



The Socio-Economic Context of Witchcraft Accusations

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Foreword

Before beginning this talk, I wanted to make some preliminary remarks. Historians, anthropologists and sociologists have often observed a link between the socio- and politico-economic conditions of a society and the ideas which the people have of witchcraft. In this talk, we will see some examples of this correlation. Before beginning, however, I wanted to say that explanations in terms of social science categories do not preclude the possibility of supernatural realities. I very much believe that Satan is at work in this world. But even if we believe in demonic powers which can affect people's lives, a social sciences perspective is still worth considering. We want, I believe, to consider all the factors which contribute to the unhappy situation with which we are living. Satan is sometimes at work through society's institutions – especially in contexts of overwhelming injustice. Besides, Satan is also interested in making us afraid through beliefs which exaggerate the power and dominance of witches in society. And we all, I think, agree that there are people (including, of course, children) who are falsely accused.¹ So the social sciences can help us better understand politico-economic systems, cultural beliefs, and the conditions under which society is more prone to an increase in the number of false accusations. Let us therefore try to make good use of all the possible perspectives on our subject.

¹ In the Focus Group Report on Child Witch Accusations in the D.R.Congo, we see that all three workshops confirmed this point. One participant from the first group, for example, said: "There are children who are falsely accused of being witches for no reason." In the third groups, someone even insisted: "This amounts to invalid testimony (mauvais témoignage), without justification or proof made against children because these are false accusations." Abel Ngolo et al., "Rapport Focus-Groups Sur Les Accusations De Sorcellerie Des Enfants En R. D. Congo," (Kinshasa, D.R.Congo: Équipe Pastorale auprès des Enfants en Détresse, 2013), 4–5.

1. Introduction: two encounters

a. My return to Beni in 2003

It was in May 2003. I had just arrived in Beni in North Kivu, after an absence of almost seven years. It was a time of great joy for me, being reunited once again with brothers in Christ with whom we had worked for 10 years before the war. The various armed groups had just signed the agreement which gave us the “one plus four” formula (one President, four Vice-Presidents from different groups) for the transitional government, and there was real hope for an improvement in the political and economic climate of the country after so much suffering. But it was a hope mixed with much uncertainty. Was it really possible that the war was over and that the different factions would lay down their weapons and work peacefully together to rebuild the nation? Would the peace last? There was plenty of reason to doubt.

Having arrived in Beni, I was astonished to see how much the town had changed during my seven year absence: a veritable transformation had taken place that I had not expected at all. For example, the phenomenon of the motorbike-taxi was already apparent, and the town, which had been really quiet before the war, was now filled with the constant throbbing of hundreds of motorbikes. And the construction projects! There were building sites everywhere with large brick houses going up where there had only been open land or at most semi-permanent dwellings. I found myself asking, Where had this apparent new prosperity come from during a time of war?

b. One of the two encounters

One day as I was on my way to the market in town, I ran across an old acquaintance – a businessman named François whom I had met when we were living in Beni in the 90s. We walked together for a few minutes, and I took the opportunity to ask him one of the questions that was on my mind: “Where have these houses come from? I didn’t expect that during a war so many people would have the money to build houses like this for themselves.” His reply surprised me. “My friend, there are some people who don’t want the war to end. These houses are built with the blood of the Congolese people.”

What did he mean? According to him, there were people in Beni who were taking advantage of the chaos of the rebellion to get rich. They were undoubtedly well connected to the local politico-administrative authorities and so were finding ways to get ahead in ways that were not entirely legal. Without the war, these individuals would not have been able to begin such construction work.²

c. The second encounter

That was the second encounter that I want to mention. The day before I was walking with a young pastor from our denomination, and I asked him a similar question. One of the motorbike-taxis had just passed us and I took the opportunity to try to satisfy my curiosity about this sign of unexpected prosperity. So I asked him: “Where have all these motorbikes come from? How are

² He also added that if you were not originally from that region and did not belong to the majority ethnic group you would automatically be excluded from all these business opportunities.

