by most people. There are two main seasons in the country, the Wet, from May to early November, and the Dry, from mid November to April. The estimated population of Sierra Leone as of July 2010 is 5,245,695 persons.

Like many sub-Saharan African countries, the major religions of Sierra Leone are Islam, African Religion (AR) and Christianity. Recent estimates put Islam at 60 per cent, AR at 30 per cent and Christianity at 10 per cent.

## Causes of the War

The precise causes of war and unrest are sometimes difficult to determine. Most often, they are identified as a combination of several factors including politics, economics, ethnicity, and religion. There are several theories about the origin

and motivation of the war in Sierra Leone. The most popular theory is that the Revolutionary United Front's (RUF) insurrection was fuelled against the corruption and authoritarianism of the All People's Congress (APC) government. Long before the rebel war, disgruntled Sierra Leoneans were praying and hoping for a radical political change that would end the twenty-four year reign of the APC government. Most people thought that the only way a one party system of government would be successfully defeated was through a bloody uprising.

Therefore, when on 23 March 1991 the RUF, led by Foday Sankoh, a corporal discharged from the Sierra Leone army by the APC government for his participation in an attempt to destabilise the regime, started a rebel war in the southern and eastern parts of the country to overthrow the regime, the rebellion was welcomed albeit with some reservations.<sup>11</sup>

Another popular theory was that the RUF was "embittered by exclusion from education and employment opportunities" (Richards 2005: 119). According to their Anthem sung daily in their forest camps, the RUF was fighting to save Sierra Leone and her people (2005: 119). It went on to assure the people that Sierra Leone were ready to utilise its wealth. All the country's mineral resources would be accounted for, and the people would enjoy the fruit of their land. To realize this utopia, the people needed the RUF as a saviour. Initially, the group received impressive support because people were looking for a change, but when the RUF revolutionary fervor degenerated into bloodlust and greed for control of the nation's only significant source of wealth – the diamond mines – people lost hope in the group. Diamonds, as a source of generating funds for the RUF and its patrons, have been referred to as "blood diamonds."<sup>12</sup> According to testimony before the Special Court for Sierra Leone, the former Liberian head of state, Charles Taylor now on war crimes trial in Leidschendam, near The Hague has been accused of receiving "mayonnaise jars" of so-called blood diamonds from the RUF, some of which he gave to supermodel Naomi Campbell at a charity dinner in South Africa in 1997. Prosecutor Brenda Hollis in her closing arguments described Taylor as an "intelligent, charismatic manipulator" who armed the RUF rebels that staged one of the most brutal conflicts in modern times, in exchange for illegally mined diamonds.

Taylor has been indicted on eleven counts of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and other serious breaches of international humanitarian law committed in Sierra Leone during the decade long civil war. The Prosecution alleges that Taylor is responsible for crimes which include: murdering and mutilating civilians, cutting off their limbs, using women and girls as sex slaves, and abducting children and adults to perform forced labor or become fighters during the conflict in Sierra Leone.

In her closing arguments prosecutor Hollis said Taylor was driven by greed and power lust in arming rebels during Sierra Leone's civil war. Taylor, she said

“bears the greatest responsibility for the horrific crimes committed against the people of Sierra Leone through the campaign of terror inflicted on them.” The Sierra Leone civil war claimed some 120,000 lives in the 10 years from 1991 to 2001, with RUF rebels mutilating thousands of civilians who had their hands and arms severed. Taylor “was in charge of, put in place, directed, nurtured and supported the campaign of terror,” said Hollis, all “to forcibly control the people and territory of Sierra Leone ... its resources, in particular its diamonds.” Taylor is charged on the basis that he allegedly backed RUF rebels fighting in Sierra Leone; that he had links with senior leaders in the RUF—such as Foday Sankoh, Sam Bockarie (a.k.a. Mosquito), Issa Sesay, and others—in addition to a second warring faction, the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC); and that he was responsible for Liberian forces fighting in support of the Sierra Leonean rebels.

Sierra Leoneans have long believed, and the information coming from The Hague now supports, that Taylor armed Foday Sankoh and his RUF rebels who staged an incursion into Sierra Leone. From the outset, the then APC government of Sierra Leone did not support Taylor’s National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) rebel incursion into Liberia to gain power through arms insurgency. In spite of the APC government’s disapproval of the NPFL, the government agreed to host the June 1990 Liberian civil war conference in Freetown, in which representatives of the Liberian government met with the NPFL and the Mediation Committee of Religious Leaders of Liberia (Kieh 2009: 11).

