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Coronavirus a revival of Spirituality among Kenyan Christians

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Abstract

When religion focuses only on the material dimension, there seems to be a faith crisis especially when such visible aspects are interfered with. This paper intends to call upon Kenyan Christians to focus on the spiritual dimension rather than the material dimension in this contemporary time. Covi-19 pandemic has caused disruptions the world over. It has limited social interactions, imposing on people social distancing, thus making social gatherings extremely difficult. In effect, public worship by all world religions has been affected.

When coronavirus started to spread sometime in March 2020, restrictions on public gatherings were enforced and some religious leaders in Kenya maintained that the government had forbidden people from worshipping, denying them the right to worship and pray against the pandemic. Some adherents have protested against some of these regulations by the World Health Organization (WHO). Thus, this has prompted the author to write this short article. The article is a review of various literature with the view of finding a suitable way in which religions can still survive the numerous crises that they undergo.

Keywords: Christians, Covid-19, Spirituality, Religion, Kenya.

Introduction

All world religions have diverse dimensions that define them, and as Ninian Smart (1927-2001) propounded, there are mainly seven dimensions. Thus, the doctrinal and philosophical dimension, mythological or narrative dimension, ethical and legal dimension, ritual and practical dimension, experiential and emotional dimension, social and institutional dimension, and the material dimension. Many religions are perceived by their tangible dimensions, with the kind of buildings they construct, their books, among others (Smart, 1992).

History has it that some of the religions have had difficulty in reconstructing their way of life because of the loss of some of the material dimensions. Some lost their scriptures, buildings, and other substantial information. It therefore meant that, they refocus on the other aspects of religion. The adherents have to rely on the lived experiences of their predecessors and the internalized aspects of their faith.

The Kenyan response to covid-19

Covid-19 is a disease caused by a coronavirus. The disease was discovered in the year 2019 at a place called Wuhan in China. It can spread through droplets, therefore to limit the spread people are to keep social distance, wear face masks in public, and to sneeze and cough in a disposable tissue (World Health Organization).

To curb the spread of the disease, most governments have prohibited all public gatherings as a way of restraining the pandemic. Experts have advised that preventing the spread of the virus is by limiting congregating and keeping a safe distance from people. This paper, therefore, intends to call upon religions to focus on the spiritual dimension rather than the material dimension in this contemporary time. The author has observed the disruptions that have been caused by covid-19 has limited social distance and therefore made social gatherings extremely difficult, thus affecting the public worship by the various adherents of religions. The pandemic has not only disrupted public worship but normal life, including learning at all levels in the majority of countries.

This virus must take people back to the drawing board. Most faithful have accused their respective governments of prohibiting worship. In as much as public gatherings are banned, religion can still be practiced. People can still practice their religiosity even in private. It is

unfortunate that this prohibition has been taken negatively by some worshippers. Some have even expressed that if it can be prolonged, it can make people to be pagans (Royal Media, Ramogi Baraza 9 April 2020).

In certain parts of Kenya, some pastors have demanded that churches be considered as essential service providers. Wambulwa (2020) reports that the clergy from some churches claim that they were not consulted, and they ought to be praying in the church because churches are like newsrooms that cannot work remotely. Some clergy have also sued the government for the ban on public worship, claiming that it contradicts the right to worship as enshrined in the constitution. They claim that they should be allowed to worship in to intercede against God's judgment in the form of this virus (Ogenda, Makokha, Luvega, Odiwuor, Byron, & Kimutai, 2020).

Interestingly it is not only in Kenya that some religious leaders complain about the ban on public worship. In California, a group has sued Governor Gavin Newsom for preventing worshippers from congregating in churches. They argue that the prohibitions are against the people's fundamental right to religion, speech, and assembly (Passantino, 2020). According to the Economist magazine, an American evangelical Rodney Howard-Browne equally claimed that he could pray to neutralize the virus's effects.

Rev Canon Omondi, a Kenyan theologian, posits that such positions being advanced by various religious leaders depend on their theological interpretations of the scriptures (The Elephant, 2020). Those who mainly insist that public worship should be allowed think that this virus is an evil sent by God to punish people's sins, such as same sex marriages (The Economist, 2020); some believe that it is from dark forces which should be exorcised (The Elephant, 2020). However, such fissures will continue to exist as observed by Rev. Canon Omondi.

