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Mineral Extraction, Human Rights Violations, and the Church's Social Responsibility in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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Abstract

The rights and dignity of citizens, especially women and children, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) are being violated by local and foreign actors, including five United States tech firms, accused of subjecting the people to hazardous and dehumanising working conditions in mining sites, in the quest for the country's mineral resources, such as cobalt, copper, tin, tungsten, and tantalum. Research has linked the extraction of these minerals to toxic contamination that has resulted in negative health outcomes in women and children and grave violations of human rights such as forced evictions of communities from farmlands and homesteads, sexual assault, arson, and beatings. Locating this mode of violence and exploitation within the neocolonial and neoliberal logic of the sacrifice of African lives, this paper undertakes a critical historical, political, economic, and theological approach to analyse the violence and argues that various stakeholders, especially the church in DRC, have a crucial role to play in standing up against the violence and exploitation going on in DRC and in working for justice, peace, development, and restoration of the dignity and value of human life in the country. At the heart of the paper is the conviction that African lives matter.

Introduction

The extraction of cobalt in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in central Africa has been linked to child labour. In 2019, a historic case was launched by fourteen Congolese families against five big United States (US) tech companies – Apple, Google, Dell, Microsoft, and Tesla. According to the lawsuit filed in Washington, DC, by International Rights Advocates, a human rights firm whose vision is 'a world free of slave labour and other crimes against humanity', these tech firms were accused of 'aiding and abetting in the death and serious injury of children' (Kelly 2019) who were working in cobalt mines in the companies' supply chain. The lawsuit further indicated that the tech giants have 'special knowledge' that the cobalt used in their products is mined under hazardous conditions and linked to child labour. Children working in the mines, mostly owned and controlled by Chinese subsidiary firms, are paid as little as $2 a day for the backbreaking and dangerous work of digging for cobalt rocks with primitive tools in dark, underground tunnels. Some children have been killed in tunnel collapses while others have been paralysed or severely injured without any compensation from the companies. A plaintiff in the suit reported how her young nephew working in an underground tunnel was 'buried alive' when the tunnel collapsed. The family has not recovered his body (Kelly 2019).

In March 2024, an appeals court in Washington, DC, ruled against the Congolese families, insisting that the five US tech companies were not liable for any alleged support of the use of child labour in cobalt mining operations in DRC. Buying cobalt in the global supply chain, the court stated, did not amount to 'participation in a venture' under a federal law protecting children and other victims of human trafficking and forced labour (Stempel 2024). Notwithstanding, in April 2024, Amsterdam & Partners LLP, a law firm representing DRC's government, sent a letter to Apple CEO Tim Cook, again raising concerns over 'blood minerals' in Apple's supply chain. In a 53-page report, the law firm outlined several claims against Apple and other foreign tech companies, mostly related to the laundry of DRC's 3Ts (tin, tungsten, and tantalum). 'Many actors along the mineral supply chain have profited from the smuggling of DRC blood minerals', the report stated, adding that 'the global supply chain is thoroughly contaminated' (Amsterdam & Partners LLP 2024:11, 51).

Aside from the 3Ts, DRC also has rich deposits of other minerals such as cobalt and copper which are used in the production of lithium-ion batteries for smartphones, laptops, and electric cars. The country holds

> the seventh largest reserves of copper globally and is the third largest producer. It also holds approximately half of the world's cobalt reserves and accounts for more than 70% of global production. (Amnesty International 2023:6)

While empirical research has linked the toxic contamination associated with extracting these minerals in DRC to negative health outcomes such as congenital malformations and birth defects in children (Brusselen et al. 2020), the surging global demand for industrial-scale cobalt mining in the country continues to result in forced evictions of entire communities from farmlands and homesteads, destruction of the ecosystem, depreciation of air quality, contamination of water, and grave human rights violations such as sexual assault, arson, and beatings (Amnesty International 2023:9-16).

There is growing concern about the problems of extractivism in many parts of the developing and developed worlds (Koster and Deane-Drummond 2024; Okoi and Nalule 2023). Writing about the Latin American context, which is similar to the African experience in many ways, Elizabeth Gandolfo (2023:21) states:

> Extractivism violates the sociality and sacred calling of our species by pitting the wealth, power, comforts, and luxuries of some human beings against the health, dignity, and survival of others.

