Manna From Hell: How the Church in Kenya Became a Refuge for Scoundrels

By Dauti Kahura

“Christianity began as a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. When it went to Athens, it became a philosophy. When it went to Rome, it become an organisation. When it went to Europe, it become a culture. When it went to America, it become a business.” – Anonymous.

In the last few weeks, Deputy President William Ruto, who has made it known to all and sundry that he has clearly set his sights on the presidency come 2022, has made troubling theological statements which cannot stand biblical scrutiny. And all this while the church’s leadership across Kenya has been eerily mum on these utterances that border on both fallacy and heresy.

At a church function in Kiambu County on June 17, 2018, feeling sufficiently sanctified to be within the precincts of a Catholic church – the most influential and powerful religious institution in the country – and after contributing what he must have considered to be an amount that would please God and the church’s coffers, Ruto was audacious enough to later claim that his cash donation was tantamount to future “risk” investments in the hereafter. After the church fund-raiser, the Deputy President met some religious leaders at the Blue Post Hotel in Thika, where he is reported to have stated: “Some people condemn me for going around raising money here and there and in church. It is up to them. I’m investing in heavenly matters...some people invest in funerals, let them continue...”
The utterances at St Benedict’s Church in the Ngoingwa suburb of Thika town were followed exactly a month later by another stupendous statement by Ruto, clearly indicating that he was confident that he was on uncritical and all-embracing grounds. On July 15, 2018, he was the chief guest at the African Independent Pentecostal Church of Africa (AIPCA) Patanisha, in Kayole, a populous suburb 10km south-east of Nairobi city centre, where he gave Sh2.5 million (about $25,000) to the church and said: “They say I’ve been purchasing seats for the churches. And because we do not ask them why they take their money to witch doctors at night, they should leave us alone to give money to church for the work of God.”

To date, no church leader – Catholic or otherwise – has found it necessary to correct his misleading statements and to remind the Deputy President that his contributions to different churches are in no way a measure of his Christian virtues, neither are they a passport to eternal bliss or a favour to churches and Christians. But the church leaders have been quiet, perhaps hoping that he will tone down on his quasi-religious utterances as they continue to reap from his humongous cash donations.

According to a July 22, 2018 Daily Nation report, in a short span of just six months, Ruto’s generous spirit has led him to dish out amounts totalling Sh60 million (roughly $600,000), most of it in cash, to various churches. The distribution of Ruto’s cash donations to Catholic churches and institutions in Central Kenya and Nakuru County are as follows: Kairuri Catholic Parish, Embu County, Sh5 million (during the fundraiser, Ruto pointed out that the contribution was a joint effort between him and President Uhuru Kenyatta); Mary Immaculate Primary School, Nanyuki, Laikipia County, Sh3 million; Holy Cross Catholic Church, Nakuru County, Sh2 million; a Catholic church project in Njoro, also in Nakuru County, Sh2 million; Baricho Catholic Church, Kirinyaga County, Sh1 million; and Murugu Catholic Church, Nyeri County, Sh1 million. (Interestingly, Nyeri town constituency is represented by the rookie MP, Wambugu Ngunjiri, the de facto leader of Central Kenya MPs, most of whom are also first-timers and who are opposed to the perception of Ruto as the Jubilee Party’s automatic presidential flagbearer after President Uhuru Kenyatta’s term ends in 2022.) This adds up to Sh14 million solely given to Catholic churches.

If we add to this the contribution to Murang’a High School, which received Sh15 million for the construction of a multipurpose hall, Ruto’s total donation to Central Kenya and Nakuru counties amounts to Sh29 million, or roughly half of his total contributions. The Catholic churches on their own have gobbled 23 percent of Ruto’s harambee donations.

At the function, where Cardinal John Njue was present (Embu County is his ancestral home), the presiding Embu prelate, Bishop Paul Kariuki, egged on Ruto, telling him: “This is the time to do what you were told, kutanga tanga (to roam). Do not be afraid because to those who will start visiting us in 2022, we shall ask them where they have been and didn’t loiter earlier. In 2022, I shall write a letter banning politics in the church.”

