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Quaker mission in the Nigerian civil war and Ephraim Isaac's mediation in the Ethiopian civil war: lessons in religious peacebuilding

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ABSTRACT

Traditional peacekeeping discourse has ignored the role of religious bodies (or individuals) in conflict resolution, preferring to focus on the activities of skilled diplomats and negotiators. History suggests, however, that not only have religious bodies been engaged in peacebuilding efforts, they have produced some of the most rewarding successes. It is in this connection that the paper examines two notable case studies: the Quaker Mission during the Nigerian Civil War and Ephraim Isaac's mediation effort during the Eritrea/Ethiopia conflict. Using both primary and secondary sources, a historical and comparative methodology is adopted. It argues that while the case studies differ in many respects, there is a convergence in methods which yielded positive results. The essay concludes that whether acting as a foreign mediator (as in the case of the Nigerian Civil War) or an indigenous one (as in the case of Ethiopia), the religious "tag" they carry gave them an added advantage in the mediatory role they performed. This is more so the case since these bodies demonstrated the spirit of nonpartisanship, empathy, integrity and credibility; all of which are necessities for achieving success in religious peacebuilding.

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Introduction

In recent decades religion is increasingly becoming relevant to peacekeeping efforts. Also, religious and ethnic identities play significant roles in setting the world's agenda. Unfortunately, in the last couple of years the brutality and violence perpetuated in the name of religion has been profoundly damaging. However, focusing solely on the destructive tendencies of religion tells only half of the story. Faith has, indeed, served as a positive and powerful force in promoting peace in states torn apart by intractable conflicts. Ranging from the Indo-China war, to the Bosnia war and many others, history is replete with several examples. Unfortunately, unlike skilled diplomats, most of these religious peacekeeping practitioners have gone unnoticed. These peacebuilders were religious men and women who put their lives at risk to bring stability to war-torn communities. Despite their efforts being

invaluable to ending the scourge of war, they never made the headlines. This fact has prompted some academics in recent years to begin a documentation of accounts where religion has served as a positive tool in conflict resolution. Such awareness is beginning to resonate across the globe so much so that if today's leaders are going to be effective, they must learn how to respond to personal and group religious identities.

Religious peacebuilding is not unconnected to social work. In fact peacebuilding, of any kind, is at the heart of the profession. Indeed, Kirst-Ashman and Hull (1993) have argued that social work essentially has three main areas of focus: (1) to help the defenseless, and to provide for the needy; (2) to control the deviant; and (3) to seek the preservation and protection of the systems. All these are compatible with peacebuilding. To be sure, the profession has contributed to peace development, particularly in relation to family violence (McClennen, 2010). Delshad (2010) has also developed an insightful study on the interaction between religion, spirituality, moral values and social work. While these studies are useful, their emphasis is mainly limited to the individual and family level. Soest and Bryant (1995), for example, agree that social work has been relatively quiet, in fact, complacent about societal and structural violence because of the heavy focus that has been placed on family violence (p. 549). This calls for social work practitioners to learn from history and draw lessons from religious peacebuilders, who have used non-conventional means in mediating in conflict zones. This is particularly useful in a continent like Africa that is used to societal conflicts and wars.

Africa is one of the most vivid examples of a continent with so many countries with people of ethnic and religious diversity co-habiting in one single nation-state. This has most times made the task of nation-building arduous. It is, therefore, not a surprise that African states have experienced a significant amount of conflict since decolonization. It is true that economic and political factors are central to these conflicts, sometimes as a result of colonial legacies, but religion and ethnic divisions play significant roles as well. For example, not many analysts would identify the Eritrea/Ethiopia conflict and the Nigerian civil war as religiously motivated. The fact, however, remains that in the two case studies the opposing camps largely identified themselves with sharply contrasting religions and sometimes used this factor as a rallying call in breeding soldiers and sympathizers.

The paper does not argue that the Eritrea/Ethiopia conflict or the Nigerian civil war were religious war. Rather, it identifies that religion plays a part, no matter how minuscule, and that this should not be taken for granted. Even more significantly, the case is made that religion was used to achieve some successes in the ensuing peace negotiations. An assessment of both case studies is necessary, because through them the paper seeks to identify effective peacebuilding skills that are unique to religious peacemakers. The remainder of the essay is divided into four main parts: conceptual clarification of "religious peacebuilding", the Quaker

mediatory role in the Nigerian Civil War, Ephraim Isaac and the Eritrea/Ethiopia conflict, and lastly, a conciliatory section on the lesson to be drawn from these religious peacebuilding efforts.

What is religious peacebuilding?