In the violence and destruction of life that accompanies the plunder of DRC's mineral resources, the lives of many Africans are being compromised for the sake of power, profit, and possessions that are enjoyed by a minority. Existing economic inequality with the developed world that relies on mineral resources from the developing world suggests that the victims of extractivism are often not the beneficiaries. This explains why, despite its rich deposits of precious minerals, DRC is still among the poorest countries in the world. In the

2023/2024 Human Development Report, the country ranked 180th out of 193 countries (United Nations Development Programme 2024).

Anthropological scholars argue that mining is

> a privileged site for accessing the totality of global capitalism and the convergence of different scales of the so-called world system. (Smith 2021:33)

In addition to sacrificing human lives, extractivism also destroys and sacrifices ecosystems to the gods of greed and corporate profit, thus posing significant risks to sustainable development. While Apple and the other US tech firms have denied complicity in the criminal abuse of children and in the exploitation of DRC's minerals, it should be stated that the resource-based violence spawned by the scramble for DRC's minerals has a much more complicated history, involving different actors, both foreign and local. To get a sense of this history, it is important to go back in time and see where it all began.

Catastrophic Convergences of Greed, Terror, and Plunder

The modern story of DRC is a story of greed, terror, and plunder at the heart of Africa's entry into modernity. Written in the imaginative landscape of Africa, this story continues to shape how Africa is perceived and its place in the world. As one African political theologian claims,

> behind the problematic state of politics in Africa are stories that carry assumptions about Africa and African societies, which in turn shape Africans and African societies. (Katongole 2011:7–8)

It all started with Belgian king Leopold II (1835–1909), who acquired sole ownership of the Congo Free State in 1885 and immediately set about the plunder of his African estate. In his insatiable quest for raw materials, mostly rubber, Leopold, through his proxies, visited untold violence and brutality on the people. Colonial state officials were required to cut off the hands of Congolese people who refused to provide their allotted rubber quota, and to mete out other forms of cruel punishment. By the time Leopold's reign of terror

ended, the number of dead Congolese numbered between eight and ten million. As one historian states, it was 'bloodshed on an industrial scale' (Hochschild 2020:4).

The end of formal colonial rule has not brought much reprieve to the Congolese people when one thinks of postcolonial incarnates like Mobutu Sese Seko who ruled, plundered, and pauperised his country for more than three decades after independence, leaving three-quarters of his people living on less than $2 a day. A year before Mobutu's death in 1997, civil war broke out in the country, triggered by decades of sociopolitical difficulties and economic frustrations. According to Rigobert Minani (2022:45), a Congolese Jesuit priest who heads the research in peace, human rights, democracy, and good governance at DRC's *Centre d'Études Pour l'Action Sociale* (CEPAS), on the eve of the war, DRC had been mired in

> a failed democratization process for at least seven years, its economy was at its lowest, and international cooperation had been suspended since May 1992. In short, the state was politically unstable and economically asphyxiated.

The combination of these factors not only favoured the outbreak of the war but also made possible

> the invasion of the country, the collapse of its security apparatus, and a scramble to loot the DRC's mineral resources that involved more than nine African countries. (Minani 2022:45–46)

A catastrophic combination of Mobutu's declining political legitimacy and ill-timed economic and structural reforms proposed by international financial institutions resulted in the privatisation of mining companies, a decision which proved fatal for DRC's economy. As Minani (2022:46) states,

> The action amounted to a selloff of national wealth and it empowered illegal armed groups and other military actors. The period also coincided with the explosion of violence in the Great Lakes countries, with war in Burundi and genocide in

> Rwanda. The DRC experienced not only internal violence, but also spillover fighting from other countries near its borders. Mining companies raced to obtain mining titles sold at low prices because of war. And they also negotiated with the groups that had military control in the areas to be developed, giving the armed groups resources and power. From that moment on, control of mines became part of the war strategy.

