

The Phenomenon of Intolerance and Its Impact on Christian - Muslim Relation in Kenya

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Abstract

One of the common euphemisms today is: "Religion is inherently violent, the cause of all major wars in history". The interlocutors accuse religion without remembering that the last two world wars were fought not on account of religion, but, because of other interrelated social, material and ideological factors, the chief of which being competition for scarce resources. Yet, when the observers cite the Crusades, the Inquisition and wars of religion of the 16th and 17th centuries, not to mention the recent spate of terrorism committed in the name of religion, it is hard to belittle euphemism. Like religion, terrorism is difficult to define. Generally, however, it is a deliberate use of violence or threat of its use against innocent people, with the aim of intimidating them specifically or others into a course of action they could not otherwise take. Terrorism is fundamentally political, even when other motives-religious, economic or social are involved. It is about power, acquiring it or keeping it. This is probably why, the discussion of apparent tension between Christians and Muslims here in Kenya can hardly be discussed without due consideration of the role of Al Shabaab and Al Qaeda. The association of Islam with terrorism in the recent past first came to global attention with the assassination of Anwar Sadat in Cairo, the then president of Egypt. This wave of violence claiming religious justification became more rampant in the 1980's finally culminating in the atrocity of September 11, 2001, in New York. Here in Kenya, there have been attacks against public institutions, bus stops and markets; an action of hostility which threatens amicable relationship between the two religions. This is why; critics of religion acknowledge that monotheism is prone to violence and intolerance. If however, there is one thing we can reliably predict about this century, it is that, an increasing share of Kenya's people is going to identify with either Christianity or Islam. And, examples of disastrous accounts of conflict can hardly enhance amicable coherence even if done in the name of religion. To meet the challenges of our time and create a desirable Kenyan society, we need to accurately assess our religious affiliations. It is not enough to assume the nature of these two Abrahamic religious traditions and their roles in Kenya. The central question this paper asks and attempts to answer is: If religion can be used as an instrument of destruction, how come it has continued to survive as the most influential social phenomenon? To facilitate our discussion the paper adopts theories of Emile Durkheim and Myerson to explain the functional relationship between religion and violence; and cultural interpretation of violence. The paper therefore, examines the following three objectives:

- Ambivalent nature of religion,
- Existential justification for hermeneutic of suspicion and,
- Abrahamic tradition: A basis for interfaith dialogue.

Keywords: terrorism, violence, religion, dialogue, suspicion, tradition and exegesis.

1.1. Introduction

A glance at history, or at the pages of any newspaper, reveals that, ideas which divide one group of human beings from another, only to unite them in slaughter, generally have their roots in Religion (Sam Harris 2006). The author is perhaps referring to the events which followed the terrorist attack of the twin towers in Sept. 11, 2001 in New York. The terrorist action crystallized how adherents to a religious fundamentalism can destroy lives and forever change lives of many others. The public's response to the terrorist attack pointed to a different side of religion: the positive cultural power of ritual to recall ties to those who have died and to reaffirm communal unity and solidarity in a time of trial (Michelle Dillon 2003:3). The experience and the solidarity of the Americans and their realization of the power of religious ritual is not different from that of Kenyans when both the American Embassy in Nairobi and the Westgate shopping mall were bombed by people believed to be associated with the same religious fundamentalism. In almost all houses of prayers, preachers underscored the importance of forgiveness, pacification, solidarity and tolerance from a religious perspective. Once more, dualistic and apparent ambivalent characteristics of religion showed itself to try to normalize a situation caused

by terrorists believed to be acting under the influence of religious fundamentalism. That is, religion can be both constructive and destructive. It is such dualistic interpretation which explains and justifies the euphemism that religion is inherently violent, the cause of all major wars in history.

Despite such observation of its differing positive and negative forms, religion has continued to be one of the most prominent and consistent social phenomena. As an ideology, religion can facilitate harmony, accelerate and justify disharmony and or violence among devotees. So much so, that a practice permitted in one religious tradition may be forbidden in another: what is interpreted as impure or taboo by one religious faith is pure according to another, a practice held to be true by one group may be regarded as a cause of error by another (vide Moojan 1999). It is such ambivalent interpretation of religion which prompted our investigation of the relation between the two groups of devotees of religions based on one Abrahamic tradition-Christians and Muslims in Kenya.

