

Between Cosmology and Community: International Conference on Religion and Sustainable Development

Cosmology and Community

By Katiryna Basinkevich

On 2 July 2019, distinguished African church leaders, students, faculty members and practitioners from the field of development cooperation came together at the Chapel of the Holy Spirit at the Humboldt University of Berlin. The aim of the conference was to discuss and exchange ideas, among all relevant actors, about religion and sustainable development.

The terms cosmology and community formed the central concepts throughout the conference from 02.07 to 06.07.2019. At the same time, the dimensions of equality, economy, and ecology were incorporated into the discussions and keynote speeches. The first day of the lecture series, inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Wilhelm Gräb, Prof. Dr. Bernd Schipper and Philipp Öhlmann, put particular emphasis on the questions of religious communities' contributions to sustainable development, as well as the impact of knowledge systems and beliefs on developmental transformations, understood as cosmology. Given that current development agendas do not include religion in their development goals, the conference made an important contribution to the understanding and the recognition of the relationship between religion and sustainable development by policymakers, scholars, and practitioners.

In the first keynote speech of the day, Marie-Luise Frost, a research fellow at the research programme on religious communities and sustainable development of the Humboldt University, presented the programme's most recent research.

In her presentation, *Community: The example of African Initiated Churches*, Ms. Frost talked about the project's fieldwork research findings from South Africa, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. The research results showed a close connection between spirituality and development, underlining the potential of African Initiated Churches (AICs) for development cooperation. A prioritization of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by African church leaders and representatives through focus group discussions showed that while all SDGs have been considered important, special preference was given to SDGS 1 to 4 and SDG 16.

In terms of ecology and equality, SDGs 5 and 12-15 have received few votes. However, an interest in all areas was observed, nevertheless. The presentation continued with examples of the religious communities' contributions to their society, be it by encouraging democratic

values through sermons or the building of schools to foster education. The presentation concluded by pointing out AICs as agents of social change, that are able to provide local solutions to developmental challenges. The following Q&A session discussed the research methods applied, as well as the complexity of the definition of African Initiated Churches.

Meanwhile, the presentation by Ernestina Novieto from the University of Ghana *Religion, Postmodernity and Sustainable Development in Africa: A Case of the Neo-Pentecostal Economy* focused on the concept of cosmology.

The keynote speech challenged the notion that religion is an obstacle to secularism and development. In her speech, Ms. Novieto talked about the activities by churches that contribute to the sustainable development transformations in religious communities. While doing so, Ms. Novieto distinguished between quantitative and qualitative contributions, such as help for the less fortunate through educational, medical or economic support or spiritual guidance. While the dependence of individuals on religious leaders, as well as the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few, remain serious concerns in the impacts of religion on development, comments in the following Q&A session pointed out and praised the clear connection made between religion and society.

Distinguished church leader lecture

The first day of the conference ended with the keynote speech *The Zion Christian Church: Praying for Peace in a Changing South African and Global Context* by the distinguished church leader His Grace the Right Rev. Bishop Dr. Barnabas E. Lekganyane of the Zion Christian Church in South Africa. After presenting the audience with the very extensive history of the Zion Christian Church, the largest AIC in Southern Africa, Dr. Lekganyane described it as a place that respects all cultures, identities, and customs. Similar to the previous keynote speeches, peace and the promotion thereof formed an important part of this last presentation of the evening. Furthermore, spiritual guidance was described as an instrument to encourage development by the Zion Christian Church, showing a parallel to the remarks made by Ms. Ernestina Novieto previously.

Conclusion

Throughout the evening, it became evident that the examples of Christian agency for sustainable development in Africa discussed on this day all had certain activities in common. The Zion Christian Church of South Africa too supports its community by providing education and health services, as well as economic support through guidance on employment opportunities, Dr. Lekganyane said.

The role of women has been raised multiple times throughout the keynote presentations, leading to the conclusion that in all cases mentioned, women's contributions to sustainable development were considered important. While the Zion Christian Church does not appoint female pastors, it ensures their participation in the community by providing them with their own leading roles, a chief member of the Zion Christian Church pointed out during a very engaging closing discussion.

The next days of the conference included the following keynote speeches with a focus on cosmology and community:

- *Between Cosmology and Community: A South African Exploration of the Practice of Sacrifice in the Context of Religion and Development* by Cas Wepener & Ignatius Swart on 03.07.2019
- *Neo-Pentecostal Cosmology and the Afro-Brazilian Communities* by Kleber Machado on 06.07.2019
- *Cosmology and Community: A Pneumatological Perspective of Missional Collaboration in Ghana* by Anna Droll on 06.07.2019