The meaning of “religious peacebuilding” is self-explanatory. It refers to the role of religion in the establishment of peace before, during or after conflict. It therefore concerns itself with not just peace but genuine reconciliation. Scholars generally accept that religion has been, at different points in history, both advantageous and damaging to the promotion of peace (Funk & Woolner, 2011). Regarding the place of religion in peacebuilding there have been many approaches. The first of such is “peace through religion alone”. This proposes to attain world peace through devotion to a given religion (Funk & Woolner, 2011, pp. 351–358). The problem with this position is that advocates generally want to attain peace through their particular religion only and have little tolerance of other ideologies. The second model, a response to the first, is “peace without religion”. This means an attempt at brokering peace without recourse to any particular religion or religious actor. This is common in mainstream conflict studies. The problem with this approach is that it is overly simplistic and fails to address other causes of conflict as well as the peace potential of religion. The model also excludes the many contributions of religious people in the development of peace. The third and final approach is known as “peace with religion”. This approach focuses on the importance of coexistence. This approach, therefore, emphasizes promoting the common principles present in every major religion (Silberman, Higgins, & Dweck, 2005). It is this third approach that best explains our case studies.

A major component of religion and peacebuilding is faith-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Douglas Johnston (2005) points out that faith-based NGOs offer two distinct advantages. The first is that since faith-based NGOs are very often locally based, they have immediate influence within their community. He argues that “it is important to promote indigenous ownership of conflict prevention and peacebuilding initiatives as early in the process as possible” (Johnston, 2005, p. 209). The second advantage Johnston presents is that faith-based NGOs carry moral authority that contributes to the receptivity of negotiations and policies for peace. One can further add that faith-based non-governmental organizations carry with them an “emotional intelligence”, by which is meant faith based NGO’s unusual capacity for deeply understanding others and experiencing, with great compassion, their hopes and their pains (Johnston, 2005, p. 209). This is present with both the Quaker experience in Nigeria and Ephraim Isaac’s mediation in Ethiopia.

The Quaker mission and the Nigerian civil war

The Nigerian civil war

The Nigerian Civil war broke out on 6 July 1967. The outbreak was as a result of the combination of an uneasy peace and instability that had plagued the nation from independence in 1960. This situation had its genesis in the geography, history, culture and demography of Nigeria as colonial legacies ensured that people of different ethnicities were forced into one single country, with the majority northern Hausas given a huge political advantage over and above other major groups like the Yoruba and Igbo.

The immediate cause of the war itself can be identified with the coup and the counter coup of January 15 and July 29, 1966 which altered the political equation of Nigeria and destroyed the fragile trust existing among the major regional and ethnic groups. As a last ditch effort to hold the country together, the nation was divided into twelve states from the original four regions in May, 1967. The former Eastern Region under Lt. Col. Ojukwu saw the act of the creation of states by decree “without consultation” as the last straw, and declared the Region an independent state of “Biafra”. The Federal Government in Lagos saw this as an act of secession and declared it illegal. Several meetings were held to resolve the issue peacefully with varied successes. To avoid the disintegration of the country, the federal government was left with no option but to use all necessary force in preventing this secession (See Forsythe, 1969).

The Federal side expected a quick victory while the Biafrans saw the war as that of survival and were, therefore, ready to fight tenaciously. By August, 1967 the war had been extended to the Mid – Western Region by the Biafrans with the aim to ease pressure on the northern front and to threaten the Federal Capital, Lagos. Both sides employed political, diplomatic, psychological and military strategies to prosecute the war. By the end of April 1969, after almost two years of bloody and destructive war, the anticipated quick victory had eluded the Federal side, the rebel enclave had been drastically reduced in size but the Biafrans were still holding on. More peace conferences were held but none achieved a cease-fire and an end to the war. The Nigerian government, however, succeeded in achieving a strategic military occupation of the remaining Biafran enclave.

By December of 1969, it was obvious that the end of the civil war was near. On the 10th of January, 1970 the leader of Biafra, Lt. Col. Ojukwu, realizing the hopelessness of the situation fled the enclave with his immediate family members. The Commander of the Biafran Army who took over the administration of the remaining enclave surrendered to the Federal Government on 14th January 1970 bringing an end to the war.

Quaker philosophy toward peacebuilding

The Quakers are a pious religious sect that began in England in the 17th century, during a period of social, political and religious upheaval. This was at a time when “Reformation” had ended the authority of the Roman Catholic Church in England and religious sects, as long as they were Christian and neither treasonable nor seditious, were tolerated (Hubbard, 1985, p. 16). Among other things, Quakers believed in equality of all men and liberty of conscience. They also understood that the self-sacrificial love that Jesus taught was incompatible with war, hence their proclivity for peace (Hubbard, 1985, p. 128). It is this background that has influenced Quakers till today. Despite their relatively small number, Quakers – informed and guided by their religious and social tenets – have been involved with peacebuilding within their own countries as well as internationally (Bailey, 2004; Kraybill, 1994; Yarrow C. H., 1978). Yarrow (1977) for example, has highlighted how instrumental the Quakers were in the India-Pakistani war of 1965. In the same vein, Connolly (2013) makes a convincing case of Quaker indispensability to the conflict in Australia and Aotearoa, New Zealand.