Because of Taylor’s greed and his vendetta against the APC government, he chose and armed Sankoh, a Sierra Leonean who was a member of NPFL and who had a bitter grudge against the Sierra Leonean government for dismissing him from the army. Taylor and Sankoh were both power hungry to rule their respective countries.

It was disappointing to Sierra Leoneans that less than a year after offering their country to the Liberian warring factions to negotiate a peace deal, the NPFL sponsored the RUF to launch a rebel incursion into their country on March 1991.

Whatever the origin and cause of the war, the civil war in Sierra Leone falls under what Clapham (1998: 7) categorizes as the fourth type of insurgency in Africa, that is, warlord insurgency, which aims at changing the state’s leadership without trying to form a new state completely different from the existing one. In view of the above discussion and extensive evidence, the civil war in Sierra Leone was neither religiously nor ethnically motivated. It was politically motivated and emanated from greed to have control of the country’s mineral resources.

The war resulted in over one hundred thousand deaths,<sup>15</sup> and the displacement of more than one-third of the population, many of whom sought refuge in Freetown and neighboring countries. Most have returned since the war officially ended in 2002.

## Religion in the Warring Camps

Mbiti (1989: 2) has observed that wherever the African is he/she is with his/her religion: he/she takes it to the farm, to parties, to the classroom, and to the house of parliament. I will add to this observation by saying that the African also takes his/her religion to the battlefield of war. Religion is a way of life that permeates every aspect of the African life. All that is sustaining or weakening in African life is “anchored in religion whether it be the individual’s relationship to the family, the clan and tribe, or morality, law, worship, politics, social status, economics, etiquette, wars and peace” (Mendelsohn 1962: 10). The Durkheimian view “that where there is society there is religion,” further portrays the African culture (Kastfelt 2005: 12; see Hopfe 1998:6).

## The RUF

In the deep reserves of the fortified jungles of Sierra Leone, the RUF, using local religious traditions as its guide, developed its own form of religious observance, rituals and worship that provided functional values to maintain their camp. Daily life in the camp began at 6:00 a.m. with compulsory prayers. Absentees were punished. Since every member of the camp was expected to practice either Islam or Christianity, different members were appointed each day to lead in prayers which would be concluded with a general recitation of the Lord’s Prayer, followed by the *Al-Fatihah*.<sup>14</sup>

On the battlefield, many RUF soldiers wore crosses or carried rosaries, or talismans. For most, AR was the religion of the battlefield. Through charms made by sacred specialists, some fighters claimed to be impervious to the bullets of the enemy. Thus AR was practiced alongside Islam and Christianity, continuing a long practice of dual religiosity.<sup>15</sup> All the religious objects carried and used assured the soldiers of God’s presence, and were believed to possess supernatural powers for protection against the enemy.

## A Government Dilemma and Religious Responses

Sierra Leone’s army had participated in the two World Wars under the umbrella of the British, and had sent platoons on UN and regional military and peacekeeping missions, but the army had been considered primarily ‘ceremonial’ and had never before fought a large scale war on a home front. Several months into the war, it became evident that the army was ill-equipped and largely unprepared for combat. At the time the war broke out there were approximately 3,000 soldiers, and although that number was subsequently increased to 16,000, there was still no strong military or police presence in the hinterland, leaving the people there vulnerable to sporadic attacks by the RUF guerrilla fighters.

Realizing the practical defenselessness of the army, and believing that the only hope for an end to the war was some form of supernatural intervention, Christian and Muslim organisations in Freetown encouraged their congregants to fast and pray. At Sunday worship services in the church and at Friday prayers in the mosques, sermons of hope and liberation were preached. The Council of Churches in Sierra Leone (CCSL) sent memos to churches to observe a time of prayer. Although in general these prayers were said for an end to the war, in my experience, they were usually offered specifically for the protection of the citizens of Freetown.

The lack of logistics and the unprepared army also led the APC government to make a public announcement on national radio encouraging all citizens, especially those in the hinterland, to use whatever traditional means or power they had to combat the rebels.