people able to buy them?” This time, too, the answer really surprised me: “Watu wengine wanasema kwamba zinatoka kwa Kuzimu” (“Some say they come from Hell (or from the Second World”). I was surprised, but I still understood: he meant that according to some people’s ideas, the owners of these motorbikes had acquired them through black magic. They had perhaps consulted someone who had taken them to the edge of a lake or a river where they had met a mermaid or water spirit who promised these clients wealth if they would just sacrifice a member of their family... That is the thinking, isn’t it?

d. Comparison of the two explanations

Now compare these two ways of explaining new wealth provided by my two friends. The businessman explained things in terms of the visible socio- and politico-economic realities of that period of the rebellion – realities that could be described in the categories of the social sciences. The young pastor referred instead to a form of “witchcraft” – to occult powers, accompanied by the sacrifice of a family member as a form of payment. The difference between a motorbike and a house has no significance here. I have heard the magical interpretation for the construction boom as well, and for other signs of prosperity too. Thus we have two different ways of explaining the appearance of other people’s surprising or mysterious new wealth.

And yet, we should note a kind of convergence between the two types of interpretation. Both refer to the unjust exploitation of others – to a kind of robbery or misappropriation, even to murder. The businessman stated that those new homes were built “with the blood of the Congolese people.” In other words, those who were building them preferred war and the spilling of blood to peace because they were benefiting financially from the current situation. My pastor friend, on the other hand, referred to the idea that those who resort to magic in order to gain an advantage over others must offer up the blood of someone who is precious to them. In both cases, the lives (the blood) of others are exploited or stolen for selfish personal gain. In both cases, we see the idea that the wealth of some depends on the suffering and death of others – thus, on a form of injustice.

I have sometimes had the opportunity to tell the story of these two patterns of explanation in discussions with friends or during conferences. I have asked the question: Which of these two explanations is more valid? Which is right? Which sheds more light on the realities with which people are living in Congolese society? We shall come back to that question later.

2. The link between social injustices and witchcraft

a. England in the 17th Century

Anthropologists and historians have often noted a link between oppressive socio- or politico-economic conditions and experiences of witchcraft in various societies down through history. For example, I have just read a book about witchcraft accusations in England during the 17th Century. English society was undergoing an important socio-economic transformation at the

time, one aspect of which was what is referred to as the 'enclosure movement'. Here I am quoting from the Wikipedia article that you can find at:

– http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mouvement_des_enclosures

The enclosure movement began in England in the 16th Century. Open fields and common pasture lands cultivated by the community as a whole were being turned into fenced pastureland by rich landowners for their flocks of sheep for the trade in wool that was expanding rapidly at the time. One consequence of this was grinding poverty among the rural population of the period, sometimes leading to uprisings.

Before these changes, many peasants depended on common lands (fields and pastureland) where they had the right to graze their animals and cultivate their crops along with everyone else, and from which they could therefore make a subsistence living. But as wool became more and more profitable, the rich began to seize this pastureland for their flocks of sheep. The enclosure movement thus deprived peasants of the means of survival that had previously been at their disposal. They became poorer than ever.³

At the same time, during this period there was an increase in the number of people accused of witchcraft. Most often, those accused came from the social stratum which had lost the right to use the common lands after enclosure. These peasants no longer had access to these lands and now had to survive by other means, including begging from the rich. The latter (the rich) disliked and grew weary of this begging and often did not want to grant their poor neighbours' requests for alms.

Suspicious and accusations of witchcraft multiplied in this atmosphere of social tension. Imagine, for example, that a widow comes to ask for help from a wealthy neighbour, but the latter turns her away. She goes home grumbling against him. During the night, the man's wife falls ill. In a context where people already have a great deal to say about witchcraft, what conclusion will the man reach? "This widow must be a witch. She is the one who bears me a grudge and who has undoubtedly cast a bad spell on my wife." These conflicts and suspicions sometimes led to witch hunts, and hundreds of people were accused and sometimes hanged. More than a hundred alleged witches were killed, for example, between 1645 and 1647, mainly because of the activities of two witch hunters, Matthew Hopkins and John Stearne.⁴ Note that in these cases, it was relatively powerless people, impoverished by radical and unjust transformations in the socio-economic system, who were accused of witchcraft and who suffered the consequences (suspicion, accusation, imprisonment, hanging...).