Indeed, Quaker participation in peacebuilding is based on their religious precepts. The religious sect has a traditional set of principles they refer to as “testimonies” that serve as a guide through which they operate. These “testimonies” are both religious and social (Connolly, 2013, p. 38). There are four basic religious “testimonies”: *that of God in everyone, direct communication with God, continuing revelation* (openness to new insights) and *all of life as sacramental*. It is out of these four religious testimonies that five “social testimonies” developed, and they are: simplicity, peace, integrity, community and equality. Out of these five, the testimonies of peace and equality are most crucial to Quaker peacebuilding efforts. As Hubbard (1985) argued, the peace testimony is a required Quaker attitude and has been maintained throughout Quaker history and many difficult regions of the world. The equality testimony on the other hand, stems from the fact that all men are of equal worth. It was such a testimony that made Quakers play a pivotal role in the movement against slavery and slave trade for example (Carey, 2012). It was a combination of both the peace and equality testimony that was also instrumental in their contributions to the peace process in the Nigerian civil war.

Quaker involvement in Nigeria civil war

Quaker involvement in Nigeria began shortly before the country’s independence in 1960 when Paul and Priscilla Blanchard were posted there. They served as international affairs representatives for the American Friends Service Committee. From the outset, the Blanchards recognized the intense rivalry that existed between the three dominant ethnic groups and, therefore, launched a series of international work camps in Nigeria in 1961 to strengthen ethnic

relations (Sampson, 1994, p. 92). Further interactions within the West African sub-region existed after the Quakers established an institute in Lome, Togo in 1963, called “International Dialogue in West Africa”. It was from this office that the head of the institute, John Volkmar monitored the rising tensions in Nigeria. It was also about the same time that another Quaker, Professor Adam Curle became interested in the situation (Sampson, 1994, p. 92).

As war became imminent, Walter Martin, another Quaker conciliator, arranged a meeting for himself and Curle with Joseph Iyalla, the Nigerian deputy permanent representative to the United Nations, on January 4, 1967, six months before war broke out. It was Iyalla that encouraged Quaker participation through an “unofficial exploration” of the country. Consequently, with the authorization from the two Quaker service agencies, “The American Friends Service Committee in Philadelphia” and “British Friends Peace and Service in London”, Curle and Volkmar toured all regions of Nigeria for four weeks in April and May to gather information and seek ways of helping reduce tensions through conciliation and humanitarian aid (Curle, 1990, p. 43). While on tour, in the East they met with Ojukwu and his allies. In Lagos they met with Okoi Arikpo, who later became commissioner of external affairs, and then Hamzat Ahmadu, who was the Principal Secretary to Gowon (Curle, 1990, p. 44).

When war finally broke out, the Quakers decided to support an African initiative: the Consultative Committee of six African head of state, which was created by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to deal with the crisis. But the Consultative Committee, bound by its authorizing resolution did not pursue a mediatory role. Indeed at its first meeting in November, 1967 it called on Biafra to renounce secession and to accept the federal offer of peace in the context of a united Nigeria (Stremlau, 1977, p. 133). The Quakers therefore had to make a decisive move. A meeting between John Volkmar and Hamani Diori, the then President of Niger (and a member of the consultative committee) was arranged. In light of the committee’s having, in essence, taken the federal side in the conflict, Diori suggested that the Quakers, with their unofficial status and long conference experience, might be able to convene a secret meeting of lower level officials from the two sides to search for possible areas of agreement (Sampson, 1994, p. 93).

With authorization from the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) in America, Volkmar and Curle channeled their efforts toward achieving direct conciliation. This time they conceived that an early meeting with General Gowon, whom they had not met previously, would be the key to the whole trip. After an attempt to get the Principal Secretary, Hamzat Ahmadu, to facilitate a meeting with the Head of State did not yield positive results, it was Edwin Ogbu, then minister of external affairs (latter permanent representative to the United Nations) who helped them gain access to General Gowon (Curle, 1990, p. 53). The Nigerian military leader honored their proposal for a secret meeting and agreed to the Quakers pursuing the

same idea with the rebel side. He, however, categorically stated that he could not guarantee their safety as all flights toward that zone were suspected of conveying weapons. Consequently, the team members, traveling in pairs, made four different dangerous trips to Biafra for meetings with officials (twice with Ojukwu), and made another eight to have consultations with officials representing the federal government of Nigeria (six times with Gowon) (Curle, 1990, p. 62).