This call by the government gave birth to several ethnic defence groups in the hinterland. The *Tamaboro* (“traditional warriors”) group was formed by the Kuranko and Yalunka people in the north. This group was later joined by some Limba people who were said to have been recruited from Warawara Bafodea Limba Chiefdom, a place which is particularly noted for its attachment to traditional beliefs in Sierra Leone (Opala and Boillot 1996). The *Gbeti* (“traditional hunters”) and *Kapra* (“traditional hunters”) groups were formed by the Temne in the north. The *Kamajoi* (“traditional hunters”) was formed by the Mende people in the south and the east, and the *Donsa* (“traditional hunters”) was formed by the Kono in the east. Members of these groups were mostly hunters who belonged to secret societies and were believed to be experts in traditional spirituality and medicine. On the battlefield, they used not only conventional arms and “witch guns” but through spiritual means used killer bees to attack and destabilise the rebels. Although it cannot be substantiated, it is believed that some rebels even died from the painful stings of the bees. Also believed, but not proven, is that the traditional fighters possessed the supernatural ability to turn daylight into darkness to prevent the rebels from seeing where they were going. The traditional fighters could see the rebels but the rebels were unable to see the approaching traditional militia, which gave the latter the upper hand in the war. Claims about supernatural gifts and prowess by warring factions in Africa are a means to weaken opponents.

Although each ethnic defense group employed its own strategies, one thing that was common among all of them was the use of a protective traditional outfit called *huronko/ronko*.<sup>16</sup> The traditional militias were not the only ones to use African religious means to fight. The rebels also made use of their own African religious powers to frustrate the efforts of the ethnic defense groups.

The APC government was overthrown on 29 April 1992 by disgruntled young army officers who subsequently formed the National Provisional Ruling



Council (NPRC) and appointed Captain Valentine Strasser as head of state. Captain Strasser was a Christian and had once served as a chorister in his family church. Although the national army, which had better military prowess than the rebels, was in charge of the country, the NPRC did not take things for granted. In manifestation of his strong belief in and dependence on God to end the war and usher in peace, Captain Strasser immediately proclaimed a national week of fasting and prayer in which I personally participated and led in the Methodist Church I was serving as a minister.

Muslim and Christian organisations and believers were delighted with this new development. In response, the CCSL sent a memo to member churches to organize daily services during the week of prayer and fasting. Attached to the memo was a suggested liturgy for worship leaders to follow. In the mosques, prayers were also offered for a speedy end to the menace and a return of peace.

Religious organisations did not only fast and pray for the end of the war, they also setup relief and rehabilitation programs which provided daily assistance of food and clothing to displaced people and those affected by the war. The CCSL, along with many Christian denominations and Muslim organisations, set up relief supply stations in areas of the country where there was no fighting.

## Religion in Peace, Reconciliation and Reconstruction

Although religious groups have a long history of perpetuating atrocities directly and indirectly (Longman 2010), religion has generally been considered to be an agent of peace. Religious groups are expected to be a vital source in the promotion and maintenance of peace. The call for peace is deeply embedded in the teachings of most world religions and each of the major religious traditions of the world has proclaimed peace and reconciliation (Schmidt-Leukel 2004; Johnston 2003; Davies 2006: 5-7; Kalokoh 2006: 11-13). Although all were not successful, there are cases of mediation and peacemaking by religious leaders and institutions that are worth mentioning. Amidst the deteriorating security situation and the failure of the international community to intervene earlier in the first Liberian civil war,<sup>17</sup> the clergy decided to intervene in the conflict to mediate a settlement (Kieh 2009: 8-10). The clergy intervened in two phases: the first was done exclusively by the Liberian Council of Churches in January and May 1990. The second phase was initiated in June 1990 by the Religious Leaders of Liberia, a much broader and more inclusive group that included both Christian and Muslim clerics. Unfortunately, all the mediations failed because Doe and Taylor had irreconcilable agendas (Kieh 2009: 9-13). The war officially ended under the terms of the Abuja II Peace Accord mediated by the Economic Organisation of West African States (ECOWAS).

Though short-lived, in 1972 the World Council of Churches (WCC) and

the All Africa Conference of Churches mediated peace in Sudan, bringing an end to the first civil war in Sudan that started in 1955 (Gray 2002: 124-25).<sup>18</sup> The World Conference of Religion for Peace (WCRP), founded in 1970, is the largest international coalition of representatives from the world's great religions dedicated to the promotion of peace. WCRP "has often been a contributory factor for reconciliation and mediation in many conflict situations, and today is recognized as an inter-religious partner by international associations like the UN. WCRP is active in some of the most troubled areas of the world, creating multi-religious partnerships and councils to stop war, end poverty, and protect the earth. Their initiative and support have led to the formation of inter-religious councils around the world to deal with the aforementioned issues (Klaes 2004: 212-213).