“Unlike God,” said Ruto, defending his generous hand towards the church, “….none of us is being asked to give more than we can.” In separate church fund-raisers, Ruto has reiterated that he has been giving “cheerfully and proudly”. Outside of the Catholic churches, which cumulatively have received the largest amount from Ruto’s largesse, the single biggest contribution to a church has been to the All Saints Cathedral in Nairobi. He gave the church Sh8 million and pledged to deliver another Sh2 million. Apart from contributing to Catholic and Anglican churches, Ruto has also given
Sh3 million to Evergreen Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) in Nairobi.

“Churches in Kenya have become – for all practical purposes – sanctuaries for politicians to do as they feel,” proffered an evangelical pastor, who spoke on condition of anonymity. “Priests and pastors alike have rendered themselves manipulable to the politicians because of their runaway greed, political partisanship and because of their corrupt, unethical lifestyles.”

Nowhere is this more evident than in the evangelical and Pentecostal churches, added the pastor. The rise of the evangelical/Pentecostal churches in the last 30 years or so in the country has led to a proliferation of churches, many of them independently run by individuals who claim they have a calling to serve God and who in the strictest sense of the word are not trained theologians i.e. they are not schooled at recognised theological institutions or seminaries.

“Many of these pastors are careerists who run the church as personal enterprises and fiefdoms – to be passed onto their wives and children – hence they are driven by a great desire not to serve as shepherds but to use their positions ... as platforms for acquiring riches,” said a pastor who ministers with one of the Nairobi Chapel/Mavuno Churches in Nairobi, and who asked that I conceal his/her name for the sake of not offending his/her fellow Christians. “Other than peddling drugs, the surest way of becoming a multimillionaire in Kenya today is starting a church. The majority of such pastors fall under the banner of the evangelical/Pentecostal churches. Is it a wonder that many of them are easily compromised [by politicians], because they have no scruples and all they are interested in is amassing enormous wealth and living large? But above everything else, they have no sound theological grounding and training to anchor their scriptural command and understanding.”

The gospel of prosperity

The rise and proliferation of these evangelical churches that were weaned off mainstream churches, such as the Catholic and Anglican Churches (with their theology of moral righteousness, sin and repentance) came with it a new Gospel teaching: the so-called prosperity gospel.

The institutional churches – the Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA), the Baptist Church and the African Inland Church (AIC) - all brought to Kenya by white missionaries – proselytised the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the local people by asking them to repent their sins and to accept the Lord if they hoped to inherit the Kingdom of God. This was the Gospel of obeying and trusting God to meet all their needs. However, the white missionaries did not preach to the local people that their faith would lead them to greater wealth.

The prosperity theology of the modern Pentecostal movement has its roots in the Bible Belt of the United States. This theology frames earthly material gain as a sign of divine blessing and unrelenting faith in Jesus Christ.

The prosperity gospel, also known as the health and wealth gospel or the Word of Faith movement, is a skewed interpretation of the Synoptic Gospel that claims that God rewards those Christians that continually increase their faith in him. Anchored in the belief that one’s (proper) faith must lead to great health and wealth, prosperity gospel proponents present the gospel as the panacea for a Christian’s earthly material needs, which include plenty of cash in the bank, multiple houses, several motor vehicles, acquisition of land and generally posh living.
Paul Gifford, religious emeritus professor at the School of African and Oriental Studies, in his book, *African Christianity: It’s Public Role*, published in 1998, points out that, “African Christians believe that success is determined by your faith.” He says that prosperity gospel preachers have moved beyond traditional Pentecostal practices of speaking in tongues, prophesying and healing to the belief that God will provide money, cars, houses and even spouses – in response to believers’ faith.