Approach at conciliation

There were three key aspects of the Quaker's conciliation role in the Nigerian conflict: opening lines of communication; reducing suspicions, misperceptions, and fears; and advocating for a negotiated settlement while supporting official mediation efforts. The first major relevance the Quakers in the war was that they served as channels of communication between both parties to the conflict. Although Gowon was skeptical about the prospects of meeting the Quakers since so many other negotiations by other conciliatory bodies had failed, he considered their proposal for negotiations and authorized Volkmar and Curle to travel to the Biafran region. He further mentioned that he would be very interested in hearing their report from the other camp and asked them to tell Ojukwu that as soon as a cease-fire was agreed upon, he would stop the federal advances (Sampson, 1994, p. 92). This was the first of at least five times during the Quaker mission that team members were specifically requested to carry message from one leader to the other. Both parties constantly shared their impressions of conditions and attitudes on the other side, to the extent possible without compromising confidentiality or providing information that might give one side a military advantage over the other. On several other occasions, both parties made substantive suggestion of their own that they conceived might help break the impasse in negotiations. One episode found the Quakers carrying to Lagos concessions being offered by the Biafrans that they felt they could not present at a formal peace talks for fear of appearing weak (Sampson, 1994). In fact, a Biafran official was once quoted to have said "You see, you are the closest we can get to Lagos." (Yarrow M., 1978, p. 219)

The Quakers conceive the central purpose of conciliation to be the correction of misrepresentation and the lessening of unreasonable fears and improvement of communications to an extent that reasonable discussion can take place and rational bargaining becomes possible. Such belief influenced the second role they played in the civil war. Because the Quaker negotiators believed that the things that separate people are relatively easy to solve, it became necessary to change people's perception of their enemies, themselves and the whole situation so that they can accept what might otherwise be a simple solution. To achieve this required a deep understanding of both parties' plight. To truly understand the

parties' attitudes, perceptions and fears demanded of the conciliators a carefully cultivated skill of listening. To the Quakers, listening has a spiritual function. A Quaker aptly described this function when he states that, "as in prayers, so in listening we try to reach a deeper part of our being" (Curle, 1990, p. 50).

Another key component in reducing suspicion and misrepresentation is to never attempt singling out the guilty party in the conflict, recognizing that "everything that happens is the product of the convergence of multiple forces: of which some may only appear more directly responsible than others." The idea is that, when the relationship is founded on real liking and the anguished words are spoken without rage they will really be heard and acted upon. For example, when the Quakers informed Gowon of the bombings of schools and hospitals in the East for the first time, he replied by suggesting that it would serve as a lesson to the rebels that rebellion is bad and prompt them to repent. To this Curle responded that in fact, the bombing had the opposite effect of causing people to think that the charges of genocide against the Ibo people must be true, and they might as well go on fighting for as long as possible, rather than waiting to be massacred. The next time the Quakers reported the same story, Gowon responded that he had given strict instructions for accurate bombing of military installations only, but perhaps the time had come to reissue the order (Curle, 1990, p. 51). The Quakers on the other hand did their best in explaining to the Ibos that the bombings were not intentional but rather hits by inexperienced pilots (Sampson, 1994, p. 96).

When it came to negotiating peace and official settlements, as nonofficial actors, untrained in diplomacy, the Quakers had no pretensions of taking the lead in mediating formal peace talks. They saw their role as strictly auxiliary to official efforts if they were to stand any chance of making progress. As a result, Quaker conciliation efforts over the course of the conflict ran parallel to – and in number of cases – intersected with numerous other attempts to bring a negotiated settlement to the conflict. Numerous international, regional, and sub regional organizations sought to mediate or in one way or the other promote peace as did a number of religious figures and institutions. The Quakers actively cooperated with two of such initiatives, those of the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Organization of African Unity (OAU). Only these two bodies succeeded to the extent of convening formal peace talks between both warring parties (Stremlau, 1977, p. 148). However, neither of their attempts at peacemaking directly ended the war.

Apart from initiating formal negotiations, neither group achieved significant results. The Commonwealth, under Arnold Smith, was a discredited organization by the Biafrans. Ojukwu and his allies made it clear that they would not accept any arbitration or mediation involving formal British participation; they were profoundly suspicious of British motives based on their interpretation of colonial history and the British role in establishing

northern dominance in the Nigerian federation. They also believed that the British were responsible for persuading Gowon to backtrack on the Aburi accords (Stremlau, 1977, p. 148). The Quaker's major contribution to the Commonwealth negotiation was to reassure the Biafrans that the Commonwealth Secretariat was impartial and to persuade them to go to the peace talks. Peace talks were successfully convened, but deep-seated distrust prevented the parties from achieving much.

The OAU succeeded in at least getting the parties as far as the bargaining table. A meeting was held in Kinshasa DRC in September 1967 to discuss the Nigerian crisis. There was another in Kampala, Uganda, the following year. The last of such meetings took place in 1969 in Addis Ababa. The Quaker conciliators were present in these meetings and on the eve of their departure from Ababa, after negotiations between the warring parties had stalled, the Biafran chief negotiator, Njoku revealed privately to the Quakers new terms that his government would be willing to accept but could not state openly for fear of appearing weak. Njoku stated that Biafra was prepared to give up its insistence on sovereignty and would be flexible on cease-fire lines, boundaries of an eventual state, composition of a peacekeeping force, and the name of the state within (which implied a compromise with the name Biafra). He maintained, however, that it could not compromise on the need for an independent armed force, cease-fire lines and having some degree of international standing (Yarrow M., 1978b, p. 208). Unfortunately, Gowon did not yield to these demands. At the last conciliatory meeting by the OAU held in December 1969 under the chairmanship of the Ethiopian Emperor, Hele Selassie, peace talks broke down because of the ambiguity under which the negotiation was to be carried out: was Selassie to act as an independent African leader or to serve under the auspices of the OAU. In the end, it didn't matter as the war came to an abrupt end in a matter of days.

