

The Challenges Facing Religion in the Contemporary World: The Kenyan Situation

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1.0 Introduction

This presentation focuses on the challenges facing Religion in the contemporary world with the Kenyan situation in focus. It is divided into five sub-topics namely an introduction, the concept of Religion, Religions in Kenya and the challenges facing them followed by a conclusion and references. Religion is one of the terms most widely talked about in the world today. In most cases, people focus on its expressions or manifestations rather than its essence which actually should be the major area of concern. Institutions, societies, disciplines and peoples in general attribute to it their own views or meanings depending on each one's area of specialization. In this regard, therefore, we can only talk of or access what Philosophers, Theologians, Sociologists, Phenomenologists, Psychologists, Historians and others take religion to mean. People in each discipline give their own understanding of this subject which is never the same as any other. This is what leaves us with a puzzle as to what exactly the essence of Religion is. To date, the world has not realized any one universally accepted definition of Religion. According to Rahner (1981) the possible root of the term religion is the Latin word "*religio*" with its different verb forms – "*relegere*", "*religari*" and "*reeligere*"

- '*Relegere*' means to constantly turn to or conscientiously observe
- '*Religari*' can mean binding oneself to one's origin and goal
- '*Reeligere*' means choosing again to live religiously by one's origin and goal

These three suggests that there is an object connected with the goal and origin of life that people constantly turn to through Religion. If this is the case then this object must be an ultimate concern, meriting and demanding people's careful attention, Rahner concludes. Furthermore, if this be the case then one's origin and goal are so essentially connected to the person that he/she has to bind him/herself to them. All these do not provide any tangible meaning of religion since they suggest an idea of a god who is the origin and goal of human life. This would exclude classical Buddhism, forms of Hinduism and several other religions that do not center on a god. Cox (1992), observes that most of the definitions of religion are either vague or prejudiced.

Some psychological definitions of religion include Sigmund Freud's (1907) observation that it is a universal obsession, a neurosis and an attempt to control the oedipal complex. This observation connects religion with some complexes in a person's psyche which is obviously very narrow. A well known philosophical definition by Paul Tillich that Religion is "*the ultimate concern*" appears to be vague since it doesn't clarify what this ultimate concern is as human beings have so many ultimate concerns. Edward Taylor on the other hand offered a more theological definition by observing that religion is belief in spiritual beings, this again excludes some religions.

These are just but examples of definitions that show that religion is not easy to define. We should note also that there is not even one African community that had the name Religion in their language. All the terms used for it are borrowed and so do not exactly tell us what it is essentially. The term "Dini" is commonly used by most Kenyan communities but it is Arabic for denomination, a small group of worshippers, which is not religion. Most scholars simply talk of a working definition. Such working definitions include the sociologists' versions as;

- A socially organized pattern of beliefs and practices concerning ultimate meaning and that assumes the existence of the supernatural.
- A system of beliefs and practices that is relative to superhuman beings.
- A varied, symbolic expression of that which people appropriately respond to as being of an unrestricted value for them (Cox, 1992).

As we can see, these are called working definitions, describing or defining the same term differently. Our conclusion therefore is that the term religion is very difficult to define and there is no such definition as a universal one. Mbiti, J. S. (1975) describes the concept in an African's understanding as that which sums up beliefs, values and morals, places and objects and officials and leaders considered to be religious. In this paper, therefore, we will take this latter meaning of religion, that is, that consisting of societies and their beliefs, values, morals, places, leaders and objects used during rituals, connected with such beliefs.

1.1 Religions in Kenya

There are almost all the religions of the world like African Religion, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Jainism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism and Sikhism in Kenya. While most of these religions are restricted to people from certain parts of the world only for example Hinduism – India, Judaism – Israel and Taoism – China, Christianity, African Religion and Islam on the other hand have adherents who are Kenyans in origin and as such are the ones that this paper will concentrate on. African Religion is that practiced by all indigenous peoples of Africa. It was and is actually still practiced by many indigenous Africans. I have used both the past and present here because as Magesa (1977) notes, many philosophers, theologians and students of Comparative Religion still feel that it is 'primal' or 'ethnic'. For this matter, such people still tie the religion to magic and fetishism. The religion may not have had a founder, written scriptures, converts or missionaries but it still organizes the lives of Africans just as the other world religions do to their adherents. Africans have been described by Mbiti (1969) as notoriously religious meaning that their religion is part and parcel of their life and may not be separated from it. There is no clear distinction between the profane and religious or the secular and the sacred as religion and culture are intertwined.