For example, after the formation of an inter-religious council in Sierra Leone in 1997, WCRP launched an inter-faith council in Liberia in 1999. In 2002 councils were formed in Guinea, Mozambique and Cambodia, and in 2003 inter-religious councils were created in Botswana, Burundi, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Namibia, Swaziland and Zambia. With the help and organisation of WCRP, representatives of the inter-religious councils of Sierra Leone, Guinea and Ghana conducted a peace solidarity mission to Cote d'Ivoire during the civil war.

In Southern Africa, various churches were at the vanguard of the struggle against apartheid and the implementation of reconciliation and peace. Two of the most cited cases are the successful mediation achieved by the Rome-based Community of Sant'Egidio which helped end the civil war in Mozambique in 1992, and successful mediation of the inter-religious council of Sierra Leone in ending the country's civil war.

In Sierra Leone as in many African countries, religion and religious leaders are held in high esteem. Their elevated status allows them to effectively take on the role as mediators and players, especially in cases of national upheaval. On account of their influence, they are relied on to broker peace during times of national crises.

Unlike the initiation of peace by the Liberian clergy in neighbouring Liberia during their civil war as discussed above, in Sierra Leone the idea of the intervention and the brokerage of peace during the civil war was initiated by WCRP. In January 1997, a representative of WCRP was sent from New York, USA to Sierra Leone to discuss the formation of a forum for inter-religious dialogue that would intervene in the civil war in order to restore peace and reconciliation. The first meeting, hosted at the American Embassy in Freetown, brought together religious leaders for a consultative meeting in order to, among other things, introduce the idea of forming a forum for dialogue (Khanu 2001: 57). This resulted in subsequent meetings, which were supported and financed by WCRP, and the proposal for a wider consultative forum was accepted in principle.

With the encouragement of and sponsorship by the WCRP, and the knowledge that religion and religious leaders are respected and heard, and the understanding that in a diverse society such as Sierra Leone, multi-faith cooperation for peace would be more effective than the efforts of a single religious group; after several consultations, a one-day multi-religious national conference was convened in the capital city of Freetown on 1 April 1997.

The conference attracted over two hundred Muslim and Christian delegates from the areas of Sierra Leone that were not occupied by rebels. Two statements were proposed, adopted, and presented to the head of state (Khanu 2001: 57). The two statements signed by a representative from each of the religious streams—Muslims, Roman Catholics, and Protestants—that officially launched the inter-religious council of Sierra Leone (IRCSL) were presented as follows:

*Statement of Shared Moral Concerns*

Concerned for the physical and social reconstruction of Sierra Leone and for reconciliation among all peoples in our nation, the undersigned responsible representatives of the Christian Churches and the leaders of the Islamic Community have decided to issue the following common statement:

1. The people of Sierra Leone have undergone enormous suffering. But, thanks be to God, the peace accords have been signed. Our task now is to establish a durable peace based on truth, justice and common living, and to collaborate with all people of good will in the healing tasks of reconciliation, reconstruction, and rehabilitation for Sierra Leone.
2. We, the responsible representatives of the Christian Churches and the Islamic Community in Sierra Leone recognise that our Religious Communities differ from each other, and that each of them feels called to live true to its own faith. At the same time, we recognise that our religious and spiritual traditions hold many values in common, and that these shared values can provide an authentic basis for mutual esteem, cooperation, and free common living in Sierra Leone.
3. Each of our Religious Communities recognizes that human dignity and human value is a gift of God. Our religions, each in its own way, call us to recognize the fundamental human rights of each person. Violence against persons or the violation of their basic rights are for us not only against man-made laws but also break God's law.
4. We jointly in mutual respectful recognition of our religious differences, condemn all violence against innocent persons and any

form of abuse or violation of fundamental human rights.