To what extent were the Quakers successful?

In the end, no group or institution was successful in peaceably ending the war, for it was only after the battle had been taken into the heart of the Eastern Region that Ojukwu and his men surrendered. The Biafran camp was unyielding for so long because of the international support they attracted through propaganda that they were engaged in a religious war. This charge had, by then, served to internationalize the war and put Western governments that supported the Nigerians – or that failed to recognize Biafran secession – on the defensive by church and civic lobbies at home. French support, together with the diplomatic recognition of Biafra by four African states: Tanzania, Gabon, Cote d'Ivoire, and Zambia, is likely to also have been decisive in prolonging the war at a critical moment for Biafra. So at a time when the Kampala and Addis Ababa peace talks might have held the promise

of a negotiated end to the war, the diplomatic-recognition by the four African states and the prospect of French recognition increased Biafran confidence and strengthened the young republic's resolve to carry on the battle. This made any positive peace negotiation largely unproductive.

What then did the Quaker conciliators achieve? At one level, the fact that the Quakers were a religious organization helped open the door for them to Gowon. So eager was the federal side to make its case that this was not a religious war of Muslim against Christians, as the early Biafran propaganda maintained. But the Quakers were not like any other religious organization; they were unique among the many religious actors that became involved in the conflict. Because the Eastern Region of Nigeria is predominantly Christian, Western churches, particularly the Roman Catholic Church, became deeply involved in providing humanitarian aid to the Biafrans. Most religious figures that made efforts to promote peace were therefore highly suspected on the federal side, and their peacemaking attempts were unsuccessful. Only the Quakers won the acceptance of both sides and sustained their involvement for the duration of the civil war (Sampson, 1994, p. 106).

According to Allison Ayida, who served as permanent secretary to the Nigerian ministry of Economic Development and was a part of every negotiation team fielded by the Nigerians, "the Quakers" most useful role was not so much peacemaking as the communication gap they filled.' Indeed, bridging communication gaps is important to conflict resolution and was, therefore, an important step in the Quaker peacemaking effort. One of the most notable examples of such role they played in message carrying had to do with the Biafran proposal sent by chief negotiator, Eni Njoku in Addis Ababa via the Quakers to Gowon in Lagos. The importance of the Quakers to the two warring parties is best demonstrated by their unwillingness to take action in preventing it. Gowon, for example, had refused to grant authorization to any official-level actors to travel into the rebel region. Other non-official members like the Vatican were asked to do so at their own risk. It also appears that the Quakers were the only actors that Gowon requested to convey messages from him into the rebel enclave (Yarrow M., 1978b, p. 210).

In a more tangible sense, the Quakers were able to reduce suspicion and misrepresentation. For example, in Arnold Smith's opinion, the Quakers may have strengthened Gowon's determination to prevent a federal occupation of the Ibo heartland and vengeance on the part of the federal troops (Sampson, 1994, p. 109). For example, the Quakers were able to help some among the Biafran leadership believe that Gowon was "Genuine in his concern for unity" and in his lack of desire for vengeance against the Ibo people. This helped some of the Biafran stakeholders to be sympathetic. By their actions they also tried in resolving the hardness of the heart. The Quakers in addition succeeded in encouraging both parties to attend peace conferences and to keep talks going. It is very likely that these exchanges between both parties

through Quaker conciliation efforts helped in a post-war peaceful reconciliation and reconstruction. It might appear on the first glance that the methods used in conciliation by the Quakers was not derived from any orthodoxy or doctrinarian position, but in actuality, central to the Quaker belief is pacifism. For example, Volkmar and Curle affirmed that the books of Mathew, Mark, Luke and John of the holy bible are very central to Quaker beliefs. The books contain phrases that include “blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God” (Matt 5:9), “Do not resist one who is evil” (5:38–42), “be at peace with each other” (Mark 9:50) and many more.

