

RELIGION AND POLITICS IN THE CONTEMPORARY KENYA

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Abstract

The term church refers to a group of people governed by similar rules and beliefs, who congregate in recognition of a higher Being. In most cases the term church and religion are used synonymously. While religions is domesticated by morals that are illuminated by faith, most states are guided by politics whose orientation is generally practical empirical. In most cases the church.

Politics on the other hand is given different definitions by different people. On one popular understanding, politics is concerned with the allocation of values in any social system.

In Kenya as it is the case with most African countries, ethnicity has been and still remains the strongest force that binds a group together because other bases of alignment such as: religion, class, nationalism etc, are recent phenomena and in most cases alien. As it has been observed critically by the author, politics in Kenya are ethno-centric. The most vivid examples are given of the Rwandan genocide where in spite of the fact that an overwhelming percentage of the population is catholic, ethnic consciousness has resisted Christian assimilation.¹ In Kenya, after the general elections of December 2007, Kenyans stooped down to ethnic/ tribal affiliations. Even the church leaders just as the Rwanda's case identified, campaigned and supported camps of their ethnic groups. People always imagine that ethnic-based thinking is the solution to every issue of concern.

In most cases the term *ethnicity* is taken to be synonymous with *tribalism*. Considerably ambivalence governs any application of the concept of ethnicity, a term which in most cases is understood negatively. This concept may refer to; *a group of consciousness of common cultural labels and the subsequent manipulation of this consciousness to construct a culturally – informed vantage point*

¹ Ogot A. Bethwell ed. (1995), 'Ethnicity Nationalism and Democracy'. In *Ethnicity and Otherness in Kenyan Cultures*, Institute of Research and Postgraduate Studies, Maseno University: Kenya.

*from which to report on and respond to contemporary situations of impoverished and powerlessness.*²

As a term, it can also be understood as a *philosophy* of its kind, such that if one does not understand the principles behind it, one will not understand the behaviour, politics and even the level of religiosity of Kenyans.

This paper therefore intends to evaluate the relationship between church and politics in Kenya. This paper falls under cross cutting themes like religion, ethnicity and politics. But in this case it falls under governance, institutions and state building, especially in Africa.

The questions that this paper tries to address include:

- How do the church and state in Kenya relate?
- Why are the church leaders in Kenya ethnic centered?
- Why are the politicians and other government leaders in Kenya ethnic centered?
- What is the philosophy behind Kenya's church and government leaders?

The authors will employ philosophical methodology. This method involves analyzing issues and rationalizing. The data that will be used includes mainly secondary data. This includes information that is obtained from libraries like books with relevant information, periodicals like journals and newspapers and even the internet sources.

This paper also tackles an important issue in most African states. The paper will assist people understand the nature of politics as well as unearthing the level of religiosity of the people of Kenya.

Keywords: Church, Politics, Kenya

Introduction

To some people the possibility of the relationship between the church/religion and the state is unheard of. The terms, politics and state have been construed as mutually exclusive. This basically means that anything political cannot be religious and conversely anything religious cannot be political. It is not easy to elucidate how religion and state in any given society relate or should relate. Perhaps, to try and explain this problem, it is sufficient to ask this question; is a religious state a contradiction?

It may seem strange to ask this question at Canterbury, the home of the primate about a

² Allen, T. (1984) 'Ethnicity and Tribalism on the Sudan-Uganda Border'. In Kitsuya, F. and Markakis J. eds., *Ethnicity and Conflict in the Horn of Africa*, London: James Curry, p.4.

Christian state. Besides being a multicultural society, England, is in fact a Christian country in which a monarch is bound to defend the Christian faith established as the religion of country by law.³

By the fact that Christianity is guaranteed to be the only religion of England does not mean, therefore, that the church is financed, protected and above all controlled by the state. Every state infant wishes to control the church or churches within their jurisdiction. And conversely, churches wish their states or governments paid their clergy, build and maintained worshipping places, as it was the case with the communists' states. This however, was not the case with England.⁴

If religion and the state were one and the same thing it would mean that the church controls the state and conversely that the state control the church. This has never worked before and will never work. The best that any state can do for any given religion or church in this case is to guarantee their existence through a given country's constitution.