In 2009 Joseph Kabila, who succeeded his father as president following the latter's assassination, signed a deal with Beijing, which gave the Chinese government access to mining concessions in exchange for development assistance. Following the concession, China took control of most of the primary industrial copper-cobalt mining sites in DRC. Presently, China dominates the international market for cobalt (Gross 2023). This situation has complicated DRC's economic woes and has created trade inequality that benefits foreign mining companies over DRC and its people. There is no doubt that corruption is a big part of the problem. Big foreign stakeholders come waving around large sums of money, which they use to pacify government officials, local elites, and rebel groups in order to maintain access to the mining sites. Findings by various anti-corruption groups such as Transparency International have revealed that the multinational mining company Glencore paid at least US$27.5 million in bribes to secure important business advantages for its mining operations in DRC between 2007 and 2018. To cover up its corruption cases, the company paid an additional US$180 million to DRC authorities in December 2022 (Transparency International 2024).

Despite its failure to promote transparency in the mining economy, prosecute corrupt officials, and create the conditions for broad legal and economic reforms, the DRC government has accused its neighbour Rwanda of grave complicity in the exploitation of the country's mineral resources and their smuggling into the international market, and of furthering instability in the country through alliances with proxy militia groups and military leaders and financing the ongoing civil war. This allegation has been confirmed by the US government:

> In many cases, these minerals directly or indirectly benefit armed groups and move out of the country through Rwanda

> and to Uganda before moving to major refining and processing countries. (U.S. Department of State 2024)

Presently, there are more than 250 local and 14 foreign armed groups fighting for territorial control of the mines and other resources in DRC's eastern provinces. There are allegations that former Congolese army general and warlord Bosco Ntaganda,

> who fought in all of Rwanda's proxy militias, was smuggling an estimated $15 million per week from eastern DRC into Rwanda

from 2006 to early 2009 (Amsterdam & Partners LLP 2024:25). Big Western players such as British national David Bensusan, a former CEO of Minerals Supply Africa, the biggest exporter of minerals from Rwanda, have also been accused of coordinating the smuggling of DRC's minerals to Rwanda and on to the international market (Amsterdam & Partners LLP 2024:27).

Since 1996, as many as six million Congolese have been killed and nearly seven million are currently displaced. Despite reforms in the country's mining code in 2017, more than 40,000 child miners continue to illegally toil in dangerous conditions (Constantine and Wolff 2023). There are no less than two million people in the country who depend directly on artisanal mining activities in order to make a living (Amsterdam & Partners LLP 2024:7). Due to the ravages of poverty, these citizens find themselves with no alternative but to risk hazardous working conditions in the mines. Siddharth Kara, who has been researching modern slavery, human trafficking, and child labour for more than two decades, notes that the level of degradation and exploitation in the cobalt mines in DRC is distressing. Here is how he describes the situation:

> Imagine an entire population of people who cannot survive without scrounging in hazardous conditions for a dollar or two a day. There is no alternative there. The mines have taken over everything. Hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced because their villages were just bulldozed over to make place for large mining concessions. So, you have people with no alternative, no other source of income, no livelihood. Now, add to that the menace in many cases of armed forces

> pressuring people to dig, parents having to make a painful decision, 'Do I send my child to school or do we eat today?' And if they choose the latter, that means bringing all their kids into these toxic pits to dig just to earn that extra fifty cents or a dollar a day, that could mean the difference between eating or not. So in the 21st century, this is modern-day slavery. (quoted in Gross 2023)

Without excusing the African purveyors of the problem, I contend that what is happening in DRC is not an isolated incident but part and parcel of a broader African crisis of dignity and development that came to life at the dawn of colonial modernity. Central to the crisis is the racialised otherisation of Africa and Africans in the Western imagination. In his well-researched anthropological work, which focuses on the lives and experiences of eastern Congolese people involved in extracting and transporting minerals needed for digital devices, James H. Smith (2021:55–57) points out that the Enlightenment trope about Africa as 'an illustrative example of the violence and horror of the State of Nature' has been reproduced in

> Euro-American representations of the allegorical journey down the Congo River [as] a movement backward in time that also entails a corruption of soul.

In the following section, I will undertake a socio-ethical analysis of the moral cost of extractivism.

