



Missionaries or Mercenaries? How the Church in Kenya Lost Its Religion

By Laureen Akoa Wesonga



As the world marks the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, it is a good time to reflect on the present schism between the clergy and the congregation in the Kenyan church. If the clergy is the proverbial shepherd and the congregation is the flock, then this shepherd has passively abdicated his duty and we need to discuss this.

First off, if you are one of those dogmatic Christians who cannot stomach any criticism levelled at the church, you may want to stop reading now, lest your delicate sensibilities are needlessly offended. This is not a conversion exercise; it is a shameless sermon to the choir. Conversions while appreciated are purely incidental.

Matters religion are always a sensitive subject and in a country where Christianity is the dominant faith, calling out the church is asking for a double dose of trouble. Then again, 500 years ago, in the Middle Ages, a young Jesuit priest faced a similar moral dilemma under worse circumstances. On October 31, 1517, he called out the Catholic church on its misdemeanours and changed the course of Christianity. *The Ninety-Five Theses*, or if you prefer, *Disputation of Martin Luther on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*, was the religious Pandora's box of the Middle Ages.

Richard Dawkins, in his book *The God Delusion* argues that religion is rarely critiqued because it is

held as a sensitive and personal issue; hence it is shielded from overt demystification and criticism. Despite this perception, we can't deny that religious arguments hold great sway in normative and even legal arguments that guide behaviour in our societies. For example, debates on issues of access to birth control, arguments on abortion and arguments on euthanasia are passionate and intense because religious arguments heavily influence these conversations that take a contrary position to science.

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In circumstances where prevailing religious dogmas have been successfully questioned, ramifications of these have been felt in the public sphere of human lives. Jesus Christ questioned Judaism's religious practices and established his ministry with societal outcasts whom he sought "to seek and save". His disciples, the Pharisees (teachers of the existing dogma) and other followers interrogated his ideas, posing all sorts of tricky questions, which he skilfully and relentlessly deconstructed.

The Pharisees weren't too pleased with this. For being such a pain in the posterior, they put out a contract on Jesus and Judas Iscariot took the bait, kissing and outing Jesus. Jesus was crucified, and his death became the martyrdom that made way for Christianity to become a new and more inclusive faith than Judaism, accepting of previously excluded people and practices. Jews were punished for killing Jesus, and they have been persecuted through history (even Luther had anti-Semitic views) till they found reprieve in 1948 through the formation of Israel.

What Martin Luther did

In the same vein, Martin Luther's move to call out the Catholic's church's moral excesses set off a series of domino waves that affect us to date. Two key things stand out. First, Luther's actions ignited the movement that eventually resulted in Protestantism, which reduced the influence of the Catholic church. Luther's second influence was more profound. By translating the Bible into different languages, he removed the monopoly of knowledge of scriptural teachings from the priesthood, diffusing it to the people. In a move reminiscent of the temple curtain tearing at Christ's death, Luther brought the people closer to God by bringing his word closer to them. Of course, there is an element of serendipity here that we must acknowledge; the Gutenberg Press and the Renaissance.

Then Europe was coming out of the Middle Ages and there was a renewed thinking about the relationship between man and God. The prevailing dogma was a pessimistic one - that man was a creature that had sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and thus worthy not of his grace. In its place, a new school was emerging, arguing that man was created in God's image and reflected God's genius. As such, it was man's duty to use all his abilities as bestowed by God to express dominion over the earth. The Renaissance Movement, which included science and innovation that marked the end of the Dark Ages, was partly inspired by this dogmatic shift on the image of man.

The technological invention of the Gutenberg printing press was the perfect medium to allow Luther to disseminate Christ's teachings to the public and to translate them into local languages. So next time you read your Bible in Latin, thank Luther for it and feel free to buy your local Jesuit priest a drink in Luther's honour.

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called out the moral and legal inconsistencies that characterised the excesses of the Moi regime in the 1980s and early 1990s. Many, such as Bishop Alexander Muge and Father Anthony Kaiser, paid with their lives.

So, 500 years later, we need to have a conversation about the church in Kenya. First things first. This is not about the spiritual relevance of the church in its congregants' lives. Dawkins will call me cowardly, but I will avoid that; God knows my views on the church and as an actor in public spaces I offend enough sensibilities as it is. What I want us to reflect on is the role and influence of the church in our public spaces and outside of our churches on Sunday. The Kenyan state is going through turbulent political times in which the church has barely weighed in. Where it has made its voice heard, it has made statements that are largely ineffectual, offering very few solutions that are in themselves escapist.

The country is experiencing political uncertainty that has seen the credibility of the electoral management body questioned over and over, lending the recently concluded elections a legitimacy crisis that refuses to go away. While courts can give legal direction on aspects of law and process, the law is but a tool of politics, subject to and vulnerable to political whims and machinations. Thus, it can only help us so far given that this is a moral rather than a legal problem. The opposition has called for civil disobedience, relabelling itself a movement (which is perfectly legal, by the way). Which is why the law can do only so much to save us from this political crisis.

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Initialising Project Genesis

When one can't make sense of the present, one goes back to the history of the problem. To what extent is the church separate from the state? Where the church extends itself, and becomes an actor in affairs of the state, then it must be called to accountability and scrutiny just like other institutions.