³ There were also other factors which contributed to dislocation in society: epidemics were killing large numbers of people, climate change was having a negative impact on agricultural production, significant population growth meant that food production was no longer sufficient, and there was political conflict and civil war between Catholics and Protestants. All this undoubtedly contributed to the unstable social climate which encouraged a tendency to fear and accuse alleged witches. Malcolm Gaskill, *Witchcraft: A Very Short Introduction*, Kindle ed., Very Short Introductions (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010); Malcolm Gaskill, *Witchfinders: A Seventeenth-Century English Tragedy*, Kindle ed. (London, UK: John Murray, 2008).

⁴ Gaskill, *Witchfinders: A Seventeenth-Century English Tragedy*.

b. African slave trade

It is very possible that the slave trade contributed to an increase in the number of Africans accused of being witches. An anthropologist by the name of Rosalind Shaw refers to a fairly detailed report of African beliefs and practices written by a 16th century Portuguese named Valentin Fernandes. This description of African beliefs dates back to the beginnings of the period of contact between Europe and Africa, and thus before the slave trade had really gotten under way. In his fairly complete picture of African religion Fernandes does not speak either of witchcraft or of witch hunts. It would therefore appear that witchcraft did not have any great importance or social prominence at that point in time.

However, a hundred years later, when the trade in black Africans was at its height, some European visitors to Africa noted that witchcraft accusations were multiplying and that these accusations were one of the ways of acquiring people who could be sold into slavery. In other words, those who were accused of being witches could be sold to white people and could thus be a source of economic gain, rather than being disposed of in some other way. Witchcraft accusations and the sale of the accused to Europeans had become “a routine and highly visible part of the practices of divination”.⁵ A Jesuit missionary called Manuel Alvares explicitly attributed the increase in the number of witchcraft accusations to the slave trade. The trafficking of slaves thus gave an economic motive for making such accusations. Accusing someone meant making money!

So once again, we can establish a connection between oppressive politico-economic relationships and the increase in witchcraft accusations.⁶

c. New forms of witchcraft

Here in Africa for some time a number of new forms of witchcraft have made their appearance. The idea that the acquisition of wealth might be the result of a contract between an individual and evil spirits who offer riches in exchange for the sacrifice of a family member was not always so popular. It is a relatively new concept, and anthropologists have suggested that this idea is linked to the arrival in Africa of capitalist economic systems which have enabled some people to get rich much more quickly than others. In a society where cultural values encourage mutuality and reciprocity — where everyone is supposed to live on a more or less equal footing — the fact that

⁵ Rosalind Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 212.

⁶ I have also just read an article on witchcraft accusations in India. According to a report, more than 2000 people accused of witchcraft (others estimate that the true number is far higher) have been killed between the years 2000 and 2012 in some rural areas. Most of them are poor women from low castes, and sometimes economic motives appear to have played an important part in these accusations and murders. A social worker called Pooja Singhal Punwar said “Often a woman is accused of being a witch so that she can be expelled from the village and her property can be confiscated, or for revenge, or because of rivalry between two families, or because a powerful man wants to punish her for resisting his sexual advances. Sometimes, too, such an accusation is a punishment for a woman who does not conform to social norms.” Thus, belief in witchcraft gives people the opportunity to advance their social or economic interests at the expense of women who are marginalised in society. Once again, we see a link between socio-economic realities and witchcraft accusations. See www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/07/21/thousands-of-women-accused-of-sorcery-tortured-and-executed-in-indian-witch-hunts/?hpid=z4. See also Alyson Callan, “‘What Else Do We Bengalis Do?’ Sorcery, Overseas Migration, and the New Inequalities in Sylhet, Bangladesh,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13, no. 2 (2007).

some people mysteriously amass fortunes in a selfish manner, while most struggle just to survive, produces tensions which lead to suspicions of and gossiping about witchcraft. Powerful men are believed to have acquired their wealth through illicit contracts made with occult forces, to the detriment of family members whom they have had to sacrifice. At the same time, poor people are often suspected of witchcraft motivated by jealousy of those who prosper. I have often heard that in villages, people who have the means to do so are very hesitant to build themselves better houses than those of their neighbours for fear that the latter will envy them and will cast evil spells on them. Thus rumours and accusations of witchcraft gain currency and become the preferred way of explaining illness, misfortune, bankruptcy, and death; but also good luck, prosperity, success (as well as failure) in a football match, at school and in political contests, etc.