Specifically, we condemn:

- (a) Acts of hatred based on political, ethnic or religious differences.  
We express our special concern at the burning of houses and property, and the destruction of religious buildings;
  - (b) The obstruction of the free right return;
  - (c) Any acts of revenge;
  - (d) The abuse of any media by any agency or entity with the aim of spreading hatred.
5. Further, we call for respect for the fundamental human rights of all persons, regardless of political, religious or ethnic affiliation, which must include:
- (a) The freedom of all responsible representatives or leaders of Religious Communities in Sierra Leone to fulfill their mission in every part of the country;
  - (b) Opportunities for the free performance of religious services and all forms of pastoral care by all Christian ministers and priests, and by all Sheikhs and Imams of the Islamic community;
  - (c) The right of every child to religious instruction in his or her own faith.
6. Finally, we call on people of good will to take responsibility for their own acts. Let us treat others as we would wish them to treat us.
7. With this statement we appeal to all believers of our Religious Communities, and to all citizens of Sierra Leone, and to H.E. Alhaji Dr. A.T. Kabbah, President of the Republic of Sierra Leone.

Signed on 1 April 1997 by:

Al-Sheikh Ahmad Tejan Sillah, Islamic Community in Sierra Leone  
Rev. Moses Benson Khanu, Council of Churches in Sierra Leone  
Archbishop Joseph Ganda, Roman Catholic Community in Sierra Leone

*Statement of Shared Values and Common Purpose*

The following was the content of the Declaration of Shared Values and Common Purpose:

WHEREAS, we believe in God, and in the revealed law of God, and  
WHEREAS, we believe in the natural law and the just law of man,  
and  
WHEREAS, we believe in the equality of all people before God and  
the Law, and

WHEREAS, we recognize our common human destiny, and  
WHEREAS, we recognize our common history with religious and cultural diversity, and  
WHEREAS, we recognize our common benefit in unity with diversity, and  
WHEREAS, we commit ourselves to truth, justice and common living, and  
WHEREAS, we commit ourselves to the respect and protection of human rights, and  
WHEREAS, we commit ourselves to peace in Sierra Leone and the world, and  
WHEREAS, we trust the just Law of the land of Sierra Leone, and  
WHEREAS, we feel responsible for the future of our nation, and the religious communities of Sierra Leone and beyond.

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that the Legitimate heads of the following religious communities of Sierra Leone:  
The Islamic Community in Sierra Leone  
The Council of Churches in Sierra Leone, and  
The Roma Catholic Community in Sierra Leone  
have written their good will in the form of the Declaration for the establishment of an Inter-religious Council of Sierra Leone.

Signed on 1 April 1997 by:  
Al-Sheikh Ahmad Tejan Sillah, Islamic Community in Sierra Leone  
Rev. Moses Benson Khanu, Council of Churches in Sierra Leone  
Archbishop Joseph Ganda, Roman Catholic Community in Sierra Leone. (Khanu 2001: 72-73)

The IRCSL is a fully recognized member of the WCRP. The objective of IRCSL that was agreed upon in conjunction with WCRP was to equip and mobilize cooperative efforts among the religious communities in Sierra Leone, and to take concrete steps in restoring stability, reconciliation and renewal to Sierra Leone (Khanu 2001: 58). IRCSL promotes cooperation among the religious communities of Sierra Leone for peace while maintaining respect for religious differences, and works to identify and put into action common religious commitments and principles conducive to the peace of the human community. The civil war in Sierra Leone brought a new awareness of the imperative to explore new and creative ways to reengage Sierra Leoneans in a meaningful relationship and dialogue. The formation of IRCSL was a step in the right direction.

A few months after its inception, the democratically elected Sierra Leone

People's Party (SLPP) government was ousted in a military *coup d'état* on 25 May 1997 by the AFRC, eventually headed by Major Johnny Paul Koroma. The IRCSL wasted no time in condemning the action of the military on international radio broadcasting stations, and demanded the return of power to the legitimate government. This prompt action of the IRCSL sent the message that the group is going to be an influential and powerful stakeholder in Sierra Leonean politics. Disappointingly, IRCSL's condemnation and call to the AFRC to return power to the democratically elected SLPP was not accepted by the AFRC. Later the AFRC invited the IRCSL to take part in the new government's inaugural ceremony but the IRCSL graciously declined to participate. The AFRC then chose religious leaders that they believed were supportive of their cause to offer prayers at the ceremony.