They are thus one and the same thing to the extent that what one can call his/her culture is also found in his or her religion, likewise, what one can call his or her religion is in his or her culture. African religion as Kirwen (2008) observes is rooted in the people's politics, economics, aesthetics, ethics, artifacts and belief systems. When keenly observed, Africans depended on elders and their wise counsel for the leadership of the community. This started right from the family unit in which the father was "the high priest" followed by the first wife and the first son. All functions and due respect in the society followed this order and people adhered to it very strongly. All these have been influenced a great deal but have not totally died.

Worth noting is the African's belief system or their world view or cosmology that has always persisted in the indigenous Africans. To the African, the Supreme Being is the most powerful followed by the spirits, ancestors, human beings, animals, plants and inorganic matter in that order. The cosmos consists of the visible and the invisible. The Supreme Being, spirits and ancestors dwell in the invisible part of the cosmos while human beings, animals, plants and inorganic matter are found in the visible. Africans believe that some evil exists in this visible world in the form of people who are anti-life like witches, sorcerers, the evil eye and even night runners. These are feared by the community since instead of building, they break the society. Ancestors are the African saints. They are people who conducted themselves well and attained a full life by going through all the rites of passage, dying a good death and acquiring a decent burial.

Another area that should be of great concern is the Africans' ethics. This is basically about the dos and don'ts that guarded the people's lives. Such were formulated in the form of taboos whose violation called for serious consequences. True African peoples still pay attention to these just as they did before the Europeans came to Africa south of the Sahara. Artifacts are the tools people use. They too, demonstrated a people's culture and religion. Aesthetics here concern color, shape and size of the people or things used. What colors did Africans prefer? What kind of animals did they sacrifice or associate with bad omen? What were their colors? What size of ladies did Africans prefer for good wives etc?

Finally, economics here concern resources and their use. How did Africans inherit and use land? Have all these disappeared? If so, what are the causes? Are Kenyans still communal, social, and hospitable as the culture and religion requires? Kinship systems and rites of passage in Kenya, are they things of the past or present? If not, then why? These are some of the questions this presentation will try to respond to. The next religion in which Kenyans are predominantly found is Christianity. This religion was brought to Kenya by Krapf and Rebmann in 1844 being the first Missionaries to visit the East African Coast (Baur, 1994:212). Many other missionaries followed to evangelize the East Africans late and succeeded in converting many to Christianity.

One notable thing here is that these missionaries were not from only one Christian group. Some were protestants whereas others Catholics. Furthermore, even the Protestants and Catholics were also of different small units like CMS, CSM, and others. Catholics had the Mill Hills, Consolata, Holy Ghost fathers and others. Mugambi (2002), notes that, the Africans notoriety in religion is one of the factors that made Christianity to be absorbed by Kenyans easily. Other factors included the translation of the Bible and the view that Christianity would make people access education, good health, good food and others. It was also seen as the religion of the elite or civilized (Groote, 1975). Missionaries also gave gifts like sugar and rice to attract many.

As Kasper (1975) notes, Christianity is a historical, revealed religion with a historical character that shapes its theology. Many theologians at one point had the feeling that Christianity is the noblest of all living religions, completely valid for all people in whatever age they are living. This resulted into many controversies pitting Christianity against other religions. This assertion was also related to the fact that heaven is accessible only through Christ. Where does this leave other religions? My personal feeling, however, is that God as the creator of all knew from time immemorial how he would intervene in the lives of all non Christians who were exemplary in their lives.

Judaism, Christianity and Islam are commonly known as Abrahamic religions because of their common claim on Abraham as their forefather. They share a lot in common in terms of teachings. The latter two, however, have had in history several splinter groups. They are both very strong institutions with clear doctrines, guidelines and a hierarchy with headquarters in some city here on earth. The major teachings of Christianity include:-

- Love of God and neighbor
- Belief in one God
- Belief in the Trinity
- Belief in Jesus as God and Man – divine and human
- Belief in the second coming of Jesus at the end of time
- Salvation can be attained by grace through faith in Christ
- The Bible as the major basis for Christian living

For Catholics, some of these teachings are contained in the apostle's creed in which it is also stated that all people have sinned and this is why they need Christ. Islam is the second major missionary religion after Christianity that has a good number of followers in Africa and Kenya in particular. Mvumbi (2008) notes, that Muslims take their religion as the last revealed religion. Its beginning goes back to the years between 610 and 613 AD when the Prophet Mohammed began to receive revelations in caves around Mecca. The name Islam is derived from the Arabic "*Salam*" which means "peace" and so Islam as a religion is that of peace acquired through the voluntary self surrender to God.