Ephraim Isaac and the Ethiopian civil war

The Ethiopian civil war

Both Ethiopia and Eritrea belonged to the ancient Axum Empire, where Christianity was made a state religion as early as 325 AD. In the 16th century Ottoman warriors raided the empire to spread Islam. With an alliance with Portugal the Axumites were able to drive out the Ottomans. By the 17th century, therefore, highland Ethiopia was predominantly Christian. It, however, remained politically and economically integrated with Eritrea. The situation changed in 18th century when their identities began to diverge. For one thing, Islam gained a stronghold in the coastal and eastern regions of Eritrea, strengthening the sense of a distinct national identity (Henze, 2000, p. 3). More importantly, in 1882 Italy infiltrated Eritrea and retained domination for the ensuing decades. Italy wanted to spread its influence to the rest of Ethiopia but British interest there made it impossible. Eventually, in 1936, Italy temporarily defeated Ethiopia and deposed Haile Selassie I. It was not until 1941, during World War II, that the Ethiopian Patriotic Force with assistance from the Allied Forces defeated the Italians and restored the emperor to his throne.

One of the post-war challenges was what to do with Eritrea. Although the country had been within Eritrea’s border for centuries it had become a nation-state in its own right during Italy’s occupation. After the war, therefore, The Allies decided that Britain should administer Eritrea as a protectorate until an international body finally resolved the issue. In 1950, the UN decided to issue a referendum in Eritrea to see if the people wanted to become an independent state or remain under Ethiopia. Emperor Selassie, however, prevented the referendum from taking place and cunningly made an arrangement by which Eritrea remained under Ethiopia. Irritated by this wanton disregard for Eritrea’s right of self-determination, the Eritrea Liberation Front (ELF) was formed and began a guerrilla campaign against Ethiopia. Simultaneously, Ethiopians were dissatisfied at home because of the Emperor’s excessive preoccupation with foreign affairs and neglect of pressing domestic issues (Marcus, 1994, p. 212). As for Eritrea, the ranks of the

rebel Eritrean Liberation Front swelled, eventually splitting along religious lines into the Muslim-based ELF and the Christian-based Eritrean people's Liberation Front (EPLF).

General dissatisfaction in Ethiopia continued over the ensuing decades, during which time opposition to the emperor mounted. In 1972 and 1973, severe drought led to famine in the northeastern part of the country. Haile Selassie's critics claimed that the government ignored victims of the famine (Young, 1997, p. 214). In 1974, therefore, Ethiopian military leaders under Lieutenant Colonel Mengistu Haile-Mariam seized the government and removed Haile Selassie from power. The new regime was initially named the Derg. The regime was brutal, and tensions erupted among the various parties.

After the ouster of the Emperor, Eritrean rebels stepped up their secessionist efforts, which directly led to the Ethiopian civil war (1974–1991). Mengistu's regime invaded rebel-held Eritrea several times, but failed to regain control. By February 1977, two-year killing spree was underway. Disgusted by the regimes policies, the opposition, The *Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party* (EPRP), targeted and killed approximately eight members of the Derg party. In response, the Derg hunted down and killed thousands of EPRP supporters and others (Marcus, 1994, p. 214). During the war support for these fledgling groups grew among the public, until the vast majority opposed the Derg. As Eritreans fought for independence from the Derg, various groups sought a regime change in Ethiopia. The desire was made manifest in 1990 when the regime fell. In 1993 Eritrea through a referendum became independent of Ethiopia. Though the Ethiopian and Eritrean oppositions to the Derg formed an alliance after the defeat of their common enemy, a number of issues since 1991 have pitted the countries against each other and have led to intermittent conflicts.

Ephraim Isaac's involvement

Ephraim Isaac was a deeply religious man who had a rich educational background having obtained a doctorate degree from Harvard University. After returning to his home country in 1960, he made a number of contributions that gave him recognition. Ephraim became an activist in seeking to combat illiteracy. He transformed the Ethiopian Student Association, served as the chairman of the Committee for Ethiopian Literacy, and became Executive director of the National Literacy Campaign of Ethiopia for seven years. The Organization enjoyed widespread support; fund-raising parties throughout the United States were held to help meet the organization's financial goals, and during the mid-1960s – courtesy of Ephraim generosity and the committee's effort – an estimated 1.5 million people in Ethiopia became literate. All these achievements made Ephraim Isaac more visible in the Ethiopian community.

Belonging to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, he derived most of his inspiration from spiritual texts, particularly the book of Isaiah and Jeremiah where the prophets clearly condemned war (Little, 2007, p. 170). Ephraim's first venture in peacebuilding in Ethiopia came in 1989 when Ras Mengesha – one of the anti-Derg leaders – invited him to a peacemaking conference in Toronto along with major Ethiopian political figures. This conference was organized after a failed attempt by President Carter to negotiate peace between the Derg and the strongest opposition party at the time, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). Crucially, however, while many important personalities in Ethiopia were present, three important groups were not represented at the conference: the Eritrean People's Liberation Front, Oromo Liberation Front – who refused to participate – and Tigray People's Liberation Front, who did not have an official representative. At the meeting the participants committed themselves to peace and decided to hold future meetings and to involve all groups in the formation of a transitional government. The Toronto congress decided that the best way to further its goal of reestablishing justice and peace in Ethiopia would be to send a party of three respected elders to those who had not attended. Ephraim Isaac was one of those nominated (Little, 2007, p. 164).