The phenomenon of child witches is another relatively recent form of witchcraft in Africa.⁷ Once again, many observers believe there is a correlation between this phenomenon and other realities in society. Let us take the case of the D.R.Congo. For several decades now the citizens of this nation have endured a catastrophic situation in socio- and politico-economic terms. A few people have appropriated political power and have used that power to accumulate great wealth, whilst the vast majority struggle to survive under terrible conditions – and all this in a nation rich in diamonds, gold, copper, coltan, tin, and other minerals, wood, oil etc. In spite of all these riches, in 2013 D.R.Congo was listed in last place, alongside Niger, on the Human Development Index (HDI).⁸ Corruption and embezzlement abound on every side; the government does not invest in infrastructure: roads, ports, electricity, schools, hospitals and medical centres – all are neglected. Insecurity reigns and the economy stagnates. There are therefore no jobs and people are forced to struggle in order to survive in a way that is often referred to as miraculous, but which is in fact simply wretched. There is no shortage of illness, but there is a shortage of money to pay for medical care. The mortality rate is high, particularly among new-born babies, and the average life expectancy remains among the lowest in the world.⁹

In addition, alongside these challenges of extreme poverty, urbanisation is weakening traditional family structures. Children therefore have to negotiate life in households that are already troubled. These urban households do not benefit from the same level of support from their extended families as what exists back in the villages. One cannot, for example, readily access the wisdom of grandparents or uncles. And on top of that, very often these are mixed households. That is, the children of one woman live with another of their father's wives who is not their own mother. And the father has no job. There are lots of illnesses but medical care costs too much.

In such a context, conflicts easily arise. Childhood, meanwhile, is a time when one is psychologically very fragile (remember Dr Andy Alo's talk). Children need love and affection. But living in an environment which is already embroiled in antagonism and jealousy, where the child is not given the tenderness and understanding he needs for his holistic development, it is understandable that he would begin to behave strangely. Even children in peaceful households

⁷ Even if one can cite a few exceptional examples of societies which have a tradition of child witches. See for example Robert Brain, "Child-Witches," in *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations*, ed. Mary Douglas (London, UK: Tavistock, 1970).

⁸ <http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/corporate/HDR/2013GlobalHDR/French/HDR2013%20Summary%20French.pdf>.

⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_life_expectancy

can go through stages of development during which they display negative behaviour.¹⁰ How much more so for children in households suffering from poverty, unemployment, divorce, conflict between these children and the “mother” who is not their own mother, etc.

Consider now the wife who is looking after the children of a rival wife. If one of her own children falls sick and dies, in an environment where there is already more and more talk of child witches, who is likely to be suspected of having caused her child’s death? According to Filip de Boeck, an anthropologist who has studied this phenomenon, “In Kinshasa they say ‘Looking after your rival wife’s child is the same as looking after a dangerous monster (kobokola mwana ya mbanda obokoli elima).”¹¹ This tendency to accuse children is of course reinforced by so-called pastor-prophets who are prepared to identify children as witches and to force them to confess to crimes committed through occult powers (often after having received an appropriate ‘donation’).¹²

In view of all of these facts, can we really accept that we should attribute the suffering of Congolese families to witchcraft? Isn’t it the case that these perspectives can shed light on our subject? Isn’t it the case that they can help us better to understand both why the Congolese people suffer and why they are willing to suspect or accuse those around them of witchcraft (and increasingly even the children in their own households)? If we attribute everything to witchcraft, do we not run the risk of overlooking or minimising the more important causes of these sufferings, namely politico-economic injustices and changes in social structures (urbanisation and its impact on families, for example)? We should not be blind to oppressive politico-economic realities, and to the way in which the ideas that people have about witchcraft might be influenced by these realities.