The Cost of Extractivism: A Socio-Ethical Analysis

Everywhere in the world where extractivism is taking place, there is a huge cost borne by citizens in those extractive communities. Scholars have referred to such communities as 'sacrifice zones' in order to illustrate that the lives of people in those communities are seen as expendable, as their health and wellbeing are sacrificed for the sake of corporate profit (Miller 2023:1625). According to Marcelo Lopes de Souza (2021:224), in a sacrifice zone

> not only human lives are disposable […] actually, everything is disposable: fauna, flora, whole ecosystems, and landscapes. In

> the eyes of Lord Capital, everything can be sacrificed – it is just a matter of economic and political opportunity.

Ben De Bruyn (2023:1478) has also noted that sacrifice zones are driven by the 'slow violence of global capitalism'. Often

> inhabitants of sacrifice zones do not possess the means to avoid such intense pollution burden and afford to move to cleaner and healthier territories, thus being truly trapped populations. (Gayo et al. 2022:2)

Religious terms such as 'purgatory' and 'hell' have been used to describe the living condition in sacrifice zones (de Souza 2021:225). The testimony of Kara about DRC's situation lends credence to the imagination of sacrifice zones. He says:

> I spoke with many families whose children, husbands, spouses, had suffered horrific injuries. Oftentimes, digging in these larger open-air pits, there are pit wall collapses. Imagine a mountain of gravel and stone just avalanching down on people, crushing legs and arms, spines. I met people whose legs had been amputated, who had metal bars in where their legs used to be. And then the worst of all is what happens in tunnel digging. There are probably 10,000 to 15,000 tunnels that are dug by hand by artisanal miners. None of them have supports, ventilation shafts, rock bolts, anything like that. And these tunnels collapse all the time, burying alive everyone who is down there, including children. It's a demise that is almost impossibly horrific to imagine. And yet I met mothers pounding their chests in grief, talking about their children who had been buried alive in a tunnel collapse. And these stories never get out of the Congo. People just don't know what's happening down there. (quoted in Gross 2023)

Kara's submission illustrates an existential situation of violence and dehumanisation, in which the victims are those at the margins of Congolese society, especially women and children. Ecofeminist scholars have noted that

environmental harms 'are not gender neutral' but disproportionately affect 'poor minoritized women and girls living in the presence of extractive projects' (Koster and Deane-Drummond 2024:2). From the point of view of sacrifice zones, DRC is only one of many theatres across Africa where the social condition under which people live is emblematic of 'death camps', signified by '*the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations*' (Mbembe 2019:68). Mbembe (2019:86) believes that our world has evolved into a vast killing field. The result is the 'normalization of the social state of warfare' (Mbembe 2019:115) where the violence unleashed on whole populations produces victims whose bodies are mutilated or outrightly massacred according to the model of ancient sacrifices (Mbembe 2019:86). The aim of the actors at the centre of this enterprise is that of

> maximally destroying persons and creating *death-worlds*, that is, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the *living dead*. (Mbembe 2019:92)

Pétronille Vaweka, a Congolese grandmother who won the 2023 Women Building Peace Award of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) for her work in mediating local peace accords in her country's wars, provided vivid images of this reality during her speech at the award ceremony in Washington, DC, in February 2024. Speaking about the tragedy unfolding in Goma, in eastern DRC, she said through a translator:

> During all the work I did in my life, I saw so many people who are crying, but tonight it's me who has tears in my eyes. (United States Institute of Peace 2024: 00:18–00:45)

In narrating the acute level of misery in the region, Vaweka asked:

> Why do we have all of this misery in the Democratic Republic of the Congo? Why do we have this suffering? It is because in the DRC we have underground such a wealth of natural resources. We have so many minerals underground which the world needs. So why do we have this misery? Why does

> it bring us all of these horrible things? […] It should bring us joy and happiness but, no, it is a curse. So, the whole world needs these minerals. Why can't we find together a responsible, civilised way so that we can all benefit of [sic] these minerals in a fair way, a way which is just in some type of Free Trade Agreement so that we will all be winners in the end? Why do we prefer to have thieves who go over the borders, who take all of these minerals and then we have war? (United States Institute of Peace 2024: 02:49–06:09)