For us to understand how the two relate, it will be important for us to differentiate these terms. Religion on the one hand, refers to the belief in the supernatural that is believed to be the author and the sustainer of the whole universe; that is, the earth is the Lord's and all that it contains. (Psalms 24:1). This belief gives the followers an upper hand over the control of the universe. This is as it is contained in (Genesis 1:28) that man should *subdue the universe*.

Irrespective of different kinds of religions in the world the roles that they play is basically one and the same; that is, that there is a supreme being who created the universe and all that it contains and that this being would want his creatures to lead a life that is pleasing in His sight. This is what every religion tries to restore where it is lacking and/ or sustain where it is still exists.

Politics on the other hand is given different definitions by different people. On one popular understanding, politics is concerned with ...*Who gets what, when and how*.⁵ (Lasswell, H. D.:1934). Sometimes Politics is also understood to be concerned about authoritative allocation of values in any social system.⁶ Values in this sense refer to any thing that might be sought for in any given social system, that is, families, institutions of learning, working institutions, churches, market places etc. In short, any place that has more than one

3 Keith, Ward, (1992). 'Is a Christian State a Contradiction?' In *Religion in Public Life*. Dan Cohn – Sherbok et.al. (ed). St. Martin's Press: New York. P. 1

4 Loc Cit

5 Lasswell, D. Harold, (1936), *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How*, New York: Whittessey, p. 3

6 Easton David (1965), *A Framework for Political Analysis, Englewood Cliffs*: N. J., Prentice-Hall, p. 4

person when something material or immaterial to be given out, at least politics is used. This means, therefore, that there are politics in churches/ religious institutions, schools, universities, families, market places, e.t.c. Generally, politics encompass all spheres of human life and he has no excuse but to be political irrespective of his position in society, gender or religious inclinations. This is also in line with what Aristotle noted that, every person is a political animal.

These values may include wealth, respect, prestige, position, security and above all power, that is, power to command. The assumption of this paper is that the majority of the Kenyan population is religious. That is, at least every Kenyan can claim to be a member of one or the other religious group. Probably this is the reason that explains why religion and hence the freedom of worship is guaranteed in the Kenyan constitution under the bill of freedom and rights. Even the chapter six (6:48) of the draft constitution outlines the same.

From the above perceptions, it becomes evident that both the church and politics encompass all human beings irrespective of their geographical positions in the world. What may vary is how the church and politics may affect people in a given place. There should therefore be a unique way that these two should relate in respective places.

This paper specifically endeavours to establish the kind of a relationship that exists between religion/ church and state in Kenya and above the factors that play roles in modeling this relationship. In order to meet this objective, it is opportune for us to assess how religion and politics are related.

The Relationship between Religion and Politics

Kenya's population is mainly Christian; that is, Protestants and Catholics. There is also a good fraction of Muslims and Hindus and other traditional religions. Although it is purported that all these religions have the same goals and even pray to the same divinity, there has been a considerable number of differences between them as regards to their values. To some extent there has also been lack of understanding, animosity, and even loss of life among the different rivaling religions groups basing on doctrinal differences. A good example is between the Christians and Muslims.

In places with the highest number of Muslims for instance, there has been a call to introduce Sharia laws. Even in places that have a good mixture of Muslims and Christians, Muslims tend overshadow Christians and they would want to make everyone a Muslim. As

Twaddle Michael noted;

*In other areas of Eastern Africa; where non-Muslims and Muslims live in close proximity, demands of the imposition of Islamic laws have also been made in recent years. The Coast province of Kenya is one such examples.*⁷

Such instances has made the opposed religious groups react negatively to such laws and in the process chaos have erupted leading to the loss of life and property. But even among Christians, for instance, some factions have claimed to be better than the others in matters of faith and deliverance.