The AFRC reinforced its rule by inviting the RUF—the national enemy of Sierra Leone—in a power sharing government. The AFRC thought that involving the RUF in the governance of the country would encourage them to lay down arms and work for the interest of the nation. The strategy failed. The RUF was not satisfied in a government sharing arrangement. Despite the AFRC's attempt to create an inclusive government, the RUF was committed to a strategy that depended on the exclusion of other political agendas. The result of this failure to unite the two groups rivalling for power was more suffering and misery for the Sierra Leonean people. It was no surprise that after nine months in power, the AFRC and RUF were removed from power by the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG)—the peacekeeping arm of ECOWAS—and the SLPP government was reinstated in March 1998. The IRCSL in response held a joint Muslim-Christian service that was attended by thousands of people at the National Stadium in Freetown in thanksgiving to God for the restoration of the SLPP government.

Because most of the AFRC leaders were active soldiers in the Sierra Leone army before the takeover, as many as could be found were quickly arrested and executed by the SLPP government. SLPP also disbanded a huge faction of the Sierra Leone Army considered to be loyal to Major Johnny Paul and the AFRC.

On January 6 1999, known as the "Day of Infamy," the joint forces of the disbanded Sierra Leone Army and the RUF rebels entered Freetown and reined unfathomable atrocities in revenge. When things eventually calmed down, the IRCSL called a consultative meeting that was attended by hundreds of leaders and dignitaries seeking a mandate to pursue peace mediation between the rebels and the government. The meeting unanimously mandated leaders of the IRCSL to pursue peace between the rebels and the government. The IRCSL not only succeeded in bringing together the head of state, rebel leaders, and all participants in the conflict, but was also able to persuade the warring factions to agree to dialogue and to find a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Seeing the

willingness of the warring groups to pursue peace, the ECOWAS, the African Union (AU), the Commonwealth, and the United Nations Organisation (UN) agreed to facilitate peace talks in Lome, Togo West Africa.

On account of its outstanding mediation and results, these international facilitating groups and the sides in the conflict granted the IRCSL “Track One” status in peace negotiations (Khanu 2001: 59). The IRCSL proceeded to formulate guidelines based on generally accepted moral principles and the relevant rules of law.

With the support of Norwegian Church Aid the IRCSL provided food for government and RUF forces, a step that considerably reduced the rampant looting. The Lome Peace Accord between the RUF and the Sierra Leone government was signed by the head of state Ahmed Tejan Kabbah and RUF leader Foday Sankoh on 7 July 1999.

In January 2000, the IRCSL came up with a working proposal for the Reconstruction and Renewal in Sierra Leone to be implemented by Muslims and Christians. The proposal covered six areas that the council intended to participate in the process of reconstruction and renewal:

- Disarmament and demobilisation of the estimated 45,000 ex-combatants
- Unearthing and investigating human-rights abuses during the war
- Addressing the democratisation and special needs of ex-rebels
- Integration, rehabilitation and healing of ex-child-soldiers
- The provision of strategic human assistance for ex-soldiers in terms of skills training and reintegration into society
- National Campaign for Confession, Forgiveness, Reconciliation and Renewal

The IRCSL has fully participated in these projects, and successfully completed its assignment despite several challenges and setbacks. These projects are now in the hands of the government and the IRCSL continues to play a role where needed.

The Peace Accord that was signed in 1999 was broken in 2000 by the RUF when they unexpectedly attacked UN peacekeeping forces and held hostage 500 soldiers, most of whom were Zambians. This setback did not deter the work and plans of the IRCSL.

In pursuit of stability, reconciliation and renewal in Sierra Leone, an IRCSL delegation visited Europe, North America and Africa, and also met with representatives of the WCC and the Action by Churches Together (ACT) in Ferney-Voltaire, France, to sensitize people and organisations to the developments in the country and to encourage advocacy. The IRCSL advocated the funding of more international military forces in the country.

In his paper delivered at the International Congress of Dialogue on Civilizations, Religions and Cultures in West Africa held at Abuja (Nigeria) in December of 2003, Monsignor Denis Isizoh of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue (PCID) in the Vatican, acclaimed the mediatory role the IRCSL played between the government and the rebels as a successful step, that continues serve as a paradigm for peace initiatives and an inspiration to religious leaders and establishments in Africa to get involved in conflict resolution and become the voice of the marginalised and voiceless (Isizoh 2003:33).

Most importantly, inter-religious dialogue and cooperation continue to take place between Muslims and Christians on the basis of a common humanity, and unity through creation. The Sierra Leonean government now has it as a rule to go through the IRCSL on any matter pertaining the involvement and welfare of religion instead of going through the different Christian and Muslim organisations. This rule has encouraged religious groups that were not completely interested in inter-religious cooperation to work with the IRCSL.