The major teachings of Islam are contained in the five pillars on which it is founded. They include:-

- The profession of faith – **Shahada**. A Muslim must confess that there is no God but Allah
- Prayer five times a day – **Salat**. Muslims are expected to say prayers before sunrise, mid morning, noon, mid afternoon and after sunset.
- Alms giving – **Zakat**. All able Muslims should assist the poor, miserable, stranded and anybody in any unfortunate situation.
- Fast during Ramadhan – **Saum**. This should be observed by all Muslims from sunrise to sunset.
- A Pilgrimage to Mecca – **Hajj**. All able and healthy Muslims should make this Pilgrimage at least once in their life time.

Kenny (2000) notes that whereas East Africa is closer to Arabia, the impact of Islam on the people here has been small as compared to both North and West Africa. Tanzania, for example has a total Muslim population of only 35%, Kenya 7% and Uganda 16%. He proceeds to note that this was due to the fact that most Arabs came to the East African coast to trade and not to evangelize. Looking for converts was just but an afterthought. Stamer (1995), notes that, this religion has been somehow distorted by fundamentalists or Islamists. True Muslims are never violent. It is the Islamists who advocate for the full use of the Sharia. Islam has several sects as Klein (1971) notes. These include Mutazilites, Kharijites and others.

2.0. Challenges facing Religion

Since this paper focuses on African religion, Christianity and Islam, the writer has focused on the challenges facing them as below.

2.1 African religion

The Oxford dictionary defines a challenge as a request to prove the truth or existence of something or an undertaking that is difficult but interesting. A challenge is an obstacle, or that which calls for questioning or simply a problem faced by a person or institution. The major challenges facing African Religion in Kenya today include first and foremost the Christian religion which was presented by the missionaries in a western culture. As Mbiti (1991) observes, Christianity pits two cultures against each other and then tries to prove that one is better than the other. This is to say that European culture which clothes Christianity is purported to be better than the African one which is part and parcel of African Religion.

These challenges are evident in areas like African rituals, initiation rites marriage customs, methods of dealing with diseases, misfortune and suffering and the place of sorcery, evil, magic and witch craft in an African's life. While Europeans are the ones who branded the practices mentioned above as primitive, pagan, uncivilized or fetish, in modern Kenya it is the Kenyan who reminds another Kenyan that these practices belong to the past, the devil or "the world" and as such cannot aid one to go to heaven. The question however is; did all our ancestors who practiced all these before the Christian Missionaries came to Africa south of the Sahara go to hell?

Africans hail many of their forefathers as ancestors yet in Christianity some refer to them as lost souls, evil spirits or ghosts. The Kenyan remains astounded as to whether there is anything called African Religion. The institution of marriage which was basically polygamous in Africa has greatly been challenged by the Christian teachings on monogamy and companionship. Marriage for Christians is majorly for companionship and one should never worry even if a family has no children. They are advised to consider that as part of their cross to carry, or otherwise adopt a child. This idea has put many Kenyan Christians in awkward positions, trying to choose between Christianity and their African world view. Is bride wealth really buying a wife?

Other challenges like urbanization, modernity, education and even globalization have also contributed to the decline of faith in African value systems and commitment to them. Education is understood by many Kenyans to create a class or status that goes beyond the African Religion to those of civilized people like Islam and Christianity. It is commonly heard in conversations that educated people should never bend as low as using herbal medicine, consulting diviners or following certain African norms like shaving one's head after the death of a close family member or taking care of a widow after the death of her husband.

We should note as Kirwen stresses that diviners, herbalists and others like midwives were pro- life and as such were embraced by African communities. Those who were anti- life included witches, sorcerers, evil magic, evil eye and others like night runners. These were never liked by anybody as they destroyed instead of helping societies. Poverty and urbanization have influenced many Kenyans to the extent that they can never be committed to the values of hospitality, communalism and socialism as before.

Our houses in urban centers are small. They may not provide the necessary conditions for accommodating our brothers and sisters who might want to look for jobs from such locations. Salaries for most employees are also generally minimal and may not support our Kenyan hospitality to all relatives as expected.

One notable issue as Shorter (1998), while quoting Jacob Donald observes, is that changes have occurred on the industrial technical, domestic technical and value levels but not yet on the African's worldview which is part and parcel of the core values level. This is evident in the sense that Kenyans have changed their manner of dressing, communication and others which are on the industrial technical level. These include cooking styles, utensils used, diet etc which are on the domestic technical level. Some of the burial rites, manner of carrying out rites of passage and even the belief systems are still very strong in Kenya no matter what certain Kenyans may want others to believe. These are on the core values level.