According to Gifford, the prosperity gospel arrived in Kenya in the mid-1980s. After the failure of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) imposed by the Bretton Woods institutions (the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank), Kenyans lost confidence in the stringent austerity policies executed through the government by these two Washington-based bodies. The social recovery safety nets and the government’s purported ability to bail them out failed. A notoriously religious society, Kenyans turned to the new revivalist churches that were now fervently preaching the prosperity gospel.

**God-fearing dictatorship**

There was another reason why Kenyan turned to these churches: The tightening of political freedoms of speech and movement under the stranglehold of the one-party dictatorship of KANU and President Daniel arap Moi led to the emasculation of people’s rights, and with this came the rule of fear and despondency.

The Bible-toting Moi is a fervent born-again Christian and a member of the African Inland Church and of the evangelical/revivalist persuasion that had swept the East African region from Uganda at the beginning of the 20th century. The Dictionary of African Christian Biography describes the *Tukutendereza Yesu* (We Praise You Jesus) as the revivalist movement within the Anglican Church of Uganda that began in the Kingdom of Buganda, hence Balokole (Luganda for the saved people). Today, the term Balokole has been embraced beyond Buganda as a movement of saved or born-again Christians across the East African region. Likewise, the Luganda hymnal song, *Tukutendereza*, has become the theme song of revivalist Christians throughout East Africa.

Moi reached the pinnacle of his dictatorship in the late 1980s, just when the revivalist churches were entrenching themselves in the country. To further keep the people in check and continue running a tight ship as he maintained an iron grip on the state, Moi would invite international prosperity gospel evangelical preachers to Kenya to hold massive crusades.

Two of the better known preacher men who visited Kenya in the late 1980s and early 1990s were Morris Cerullo from America’s southern Bible Belt and the German Reinhard Bonke. Both were friends of Moi and their first port of call was the State House. The undertone of their preaching then was that Moi was a God-fearing, divinely-ordained leader like the kings of the biblical yore and it was only through unwavering faith in the Almighty that the people would count and reap their blessings in abundance.

These new churches preached the gospel of materialism and miracles. Burdened by economic woes and spiritual poverty occasioned by the devastating austerity measures of the SAPs, Kenyan Christians turned to these apostles and prophets in the hope that they would alleviate their suffering
and offer them earthly happiness. As fate would have it, prosperity gospel thrives in Kenya because it resonates well in societies that are economically afflicted and are hostage to spiritual powers, believing these powers control the fortunes of all.

The churches’ leaders had appealing fancy titles to announce their arrival: apostle, prophet, visionary. They offered utopian hopes to disillusioned and dispossessed poor people through miracles and promises of prosperity. Gifford, in his essay, “Expecting Miracles: The Prosperity Gospel in Africa” (www.christiancentury.org published in 2007), observed that the churches equally had fanciful names, such as Jesus Breakthrough Assembly, Triumphant Christian Centre and Victory Bible Church.

According to theologians and experts in the scriptures, there is probably no religious phenomenon today that has attracted as much controversy and varied interpretations as the prosperity gospel among Christian believers. Efe Ehiogae and Joseph Olanrewaju, in their essay, “A Theological Evaluation of the Utopian Image of Prosperity Gospel and the African Dilemma” (https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org), argue that the African continent, alongside Latin America, is considered to be the richest hunting ground for evangelical Pentecostalism, one of the fastest growing religious movements globally. There are some religious leaders who today argue that the ancient practice of selling the blessings of the church has been subsumed by the prosperity gospel.

For many Christians, theology is a vague and an oblique academic notion. It is true many people consider theology to be the science of religion, and rightly so, but oftentimes they associate it with the quaint branches of academic disciplines, like numerology, that few people today take seriously.