¹⁰ The three workshops which contributed to the Focus Group Report into Child Witch Accusations in the D.R.Congo gave lists of ‘signs of witchcraft’ used by accusers to identify child witches. Among these ‘signs’, there is nothing that would surprise anyone with a knowledge of the psychology of children growing up in difficult conditions. My own children have displayed most of these ‘signs’, especially after the events of war to which they were exposed. The signs cited were as follows: difficult behaviours such as refusing to pray, stubbornness, rowdiness and fighting, rudeness, talking too much, cruelty, stealing, lying, lack of cleanliness, gluttony, shyness, and fear; night time issues like bedwetting, disturbed sleep, sleep talking, and bad dreams; illnesses or other physical problems such as delayed growth, ringworm, fleas, weight loss, adult appearance, recurrent illnesses, and epilepsy. Once again it should be emphasize that there is *nothing* abnormal in any of these things that would indicate the presence or activity of supernatural powers. (Ngolo et al., “Rapport Focus-Groups Sur Les Accusations De Sorcellerie Des Enfants En R. D. Congo,” 6.)

¹¹ Filip De Boeck, “Children, Gift and Witchcraft in the Democratic Republic of Congo,” in *Makers and Breakers: Children and Youth in Postcolonial Africa*, ed. Alcinda Honwana and Filip De Boeck (Rochester, NY: James Currey, 2005), 204.

¹² We could refer here to the General Report submitted by Denis Kabamba Kasenda to the Journées Scientifiques de l’U.PRE.CO which formed part of the preparations for this Forum: “Revivalist Churches turn witchcraft into the big demonic evil that must be fought with still greater spiritual energy and through deliverance ceremonies that are increasingly inhumane. It is mainly children who are accused of witchcraft and violently abused on the basis of false prophecies!! These Churches thus become spiritual shopping malls designed to satisfy the selfish financial motives of their founders. They subject so called ‘child witches’ to a great deal of abuse.” (Denis Kabamba Kasenda, “Journées Scientifique De L’u.Pre.Co.: Rapport Général,” (Kananga, D.R.Congo: Université Présbytérienne Sheppard et Lapsley du Congo, 2013), 3–4.) Let us add to this the words of the Focus Group Report on Child Witch Accusations in the D.R.Congo: “Everyone is aware of the fact that here in D.R.Congo and in other countries in the world, church leaders are often principally responsible for the spreading and perpetuation of beliefs and accusations of witchcraft against children in their churches and their local communities. Their ostentatious actions adequately show that they are often actively implicated in the torture and abuse of so-called ‘child witches.’” Ngolo et al., “Focus-Group Report on Child Witch Accusations in the D.R.Congo” 2.

d. Conclusion to this section

In all these examples, we see connections between unjust and oppressive politico-economic realities on the one hand and the ideas about witchcraft that we encounter in society on the other. It would appear that in contexts where some people get rich and become politically powerful at the expense of others, it can often be the case that feelings of suspicion, mistrust, jealousy and resentment create opportunities for an increase in rumours, gossip, fear, and, quite often, accusations of witchcraft, particularly against those who are marginalised. If this is true, we must oppose as much as possible the injustices which produce such bitter fruit. In other words, if these are the conditions that contribute to witchcraft accusations, then such accusations are much less likely to occur in a social context where people are actively seeking to relate to one another with love and biblical justice.

I believe that, according to the Bible, the Church was created, among other things, for this purpose. One of God's aims in bringing the Church into being was that it should be an alternative counter-cultural society in the midst of the world, different from the one we see all around us in the world: a place of refuge for the suffering; a family whose members take care of one another; a community which shows to the world how much the disciples of Jesus love one another so that those who do not yet know Him might come to believe that He really is the Saviour of the world (John 13:34-35, 17: 20-23). In that kind of social context, I truly believe, suspicions and accusations of witchcraft would not have the same prominence.

2. Biblical perspectives on socio- and politico-economic systems

a. What does the Bible have to say about the socio- and politico-economic field?

The topic we are looking at in this section is too big to be able to deal with it fully in a short presentation like this one. Nevertheless, we will try to highlight a few points that might be useful for us to consider.