Further still, some churches have failed to deliver as expected by their followers and therefore, lack a grip over their faithful. Some of the earlier evils committed by churches which are still vivid among the followers may also aggravate the problem. For instance, in the first year of post-independence Africa, the Christian churches in Africa, as it is the case in Kenya took a low profile because of its earlier close association with the European colonial powers.⁸ The association that existed between European missionaries and the colonizers can explain this further. Sometimes, there was no big difference in functions of state and the functions of the church. The church for instance could hire civil servants and pay them in church compounds.

It was not until in 1969, during the post-colonial Africa, when Tom Mboya, a government minister in Kenya was assassinated that several church leaders expressed anxieties over pastors and priests making political comments. While Jomo Kenyatta remained president of Kenya, government attacks upon individual churchmen was never eradicated.⁹ Both the Churchmen or clerics and laymen fell victims of the wrath of the government. An individual could not stand to oppose the evils of the state. It needed a stronger watchdog to do this. Perhaps this watchdog needed to be stronger than the international bodies. It was also the case that these watch dogs in most cases intervene mostly in cases where they are likely to benefit. In Rwanda also, for instance, it took international bodies more than ninety days to respond to the Rwandan genocide when people close to one million lost their lives. This thus left the role of putting the government to its toes to the churches although they could not perform the duty appropriately. As David Throup expressed:

7 Holger B. Hansen et.al. (eds), (1995) Twaddle, Michael 'The Character of Politico-Religious Conflict in

Eastern Africa' In *Religion and Politics in East Africa*. Fountain Publishers: Kampala, p.7

8 Ibid p. 8

9 Loc Cit

...only church leaders have the freedom to criticize the government without risking detention in Kenya.¹⁰

The role that is performed by the church in this case is supposed to be performed by the opposition parties of any given state. These parties in Kenya are weakened because they are either suppressed or given monetary favours in forms of bribes and being appointed to governmental ministerial positions.

This is a view has been expressed by many people including politicians themselves and experts. They strongly feel that churches should act as the nation's conscience in most matters of the government even including moral aspects. In cases where the government tends to be corrupt churches are expected to be outspoken and point out such evils.

Mwai Kibaki, while serving as a minister in KANU government held similar views. While addressing church leaders at an Annual General Meeting of the National Christian Council of Kenya at Limuru conference center, Kibaki reiterated;

...a modern church is expected to be outspoken because other groups must be cautious. We must have at least some organization, which speaks out for the rights of man regardless of what happens tomorrow.¹¹

This objective cannot be achieved overnight because it demands a lot of dedication, time and money. One way towards the achievement of this is by the church and her ministers to be accepted by the society as its true conscience. There is also the need for the church to reach people frequently through education and the word.

But this has not been always the case. In some cases, churches are seen compromised and put in some awkward positions by many associated factors. Churches have been seen to fall back to corruption and search for material goods, they have lacked seriousness and focus among their servants and above all, ethnicity and favourism has entered these institutions. This has, therefore made religion not play its primary goal in society. Among all the factors that affect both religion and politics in Kenya, ethnicity is ranked first. The other factors like riches, however they may be affecting politics, their influence is minimal. In the following section, we shall focus on the role that ethnicity plays in politics in Kenya. This factor seems to shape the Kenyan politics, as it is the case with other African states.

10 Ibid

11 Okullu Henry, (1974). *Church and Politics in East Africa*. Uzima Press: Kenya, p. 27.

Ethnicity and Politics in Kenya

According to the Oxford advanced learner's dictionary the term ethnic is defined as that which is *of a national, racial or tribal group that has a common cultural tradition or of a particular ethnic group.*

In most cases the term *ethnic* is taken to be synonymous with *tribe*. Considerably ambivalence governs any application of the concept of ethnicity. This concept may refer to;

*a group of consciousness of common cultural labels and the subsequent manipulation of this consciousness to construct a culturally – informed vantage point from which to report on and respond to contemporary situations of impoverished and powerlessness.*¹²