The belief that one can only worship in church, depicts a distorted religiosity of some Kenyans. Such a perception needs to be assessed critically. Limiting religiosity to church attendance focuses on one aspect of religion. Kenyan religions therefore, should have a paradigm shift in their thinking. The magical way of practicing religion should pave the way to true religiosity, which rooted in one's lifestyle and become part and parcel of one's daily life. The idea that one must just pray in church is distorted thinking. God can listen to people's prayer anywhere. People can also pray as individuals. It is also not right to limit God in a particular building. Adherents can still worship in their individual residences. Similarly, Siker (2000) advances that,

Christians during the persecutions of the second and the third centuries went into hiding and could still worship.

According to the media reports, those who are complaining about worship being curtailed are some members of the Christian sects. Some have even urged the government to worship and pray for the virus to go away. Some church leaders have even gone to court to ensure that worship is resumed. According to media reports by Racheal Mburu, three preachers have filed a petition in court to seek a resumption of congregational worship (Capital News, 9 April 2020). This explicitly indicate that some of these Christian adherents cannot pray independently unless they congregate to worship.

In Kenya, there are many other religions whose public worship has been equally disrupted, Islam, Hindu, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jews, Baha'i faith, just to mention but a few. Some of these religions have taught their adherents the importance of individual prayers. For instance, Islam stresses on praying five times daily, similarly Baha'i have daily prayers that the members recite as individuals. Such prayers are emphasised than public worship. These and other religious practices enable the faithful of some of these religions more edified than public worship.

The stress on public worship at the expense of individual religious practices has made some Christians have a peripheral faith. Most Christian churches determine religiosity with church attendance. One who frequents worship in church is viewed as a pious Christian. Paul (2016) contends that going to church is just to be religious but not spiritual. There is often very little focus paid on the individual actions of Christians. This is belief on daily or weekly worship attendance must be relooked. They must re-evaluate how they propagated the faith. They ought to make religion to be lived rather than being practiced. Faith should be pragmatic in the day to day life of the adherents. They must not just imagine that religion is a once-a-week practice such that failure to do so, then religion becomes extinct.

The history of religions indicates that there are incidences when religion may not be practiced in public. Almost all world religions have experienced a moment when faith was endangered. During such times, the adherents had to go underground as they practiced their faith. These religions still survived the socio-political crises of their time. Religions like Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Jainism, and Baha'i overcame the persecutions of their time, and they are still having millions of believers.

Therefore, given the past experiences of most religions, coronavirus is not a critical thing that should challenge religion simply because people cannot have congregational worship. This is important for religions to note and avoid depicting this virus as satanic and interpret it in religious terms. The history of humanity has seen many dangerous viruses and bacterial infections. Human beings have managed to deal with such pandemics. Coronavirus has caused panic across the globe, but some diseases like cancer, HIV/AIDS, malaria, have claimed more lives.

Focus on Spirituality

This era of covid-19 is a time for spiritual revival. When a person is spiritual, the emotional aspects of religiosity pave the way for rational and spiritual introspection. Each adherent must seek to understand himself/herself in solitude with the Supreme Being. The main issue here is that in Kenya, most worshippers are accustomed to noisy congregational worship where people sing and dance and express their emotions. People find joy and satisfaction in the gathering; they get engulfed in the public and forget about one's self. Refocusing on spiritual development is in line with the words of Pope Francis that the pandemic is a time to separate the essentials of faith from that which is not, that it is a time that calls for *a coup de grace* (The Economist, 2020).

Many worshippers in Kenya are used to religious patterns, rituals, liturgies, and particular actions. Coronavirus is challenging the ordinary life of many worshippers. It has broken the rhythm and normalcy of all aspects of life. People must shift and find alternative ways of getting satisfaction. People cannot lament over it because at the end of the pandemic, life will have to continue. They must learn to act outside the norm. Overcoming it calls for creativity, to come up with these alternatives. This calls for a revival of spirituality. Rev. Canon Omondi equally asserts that this is not a time to stress so much on the different theologies but to focus on spiritual development of the faithful (The Elephant).

Instead of imagining that this virus is used by God to inflict pain to sinners as some religions justify, it can be interpreted that God has permitted it to enable individuals introspect themselves and renew their relationship with him. Scholars of religion have advanced that it is only in solitude that one comes in touch with the sacred or "the other" (Paul Tillich, Martin Buber, and Mircea Eliade).

