

Bishop Atle Sommerfeldt:

Challenges to religious communities and development actors

Religion and development, dialogue on gender, rights and sensitive issues

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Introduction

May I first congratulate UNFPA with the report "Religion, Women's Health and Rights - Points of Contention and paths of opportunities" - and the clear understanding in the report of the importance of religious communities in development issues in general, and in sensitive issues linked to gender and sexuality more specifically. This may be a sign that religion finally is accepted in the mainstream in the intergovernmental development system. Religion normally is a part of people's understanding of life and have significant importance in the way people conduct their lives. Any societal process excluding religion will therefore fail, most dramatically the close one moves into micro level processes. This does not imply that religious communities are outside critical evaluation on their contribution to the goal of all human rights for all people. But it implies that any serious process of societal change needs to include religious communities both as actors and as hub for values and traditions.

I am invited to raise some challenges based on my more than three decades as development actor in church based organizations, and a little more than four years as a religious leader in The church of Norway.

Challenges to religious communities

- Deep in the religious tradition of the three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, is the conviction that God hear the cry of a suffering humanity and creation. The classical expression is God's statement in Exodus 3: "I have heard the cry of my people", which marks the entry point for God's liberation of the people from the slavery in Egypt.
- The obligation of religious communities is therefore to constantly improve our ability to listen to human experience of violence and oppression, see the realities as they unfold before us, and change traditions and positions in light of what we see and what we hear in order to protect and promote human dignity. Regrettably, there are too many examples where religious communities have neglected cries of Gods people and not protected or promoted human dignity. Some examples from my own experience:
 - o Domestic violence and religious sexual abuse in Europe and North America.
 - o The Catholic church's denial of the use condoms in the fight against HIV/AIDS (but the pope is correct in underlining that condoms are not sufficient to fight aids - "rape with condoms" is not an acceptable concept).
 - o The status of women as minors in marriage and institutions and organizations.
 - o Harmful traditional practices against women and children - e.g. FGM.
 - o The alliance in e.g. Uganda and Ethiopia of religious actors against homosexuality.

- The "Not in my Name"- statement from UNFPA 2014 conference for religious leaders echoes the Exodus-tradition because it expresses an ability to listen, see and act accordingly:

“Not in our name should any mother die while giving birth. Not in our name should any girl, boy, woman or man be abused, violated, or killed. Not in our name should a girl child be deprived of her education, be married, be harmed or abused. Not in our name should anyone be denied access to basic health care, nor should a child or an adolescent be denied knowledge of and care for her/his body. Not in our name should any person be denied their human rights.”

- In order to change our practices in cases where violence and oppression happens in our name, will we have to read our scriptures and traditions anew and increase our ability to see and listen. We have to evaluate our practice in light of the center in religion: God’s creation of all human beings and the belief that we encounter the divine in the other person. Traces of oppression and violence in the other is therefore to recognize wounds in the divine, in God.
- This constant search for the normative core in our religions is an obligation specifically for religious leaders to facilitate and conduct. My observation is that the report in chapter 5 gives several examples of this kind of search for a normative core protecting and promoting human dignity of all people. The cases are from all faith traditions and different cultures and societies, both from religious leaders and from committed groups within religious communities with specific experiences, insights or convictions.
- The major strategic challenge for religious leaders is to build a bridge between these specialised groups and mainstream religious education and religious life as practiced in the communities. In this process legal frames and political interventions may enable the religious communities and leadership to discover alternatives to traditional interpretation of the religious practices. The obligation to religious communities is therefore also to listen to insights gained in the wider society and promoted by political movements, not by submissive acceptance, but honest engagement with the positions in the wider community.
- This does not imply an uncritical acceptance of every dominant trends in society. In our European tradition we have the horrifying experience of how religious communities and leaders accepted the Nazi-revolution as a divine salvation of the German people. Examples in the same tradition are the legitimization and even participation of religious institutions in the genocide in Rwanda, and major South African religious leaders legitimization of apartheid and their apartheid-practice in church and society.
- It is historically naïve to assume that the decisions by government bodies, including UN-bodies, is above critical analysis by religious communities. Those of us who remember different development-policies know that.
 - o The almost Malthusian arguments for population control in developing countries in the 70ties and 80ties is a relevant example. One never focused on the over-consumption and therefore over-population in so called developed countries. The paternalistic and simplistic arguments certainly formed a major part of the popes criticism of population control – and the pope was right. It is frightening that these positions can be observed in some circles in the present climate-debate.
 - o Even the WHO definition of health – “A state of complete physical, mental and social well-being» – can be misused and legitimize quite destructive attitudes and policies against persons and people. We can observe such tendencies in our Norwegian debate