The current upsurge of such consciousness has resisted dissolution or assimilation by other stronger group tendencies like class, religion, or historical trends such as modernization and industrialization. Thinking after Talcott Parsons, Daniel Patrick and Nathan Glazer;

*Class circumstances would become the main line of division between people, erasing the traces of religion and even national origin.*¹³

In Africa, ethnicity is such a strong power that can even *move mountains*. Talcott himself had earlier talked of the emancipation of individuals of all categories from what he called *diffuse particularistic solidarities*, meaning ethnicity. It is clear that Talcott and those writing after him were thinking of the post- revolution Marxian utopia of a classless society and for Marxists ethnicity had always been nothing but irrational social consciousness.

The collapse of communism has not only thwarted this grand march towards a classes society, it has also led to renewed upsurge of “particularistic solidarities” backed unwittingly by the western stress on liberal democracy. It has been argued that there must always been a we/they dichotomy to apply the concept of ethnicity.

In the colonial setting, tribe did not only denote an administrative unit, it was interested with certain characteristics, which made it antagonistically dissimilar to other tribal units. This enabled colonialists and even missionaries manage Africans administratively in their colonies. Writing on the same policy of policy rule, Tom Mboya asserted:

12 Allen, T. (1984) 'Ethnicity and Tribalism on the Sudan-Uganda Border'. In Kitsuya, F. and Markakis J. eds. , *Ethnicity and Conflict in the Horn of Africa*, London: James Curry, p.4.

13 Sallors, W., (1986) *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 20.

*The European colonial powers and even missionaries for a long time tended to build up tribal antagonisms. It made it easier to influence people, if they could find an amenable tribe to use it against another tribe, which was hostile.*¹⁴

It is often admitted that more than the colonial administration, the post-independent political leadership in Africa has exploited ethnic differences in earnest in order to maintain themselves in positions of power. And the same case has applied to any other group which tries to legitimize certain positions of power which may not be necessarily be political power. In both colonial and post-colonial societies, the construction of conflict ethnic identities do not merely take the form of political incitements of a group against another; it involves a more subtle exercise of ethnic stereotyping masked in some form of intellectual innocence. It has also been noted that the more educated a person is, the more ethnic conscience one becomes. In fact, some advantages of ethnic have been outlined. Most of us benefit from them. For instance ethnicity has assisted many to get good accommodation in towns, get good jobs, be put in good offices, parishes and even be promoted to higher positions in ranks. To the beneficiaries, ethnicity is in fact very good and laudable. But in reality, it is a source of discrimination among the people; it denies people their democratic rights of equality and hence equal opportunities.

In Africa, ethnicity remains the strongest force that binds a group together because other bases of alignment such as: religion, class, nationalism etc are recent phenomena and in most cases alien. The vivid examples are given of the Rwandan genocide where in spite of the fact that an overwhelming percentage of the population is catholic, ethnic consciousness has resisted Christian assimilation.¹⁵ Not even the spirit of nationalism could stop the massacres.

In Kenya, the dominance of ethnic affiliations comes to the fore in almost all aspects of human life. In Kenyan politics for instance, the strong ethnic bonds was reaffirmed in the recent referendum elections. The referendum, in which the government lost miserably, is evident that tribalism is still a bigger challenge to Kenyans. In cases where ethnic affiliations are strong like this no one would like to think freely. People always imagine that ethnic-based thinking is the solution to every issue of concern.

It is worth noting that such ethnic based thinking is a big challenge and threat to development, perhaps slightly less dangerous than poverty diseases and illiteracy. As it has been noted earlier, the more one is educated, the more ethnic conscious, or tribal he/she becomes. The proof of this fact can

14 Mboya, (1986) *Freedom and After*. Nairobi: Heinemann.

15 Ogot A. Bethwell ed. (1995), 'Ethnicity Nationalism and Democracy'. In *Ethnicity and Otherness in Kenyan Cultures*, Institute of Research and Postgraduate Studies, Maseno University: Kenya.

be observed in the fact that most of our ministers, having been enlighten about the dangers that are posed by ethnicity, still continue to practice it.