First of all, we must stress that the Bible recognises the realities of oppression and injustice in human societies. According to Biblical doctrine, human beings, sinners that we are, often seek to gain political and economic power for ourselves in selfish ways; and in order to do this, we are all too willing to crush and exploit our neighbours. The Lord, however, asks His people to pursue justice in their social relationships. Just as God delivered them from slavery in Egypt, so He wanted them to be willing in their turn to help other oppressed people. "You shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and that the Lord your God rescued you from there; this is why I give you these commandments" (commandments about social justice among other things). (Deuteronomy 24:18). So God wanted His people to strive to ensure justice for the oppressed within their society. They were not to allow the strong to oppress the weak. In the first presentation, we quoted the passage in Exodus 22 :21-24:

You will not mistreat or oppress a foreigner; for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt. You will not take advantage of the widow or orphan. If you do and they cry out to Me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless.

There are many other passages in the Law of Moses which address this same issue. One could quote for example the law of jubilee which required those who bought fields from the poor to give them back these fields after 50 years – the year of jubilee. We do not have time here to explore in detail the operation of this law.¹³ Let us simply note that if the Israelites had obeyed it, powerful men would not have been able over the years to acquire the productive fields of others, and everyone would have retained access to the means of providing for themselves the basic necessities of life.

In requiring such actions of them it appears that God wanted Israelite society to be an example or a model of justice to the pagan nations around them (an alternative society).

See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me... You will observe them and put them into practice, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these laws and who will say: surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people! What other nation... has such righteous laws and decrees as this body of laws that I am setting before you today? (Deuteronomy 4: 5–8).

Unfortunately, the Israelites did not obey this law. For this reason the prophets rebuked them in the strongest terms regarding the suffering of the poor and marginalised members of their society. Here are a few passages that speak to this issue. The first seems to be addressed to the rich in Israelite society, scolding them for having neglected the law of jubilee. They had not returned the fields in accordance with the requirements of this law. So the Lord said to them: “Woe to you who add house to house and join field to field till no space is left, and who live alone in the middle of the land.” (Isaiah 5:8).¹⁴

Look too at Micah 3:1–4 where we have a shocking picture of the oppression of the people by the powerful in society:

Listen, you leaders of Jacob, and rulers of the house of Israel! Should you not embrace justice? [But instead of acting justly, these leaders] eat my people’s flesh, strip off their skin, and break their bones in pieces; they chop them up like meat for the pan, like flesh for the pot. Then they will cry out to the Lord, but He will not answer them. (Micah 3:1–4).

So the children of Israel, and especially the leaders, did not obey the will of God. Their society was instead characterised by injustice towards the poor, by oppression and extortion of the powerless. Instead of striving to ensure justice in society, powerful men were seizing the houses

¹³ For further insight into the Jubilee legislations, see Christopher J. H. Wright, *La Mission de Dieu: Fil Conducteur Du Récit Biblique* (Charols, France: Excelsis, 2012).

¹⁴ A little further in Isaiah, we read, Woe to those who make unjust laws, and to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless. What will you do on the day of reckoning, when disaster comes from afar?” (Isaiah 10:1–3).

and fields of the poor for their own selfish gain. This is why the Lord delivered them into the hands of their enemies so that they could be taken off into exile.

Nevertheless, the Lord promised that He would one day have mercy upon them, that He would forgive their sins, and that He would return to save them a second time. And this second time, His work of salvation would go still further:

I will give you a new heart and I will put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and to be careful to keep my laws (including laws of social justice). (Ezekiel 36:26–27, see also Jeremiah 31:31–34).

As we said in the first talk, it is precisely this that Jesus came to accomplish: “(He) gave Himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for Himself a people that are His very own, eager to do good works.” (Titus 2:14). “For we are His workmanship, created for good works in Christ, which God has prepared in advance for us to do.” (Ephesians 2:10). These good works are precisely the works which come from love for one another — a love which would always seek justice for all, and especially for the powerless and marginalised.

b. The Church as a place of justice — the people of God as those who hunger and thirst for divine justice (Matthew 5) (love)

Thus the Church should be a place where we work for social justice in so far as this is possible. The members of the early church sold their houses and their fields to ensure the survival of the widows among them. (Acts 2: 42–47, 4:32–37, 6:1–7). When Jesus said that we should store up treasures in heaven instead of on the earth (Matt 6:19), he was speaking above all of our duty towards the poor and the weak (not about building big church buildings — see for example Matthew 19:21, Mark 10:21, Luke 19:8). Christians of the early church were making significant efforts in this direction not because they felt under obligation to do so, nor only to gain some reward, but rather because of the love that God had placed in their hearts for one another. In 1 John, we read:

