The Threat of Postmodern Relativism to the Church in Nairobi, Kenya: A Postmodern Public Theology Approach

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Abstract

The church is one of the social institutions of the society with the primary purpose of the religious and spiritual upbringing of men and women, young and old into conformity with the life of Christ for better society. Historically, the church received its heritage of beliefs, doctrine and practices that has been passed down from the apostolic age to present postmodern time. However, the universality of the church as the custodian of truth is now being challenged through its doctrine and practices within some churches in Nairobi city of Kenya. Several young people feel the church is no longer attractive based on the traditional theologies and liturgies within the various denominations. This has posed a challenge to the postmodern church and raises the main question this paper addressed: how can the church re-conceptualize its theology to effectively engage with the postmodern Nairobi youths? This paper employed a postmodern public theology in addressing the need for the church to re-conceptualize her theology to resonate with the reality of several young people. Several churches within Nairobi should understand that the gospel message needs to be contextualized to address issues young people are facing and also be dynamic in the liturgies that accommodate contemporary life. Understanding that the way of life and ministry during the apostolic time is quite different from the postmodern time. The use of postmodern public theology in this work aims at bringing into dialogue the traditional theology of the church with contemporary so that it will accommodate every member of the church so that they will feel at home within the church and during services.

Keywords: Foundationalist, Relativism, Traditional And Contemporary Theology, Postmodern

Introduction

The Church as a live organism is expected to grow by reaching out to all people in the environment, neighborhood, place of work, market places, schools, the nation, and the world. The Church is to participate in the mission of God (*missio dei*) by being all-inclusive of people from different nations, ethnicities, nationalities, ages, gender, among others. The Church is expected to reach out into industry, medicine, labor, the arts, ecology, population problems, and changing moral standards of the society (Partners in Mission, 1973:50). The ways and manner the churches in Africa reach out to the unreached and even minister the Gospel to those inside the church differ due to their mission's statement or beliefs. However, this paper focuses on the church in Nairobi, Kenya, emphasizing few denominations within the city and how the church is reaching out to the young people in a postmodern world. Kenya is also believed to have a higher number of Christians than other religions in the country. Considering that the large populations are young people within the age range of 20-35 years (Census 2019).

Kleber and Oliveira (N.D:23) observe that the postmodern world or era could be portrayed as "an intellectual mood and a set of the contemporary cultural oppression that challenge the main beliefs, values, and principles, thus indicating the end of a single universal, all-encompassing worldview." Similarly, Michael Foucault (2006:370) coincides that the postmodern perspective on truth is that of relativity. In other words, truth is determined by the community or individual and accustomed to the peculiar and distinctive practices of each community. Subsequently, for postmodernists, the confines of behavior and religious authority are inconsequential since truth is only community-determined. Such communities can be viewed in terms of various beliefs and practices, which, even within a set religion, there are various offshoots with different beliefs from others. This leads to the claim that beliefs are relative and cannot be restrained by any universal values. Therefore, this ignites a doubt on the existence of any universal truth, beliefs, and doctrines. In this regard, Mohsen Faramahini (2014:7) posits that there is no theory, interpretation, perception, and knowledge, among others, that is constant and definite.

Consequently, a research conducted by Shorter and Onyancha (2007:23) demonstrates that "the church attendance in Nairobi is as low as, or even lower than that in some European cities, as secularization takes root among urban poor, the newly rich and the intellectuals of Nairobi." Considering the statistics presented by the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2019, it is

imperative to note that young people constitute a large percentage of Kenya's population. Therefore, this clearly indicates that the number of young people attending churches in Nairobi Kenya is drastically declining. This poses the question: why is it that churches in Nairobi are not attracting the younger generation? Nevertheless, when it comes to social gatherings such as cinemas, watching and playing football, clubbing, among others, they appear to attract the young people than going to church. This leads to the main question that this paper aims to address: how can the church re-conceptualize its theology to effectively engage with the postmodern Nairobi youths? In order to address the question, this paper employed postmodern public theology in an attempt to have conversation between the church and the young people.

Postmodernism signifies a move away from foundational theology that presents some serious difficulties for Christianity and adopts a postmodern and contextual approach to theological enterprise. This approach's centrality to the concerns of postmodern theory gives rise to the assertion that the Kenyan Church should reinterpret her theology and adopt postmodern public theology to effectively engage with the postmodern Kenyan youth. Postmodern theology, as used in this paper, is the act of challenging the traditional mode of doing theology and liturgy with dynamic ways of approaching and understanding God in perspectives different from the orthodox way of theology. The questions that this paper asks concerning postmodern theology include: is truth absolute or relative? Is the church tradition cast on stone or it is dynamic? What is the place of gender in the hierarchy of the church? All these are some of the issues that postmodern theology address in order to meet the needs of a changing world and church.

The Situation of the Church in Nairobi, Kenya
Kenya, has the highest population of young people (based on the census 2019), with a significant number of them being nominal Christians or those that claim to be Christians but are not interested in church life (Sylvia Wakhisi, 2020). This paper acknowledges that not all youths in the churches within Nairobi are postmodern in nature, but several of them are accustomed to the postmodern lifestyle which this work has focused on. Several youths in Nairobi seem to be losing interest in the church which resonates with the description of the quantum changes necessary in the church as Gibbs and Coffey (2001:10) aptly aver: "The church has always been potentially just one generation away from extinction. However, now, a generation of under thirty-five-year-olds turning away from institutional expressions of Christianity." The argument

of Gibbs and Coffey reflects what is happening in Kenya and possibly other nations in Africa and beyond, especially within the Nairobi metropolitan city; where the hosts, young people, are from different backgrounds; ethnicity, race, nationality, age, and gender. In this regard, the Conversation team (2015) opines that

> Globalization is the linking together of the globe through economics, culture and technology. Drive across Nairobi and you will see the web of globalization; from global cultural icons such as 'celebrities' inspired by other world celebrities to global banks and global it providers. It is through the latter door that the postmodern debate has entered Kenya. The door of it is ushering Kenyans into postmodernism in which the individual determines what they believe, what they wear and who they associate with. If postmodernism is about lack of confidence in absolute truth claims, then, the church in Kenya is one of the institutions greatly affected.