Unfortunately, this committee of elders disagreed on minor details, which prompted Isaac to dissolve it to form a new one, christened Ad Hoc Peace Committee for Ethiopia (AHPC). Isaac sought to model the committee after the elder culture in Ethiopia. In recruiting members, therefore, he looked for individuals of reputable character that were elderly and well respected locally and internationally. These elders also had good linguistic skills and had experience in conflict resolution. They were essentially drawn from the churches, academia and the military. The emphasis on the elder culture is very much in tandem with the doctrinarian stance of the Ethiopian Orthodox church (Little, 2007, p. 165). Isaac indeed identifies that such bible passages as Leviticus 19:32 (*“Stand up in the presence of the elderly and show respect for the aged”*) and Job 12: 12 (*“wisdom is with the aged and understanding in length of days”*) helped cement the place of elders not just in the church but in the Ethiopian society.

As fighting intensified in Ethiopia during the latter months of 1990 and the beginning of 1991, the balance of power began shifting away from the government and the need for peace talks became increasingly urgent. Consequently, in the ensuing months, the AHPC held a number of conferences in London and then Addis Ababa. Rather than attend the London peace conferences as a leader of the declining government, the then Derg Ethiopian President, Mengistu decided to acquire American and Israeli assistance for his cause by using the fourteen thousand Jewish refugees as a bargaining chip. In exchange for agreeing to protect the Jews Mengistu demanded weapons, 60% of the seats in a new transitional government for

the Derg, and promised that Eritrea would not secede from Ethiopia (Little, 2007, p. 167).

Most of the important parties participated in the Addis Ababa peace conference, with the exception of two socialist groups who distrusted the whole peace process: the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party and the MEISON, both of whom formed the Coalition of Ethiopian Democratic Forces (COEDF). Despite the absence of these groups, however, two important decisions emerged from the conference. First the Eritrean people would remain part of Ethiopia for two years, after which they would determine their fate in a 1993 referendum. Second the transitional government would be determined by a system of proportional representation, which would include all the major opposition groups. Meles Zenawi became the President of the coalition government (and later Prime Minister). Ephraim Isaac, however, realized that since some significant entities were absent peace might have been established, but reconciliation had not yet been achieved. Consequently, the AHPC met and decided to continue their peacebuilding efforts, howbeit, under a new name, Peace and Development Committee (PDC) (Little, 2007, p. 169).

The PDC worked more closely with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and opened an office in Addis Ababa, becoming the first local NGO there (Little, 2007, p. 171). After Eritrea's referendum and consequent independence, Ephraim urged the leaders to build grassroots collaboration across borders. Unfortunately, such cooperation did not last long. Between 1998 and 2000, war broke out Ephraim was told that the genesis of this was the newly created Ethiopian currency, which had on it as a symbol, the camel. When the staunchly Christian people in the region of Tigray in Eritrea saw the *nakfa* (Eritrean currency), they identified it as Muslim money as they associated the camel with Islam. For that reason, the Tigrayans, who as Christians contributed tithes to the church, refused to accept the *nakfa* because they saw it as sacrilegious. The *nakfa* also caused other problems as it was at the epicenter of most of the border conflict between Ethiopians and Eritreans.

As soon as Ephraim grasped the gravity of the situation, he met with his elders in the United States, called the office in Addis Ababa, and coordinated with the offices of Prime Minister Meles and President Isaias Afewerki to arrange a meeting with the elders and each side, respectively. The idea was welcomed by all, and the first meeting in Addis Ababa went smoothly. The PDC also received the cooperation of the US, UN, OAU and other significant bodies, but Ephraim himself was quick to point out that these bodies largely goofed because "their professionals lacked real understanding of the issue," and gave "false promises" (Little, 2007, p. 176). The war eventually ended with the Algiers peace agreement negotiated through the US and the UN. The most important achievement of Ephraim and his allies, therefore, was his ability to bring grieving parties to the table not just for the purpose of peace but for the purpose of reconciliation.

Religious peacebuilding from the Nigerian and Ethiopian examples: lessons for social work

The Nigerian and Ethiopian case studies are admittedly different. However, the religious peacebuilding efforts of both parties are remarkably similar. They are unique in the sense that their modus operandi sharply contrasts to their counterparts in track I diplomacy (skilled diplomats). This section seeks to highlight such uniqueness and identify lessons religious peacebuilders and social work practitioners can draw from our case studies. Firstly, the case can be made that the starting point for these religious peacebuilders was attaining the trust and respect of both parties to the conflict. Poitras (2009) has identified that the relationship of trust between mediators and parties is a key element of any mediation process. In the words of Joseph Iyalla, the Nigerian who from his post at the United Nations helped launch the Quaker mission, the team was successful in gaining “a good hearing and complete and uninhibited acceptability by all sides” (Sampson, 1994, p. 102). On his part, Ephraim Isaac through his scholarship and charitable works had been able to achieve visibility and by extension, respect. According to him, to be a negotiator, “you have to be known and respected, and loved as a person who serves his people with no ulterior motives. People must want to listen to you.” (Little, 2007, p. 164) Ephraim also suggested that it was a lack of respect that turned out to be a key obstacle for the EU, US, and UN representatives when they attempted to negotiate peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea (Little, 2007, p. 179).