on the rights of persons with disabilities to life before and after birth. Part of the arguments in favor of abortion also neglect totally the independent value and dignity of the fetus in favor of a one-sided emphasis on the social wellbeing of the mother. I must add that the way the abortion issue is handled in the contemporary reproductive health discourse, as documented in the report, is quite balanced and proper - as far as I am concerned.

- But these weaknesses do not reduce the fact that we as religious communities have to recognize that major insights in terms of an inclusive understanding of human dignity and human rights, have been promoted first by political and social movements. This has deepened the insights in our own religious tradition, certainly true for my church, both when it comes to worker's rights, women's rights and the rights of sexual minorities. To quote pope Frans: "We have to recognize the work of The Holy Spirit in the women's movement for the dignity and rights of women" (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, 14.3.2016, paragraph 54). These processes are painful, but necessary. Only sculptures made of stone don't change, religion is however all about life and therefore by necessity about change because our divine call is to listen to the cries of God's people - and act!

Challenges to the development actors

- The development actors have to recognize that changes in people's most intimate and basic life takes time and involves an holistic approach to people and worldviews. People's life is more than economics, and their dignity is reduced if we view humans only as economic actors whom will change with economic incentives.
- Development actors must therefore learn the language of faith and make alliances with institutions and organizations which have this language as their mother tongue. Important intermediators are the specialized humanitarian and development organizations of religious communities, since they are bi-lingual out of necessity.
- Governmental development actors cannot demand more consistence in the attitude and action of religious actors than they demand from their own governments:
 - The lack of a coherent governmental development strategy is well known, not least in terms of human rights and gender rights. Trade, geopolitical interests and domestic priorities usually overshadows most governmental development policies both in quantity and quality.
 - The gap between legislation and practice in many countries may be due to governments lack of will, but also lack of capacity to enforce their own legislation – not least on issues related to women's rights and gender based violence. The lack of capacity is often a product of mistaken conditions by international financial institutions, unjust terms of trade and inadequate development assistance.
 - The non-criticism of the authoritarian Chinese one-child-policy is another example communicating that the major population problem is the numbers of people in the South, not the lack of just distribution of resources in the one, global human family.
- The UNFPA Report is correctly concentrating on specific societal and human realities in order to change the most oppressive and violent practices. This approach is not undermining more deep-going processes linked to analysis of the patriarchy or the hierarchy in culture and religion, but realize that major achievements are possible with less ideological arguments.

- We know that change in religious communities is most sustainable when the change is motivated in the religious traditions and performed by legitimate religious actors on all levels. This implies that capacity-building must include support to religious formation and educational institutions on all levels.
- Studies show that changes in the practices of religious communities are enhanced when local, national and global expressions of the religious community are linked. This implies that legitimate global expressions of religious communities must be financed and be part of the discussions on challenges and actions. The development actors must realize and priorities religious actors with both a horizontal and a vertical network and organizations that facilitate these networks.

Conclusion

Not in my name – an excellent agenda for the religious community to be involved in gender, rights and sensitive issues. We have heard and seen, now is the time to act together!