The preference of tribalism in Kenya is only denied verbally, while its prominence features and affects politics, religion, education and to a larger extend development. It is due to this fact that prominent veteran politician Shikuku noted; *...Kenya has failed because leaders are not honest. They pretend that there is no tribalism yet they practice it.*¹⁶

Other politicians, who are deemed to be the elites of the society, hold tribalism with a spirit of ambivalence. As a matter of fact, most political parties are found on tribal lines and above all, most members of parliament are rated in or out of parliament on tribal lines. This, therefore, makes it difficult for the politicians to eradicate the vice from society. In view of this the claims of some political leaders should be held with a lot of suspicion. A case in point is thus the claims of honorable Nyachae, the new energy minister at the end of elections asserts; *...Before the referendum I had never known tribalism in my life.*¹⁷

Nyachae like many of his colleagues in politics was not being honest. He is the chairperson of a political party, for which he was a presidential candidate that most of his members were of predominantly of a given ethnic group.

Because of the vice, the majority of the citizens who qualify for opportunities are never considered. Instead politicians practice nepotism, which is a narrower aspect of tribalism. Most of those who wield power are now *filling positions in their ministries and parastatals with their relatives and constituents who are close associates.*¹⁸ In such situations, their considerations are only for their close relative and never consider their broader ethnic groups. Such occurrences are also prone to happen in religious groups since they are also directed by politics.

According to professor Ruth Oniang'o, a nominated member of parliament of KANU; *...tribalism permeates every sector of national life*¹⁹. Above all, tribalism seems to permeate even the religious sectors. She admitted...*Even religious leaders who once were looked upon as having the moral strength to rise above tribalism are no longer the exception.*²⁰

Tribalism is as old as humanity itself. It may be tapped either positively or negatively. During the colonial times, it was adopted by colonialists as a divide and rule mechanism. In Atsango chesoni's, a human right lawyers view, *"Tribalism is a divide and rule tool that was initially used by*

16 Shikuku Martin 'Refurendum Exposed Dominance of Tribalism' Ostieno Namwaya

The Sunday Standard, January 8th 2006 p. 16.

17 Nyachae, Simeon 'Refurendum Exposed Dominance of Tribalism' Ostieno Namwaya

The Sunday Standard, January 8th 2006 p. 16.

18 Ostieno Namwaya 'Refurendum Exposed Dominance of Tribalism'

The Sunday Standard, January 8th 2006 p. 16.

19 Ruth Onian'go. 'Refurendum Exposed Dominance of Tribalism' Ostieno Namwaya

The Sunday Standard, January 8th 2006 p. 16.

20 Ibid p.16

*the colonial regime.*²¹ This was adopted by most African states that look over from their colonial masters. Unfortunately it took root and yielded negative effects.

From the preceding views of the legislators, ethnicity is no longer a myth. It has permeated all spheres of human life, ranging from religious, social and above all the political ones. Its presence in any given society impacts negatively to the people within that society. In view of M. Shikuku, “...tribalism is a cancer that has been around for some time, but there has been lack of political will to fight it. Most of the political leaders have benefited from tribalism.”²²

In Africa, as it has been noted earlier, ethnicity remains the strongest force that binds groups together more than even religion. It is because of this fact that it becomes difficult to eliminate it and any attempts to do it, if we are not careful may only remain at a mere verbal level. It is due to tribalism that most African states are corrupt and inefficient. And as it looks, the vice may not be eradicated soon. In the next section, we shall try to look at the remedies to the problem.

Conclusion and Recommended Solution to the Problem

From the foregoing arguments, it is worth noting that the efforts to curb tribalism, which is at the core of Kenyan politics seems to be more theoretical than practical. According to Hon. Muite, the solution lies in clear economic policies that, rather than benefit only a few political elite, can make the majority independent. This implies for instance that, every time there is employment to be done, it should be done in view of the tribes that are present in a given state. This may not be an appropriate solution because it identifies people with particular ethnic groups and may therefore make one more ethnic conscious than before.