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth. (1 John 3:16–18)

So the Church should be an alternative society where love prevails, without regard for social status. The poor man should be honoured as much as the businessman (James 2: 1–9). We must have the same concern for the weak (children among others) as for the strong. And undoubtedly we must strive harder on behalf of the weak, since they have greater need of our intervention. I say again, “an alternative society”. We are called to be different from the world that surrounds us — this world where everyone is looking out for his own selfish interests and where those who succeed are often willing to ride roughshod over the powerless in order to obtain an even larger slice of the cake.¹⁵

¹⁵ “By what right do you crush my people and grind the faces of the poor?” declares the Lord God Almighty. (Isaiah 3:15)

This presentation talks of “politico-economic systems”. These two social arenas – that of political power and that of the economy – are often closely linked to one another. The rich are normally the ones with the most influence in the political sphere, and politicians often use their power and their positions to get still richer. Thus each has an interest in working to acquire the most important positions.

Jesus was well acquainted with this tendency in human beings. One day he said to his disciples: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them and their high officials exercise authority over them.” (Matthew 20:25). Jesus, however, calls us to another way of behaving. In fact, Jesus spoke the words that I have just quoted as he sought to correct his disciples who had just demonstrated their conformity to the political ways of the world. James and Jean had just been putting in their request for the top places in His kingdom. The others were complaining about them because these two had gotten to Jesus ahead of them. So everyone was squabbling over these positions. But Jesus reproached them, saying “It will not be the same among you. Instead, whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:26–28).

Thus according to Jesus the politics of the Kingdom of God are an alternative politics – different in both their aims and in their way of acting. In the politics of the Kingdom we are to serve others, and especially those who are marginalised. And who is more potentially marginalised in society than children? Thus, we must acknowledge, as Dr Alo said,

In the Kingdom of God, humility is a capital character. Adult men, including Christian (spiritual) leaders, are often attracted by power and honour. Human beings want to become the greatest in every aspect of life. But in the Kingdom of God, children become our models. Jesus goes further to say that whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me (Mark 9:36; Luke 9:48).¹⁶

So Jesus calls us to serve our children and to sacrifice ourselves in their defence in order to give them the protection they need in a society that is so characterised by injustice, corruption, and the misappropriation of wealth that ought to be used for the kind of development that would allow everyone to work and to make a living.¹⁷ In the context of this corrupt world, Jesus calls us to be an alternative society where we help one another to blossom and flourish so as to realise our full God-given potential as creatures made in His image.

I truly believe that where the Church, guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit, strives for justice, and works to become increasingly the kind of alternative society that Jesus came to create, there will be no room for accusations against children or against other people who are marginalised by society but precious both to God and to His people.

How do we achieve this? As I read the Focus Group Report on Child Witch Accusations in D.R.Congo I was very encouraged. In that document you already have a good starting point with excellent suggestions for future action. You also spoke of initiatives that have already started and

¹⁶ “Dr. Andy Anguandia Alo, “Children in the Bible: Blessings from God and Images of His Kingdom,” (Kinshasa, D.R.Congo: Stop Child Witch Accusations, 2014), 6.)

¹⁷ See Ephesians 4:28, 1 Thessalonians 4: 11–12.

steps already taken. You spoke of “mechanisms for caring for so called child witches” which have been put in place by churches and NGOs, You mentioned the enormous potential of the churches “to give to children, parents and communities the knowledge, attitudes, skills and strategies they need to deal with questions concerning child witches”¹⁸ You mentioned the importance of an holistic education (including Biblical, legal and social elements, etc.) for Christians, families, and even for the general public regarding the concerns which have brought us together at this Forum. We do not have the time to review everything you said in that document, but I think it could provide a starting point for future discussions and eventual action steps.

May God bless you in this work that is without any doubt on His heart.

Dr. Timothy D. Stabell, August 2014

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¹⁸ Ngolo et al., “Focus Group Report on Child Witch Accusations in D.R.Congo,” 10.

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