

**"The truth must be told and accepted;
the memory must be respected"**

On the occasion of the WCC delegation's visit to Rwanda, an interview was conducted by the WCC Public Information Team with His Holiness Aram I, Catholicos of Cilicia and Moderator of the WCC Central Committee. In the following interview His Holiness addresses issues like the role and future of Africa, conditions for healing and reconciliation, and the relations between religion and violence.

Your Holiness, the WCC general secretary is visiting Kenya and Rwanda. What are the reasons for this visit, and what do you see as the significance of this event?

This visit has a profound pastoral and ecumenical significance. First, this is a concrete expression of the Council's commitment to Africa as this region, at this juncture of its history, is facing tremendous challenges. Second, it is a manifestation of the Council's solidarity with the people of Rwanda as the people of this small African country are involved in a process of transformation and reconciliation after the genocide of 1994.

The visit to Rwanda comes at the time of the 10th anniversary of the genocide in that country. That tragedy has had profound human and spiritual consequences. What contribution do you see the WCC and the ecumenical movement bringing to the healing of this country?

Healing is essential dimension of the church's ministry. The WCC through its programmatic activities, through its relationships and partnerships, has always taken healing very seriously. I believe that the Council can and must express, in tangible ways, its healing ministry in Rwanda. This could be done within the framework of the Focus on Africa as well as through other programmes and actions of the WCC.

Churches are carriers of historical and sometimes of national memory, but are also called to be communities of healing and forgiveness. How can churches find the right balance between the need to remember and the need to forgive?

Healing and forgiveness are interconnected and they are integral part of our Christian vocation. We cannot neglect our past; the memory will always remain with us, but we can heal and reconcile our memory. Reconciliation is based on forgiveness and forgiveness must be based on confession. Therefore, it is confession that generates healing and forgiveness. I don't believe in a cheap forgiveness and reconciliation. The truth must be told and accepted; the memory must be respected.

The restorative justice of the Gospel can sometimes seem very different to human, legal justice. When legal justice against those who have committed crimes seems to prevent healing and restoration of community, what attitude should churches take regarding this process?

I believe in restorative justice where the oppressor and the oppressed come together in a dialogical inter-action. The ultimate aim of restorative justice is healing and reconciliation. Therefore, the churches should promote the kind of juridical-legal system where preventive, punitive and restorative justice are taken together for the transformation of the whole society.

In the Armenian genocide, at the beginning of the 20th century, Muslims killed Christians; in the Holocaust, in the middle of that century, Christians killed Jews; in the Rwandan genocide, the last one of that century, Christians killed Christians. What has been the role that religion in general, and Christianity in particular, has played during the century - which is seen as one of the most violent periods of human history?

I don't agree with this way of describing some of the genocides of the 20th century. In the Armenian genocide Muslims did not kill Armenians because they were Christians. The Ottoman Turkish government organized and executed the Armenian genocide , exclusively for political purposes, mainly to implement its political-ideological project of Pan-turanism. Hitler did not organize the holocaust for religious considerations. Again, he had a political-ideological project. Of course, in such circumstances, religion may become a negative factor when it is used for political aims. I believe, that the misuse of religion is a serious matter that must be dealt with in a broader perspective in the context of inter-religious dialogue.

How do you personally, as a Christian, make sense of those genocides?

Genocide is one of the most horrible expressions of violence and terrorism. It is a crime against humanity. The international community, and in fact all the religions of the world, cannot accept such crimes. Hence, those who have perpetrated and may perpetrate such crimes must be called to justice. The ecumenical movement, through the "Decade to Overcome Violence", must wrestle with this question.

There is an important regional dimension to the visit, with a focus on peace in Africa. What is your vision for this continent, in which some see the seeds of a new hope? Will Africa, with its outstanding rate of church growth, play a particular role in the future of Christianity in this century? What is the single most important factor for a lasting peace in Africa?

Africa is becoming an important region for many reasons. The ecumenical movement must take Africa very seriously. Africa cannot remain on the periphery of the international community; its problems are our problems, its dreams our dreams, its struggle our struggle. The ecumenical movement is called to participate in all processes and actions that are aimed at establishing lasting peace in Africa.