Despite all the challenges already mentioned, African religion is still strong in many parts of Kenya. Mugambi (2002), notes that, no doubt, there is a process known as the Africanization of Christianity which is still going on. The idea of contextualizing or indigenizing Christianity through what many people call inculturation is also still ongoing. It is bringing good and agreeable African cultural and religious practices to dialogue with Christianity for a better life in Africa.

2.2 Christianity

Christianity is one of the religions with a wide following in Africa and Kenya for that matter. Mbiti recorded about 234 million Christians in Africa by 1984 and postulated that this number would rise to about 400 million by the year 2000.

The challenges that continuously bedevil this major Kenyan religion include syncretism, secularism, materialism, modernity and education just to mention a few. Syncretism means the attempt or tendency to combine or reconcile differing beliefs particularly in religion and/or philosophy (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English language, 1969).

This has been a major challenge to Christianity in the sense that in Kenya and of course Africa, there is not even a single person who is a 100% Christian or 100% African. Most Kenyan Christians practice only a percentage of African Religion and a percentage of Christianity. As already noted above, the African belief systems have not totally been cleared from an African's mind or way of life and as such many a time, Kenyans who purport to have totally left such practices, which are intertwined with African religion, have simply not done or embarked on a serious retrospection or self examination. Many preachers have described most Kenyans as "Christians by day and Africans by night".

This means, in most cases, that such people do certain rituals or consultations with diviners at night yet during the day they are actively involved in Christian activities. They could even be the church leaders informing others never to 'look back' meaning revisiting African belief systems. This, as Baur (1994) already noted, was a mistake created by the missionaries who dismissed African Religion and Culture out rightly as evil, primitive, pagan, native or fetish. The Africans and Kenyans in particular, were forced to accept conversion into Christianity without understanding why their own religion was considered evil.

All Christians to date marry in the African way first then go to Church for a Christian wedding or exchange of vows which again are not totally obeyed. This is evidently shown in the fact that death never ends African marriages as repeated in church vows "until death do us part." Children are sought by all Africans and can lead to the practice of polygamy in case of childlessness even if people are, so called, very strong Christians. Death is reacted to in almost the same way our fathers who were not Christians did and finally our names are still partly African and partly Western, for example, most of us are called Jacob Omollo, Peter Mbugua, Frederick Kasyoki, Paul Wanyonyi or Esther Nafula. Why must the African name be added next to the Western one yet we are Christians? Furthermore we still follow the same order in building houses to our sons just as our fore fathers did. That is, the first son builds first then the others and the first daughter is married first then the others just to mention a few. The issue here is that as all these things happen, many who do these things call themselves strong Christians. These points may appear simple but they reveal a lot about Kenyan Christians with regard to religion.

One of the great challenges facing Christianity in Kenya is the multiplicity of churches. In every corner of Kenya one visits, he/she will find a number of closely related churches particularly African independent ones, whose agenda and mission are not apparently the same. They all use the same Bible, believe in the same God, same savior and Holy Spirit but still attend different Christian groupings. One is left wondering whether all these churches serve the same God or different ones. Is there really a true Christian church on earth? These differences and divisions are still increasing.

There are others known as Zionist, Messianic and Ethiopian Churches which share most things in common with the Neo-Pentecostal ones. Which Christian group should people be encouraged to join? Does it really matter whether I belong to this church or the other? Another influence that is challenging the Kenyan Christian is materialism. This is very evident on our television programs. Pastors post their phone numbers for followers or well wishers to send money through M-Pesa to support programs that are never specified. It appears that many of the pastors particularly of the Neo-Pentecostal church start their churches in order to be rich. They are ready to go as far as bribing their followers to pretend that they have been healed miraculously yet, in reality, nothing like that is the case. The best example is pastor in Nairobi who bribed a prostitute to confess in church that she had been healed. She disguised herself as a sick visitor looking for assistance (mwakilishi-20/07/2012 on www.optiven.co.ke)

We have heard it on TV again and again that the God of some churches is a rich one and members of such churches can never be so dedicated to church affairs yet they remain poor. This dedication, however, calls for self giving both in wealth and health. One is poor, looking for wealth yet, he/she is asked to give in kind. It is in

Kenya again where a pastor purporting to cure AIDS through prayer was interrogated by the police concerning her claims. It was found out that she organized with some laboratory technician of a particular hospital to declare the people sent there by her church free from the virus after prayers that costed Kenya Shillings 50,000.

Miracles are advertised in Kenya so that as many as possible attend crusades whose aim could include collection of funds. A case in question is the Nakuru crusade attended by Pastor Reinhardt Bonnke in 1992 in which millions of shillings were collected to the extent that fraudsters took advantage of the situation and made a way with lots of cash. A miracle by its very nature is an event which does not follow the known laws of nature and should always be surprising. Once advertised and expected they cease to be miracles. This is making Kenyans to doubt the authenticity of such miracles and instead of drawing people closer to God; I think they result into the opposite.