A religious peacebuilder or social worker must also shun publicity. Both parties in our case study clearly avoided media hype. They shunned the media and by so doing won the confidentiality of the parties they mediated upon. With being more modest and discreet than some of the other third parties who sought to become involved in the Nigerian civil war, the Quakers enjoyed relative success. According to Hamzat Ahmadu, the then principal secretary to Gowon “The effect and confidence (displayed by both the Biafran and Federal parties) might be more than with publicity and ostentation as with a party doing it to get result or publicity.” Ephraim corroborates this position in his own case when he stated that “once the media reports what people said other people said, it sinks peace effort” (Little, 2007, p. 165) It becomes imperative, therefore, for religious peacebuilders to distance themselves from media and publicity outlet so that they could act strictly as mediators for peace. In fact, Ephraim perceived (and disliked) what he views as the ulterior motives and self interest that can come into play when track I diplomats handle negotiations. He believes that diplomats frequently seek publicity and credit for themselves and compete with each other in doing so.

In addition, religious peacebuilders do not flaunt the “religious” tag or the profession they represent. The substance of Quaker discussions with the parties, for instance, dealt very much with political, economic, and military issues in the conflict-with positions and possible terms of settlement. Their message was

never religious per se, but in certain respects it might be considered spiritual. According to former Biafran Commissioner of Commerce and Industry Silvanus Cookey, the “desire of the Quakers for peace was well-known” (Sampson, 1994, p. 96) Similarly, in Ethiopia, Ephraim Isaac addressed issues that would directly impact the conflict rather than appeal to religious dogma. The problem with religious peacebuilders adopting religious dogma in conflict resolution is that the warring parties easily perceive their efforts as a rhetoric geared toward extolling their own religions.

Furthermore, as conciliators, religious peacebuilders should never point the finger at single guilty party recognizing that everything, that happens is the product of the convergence of multiple forces: of which some may only appear more directly responsible than other. When the relationship is founded on real liking and the anguished words are spoken without rage they will really be heard and acted upon.’ At no time, therefore, did either of the Quakers or Ephraim Isaac point accusing fingers at any of the parties to the conflict. This again brings to the fore the relevance of ignoring religious dogma in the practice of religious peacebuilding. Failure in doing so will inadvertently, overtly or subtly, lead to condemnations or finger pointing.

Finally, it goes without saying that the religious peacebuilders and social workers, despite all temptations, are to at all times be seen to remain neutral. Indeed, Carrasco (2016) has opined that though neutrality is not a basic premise in the role of a social worker given that certain robust tasks such as evaluation, supervision, advice and assistance are included in the social worker’s professional code, when social workers are only carrying out professional mediation as a sole objective of their intervention in a conflict, neutrality becomes absolutely necessary (Carrasco, 2016, p. 280–2). For example, the parties’ assessment of Quakers’ motives-together with the Quakers’ obvious lack of a political or denominational interest in the Nigerian case appears to have endeared them to the hearts of the conflicting camps. According to a former federal official, Hamzat Ahmadu, “we embraced them more with an open heart perhaps more than others with religious dogma, such as the Catholics, the bulk of Southern Christians, and the Muslims in the North. We saw them as a religious people but [also] as friends” (Sampson, 1994, p. 107). Similarly, Ojukwu points at the Quakers’ nonofficial status and their denominational disinterestedness as a critical factor in their acceptance of them (Sampson, 1994, p. 107). This also can be said of Ephraim Isaac and his committee of elders.

Conclusion

In our case studies one obvious fact stands out, unlike the track I diplomats, these religious representatives carried out a quiet, totally behind-the-scenes effort – an auxiliary role in most respects. And the core of what they aspired

to do was to get the parties to have a re-perception of the conflicting issues. The other conclusion to reach is that these religious peacebuilders were genuinely appreciated and valued for what they did. The Quaker team, for example, was the sole third party that won the complete trust of both parties in the conflict, and they sustained that trust for the duration of the Nigerian civil war (Sampson, 1994, p. 111). Their nonpolitical base of operation and their powerlessness can also explain their acceptance. It is easy to raise the objection that neither the Nigerian war nor the Ethiopian conflict ended through these negotiations, but the fact remains that these religious peacebuilders went farther than most in achieving peace. Insofar as these conciliators had a hand in sensitizing the conflict sides on the position of the “other” they can be deemed to have had a hand in winning the peace that prevailed in Nigeria and Ethiopia.

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