The question this paper asks and attempts to answer is: if religion can be used as an instrument of destruction and or violence, how come it has survived the onslaught of secularization and remained a most prominent and consistent social phenomenon? To answer the question and contextualize our discussion, the paper adopts Emile Durkheim (1912/1976) and Myerson (1991) theories. Both theories explain the functional relationship between violence and religion: and why interpretation of violence is culturally freighted. To facilitate the discussion, the paper is divided into three objectives as:

- The concept of violence and ambivalent nature of religion,
- Existential justification for hermeneutic of suspicion and,
- Abrahamic tradition: as a basis for interfaith dialogue.

1.2. The concept of violence and ambivalent nature of religion

The term violence, like religion is difficult to define and interpret. Commonly however, it may be any action that inflicts, threatens or causes injury (Hall 2003). Because of its interrelatedness with culture, however, it may mean different things to different people. It can be corporal, written, verbal, psychological, material or social. According to John Hall therefore, violence should not be restricted to conventional definition which tends to associate it with deviant or physical force to cause injury to persons and sometimes damage to property (Hall 2003:361).

In this paper, we are arguing that violence can be subjective and culturally interpreted. That is, violence can encompass actions which are subjectively inflicted and those which come from without. For example, a devotee of a given religion may voluntarily fast to the extent that it affects their life or a young person may pierce their ears and the wound fails to heal and becomes ulcerous!

We have already pointed out that religion is equally hard to define. Commonly, however, it involves some form of beliefs in a way of thinking and understanding the world, or a relationship between human beings and a transcendental reality. But, beliefs as Sam Harris (2006) has observed, define ones vision of the world, they dictate one's behaviour and determine one's emotional response to other human beings. That is, the meaning of religion unfolds through participation by following a prescribed path and discipline. The pendulum of religious faith therefore, swings between the believers and relationship with other fellows in an attempt to execute the commands of their deity. Said differently, it is the interpretation of religious ideology which determines its constructive and or destructive character. This is why Moojan (1999) has observed that, almost every social scientist and great philosopher has had something to say about religion; its origins, social function or its structure. Anthropologists for example, have attempted to show that religion is an ubiquitous social phenomenon, whereas sociologists have underscored the social function and significance of religion.

Emile Durkheim (1912/1976) pointed out that religion is both a glue and lubricant to the social process, both by binding the individual to the society and providing legitimation and authority for the social structure and moral order to facilitate the smooth function of society. And, through ritualization we have referred to above, the dependence of the individual upon the society is further emphasized. The society therefore, uses religion to exercise control over the thoughts and behavior of the individual (Stephen 1982). In this way, religion can be used as an instrument of oppression as Karl Marx (2008) once remarked. But, the same religion has been known to enable people acknowledge and protest against the oppression or ill treatment inflicted upon them.

Here in Kenya, the use of religion as a vehicle of redress is common in cults of affliction and peripheral cults (vide Bourdillon 1990). Prior to independence, under the British political domination, Kenyans had no open paths to express their discontent openly, and they did so through religious cults. For example, in Western Kenya, *Dini ya Msambwa* was an anti-white religious movement led by Elijah Masinde, in 1943 (Reed 1954); *Mumbo* movement attributed to Onyango Dunde of the then Central Kavirondo, now Kisumu county, was an anti colonial resistance movement that promised to drive out the imperialists and condemned the white man's religion (Brett L. Shadle 2002); Yohanna Owalo, in 1914 started *Nomiya Luo* Church to rebel against missionary interpretation and presentation of the bible and to stand against colonial political oppression. Both Ogot (1973) and Odinga (1968) acknowledge and describe Owalo as the first Christian rebel in Luo Nyanza. His, was the first

African indigenous church in Kenya. The Mau Mau rebellion against the British rule in Kenya succeeded because; the followers took oath according to traditional rituals. And, in our own time, *Mungiki* challenged KANU single party government as a cult of affliction. Like the Mau Mau, members of *Mungiki* used traditional religious paraphernalia and symbols for oathing to initiate followers to the cult. The majority of *Mungiki* adherents were young unemployed people who felt oppressed by the then political authority, and since they lacked amicable avenue to express their discontent, religious cult became more useful.

