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# Faith in Civil Society Religious Actors as Drivers of Change



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Faith in Civil  
Society  
**Religious Actors  
as Drivers of  
Change**

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# Inter-religious dialogue in Haiti – a tool for peace and development

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Haiti sees three large religions formally established, recognised, and accepted as such: Christianity (Catholics and Evangelical as well as Anglican Protestants), Voodoo, and Islam. It is difficult to establish how many of the population that belong to one religion or the other, much because religious syncretism is very common. Syncretism links beliefs to each other in different ways, and the religious practices of one group can be tolerated and even practiced by another. This is especially the case between Catholics and Voodoo practitioners. For example, the All Saints' Day and the All Souls' Day are originally Catholic holy days that are also celebrated within the Voodoo religion. Protestants are normally and formally very critical to this kind of practice, but, also some Protestant believers are secretly practicing syncretism. So, acquiring reliable statistics concerning religious affiliation is a tricky business in Haiti; a Haitian could easily be associated with two or three religions at the same time. The Islamic sector is relatively new on the scene, but it is estimated that there are about 5,000 Muslims in the country.

## **Relations between religions**

Due to the immense economic and social distress which affects 80 percent of the Haitian population, the religious sentiment is very important in people's worldview. Since there seems to be no concrete solution to people's problems, they need to be nourished by the hope of deliverance by God. Many believe that only God can pull Haiti from this abyss where Satan has placed it. But which religion represents God, and which represents Satan in Haiti?

This issue is central to the understanding of the relations between the different religions in the country. Since the colonial period, Voodoo

has been seen by Christians as a satanic religion. Voodoo practitioners can testify to the numerous persecution campaigns they suffered from 1804 up to 2010, when the tremendous earthquake took place. It may be said that the most important Haitian resource is God – but even this providence is not democratically shared. Christians, especially evangelical Protestants, claim a monopoly of God, and assign to Voodoo the monopoly of Satan. Also among the Christians themselves there are serious difficulties to accept each other. According to Evangelical theology, Catholics and Anglicans are not following the appropriate doctrine to be received by Jesus. So with passion and compassion for all the lost souls, many Evangelical crusades are realised to convert them.

Voodoo came originally from Africa with the Haitian ancestors, and has thus been implanted in Haiti since the colonial period. The practitioners were first persecuted by Catholics and later on by Protestants. Voodoo practitioners and priests were burned or otherwise executed by political and religious leaders. Despite five centuries of persecution and evangelisation campaigns to slow it down or uproot it, Voodoo religion resisted and survived until today. Between 2001 and 2003 it was granted legal statute and recognised as one of the religions of the country.

### **The 2010 earthquake and the emergence of inter-religious dialogue**

It was in this religious context that Haiti experienced the earthquake that lasted for a few seconds on January 12, 2010. I can testify that among the hundreds of thousands of people who were buried under the rubble, there was no difference between Protestants, Catholics, Anglicans, Voodoo believers, or Muslims. The campuses of all the religious institutions were filled with displaced people, and there was no possibility that faith differences could be considered in the efforts to meet the emergency needs. God was for all, merciful to all, and millions of people, representing all religious beliefs, were gathered at the ruins of the national palace to pray and ask for deliverance from this painful situation.

Already before the earthquake, there were some religious leaders who were relatively open to dialogue. The ecumenical tendency was there, but not very strong because of Evangelical resistance. However, in the

post-disaster ambience, there was a momentum to launch the process of religious dialogue, and a delegation from *Religions for Peace International* visited Haiti in order to motivate the leaders from the various religious sectors. This initiative led to the creation of the interfaith and humanitarian platform *Religions for Peace, Haiti*.

Just created, the Haiti interfaith platform was facing three main challenges:

- to continue the dialogue in order to maintain trust between leaders and to reassure the followers of each religion;
- to carefully determine the points of convergence between each religious sector in order to establish a common ground; and
- to identify areas of differences to be respected and to celebrate them as a force of enhancement provided by each religion.

While the platform was working on these challenges, it was also concerned to intervene urgently on the following aspects of the Haitian socio-political context:

*The cholera outbreak:* The platform stood up to educate and mobilise the nation to overcome the disease. About 75 voodoo adepts were murdered because people charged them with being responsible for the cholera outbreak. Religions for Peace, Haiti denounced these crimes committed by non-identified persons, required that the persecutions stop promptly, and a ceremony was held to commemorate the victims and to provide spiritual support to their families.

*Political unrest:* After the elections of November 2010, Haiti experienced a really menacing post-election crisis. Religions for Peace, Haiti worked with the protagonist to avoid an explosion in society.

*Desecration of a Catholic cathedral:* The nation was shocked by this act of vandalism against one of its churches. Some were worried that it would lead to interreligious unrest. The platform protested against the act and called upon the government to take legal action against the law breakers.

*Tense relationship between the executive and the legislative powers:* The Haitian constitution of 1987 created a semi-parliamentary regime, where power is shared between the executive and the legislative branches. This regime is new to the Haitian people and contrary to its cultural mind,

which is used to a presidential regime with all power concentrated in the hands of the President. Because of this legacy, collaboration between the President and the Parliament is difficult, and especially so because after the last presidential elections the majority of senators and congressmen represent another party than the one of the President. Another constitutional problem is that the President is the Head of the executive power, and the Prime Minister Head of the government; this situation does not encourage good collaboration between the two parties, and is, in fact, possible only if the Prime Minister remains completely submissive. In these elections, the nationality of the President was also questioned, a situation that contributed to the creation of an explosive climate. The platform of Religions for Peace, Haiti was called on to help in decreasing the tensions and to facilitate communication.

Despite the enormous differences between the religious sectors, experience has taught us that *inter-religious dialogue is key* when it comes to the prevention of conflict and the building of trust within the Haitian society. In Religions for Peace, Haiti, we never vote. All decisions are taken by consensus after a time of sufficient dialogue to find the points of common understanding, and the process of decision-making is always supported by deep spirituality and prayers. The reason for not voting is simple: the platform represents five distinct religious groups, out of which three are closely related (the three Christian groupings). Voting would give this group an immediate and constant majority, so to encourage and assure a space of dialogue and free expression we take our decision by consensus. Each religious group is represented by a person officially designated by the head of the sector he or she represents.

### **The road map of Religions for Peace, Haiti**

The platform wants to reinforce its local institution, develop its strategic planning, and facilitate a better relation between Religions for Peace, Haiti and international organisations that are involved in similar work. The following points are addressed in order to better contribute towards the holistic wellbeing of Haitian men, women and children:

- *Protection of vulnerable people, such as women and children*, using seminars, conferences, and radio and television broadcasting to motivate people;
- *Promotion of family values* through our congregations and by using the media and public institutions;
- *Advocacy for the protection and regeneration of the environment*, through the promotion of a ‘green theology’;
- *Prevention of conflict, conflict resolution, education for tolerance and peace* through the development of dialogue between people of different zones and through facilitation of common initiatives between these groups; and
- *Advocacy for the respect of fundamental human rights*, respect for democratic and republican values.

The ongoing dialogue between representatives of the religious sectors ensures harmony within the platform. This harmony may lead to mutual acceptance, public trust, and cohesion among different fragments of the population. The religious leaders involved in Religions for Peace, Haiti intend to serve their nation and to create a space where Haitians can come together, talk to each other, listen to one another and move forward with their lives.

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