**Liberation theology**

One enduring fact is that Africans as a whole have continued to suffer defective Christian theologies. One such theology - the remnants of which persist to date - is white theology, a carry-over of the white missionaries’ gospel teaching of doom and gloom, of trust and obey (for there is no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey). That white theology, instead of contextualising the people’s developmental needs vis-à-vis their spiritual growth, has continued to create frightening doomsday scenarios of sinners eternally roasting in balls of hell-fire and brimstone.

White theology should be understood in context and especially in relation to its nemesis - black theology. In the United States, white theology was associated with racism, slavery and the oppression of African-Americans, but above all with white supremacy. This was also the case in Latin America and Africa where the gospel was proselytised by white missionaries who brought their white culture and biases with them. In South Africa, white theology was propagated by the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) to sanctify the segregationist rule of Apartheid.

Dr. James H. Cones, who died in April this year, and who was considered to be the father of the black liberation theology movement in the United States, invited Americans to understand the corrosive effects of white theology: “Christianity was seen as the white man’s religion...the Christian Gospel is not the white man’s religion. It is the religion of liberation, a religion that says God created all people to be free. But I realized that for black people to be free, they must first love their blackness,” he said. He defined black liberation theology as the interpretation of the Christian Gospel from the experiences, perspectives and lives of people who are at the bottom in society - the lowest economic and racial groups.
Emeritus Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town and the Nobel Laureate Desmond Tutu is today remembered for his fearless fight against the Apartheid system in South Africa, for which he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984. What many people, particularly Christians, may not know is that for him to confront the all-powerful Apartheid state machinery that was spiritually sanitised by the Dutch Reformed Church, he had to confront the theology propagated by this church, which claimed that the principle of separate and unequal co-existence (segregation) of black and white South Africans was biblically ordained. Just as the African-American Christian leaders during the civil rights movements in the 1960s came up with black theology to fight the monster of racial discrimination, so did Tutu, who also came up with a black theology in South Africa to liberate his people.

In Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s, where a great majority of the world’s Catholics lived, a different type of theology was taking shape: liberation theology. It was propagated by the likes of Archbishop Helda Camara and Leonardo Boff (then a Franciscan priest), both from Brazil, the Peruvian Dominican friar, Gustavo Gutierrez, and the Spain-born Jesuit priest, Jon Sobrino, who migrated to El Salvador where for many years he performed his major ecclesiastical work.

Liberation theology in Latin America was the fusion of Marxist teachings – class differentiation and means of production – and Catholic teachings, especially of the small Christian communities tradition (in Kenya known as jumuya ndogo ndogo). It was Sobrino who in the late 1960s said that Latin America had reached a “theological boiling point”. In short, what Sobrino was advocating was a new theology to tackle debilitating poverty under military dictators who oppressed and killed their people. In his view, as indeed in the views of his contemporary like-minded Catholic priests, the theology of sin and repentance was not working.

Fr. Gutierrez, now 90-years-old, who is considered the father of liberation theology, argued in his book, A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation, published in 1971, that there are two schools of thought on poverty and both are derived from the synoptic Gospels: The first talks of Christ’s sensitivity towards the poor and their sufferings. The second, that Christ himself “had lived a life of poverty, and so, Christians from their origin understood that in order to be his disciples, they also had to live a life of poverty.” Both of these schools of thought are true, pointed out Gutierrez, “but we interpret these two points of view on the bases of our historical context and of our lives.”

“The first perspective is found in Luke’s version of the beatitude of the poor (Blessed are you, for the kingdom of God is yours). The second is reflected in Matthews (Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven),” he wrote. “I think both lines of thought – poverty as scandal and poverty of spirit can be useful, although their meaning must be actualized in our historical context.” The Catholic priest argued in the book that poverty is not a result of fate or laziness but a result of “structural injustices that privilege some, while marginalizing others.” When Jesus said, “blessed are the poor,” emphasised Gutierrez, he did not mean, “blessed is poverty.”