Although Vaweka does not mention names, her mention of a Free Trade Agreement and thieves who go over the borders to take DRC's minerals suggests that there are powerful forces behind the exploitation of her country's resources. Congolese attorney Herve Diakiese Kyungu has revealed that foreign extractive companies and high-ranking Congolese officials, including members of the current president's family, are involved in the plunder and smuggling of the country's minerals (Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission 2022). In this respect, whatever critical thought one might have about the neocolonial exploitation of Africa's resources by foreign entities, it is crucial to admit that such exploitation could not succeed without the active connivance and cooperation of local actors who also benefit from the exploitation and oppression of their people. As Ilo (2011:109) notes, 'If we Africans continue to play the victim, our so-called victimizers will not stop victimizing us.' This, however, does not negate the fact that there is a historical and structural violence embedded in neocolonialism that ensures there is a 'profoundly unequal redistribution of the resources of life' on a planetary scale (Mbembe 2017:45). This logic drives the violent extraction of resources in DRC and in many other places across Africa and the developing world.

Pope Francis has criticised the imbalance in the governance of today's global economy whereby a minority enjoy the kind of prosperity not afforded to the majority. He sees this as the result of an idolatry of money, comparing it to the biblical golden calf:

> The worship of the ancient golden calf (cf. Ex. 32:1-35) has returned in a new and ruthless guise in the idolatry of money

> and the dictatorship of an impersonal economy lacking a truly human purpose. (Francis 2013:47)

For Francis, an economy that excludes the majority and does not safeguard the value of human life is a deadly economy. 'Such an economy kills' (Francis 2013:45).

Faced with awareness of the grave human rights violations that accompany the mining of minerals which go into producing the technological products that we enjoy, there is a moral responsibility that must fall upon consumers. The American theologian and economist Daniel K. Finn (2019:2) has pointed out that, given the way supply chains work, there is a causal relationship that exists between consumers and producers, which

> provides the material foundation for the moral claim that consumers are complicit in – and so in some degree morally responsible for – the injustices suffered by the distant producers of the things they buy.

This implies that consumers cannot be indifferent when injustices are discerned in the supply chain that delivers the goods and products they enjoy. If we know that 'our participation in the global economic system renders us morally accountable for the injustices within it' (Finn 2019:144), the least we can do as consumers is

> to alter our consumption patterns by purchasing 'fair trade' or 'ethical trade' products and favoring brands known for their efforts to ensure responsible production. (Finn 2019:5)

This attitude corresponds to what Christian social ethics calls solidarity. It is a moral and social attitude that arises from an awareness of the sufferings of certain individuals and communities and the interdependence between the lives of the individuals and communities and those of other men and women in the rest of the world.

When Vaweka told the audience at her award ceremony,

> I would like to have […] all of you here in front of me help us so that we can find a strategy, so that this unbelievable wealth of resources is developed in such way that we can find the strategy which makes us all winners

she was inviting her listeners to not be indifferent but to enter into solidarity with the suffering people of her country 'so that nobody needs to suffer' and so that 'people in the Congo [...] can live their life in happiness and peace' (United States Institute of Peace 2024: 06:15–07:54). Christians in the West who are members of the same body of Christ with their African brothers and sisters are challenged to see the connection between the material prosperity that they enjoy and the disposability of African lives that makes this prosperity possible, and thus stand up against the structures of sin present in their societies that allow such injustices to go unchallenged. Beyond this moral call, local and international regulatory structures need to be put in place to enforce a more just governance regime in the extractive sector. I now turn to analyse some of the efforts that have been made in this regard.

Local and International Regulatory Efforts and Frameworks

Worried by several reports alleging the involvement of armed groups in mineral exploitation in DRC, US president Barack Obama in July 2010 came up with Section 1502 in the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act to sever the link between mining and conflict financing in DRC. According to the piece of legislation, US companies registered on the US stock market were required

> to report on an annual basis whether they had sourced tin, tantalum, tungsten, or gold from the eastern DRC or neighbouring countries and, if so, whether those minerals had financed conflict. (Radley 2023:1)

