

# Interreligious Insight

## July, 2005 Edition

### Reflections

*Alan Race attended the conference 'Africa and Globalisation for the Common Good: the Quest for Justice and Peace', in Kenya, in April 2005. The experience awakened in him some deep contrasts.*

Look into the eyes: do they sparkle with hope or do they reflect a well of sadness? Attending an international conference can heighten awareness of issues and that is good. Experiencing the lives of people brings a complementary type of awareness. Consider three examples of contrast.

#### CONTRAST ONE: GLOBALISATION AND TRADE

A couple of centuries ago peoples from the Indian sub-continent got themselves to East Africa via the Indian Ocean; they set up businesses, helped build railways, and brought tea. Kenya is now the biggest exporter of tea in the world! Tea is grown as a small bush and the tips of the branches are picked for little wages, often under conditions of intense heat. Many tea plantations bear the logo signs of British or American companies. Also, the Dutch grow flowers in huge polytubes for export, while enterprising Indian business people offer tourists luxury accommodation in splendid hotels on the Mombassa coast, by the warm Indian Ocean. But notice this: the ownership of wealth production is in the hands of the British, Americans, Dutch and Indians. True, they provide people with employment and that is to be celebrated; but none of the businesses are owned by Africans. So how do Africans reclaim dignity and self-worth?

#### CONTRAST TWO: GLOBALISATION AND HIV/AIDS

HIV is pandemic in Africa. Visiting two small schools for orphaned children of HIV families, the care and natural human love lavished on the children was palpable. The struggle to educate people about HIV is huge, especially in villages. However, in general terms, the culture does not encourage males to practice sex with condom protection. "Isn't that a problem?," I enquired of one pastor from Swaziland? "The women are slowly beginning to take control," he replied. "On the whole they are the losers, so they are starting to say: 'No protection, no sex'." Perhaps a tiny glimmer of hope here? Yet the West still withholds retroviral drugs for HIV by keeping the prices high, so that Africans can't afford them.

#### CONTRAST THREE: GLOBALISATION AND WILDLIFE

Witnessing giraffe, zebra and baboons by the roadside, and hippos coming in to shore from the middle of Lake Navaisha, are enchanting moments for westerners. As was the experience of an animal sanctuary which rescued injured or rejected animals. There is the care for wildlife, in spite of illegal gaming and greedy poachers. But a radio item, on my return, reported that elephants are more in danger now from global warming than from illegal gaming. When the weather is dry elephants migrate to wetter places. Yet global warming entails that wetter places are becoming increasingly rare; and so extinction threatens. Elephants threatened with extinction? No enchantment here for Westerners, or anyone else.

“COMMON GOOD”?

Can religion help? Tony Blair’s *Commission for Africa* has dared to comment that religion provides the language of hope and aspiration at times of desperation. One contributor in the Commission has said: “Religion can be a force for good or bad in Africa, but it can’t be ignored.” As ever, it depends on whether faith communities can work together without becoming mouthpieces for narrow political gains.

Globalisation for the Common Good holds out the audacious hope that we can create a different future of human solidarity inspired by spiritual values. The peoples of the world are connected by all kinds of ties – trade, travel, migration, knowledge – and perhaps above all by the crises that affect the planet as a whole. This is “Globalisation”. Adding the phrase “Common Good” reconnects us with ethical values, such as compassion, justice and the love of creation itself. Moreover, there is every reason for thinking that this is a vision that can be shared by people of many faiths and none.