The need for constant dialogue and cooperation, as well as the expression of views in support of the common good of Muslims and Christians, gave birth to the launching of the IRP series by the CCSL. The first in the series, *Peaceful Co-existence in a Multi-Religious Society* (2006), explored the historical and theological aspects of interfaith cooperation and the shared affinities of Islam and Christianity as recorded in the Qur'an and the Bible. The second publication, *War, Peace and Reconciliation* (2006), summarized from Christian and Muslim perspectives their understanding of War, Peace and Reconciliation based on the histories and Holy Scriptures of the two faiths.

## **The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Sierra Leone**

The Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established as a condition of the Lome Peace Accord, an Accord which as discussed above came about on account of the work of the IRCSL. The TRC's mandate was to "create an impartial historical record of violations and abuses of human rights and international humanitarian law related to the armed conflict in Sierra Leone, from the beginning of the Conflict in 1991 to the signing of the Lome Peace Agreement; to address impunity, to respond to the needs of the victims, to promote healing and reconciliation and to prevent a repetition of the violations and abuses suffered." Honouring the pivotal role of the IRCSL in the peace process, the commission chose Bishop Dr. J.C Humper of the United Methodist Church to chair the proceedings.

The commission worked from November 2002 to October 2004 during which they received statements from people throughout the country and held public hearings. The TRC made its final report to the government of Sierra



Leone and the UN Security Council in 2004. This report includes the names of individual perpetrators and recommendations for the government moving forward, which is beyond the scope of this paper. However, what is more of interest to this paper is Article 7(2) of the TRC Act which explicitly refers to the assistance from traditional and religious leaders in facilitating reconciliation:

The inter-faith community in Sierra Leone has played an important role in the negotiations for peace and is still one of the strongest support networks for people affected by the war. In view of the limited mandate of the TRC, partnerships with religious and traditional leaders have become all the more important. The dialogue that has started between various groups and the community can continue with the presence of these leaders. Traditional and religious leaders can help make reconciliation more sustainable. They were involved in all the activities of the Commission, including the truth telling and conflict resolution sessions, sensitization activities, statement taking, hearings and reconciliation initiatives.

Caritas Makeni, the report went on, used such methods during reunification ceremonies for abducted children, as recounted below:<sup>19</sup>

When Caritas Makeni reunified child ex-combatants with their families, the latter sought to “change the hearts” of their children through a combination of care, support and ritual action. Usually, the eldest member of the family prayed over a cup of water and rubbed it over the child’s body (especially the head, feet, and chest), asking God and the ancestors to give the child a “cool heart,” a state of reconciliation and stability in which the child is settled in the home, has a proper relationship with family and community and is not troubled by nightmares and bad memories. Some parents then drank the consecrated water that had washed their child. The consecrated water now becomes the new physical bond between parent and child ... some parents also offered kola nuts .... Some parents, in addition, followed this up with liquid Quranic slate water .... Others again made a *fol sara* (chicken sacrifice) to thank the ancestors and God, either dedicating a chicken and caring for it thereafter, or slaughtering and cooking it with rice as an offering to poor people, or to a Muslim ritual specialist to eat.

### Conclusion

In examining the annals of civil, political and religious institutions, one would soon realize that wars and atrocities are not unique to Africa. They are universal human problems. As such, African exceptionalism should be avoided. In human history, religion has always played a role in war and peace. This was evidently the case in Sierra Leone's civil war. The rebel war of Sierra Leone had significant religious dimensions in terms of the active role played by religion during and after the war, and the socio-religious changes and innovations religious groups produced on account of the war. Religion permeates the life of the African, no matter which side of the battle he or she stands. Both warring factions—the rebels and successive national governments—used religion for their gain, while interfaith groups used it to broker peace and restore stability. The roles played by religious groups contributed immensely to the prosecution and restoration of peace in the country.

Although the war brought unforgettable destruction and mayhem to the country, it ironically succeeded in bringing two of the major religious traditions of Sierra Leone closer together than they had ever been. Religious cooperation replaced biases and indifferences as the groups worked together while maintaining respect for religious differences. This unity produced the IRCSL, which eventually succeeded in bringing together the warring sides for negotiations and a peaceful end to the war.

Religions continue to be hijacked with malicious intentions to instigate violence. Thus, some have argued that the world would be a far better place without religion. The positive results religion produced in Sierra Leone through religious cooperation and participation are a source of encouragement to religious traditions in pursuing peace and reconciliation.