The legislation was celebrated as a milestone in the US government's effort to substantially weaken the capacity of armed groups in DRC to finance conflict. Given that US companies such as Apple and Intel had no way of verifying the origin of the minerals they sourced from DRC or whether those minerals had financed conflict, the passing of the legislation made most international buyers

stay away from the region rather than put their organisation's reputation at risk. Although the US government's decision forced the DRC government under Joseph Kabila to initiate the process of reforming the mining sector, such as instituting mineral certification systems, this did not quite succeed. The need for such certification was reinforced by OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Minerals of 2011. The DRC government ratified the OECD guidelines in February 2012, with the result being that the country has seen 'a shift towards a foreign corporate-led model of mining-based development' (Radley 2023:3). As earlier noted, Chinese companies have taken over most of the mining concessions in DRC.

A policy document of the White House, *U.S. Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa*, insists that China's trade relations with Africa have circumvented good business ethics. 'The People's Republic of China', the document notes,

> sees the region as an important arena to challenge the rules-based international order, advance its own narrow commercial and geopolitical interests, undermine transparency and openness, and weaken U.S. relations with African peoples and governments. (White House 2022:5)

In addition to China, the document also takes a swipe at Russia for viewing Africa 'as a permissive environment for parastatals and private military companies, often fomenting instability for strategic and financial benefit' (White House 2022:5). Beyond these, the document affirms the US government's commitment to helping African countries develop policy frameworks for economic growth through the management of its strategic and valuable mineral resources, and outlines a set of goals that will help to strengthen democratic governance, deliver security, improve transparency, support reforms, expose corruption, and tackle climate change (White House 2022).

Earlier in 2022, the US Department of Justice had secured the conviction of the Swiss company Glencore and its subsidiaries for violating the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA) by acts of corruption and bribery to secure improper business advantages in DRC. Pleading guilty to one count of conspiracy to violate the FCPA, Glencore 'agreed to a criminal fine of $428,521,173, and

agreed to criminal forfeiture and disgorgement in the amount of $272,185,792' (U.S. Department of Justice 2022). US district judge Lorna Schofield handed down the sentence to Glencore in February 2023 and ordered the company to pay US$700 million in connection with its guilty plea (Cohen 2023).

The commitment that US administrations have shown in tackling the international dimension of the crisis in DRC should be commended.

> The U.S. government continues to take steps aimed at helping transform the illicit flows of these minerals into a responsible trade rooted in the DRC that helps build the economic foundation for a sustainable peace in the DRC and the broader region. These steps include encouraging responsible investment in and sourcing from the region, including by U.S. companies, identifying stronger due diligence mechanisms that U.S. and other companies can voluntarily implement in sourcing minerals from the African Great Lakes Region, and issuing periodic statements regarding conflict concerns in the region. (U.S. Department of State 2024)

In 2023, Apple announced that it was accelerating its work to expand the use of recycled materials across its products. Its target is to design all batteries in Apple products from 100 percent recycled cobalt by 2025. Additionally, the company plans to produce the magnets in Apple devices from all rare earth elements. It has also stated that since 2022 it has

> expanded its use of key recycled metals, and now sources over two-thirds of all aluminium, nearly three-quarters of all rare earths, and more than 95 percent of all tungsten in Apple products from 100 percent recycled. (Apple 2023)

Apple's goal is to 'one day make all products with only recycled and renewable materials' in line with its commitment to make every product carbon neutral in 2030 (Apple 2023). Reaching these goals will significantly divest Apple's reliance on newly mined minerals given that there are around 2.2 billion active users of Apple products worldwide. Moreover, the company has indicated that it is also 'pursuing ways to directly support communities whose livelihoods

depend on mining' (Apple 2023). These are significant commitments, and every effort should be made to see that they are fully implemented.

The role of global civil society organisations such as Global Witness, Oxfam America, and Natural Resources Governance Institute (NRGI) in improving the governance regime in the extractive sector in developing countries is also commendable.

> These all recognize, in different ways, that natural resources can provide a means, when properly used, for poorer nations to decisively break with poverty. (Addison and Roe 2018:3)

Why DRC's case remains seemingly intractable is partly the result of lack of political will to implement mining policies, enforce norms, and prosecute offenders. In the midst of these challenges, there is one institution that many people still look up to: the church. But can the church really make any difference? In the final part of this paper, I examine the role of the church in the Congolese people's struggle for justice and dignity.