The Kenyan story with the church begins with colonialism. The missionaries came to spread the gospel and change our lives for the better. They built schools, hospitals, and churches where they taught us that we must be obedient to our masters, aka the colonialists. (Anecdote, depending on who you believe, they also instructed natives in Polynesia how to have sex in acceptable civilised positions, hence the missionary position, but I digress).

The church, being in bed with the colonial government, had access to large tracts of land, where they could do their missionary work. It's instructive to note that the early church in Kenya never called out the colonial government for its forced displacement of Kenyans from fertile highland areas and neither did it call out the use of forced labour, introduction of taxation (hut tax) or the *kipande* system. Why bite the hand that feeds you? With the ownership of land, a key scarce and hotly contested resource, the church in Kenya adopted multiple identities. While it serves the role of spiritual shepherd, by owning land, it is also an economic actor, which makes it an interest group with great political influence.

Now to the fight for pluralism. The church spoke with one voice for the cause for pluralism. One of

the reasons that much, though not all, of the clergy was united about this was because the fight for pluralism did not compromise the economic interests of the church. Thus, the shepherds rose to the occasion and guided their flock, using captive audiences every Sunday, issuing pastoral letters, and using their spiritual influence to influence the political decisions of their flock. As the clergy spoke with one voice against the Moi regime, we the congregation saw that it was good and were immensely pleased with our shepherds.

The land question

With political pluralism came freedom of expression, creating space for many voices hitherto unheard. Naturally, the land question, a question as original as colonialism, came to the fore. Calls for constitutional reform wanted to contain an all-powerful executive in Kenya as well as resolve the land question. From issues of displacement to land tenure to taxation on land, all these touched a nerve among the owners of large tracts of land in Kenya, including the church. As such, while the church was united in opposing Moi as a powerful executive, they were less singular in supporting a new constitution whose reform was based on revising and checking executive powers to avoid a repeat of Moi 2.0 in the future. Why the inconsistency? Because the land question affected the church as landowners.

In an ironical twist, an unholy alliance even, the mainstream churches teamed up with large-scale land owners in opposing the draft constitution of 2010. While the landholding elite were obvious about their reservations about land reform, including issues around community land and lease tenure, the church cloaked its opposition to the new constitution in congregation friendly positions, such as half-baked arguments on abortion, gay rights and Islamic courts. Cheap and dirty propaganda tactics were not beneath the moral etiquette of the church; it was survival time after all. From leaflets with outrageous interpretations of the Bible to parading prepubescent girls in front of congregations and alleging that the draft constitution would allow them access to contraceptives, the church employed every weapon in its bag of tricks. Never has the moral compass of the church faced south as it did then.

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Which brings us to the present. The church in Kenya today cannot speak with one voice on political issues that threaten its status quo. And this has nothing to do with our souls. The stairway to heaven hasn't changed; it's still all about fat camels and tiny eye needles. It's not even about remorse about the church's diminished moral authority after the position it took in the 2010 constitutional referendum. It's the congregation numbers, stupid. When the politics is about issues that are a live wire threatening church power dynamics and the loyalty of congregations, making political statements is hara-kiri. Being no brave samurais, the church avoids this scenario by simply not taking a side. Hence the feeble and mostly ineffectual statements we have been subjected to in the face of this political crisis.

To pick a side, even a moral or ethical one, in the current political debate would mean taking a position and risking alienating half of the flock. The flock and its spiritual dependence on the church is what keeps the church relevant. The flock's loyalty to the church is what provides a modicum of decency to the economic interests of the church, especially where they concern land. It is not in the church's interest to take a political position that will see it lose sections of their congregation. So rather than alienate its money maker, the shepherd, aka the church, is sitting this one out (sorry flock).

The case of the Catholic church in Kenya is particularly illuminating. It is certainly not in the realm of outrageousness to imagine that the Catholic church wants a Catholic president, especially if the president comes from a family that is the largest landowner in the country. Why would you chide this bloke? You are taking care of his spiritual needs now (and his soul in death) and he is safeguarding your material possessions on earth, *quid pro quo*, neat. Sounds sordid? Maybe, then again, most realpolitik is that; sordid, dirty, self-serving, amoral, inward looking, forget Bentham and utilitarianism. Besides, the shepherd needs to be well fed and rested and comfortable to take care of his flock, right?

Lost sheep

Which brings us to our current dilemma. What do we do with the shepherd who has absconded his duty? That is the question the congregation must deal with. What must be made clear is that to the extent that the church has a political voice that it exploits through action (and inaction), it must be held accountable for its political positions. In the same light, the church must come clean about its economic grip on the country, if for nothing else than for purposes of disclosure.

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The church and state are far from separate; they are joined at the hip. In the meantime, the church has failed the country by failing to speak up, to take a position and to provide direction in this time of crisis. The church has failed the country by putting itself and its interests before those of its congregation.

In the *Divine Comedy, Inferno*, Dante Alighieri famously said, "The darkest places in hell are reserved for those who maintain their neutrality in times of moral crisis." Feel free to take a moment to ruminate on the irony of the Kenyan clergy having a special place in hell, if Dante is to be believed.

Meanwhile dear flock, the shepherd is not reporting for duty. The flock can choose to wait all rudderless till the shepherd resumes duty or, like Martin Luther some 500 years ago, the flock can revisit its relationship with the shepherd. For what good is the church as a leader when it offers us promises of spiritual riches while watching from afar as the vices of the flesh consume us here on earth? Not to put a fine point to it, but perhaps we should be asking ourselves, what would Martin Luther do?

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