This is because an individual can be religious and not spiritual. Religion has to do with organized beliefs and practices shared by a group (Paul, 2016). On the other hand, spirituality is an individual practice and having a sense of peace and purpose. Spirituality relates to deep feelings and beliefs, which are essentially religious (Cambridge Dictionary). Puchalski (2009) et al. opines that spirituality is an aspect of humanity that refers to the way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose and the way they indicate their connectedness to the moment, self, others, nature, and the significant other. Spirituality involves searching for meaning in life. This search for meaning is only possible when one is in complete solitude.

Most religions stress practice at the expense of spirituality. Spirituality is always ideal in times of life crisis. Indian religions focus on yoga to assist an individual overcome self. Such enables one to re-evaluate the values of life and handle the daily pressures of life. Spirituality enables an individual to re-think and re-focus on life's direction. Being spiritual allows one gain self-knowledge and understanding through introspection. The challenges posed by coronavirus is the moment that most religious people should turn to be spiritual to face themselves, life, and God in their solitude. It is a time that most Christians and religious people should cultivate spirituality. Majority rely on the group rather than developing an individual relationship with the divine.

Most of the spiritual gurus of various religions discovered religious truths in solitude. Gautama Buddha found the four noble truths, Prophet Mohammed received the Quran, Moses, on several occasions, communicated with God. The material dimensions of religion, such as buildings, statues, pictures and portraits, paintings, and books, among others, are significant. The study of religions depends on the material aspects, which can be perceived. However, spiritual dimension should equally receive much attention.

The importance of emphasizing on the spiritual than the physical dimension of religion is that in as much as the material dimensions of religion are important, in times of crises, there can be a hindrance in the expression of religiosity. The spiritual aspect is appropriate during those difficult moments. This is evident in the history of many religions. Judaism suffered when the temple was destroyed twice, and the majority of the population dispersed to other countries.

When the first temple was destroyed in 586 BCE by the Babylonians, some were taken to exile. Away from home, the Jews suffered great confusion, they were uprooted religiously, socially, and culturally. There was no temple for both those who remained in Judah and those who were taken to Babylon; worse, those who went to exile were in an alien land, which was considered

profane. As LaGrone (2020) puts it, the post-temple era was a trying and stressful moment for the Jews. It warranted a paradigm shift in their religious observances.

The temple was significant because it was a place for offering sacrifices and other Jewish festivals. According to Green (2014), the temple was a symbol of God's presence and where the Ark of the Covenant resided. It was a great symbol of Judaism. The absence of the temple meant that these religious festivals had to change. The Jews had to adopt other ways of worshipping. Green (2014) asserts that after the destruction of the temple, the Jews had to shift their religious rituals, from sacrificial worship to prayer and obedience to the Law. Those who were in exile had to prioritize the reading of Psalms and the reading of the Law.

The second destruction of the temple in 70 CE by the Romans again posed similar challenges that had happened centuries ago. After the Roman's destruction of the temple and the dispersal of the Jews to other parts of the world, the Jewish way of worship had to change, and revolved around the Law and prayer (Green, 2014). Alieza Salzberg corroborates that, the destruction of the temple had to change the political and religious life of the Jews. The absence of the temple gave rise to Rabbinic Judaism that focused on the Torah and Jewish law. LaGrone (2020) validates that they had to develop a lifestyle that would enable them to live with other people. And as Prof. Lawrence Schiffman observes that it is the Pharisaic tradition that enabled Judaism to survive after the destruction of the temple. They made laws that were flexible and pragmatic to their situation.

The history of Judaism is a vivid example that religions ought to change their patterns to accommodate the moments of crises. For Christians, Jesus himself alluded to the change from materialistic to the spiritual dimension by stating that, time will come when people will no longer go to Jerusalem or consider the importance of the temple (John 4:20-22). The assertion by Jesus is an indication that Christianity, which is attributed to Jesus, should be more spiritualistic than materialistic.

Conclusion

This article wanted to stress the importance of the spiritual dimension of religion among Kenyan Christians. Christian sects in Kenya focus more on the material dimensions such as public church attendance, elaborate liturgies with singing, and dancing, among others. When there is an issue that affects such worship, then the adherents of such sects find themselves thrown off balance, as

it has happened during the covid-19 pandemic. These Christian sects should re-focus on the spiritual developments of the adherents that can enable them to go through various crises that might affect their public gatherings and worship. The Christian faithful must be trained on how to grow spiritually to have a proper relationship with the supernatural.

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