The Church in DRC: Any Sign of Hope?

A discussion of this nature cannot afford to ignore the role of the church in DRC. Christianity is the majority religion in DRC. Of the 89.5 million people in the country, 94.97% are Christians (Aid to the Church in Need 2023). DRC has the largest Catholic population in Africa. Statistics from the Vatican reveal that there are over 52 million Catholics, representing more than half of the country's total population (Holy See Press Office 2023). Although these statistics might be contested, as data from other sources suggest, what is incontestable is that the Catholic Church constitutes 'a powerhouse' in DRC (Lokola 2020:191) and that religion plays a significant role in political life (U.S. Department of State 2022). This raises a key question: how could DRC be overwhelmingly Christian and yet have these atrocities happen in the country? Can the church really be a sign of hope for the Congolese people?

Hope, according to German theologian Johann Baptist Metz, is what theology and the church are called to offer in a world of injustice and suffering. For Metz (2007:23), the relevance of theology and the church will have to be determined

by their capacity to offer an account of hope amidst 'the concrete historical-social situation in which subjects find themselves: their experiences, their suffering, struggles, and obstacles'. One of the real challenges of modern Christian theology is the predisposition to rush to offer the all too familiar answer to the question of injustice and suffering whereby all things are put right by God in another life, in the eschatological future. The Spanish Jesuit theologian Jon Sobrino (1993:234) contends that this hasty leap from Good Friday to Easter Sunday is problematic, for it deprives theology of the oxygen needed to confront human suffering in historical time, especially when it has to do with the sufferings of innocent victims of history who are not even able to fight for themselves. This is why Metz argues that Christian hope cannot be hope solely for the future, but also hope for *this* world. It is hope

> with which men and women, faced with the accumulated suffering of the just, stand up again and again against the prevailing unjust conditions. (Metz 2007:84)

South African theologian Allan Boesak (2014:41) states that 'Hope tears the veil of separation between all struggles for justice and opens wide the window on the world'. It is only from this horizon of hope that

> the interrelatedness of life and the connections between struggles for justice, human rights and dignity, and struggles for the life of the earth

become theologically plausible (Boesak 2014:54).

Having said this, let me examine some concrete steps that the church in DRC has taken in light of the country's challenges. Christian bodies, mainly Catholic and Protestant, have been speaking out against the injustice, oppression, and exploitation of the people as well as the armed violence that has lasted for almost three decades. Raphael Okitafumba Lokola (2020) has brilliantly documented and analysed the role of the Catholic Church and specific Catholic leaders in the country's struggle for justice, development, and peace. Similarly, Minani (2022) has focused on various statements that the Congolese Catholic bishops have issued for nearly two decades regarding good governance of the mining sector. In 2007, speaking about how the extraction of the country's

minerals has become a source of wealth for some and a source of great misery for others, the bishops stated:

> Instead of contributing to the development of our country and benefiting our people, minerals, oil, and the forest have become causes of our misfortune. How do we take the fact that our fellow citizens, without consideration or compensation, are stripped of their land […]? Is it permissible for Congolese workers to be treated without regard for their rights and human dignity? (Minani 2022:48)

At an extraordinary meeting in November 2022 to address mounting socio-political challenges in the country, the bishops rebuked international actors:

> The international community which in its duplicity blows hot and cold, carries a grave responsibility for its indulgence towards the multinationals and the countries which are predators of our natural resources. What sort of peacekeeping are we talking about when the number of deaths never ceases to multiply? (Aid to the Church in Need 2023)

Thousands of DRC's Christians have taken to the streets at various times to protest against the violence in the country's eastern region. One such protest in December 2022 highlighted emerging religious fissures in the country's crisis as Islamist militant groups grow stronger in the region and are taking advantage of the social chaos to kidnap and force their victims to convert. In a 2021 communique, the Catholic bishops stated that the aggressors aim to exploit 'the weaknesses of the regular armed forces in order to achieve their political and religious goals', which include

> the occupation of the land, illegal exploitation of natural resources, gratuitous self-enrichment and the Islamization of the region without regard for religious freedom. (Aid to the Church in Need 2023)

Other Christian bodies like the Ecumenical Council of Congo (COE) also play a significant role in political affairs, although there is hardly any scholarly

academic documentation of its work. In a similar vein, there are interfaith bodies working to bring Christian and Muslim leaders together to dialogue and propose solutions to the country's challenges.