Kenya being a patriarchal society, traditionally, gender mainstreaming has not been a primary concern. Consequently, such androcentric fallacy has given way to a variety of peripheral cults involving people who are not at the centre of political or economic power of society. Examples of peripheral cults are *sar* among the Somali people. *Sar* like *sepe* spirits among Luo Nyanza women are spirit possessions; which are believed to provide a sort of refuge for women under stress to prompt attention and sympathetic hearing of their problems from their apparent oppressive male folks.

The social function of religion can hardly be ignored. Even Sigmund Freud who said that religion is a universal obsessive neurosis and Karl Marx who described it as opium of the people, a tool used by the ruling class to subjugate the underclass; both acknowledged the kratophany of religion. The double edge sword characteristic of religion nevertheless is difficult to dispute. Religion can make people arrogant, suspicious, ignorant, violent, native teleologists, underdeveloped, and even prevent them from seeking medical assistance. Yet, the same religion is lauded in history books as a means to civilization, human development and freedom from oppression. This is perhaps, because of the interrelatedness of religion and culture. And, violence is part and parcel of human culture; accordingly, religion and violence are not strange bed fellows as this paper describes.

1.3. Existential justification for hermeneutic of suspicion

History of religion is tainted with several examples of atrocities, terrorism and violence. Here in Kenya, violence associated with religion was rare until 1980 when Norfolk Hotel next to the University of Nairobi was bombed by an agent of popular front for the liberation of Palestine (PFLP). The bombing was in retaliation against Kenya's role for having aided the Israeli commandos who rescued Israeli hostages held in Entebbe Airport in Uganda. Eighteen years later, over two hundred Kenyans were killed when the American Embassy in Nairobi was bombed by people believed to be associated with Al-Qaeda, a Muslim fundamental terrorist group. While Kenyans were still nursing the wounds of victims of the bombing, a Christian church building was burnt down in Nairobi South C, again by people suspected to be followers of Islam religion.

Soon, the paths for hermeneutic of suspicion was paved and made clear by the operation of Al-Shabaab, a terrorist group in the neighbouring Somali. This group frequently raid border towns between Kenya and Somali, an act which prompted Kenya government to send her defence forces (KDF) to defend her territory. Since then, there have been several incidents of sporadic retaliatory attacks, believed to be organized and carried out by Al-Shabaab group. Most of these inimical attacks have been directed to Christian church buildings and more often when congregations are having their liturgical celebrations; be it in Mandera or Garissa in Northern Kenya. The attacks also have been carried out in Mombasa, here in Nairobi at Eastleigh, Gikomba market and Machakos bus station. These reported incidents are serious enough to prompt an investigation in order to assess and find out relations between the two religious groups-Christians and Muslims. Is there suspicion occasioned by the said attacks? If so, what can be done to ameliorate the situation?

Some of our conversations with the clergy, teachers of religion, students, apart from available literature revealed that, generally, there is no ground for hermeneutic of suspicion between Christians and their fellow Kenyan Muslims, especially so in the rural areas. Brief, but more damaging suspicion tends to occur whenever there are such occasions of attack like the highway killings of several non Muslims in both Lamu and Mandera. Such incidents when reported in the media, especially in urban centres tend to strain relationships. Nevertheless, Kenyans have resisted temptation to generalize and associate these incidents with every Muslim and give the impression that Islam is a religion of violence. Most Kenyan Christians are aware that those who attack Christian institutions and soil the name of Islam are individuals exercising their terrorist attacks in the name of religion.