Others like Oniang’o claim that tribalism should be outlawed. This may not also work since it is similar to the US problem of racial discrimination between 1980’s and 1960’s where racism and other related forms of discrimination were outlawed. In spite of this, the prevalence of racism in America is shocking.

As regards the church’s own role and position, it appears to many people as though its leadership refers to an inherited complex structure, which in essence is still being viewed as foreign.²³ Above all it is mixed with the predominant African problem of ethnicity, a dominant factor in Kenyan politics. The ministers of the church in this case find themselves in new environment in which they are expected to serve as poor ministers and sometimes be celibates, obedient and poor. In most cases, they are also construed as strangers trying to propagate foreign religious doctrines. This is contrary to

21 Atsango Chessoni, ‘Refurendum Exposed Dominance of Tribalism’ Ostieno Namwaya
The Sunday Standard, January 8th 2006 p. 16.

22 Shikuku Martin, ‘Refurendum Exposed Dominance of Tribalism’ Ostieno Namwaya
The Sunday Standard, January 8th 2006 p. 16.

23 Martin Doornbes (1975). *Church and State in East Africa: Some Unresolved Questions; in Religion and Politics in East Africa*. Fountain Publishers: Kampala, p. 267

most African values. The church is therefore, required to face this challenge prudently and make people accept their faith. This can easily form a new solidarity, a religious solidarity that can take the place of negative ethnicity. People will no longer view other on tribal line but as members of one family, a common ancestry and children of the Almighty. This will first all require a change of heart on the side of the ministers of the church.

Other religions like Islam, although it has most of its tenets similar to most African cultures like polygamy, should on the other hand change its negative precepts like violence and killings in the name of Yahweh. If this is not done, then, ethnicity will continue playing a major role as before.

Although African churches are still young in this new faith, they seem to be demanding a lot from their converts. However, there is an enormous awareness that they will no longer be receiving the support financial and manpower from Europe, which it used to enjoy; while at the same time it is still insufficiently rooted to the genuinely sustained on the basis of African support and African style. The founders of these churches, for instance prescribe enculturation to African churches, in order to understand foreign religions in an African eye in order to strike a balance between the two faiths. This has not even done any constrictive work in this area. This is because Africans still have other problems that demand an immediate focus like poverty, hunger unemployment that need to be addressed. If this persists, then ethnicity will continue on a higher note.

It is because of these factors that some churches and /or her ministers in Kenya and other African countries are tempted to be corrupted. The top ministers like bishops tend to recruit their relatives and put them in good parishes where there is money. Others still are prone to take bribes from some politician, especially the ones who are from their ethnic groups and may need support in whatever levels.

These factors have also made religious leaders who were very articulate against evils in one regime seem to defend some malpractices in a subsequent regime. Besides most religious leaders are compromised on ethnic grounds others are even compromised on both ethnic grounds and on material benefits.

Dr. Kilemi Mwiria assistant minister for education for instace noted:

...this is perhaps the first time in our history that spiritual leaders have contributed to dividing the country along ethnic lines.²⁴

This has been an issue of concern other parts of Africa as well. Nyamwamu noted the following regarding the tribalism and materialism in reference to the religious leaders noted;

...Most of the decisions by religious leaders were guided by either their ethnic affiliations or in a few cases, material consideration.²⁵

24 Kilemi Mwiria. 'Refurendum Exposed Dominance of Tribalism' Ostieno Namwaya
The Sunday Standard, January 8th 2006 p. 16.

25 Nyamwamu, 'Refurendum Exposed Dominance of Tribalism' Ostieno Namwaya
The Sunday Standard, January 8th 2006 p. 16.

In most cases, there has always been some interference from states in the activities of the church. States should allow churches play their roles independently. Churches on the other hand need to retrain their servants in attitude and pay them commensurate to the work that they do and according to their qualifications. They should also try to practice fairness and equality on all their servants. It is not until this is done that ethnicity can be eradicated in Kenyan politics.

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