Even with the efforts of the government and the IRCSL, the social and economic situation of the people of Sierra Leone has not rapidly improved. It amazes me every time I go to Sierra Leone to observe the faith kept by Sierra Leoneans amidst suffering and hardship. Even the setbacks of the decade long civil war have not lessened the people's trust in God. In many cases it seems their faith is strengthened by the experience. Their predicament, they say, is not God's doing, but the greed and selfishness of evil people. During the war and after, churches, mosques and prayer houses continue to thrive.

In Sierra Leone, the concept of "living for the moment" is given a different connotation. As Sierra Leoneans live in uncertainty and fear, every moment of everyday must be committed to God. Their objective is to fulfill God's desire every step of the way, so that even if death comes at any moment, they will surely spend eternity with their Creator. As they "live for the moment," any challenges that come their way are met with the comfort of the sentiment "this too shall pass."

## Notes

- 1 For a detailed study on these issues, see the works and bibliographies contained therein of Richards (1996), and Abdullah (2004).
- 2 The field research in 2002 and 2005 was for my doctoral studies and was limited to the role of African Religion in Sierra Leone's civil war. In 2006, the scope was broadened to include the contributions of Christianity and Islam during after the aforementioned civil war.
- 3 In another paper on the part religion played in Sierra Leone's civil war, Richards (2005: 119-46) limits his work to the camp dynamics of one of the warring factions – the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) – and the function of religion in their camps.
- 4 See Kastfelt (2005); Hasan and Gray (2002); Longman (2010), to name a few.
- 5 A popular anti-colonial African war that is believed to have religious elements is Kenya's Mau Mau rebellion from 1952-56 (see Kastfelt 2005: 5).
- 6 The edited work of Kastfelt (2005), which contains chapters originally presented as papers at a conference on "Religion and Social Upheaval in Africa" in December 1999 at Tune Landboskole outside Copenhagen, Denmark, discusses seven case studies of the role religion in some of Africa's most notorious postcolonial civil wars.
- 7 See Hasan and Gray (2002).
- 8 This theme is about the sagacity of African civil wars and the excessive use of atrocity in some of the wars, and the role of religion in this atrocity. The civil wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia are categorised under this theme because they manifested very strong religious and cultural elements alongside extreme violence (pp. 9-12). These civil wars have "produced attempts at understanding the rationality of extreme violence and its distinct cultural and religious expression" (p. 10).
- 9 See the discussions in Longman (2010: 1-30) and Schmidt-Leukel, ed. (2004: 1-8).
- 10 Longman (2010) provides the reasons and level of participation of the churches in the Rwandan genocide. See also Longman (2005: 82-101); Kastfelt (2005: 16-17).
- 11 This buttresses Kastfelt's theory that civil wars are mostly "continuations of old conflicts whose political substance and cultural expression are also found in times of peace" (Kastfelt 2005: 2).
- 12 Blood diamonds are also called "conflict diamonds" because they come from war-torn parts of Africa and are mined under circumstances that violate basic human rights to fund illegal and unethical practices of anti-governments groups. With the money from the sales of blood diamonds, rebel forces buy arms and ammunition or further fund their military operations.
- 13 There are several accounts and figures about the death toll.
- 14 The Lord's Prayer is the prayer that Jesus Christ taught his disciples contained in the Bible (Matthew 6:9-13). It is used in most Christian traditions. *Al-Fṭīḥah* (The Opening) is the opening chapter in the Muslim holy book—the Qur'ān. It is considered the quintessential Muslim prayer. Most Muslims say that no prayer is complete without the recitation of *Fṭīḥah*.
- 15 See Møller (2006:6) for the involvement of Africa's three major religions in wars and conflicts in the African continent.

- 16 *Huronko/ronko* is a fearsome traditional brown or red gown with black vertical stripes, prepared by sacred specialists, and drenched in herbal medicines believed to make the user invulnerable.
- 17 The first Liberian civil war was from 1984 to 1997 and the second civil war was from 1999 to 2003.
- 18 The second Sudanese civil war started in 1983 and has not yet officially ended. See Hutchinson (2005: 28-51) for a discussion on the second civil war.
- 19 Caritas is a confederation of a hundred and sixty-two Catholic relief development and social service organisations one of which is found in Sierra Leone.

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