However, since the assassination of Anwar Sadat, the then president of Egypt, and the following rampant wave of violence in the 1980's claiming religious justification culminating in the atrocity of September 11, 2001 in New York; very few academicians would readily exonerate Islam from violence. Unless exegetically interpreted differently, parts of Quranic texts remain a challenge to non Muslims in disassociating the religion from violence. For example, Quran 9: 73 says: *prophet, make war on the unbelievers and the hypocrites and deal rigorously with them. Hell shall be their home: an evil fate.* In the same chapter, 9:123, it says: *believers make war on the infidels who dwell around you. Deal firmly with them. Know that God is with you the righteous* (quoted by Sam Harris 2006:32).

Indeed, any theological task is to exegete correctly the revealed word of God in its own cultural context and to interpret it so as to speak authentically to the issues of our time. Exegesis and interpretation are

two distinct, but nevertheless interdependent sides of the one hermeneutical process. But, hermeneutic is a three way mode of conversation. It involves a dialogue between a final and unchanging text as the word of God and a relative and ever changing context of human thought and practice. The exercise becomes even more difficult when the text in question was given in a different language and the interpreter is dealing with translation. This is why; our reaction about the said verses must be guarded carefully lest we conclude more than the original meaning. But, in the absence of anything else, a reader is bound to interpret what is presented as it is. This is why, non Muslims tend to associate Islam with violence because, there can hardly be any war without destruction of life, and a destruction of life assumes violence.

Such a belief and interpretation though may be myopic, points to further challenge of rationalizing the present common practice of suicide bombers carried out by some Muslim terrorists in the name of Jihad war. Even though, martyrdom seems central to Jihad belief, doesn't this contradict the meaning of Islam which is "peace"! This therefore, may mean to a lay interpreter of Quran that the verses point to violence. Such are few concerns of non-Muslims in interpreting Quranic verses. They are indeed theologically challenging when the issue of violence is being linked to the teaching of Islam. Again, some Christian respondents to our questionnaire pointed out that, since Christians accommodate the Trinitarian doctrine of God the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit against the strict monotheistic teaching of Muslims, might the latter conceive the former as pagans! That is, in one way or another, some Kenyan Christians feel that their fellow (Kenyan) Muslims view them as pagans, polytheists who recognize the plurality of deities. Our respondents, especially Christians wondered that if Muslims believe in and worship one God, they must also acknowledge that a church building like a mosque is extrinsically holy, set apart for worshipping God. Why would some of the Muslims burn down and or even bomb such buildings, killing some members of the congregation in the process of their liturgical celebrations? Said differently, most Christians we spoke to seem to reach a conclusion that their fellow (Kenyans) Muslims do not recognize them as true believers in one God; a monotheistic faith based on Abrahamic Judaic tradition, just like the Muslims. This is the basis of hermeneutic of suspicion whenever a Christian institution is attacked or when some Kenyans are lined up and killed on account of their religious affiliation. Violence we may repeat, is a complex social phenomenon, it can be motivated by hunger for political power, economic need or even religious competition. It nevertheless, causes much concern when the said religions have a common origin and one object of worship- Yahweh the God of Abraham. This concern therefore leads to the next part of this study, namely, the need for interfaith dialogue to ameliorate the tension.

1.4. Abrahamic tradition: A Basis for interfaith dialogue

Our point of departure in this part of discussion is that, both Christians and Muslims are believed to be worshipping one God as dictated by Judaic - Abrahamic tradition. They can talk together or have an interfaith dialogue whenever circumstances dictate and justify the discussion.

Since the convening of Parliament of Religion in Chicago in 1893, Ecumenism and interreligious dialogue have been part and parcel of world religious theologians. One of the outcomes of the conference was the need to revoke the 19th century assumption of the superiority of Christianity and Western culture and to give an opportunity to the representatives of the major religious traditions of the world to represent their view points and contributions (Moojan 1999). The conclusion opened a path for ecumenism and interfaith dialogue which was re-emphasized during the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. Today, interfaith dialogue is a common discussion and concern among theologians. Here in Kenya, ecumenical services and prayers on national days are taken for granted. This therefore means that, in the eyes of the government, all religious affiliations are publicly recognized. That being the case, it may be further assumed that a dialogue between any given religious communities is possible.