The church and politics in Kenya

In Kenya, our Christian clergy may not have evolved any particular theology but the country nonetheless produced, in its heyday, fearless church ministers who were not afraid to speak the biblical truth as they understood it, to both the powers that be and to their flock. Such clergymen included the controversial Anglican bishop Alexander Muge, the fearless Reverend Timothy Njoya of
the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA), Anglican Bishop David Gitari and the mercurial and politically savvy Bishop Henry Okullu. (All are dead except for Njoya. The death of Muge in 1990 in a bizarre road accident is still shrouded in mystery.)

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In 1975, as the Anglican Church of Kenya (ACK) bishop of Maseno South, Okullu published his seminal book, *Church and Politics in East Africa*, which soon became a bestseller and a guide for church leaders, church groups and students studying Christianity in the region. It was under Okullu, who was first elected as the chairman of National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCK) in 1976 and went onto serve for two terms, that the NCCK, during its annual general meeting in 1977, crafted the all-important statement regarding the central role of the church: “The Church being the conscience of the nation, should teach and safeguard intrinsic values of persons, knowing that all men and women are children of God. The church should endeavour to show, both in action and preaching, that it is not wealth, education or status that matter, but the individual’s intrinsic value.”

Dr. Okullu was a firebrand prelate. In 1998, I had the chance to meet him. Soft-spoken and cheerful, Okullu liked regaling one with stories. I remember him telling me how many Kenyans did not know that before rubbing the Kenyan political establishment the wrong way, he had locked horns with Ugandan President Milton Obote in the late 1960s when he served as the first African editor of the Church of Uganda-owned newspaper *New Day*. In 1967, Okullu had to come back to Kenya after he penned a scathing editorial on the one-party system, which Obote had introduced through the Common Man’s Charter policy document.

With the demise of these outspoken institutional church leaders, who in their own limited ways sought to speak truth to power, the mainstream churches’ leadership has been clipped and is a pale shadow of its former self. Even the elaborate voice of the Catholic Church, which used to be relayed through powerful pastoral letters, has been dead for a long time.

“The mainstream churches lost the plot in 2005,” said a Catholic priest from Kitale diocese. “That referendum [on the new constitution] split the churches along ethnic fault lines and they have never recovered to date.” The referendum that proposed a new constitution pitted the opposition, led by Raila Odinga, against President Mwai Kibaki. It was the first real test of Kibaki’s grip on state power. When Kibaki lost the referendum, the opposition knew it had rattled his power base.

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“The church leadership, instead of stepping in and cautioning against the imminent ethnic battle lines that had been drawn out by the mini-election, which, if went unchecked, would definitely escalate into ethnic warfare, also entrenched its ethnic position that had informed how it had voted in the referendum,” said the priest. “Remember these leaders would openly canvass for their political sides to their respective congregations, which fell in place.” The priest said when the presidential election came in 2007, “all it did was accentuate the leaders’ ethnic positions”.

Since 2007, the story of Kenya’s church leaders has been the same: in 2013, they led their congregation to vote along ethnic lines. The same happened in 2017, observed the priest. “What
Ruto is now doing is heavily infiltrating the churches’ leadership and exploiting their political differences and personal greed by dishing out lots of money, because everybody understands it’s their time to make hay while the sun shines.” Meanwhile, people facing hard economic times have been crying for help from their shepherds for moral courage and help, as well as guidance, but the clergy, unbothered and unconcerned by the “disconcerting noises” from their flock, continue with their privileged lifestyles.

The priest said the Deputy President has deliberately targeted the Catholic Church in Central Kenya because he reckons that this could possibly be one of the best strategies for penetrating and winning over the difficult Kikuyu constituency. “Even if he doesn’t win all of them, it would still be important if he got a foothold in the region.”

He said that in Kenya today, the church cannot speak in one voice and will not condemn institutionalised state corruption because it is fragmented and its leadership across the board has benefitted from that same corruption’s largesse. “It is not too difficult to see what is happening: The people are crying, the people are hurting, the people have been rendered poor and the Levite priest is on his way to Jerusalem.”