Since 2006, CEPAS has been calling for an overhaul of the country's mining sector. Its campaign with other local and international civil society groups, the Congolese Catholic bishops' conference (CENCO), and mining evaluation experts succeeded in laying a foundation for DRC government's revisiting in 2019 of 61 contracts signed during the war. The government invited CENCO and CEPAS as observers of the process and entrusted CEPAS with the responsibility of publishing the official government report at the end of the process.

> Unfortunately, when the time came to actually renegotiate contracts, it was done exclusively between the government and mining companies with no outside experts or observers. And because of confidentiality language included in the contracts, no details were made public. (Minani 2022:48–49)

During his visit to DRC in 2022, Pope Francis took the path of prophetic social critique to call out foreign actors orchestrating the armed violence in the country in order to continue to exploit the country's resources.

> Hands off the Democratic Republic of Congo! Hands off Africa! Stop choking Africa: it is not a mine to be stripped or a terrain to be plundered. (Francis 2023a)

The pope's planned visit to Goma, the centre of the armed violence in the eastern region, could not take place because of security concerns. But when he met with the victims in Kinshasa, after listening to their sad and painful testimonies, he went on to issue a warning to the beneficiaries of the armed conflict:

> You are enriching yourselves through the illegal exploitation of this country's goods and through the brutal sacrifice of innocent victims. Listen to the cry of their blood (cf. *Gen* 4:10), open your ears to the voice of God, who calls you to conversion, and to the

> voice of your conscience: put away your weapons, put an end to war. Enough! Stop getting rich at the cost of the poor, stop getting rich from resources and money stained with blood! (Francis 2023b)

Reflecting on the pope's visit, Nigerian Catholic bishop and social activist Matthew Hassan Kukah (2023:7) wrote that it has 'provided pointers and encouragement for local actors to carry on where the Holy Father left off', adding that his messages 'have left us with working tools to bring reconciliation to our diverse and sometimes fractious communities'. At any rate, as church leaders in DRC continue to discern the sort of actions that can best transform the country's situation and bring peace and development, the following conclusion reached at the public reasoning process of the October 2019 Amazon synod is helpful for thinking about the church's role in the DRC context:

> We may not be able to modify the destructive model of extractivist development immediately, but we do need to know and make clear where we stand, whose side we are on, what perspective we assume. (Deneulin 2021:79)

Conclusion

The background of this article is the gross human rights violation of Congolese people, especially children, forced to work under dehumanising and hazardous conditions in cobalt mines. While this implicated some key US tech firms that benefit from DRC's mineral resources, the article showed that the problem is much more complex and involves the complicity not just of successive DRC governments, politicians, and local elites, but also several other African countries. Furthermore, it analysed the theological implications of extractivist violence, using resources from Christian social ethics to illumine the DRC context. This led to a discussion of some local and international efforts to promote enforceable agreements, policies, and regulatory norms to govern the just and equitable management of DRC's mineral resources. The article concluded by examining the church's social responsibility and some concrete actions it has taken to work for justice, peace, and development in the country, especially the reform of the mining sector. While standing as a beacon of hope to the poor and oppressed is central to the church's social commitment, the

article noted that the DRC situation does not admit of any quick fixes that can rapidly transform present realities. Nonetheless, hopelessness is not an alternative.

The apostle Paul reminds Christians that 'hope does not disappoint us' (Romans 5:5, RSV). This hope must always take account of the gospel ethos of God's preferential love for the oppressed poor and, in particular, for all children. Consequently, all forms of violation of children must be unequivocally condemned. Hopefully, all those at the other end of the chain will sooner than later be able to see that 'the blood-caked corpse of that child lying in the dirt is one of their own' (Kara, quoted in Gross 2023). In conclusion, if there is going to be a future of peace and prosperity for DRC, I believe it can only be rooted in a recovery of African self-respect and the inalienable dignity of African lives. African lives matter.

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