The term dialogue suggests duality as observed by Shorter (1977) that no dialogue is possible unless there are two sides or two persons ready to engage in it. A dialogue therefore, is a dialectic process through which both parties are able to learn from each other. It prevents preconceived ideas, feelings and prejudices that curtail free and mature conversation (Ongong'a 1983). In a dialogue, especially of interfaith discussion, it is not fair to fix comprehensive goals ahead of time. This is because, in such a dialogue, the purpose is not to persuade others of the truth of one's own faith, or to "convert" and ask them to surrender their own faith (vide A. Bea 1964), but rather, to freely have a conversation and address issues at hand. Accordingly, Kenyan Christians having an interfaith dialogue with a fellow Muslim must first acknowledge the central tenets of Islam as a strictly monotheistic religion. The Vatican II documents, especially *the Declaration on non-Christian Religions*, urges Christians to prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with followers of other religions ...promote the spiritual and moral good found among these men as well as the values in their society and culture (Nostra Aestate, Art 2). From the point of view of the Vatican II, as summarized by Ongong'a (1983:5), common characteristics of an interfaith dialogue include; meekness, clarity, trust and prudence.

Since in part of this paper we have made reference to hermeneutic of suspicion existing between Kenyan Christians and Muslims due to violence related activities, trust and prudence are of paramount

importance in their engagement of interfaith dialogue. Muslim leaders until now have taken a recognizable step in that each time a Christian institution is attacked by a terrorist believed to be a Muslim follower, they (leaders) have come out very strongly to ask for forgiveness and remind Kenyans that, both Christians and Muslims are brothers and sisters living in one nation-Kenya and they worship one God. This is indeed an opening path for a dialogue. In that, if both sides can forgive, then a way for trust will be found. For a dialogue, as we have pointed out, the parties have to avoid preconceived ideas and prior conclusions or convictions to pay attention to what is at hand for discussion.

As Muslim leaders have frequently pointed out, both Christians and Muslims, apart from being Kenyan citizens, do claim to worship one God, Yahweh or Allah based on Abrahamic tradition. Why then should they not sit together and discuss problems as people who despite ritual differences believe in and profess primarily common faith- monotheism. Whenever there is willingness for openness and trust in a dialogue, the discussants will certainly be prudent in whatever they say and choose their words and or expressions appropriately. Because, trust alone without guarding against expressions and use of words can hardly achieve the intended reconciliation and prevent hermeneutic of suspicion!

In Kenya, as pointed out above, Christians and Muslims have been living together as one nation for years; potential for agreeing is evidently reachable. They can easily identify incidents which promote violence and their agents, to dialogue and find a common ground for agreement or prevention. Again, through the practice of dialogue the proneness to generalization about one party against the other will be controlled or minimized. All that is necessary is to identify qualified people who appreciate the principles or characteristics of an interfaith dialogue.

1.5. Conclusion

It is evident from the contents of selected objectives and discussions with the clergy, colleagues and students; to conclude that, the euphemism linking religion with violence is not a far-fetched accusation or expression. Religion and violence can hardly be separated; both are part and parcel of social phenomena. However, due to its social function in justifying ethical and dependence of individuals upon society, and as a means of regress from oppression, religion can be interpreted as being a constructive and destructive social phenomenon.

Violence on the other hand is more than physical, it can be subjective, written, verbal and from without. When it is used in the name of religion, it has more power than otherwise. Here in Kenya, its association with Islam seems to strain relationship between Christians and Muslims. And, even though it is known that religion as such is not violent, people easily blame it as an instrument of destruction. Granted however, such destruction is a misuse of the essence of religion in the name of fundamentalism. The solution for ameliorating the relation between Kenyan Christians and Muslims is to allow for a genuine interfaith dialogue by people who are well grounded in the principles and characteristics of dialogue. Finally, both Christians and Muslims should remember that they are Kenyan citizens believed to be worshipping one God based on Abrahamic tradition-monotheism.

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