It is also in Kenya where a pastor advertised to both single ladies and men in need of husbands or wives to attend his crusades so that they are assisted to get one. The crusade, as reported by NTV's Pamela Asigi on 22/07/2012, dubbed "your set time of marriage" was attended overwhelmingly by both single ladies and men. Did they get husbands or wives by the end of the day? Not known yet. Would the same people attend crusades with titles like this in case they heard of them later? May be not likely if they never got husbands or wives. Christianity has also been challenged by instances of immorality that leave other adherents discouraged. Perhaps most people must have heard of a pastor in Kisumu who was found with another man's wife in bed and drugged naked up to the police station on 22/11/2009. This was just but one instance. How many times have we heard of pastors having a good time with some of their women flock in terms of food, drinks, hot bathing water, intimacy and others that the said ladies never provide to their husbands? What would be the views of such husbands on the said pastors and their churches?

People are also becoming very secular today. This is seemingly being caused by modernity, education and others. Many people who are highly educated may, at times, feel that religion is just but a way of controlling the masses as many sociologists and psychologists have noted. They therefore withdraw and never value church attendance, prayers or Christian activities. This could apply to all religions but since Christianity is the religion with the majority of followers in Africa, it may be consequently the hardest hit. This comes with some complacency and an I don't care attitude or some lack of interest in religious matters. This threatens Christianity in the sense that such people may not impart Christian values to their children and as such a general crop of a non committed youth in Christian affairs may result. There are so many challenges that this paper may not exhaust.

2.3 Islam

This is a religion that is slightly adopted a different approach in its evangelization of Africa. They, the evangelizers, did not insist on Africans abandoning their cultural practices totally. By 1984, Mbiti notes that there were approximately 211 million Muslims and perhaps the number would increase slightly by the year 2000. The challenges facing this religion in Kenya include a negative attitude from members of other religions due to Muslim fundamentalism and sects. As Klein (1971) records, there are many sects in Islam that hold different opinions regarding the teachings of the prophet Mohamed on the attributes of God and his unity, predestination and Gods justice, Gods promises and threats including revelation, reason, apostleship and Imam. Groups like the Qadariya, Nejjariya, Zabariya,

Ashariyya and Karramiya all have different options regarding the above. Likewise the Mutazilites and kharijites also have such differing options. All these Islamic sects exist discretely in Kenya in ways not known to ordinary non Muslims. The well known groups are the Sunni and Shi'a that were there as early as the time of Ali, the last of the rightly guided caliphs after Abubakar, Umar and Uthman. These sects, in most cases, never agree just as some of those in Christianity and as such a challenge to the whole religion.

Islamism or fundamentalism however is one of the greatest threats to Islam. Groups like al Shabaab, Boko Haram, Hamas, al Qaeda and other Islamic militants continue to pose many dangers to the citizens wherever they are found and as such are turning many away from the religion. Members of these groups are not authentic Muslims as was noted by the prophet. They are bent on causing chaos by creating bad blood between Jews, Christians, Hindus and Muslims. The Kenyan situation today of the al Shabaab targeting Christian churches for terrorist activities is an issue that if not corrected can easily lead to religious wars. Could non Muslims really appreciate this religion if what they know is only terrorist side?

Other influences include modernity, education, urbanization and democracy in the world. For those Muslims who believe that all authority belongs to God and that there should be nothing like consensus, a constitution or an individual decree but only God's will, disappointments are inevitable (Mvumbi 2008:120).

3.0 Conclusion

This paper has considered religions in Africa and Kenya in particular with a special focus on African Religion, Christianity and Islam. It has tried to explain the major teachings by these religions and the challenges facing them. The paper established that the three religions mentioned are the only ones with a wide following by the Kenyan population. Secondly it has tried to show that all of three face challenges that should be attended to urgently if a positive attitude towards them have to continue.

3.1 Recommendations

This paper recommends that all Church, Muslim, and African Religious leaders should work very hard to see in to it that these religions are not totally interfered with by those who do not value the practice of true or pure religion. Those individuals hungry for material welfare should not be left to freely infiltrate into these religions with their greed and take total control of the same. Every adherent should be reminded to practice true repentance and a strict faith in God. Governments should also make sure that not every group purporting to be religious is registered. A mechanism should be put in place to vet all new religious groups to determine their authenticity. Consequently, only those with good intentions should be allowed to operate or practice.

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