Similarly, Amuka and Siundu (2020) concur with conversation team that, "the postmodern generation does not believe in absolute truth; to them all truth is relative. They do not believe in a metanarrative; they believe in little, individual stories, with their little truths. They do not believe in a correct reading of a text; to them, any reading could be a misreading." The challenges within postmodern theology is that it challenges the traditional interpretation of biblical text that tends to marginalize and subject others especially women in several ways. In the context of the churches within Nairobi City, the influence of postmodernism is evident with the young people rejecting the claim that the church is the custodian of universal truth that is inspired from traditional interpretations and teachings from the Bible. Most of these young people are propelling the narrative that they are spiritual but not religious because religion does not reverberate with the world reality. When questions are asked concerning how the traditional interpretation of the Bible is done, such individuals are called heretics. In a research conducted by Standard Media Group (2017) one of the youths said, "I stopped going to church after high school; I find it boring. I feel I get more out of religious discussions with my friends than I do out of church." This poses a challenge to the fundamental and traditional identity of some mainline and new generational Churches within Nairobi such as strict adherence to the doctrines, beliefs, and faithful performance of prescribed activities in which youths find as boring. Deneault (2003) observes that the relativism of truth and dismissal of metanarratives is the "rejection of authority" and, in this case, the church.

Dudzirah Chimeri (1998:40) buttresses that religious truth is seen as a special type of truth, but not an eternal and perfect representation of cosmic reality. Enforcing a single official reality

construct is hard to postmodern youths since there are various ways of interpreting the sacred text. This appears to be the reason why many youths in Nairobi have been disenfranchised by the church and feel unattached to the its current theologies and liturgies because of the church's claim of universal truth without being dynamic in a changing world. The terrain of postmodernity is complex within the church, expansive and marked by intense disagreements between traditional interpretation and teaching of the church and what some young people are upholding as truth. The goal for dealing with it is a deliberate choice to isolate and extrapolate the dimensions and insights which are instructive for a radical agenda in an epoch of globalisation, increased inter-determinacy between societies and peoples and intensified inequalities along various trajectories (Chimeri, 1998:90). Most churches face the challenge of portraying God in an exclusive and unreachable masculine image and an exclusivistic foundational and traditional theology that argues there is only one universal church.

Furthermore, Sampson Nwaomah (2017) notes that, "drawing from this pattern of thought in the context of Africa, and ATR, which are indigenous to the people, cannot be relegated behind Christianity, which may be considered foreign and distanced and may be perceived as incapable of addressing the people's worldview." Besides, churches appear not to be supportive of cultural and social issues of importance to youth: homosexuality, abortion, modern dress code, music, gender equity, etc. These reasons have made several young people distance themselves from the practices of the church. A few of them attend the church occasionally to identify with Christianity but not necessarily subscribing to the beliefs and make it a spiritual home, while there are still those that believe in the traditional interpretation and fundamental teaching of the church. This paper believes that not all Christian youths within Nairobi city are postmodern in nature, but for the majority of them, it is due to the influence of globalization, modernism, among other reasons. More so, Dorrel (2006:120) explains the realities about today's church:

> Most church services are boring to the average person. Young children squirm, wiggle and talk too loudly. Teens write notes and whisper. Adults often fade in and out of sleep, just getting through the sermon. What should be one of the most celebrative and meaningful times of the week usually ends with a "whew", instead of an "amen". As Creator God, how he must grieve over our lack of creativity and sameness. The God who made mountains and oceans, flowers and trees, kangaroos and iguanas, and people...must wonder at our dullness. Somehow through the years, we have reduced worship to stoic readings, outdated hymns, and mundane sermons. And though these traditions become sacred to the die-hards, the unbelieving world is not very interested.

In this sense, it is evident that the church's foundational nature appears to "other" several of the young people instead of finding a way of having a conversation with them. Faced with this challenge, the Kenyan church has two options; either to exist without the young generation, or face the challenge and try to do something about the situation. For instance, when it comes to church services, young people are disinterested in the traditional liturgies and foundational theologies that inform the sermons, which do not address the issues, they are grappling with in the postmodern context. This appears to make most of the young people not flow with the worship service, and therefore, most of them aspire to be different. This is palpably highlighted in Sylvia Wakhisi's (2020) confession on the realities of today's church:

> It has been a while since I stepped into a church, not because I do not like going to church, but because I have not yet found one that appeals to my heart. I prefer staying at home on Sundays and watching other programs aired live on TV. Unlike in the past, many teenagers and youth in their 20s and 30s are not following in their parents' church-going footsteps. Their religion is expressed differently from that of the older generation, from watching church services on TV and online to listening (and dancing!) to gospel music whose beats and gyrations make church elders cringe. The reasons for dropping out of church seem to be highly interrelated. The young people who choose to disconnect perceive the church as irrelevant because they sense they are unaccepted and feel that their needs are neglected. Many say the church does not cater to them through relevant programs. This, combined with various personal issues and disappointment with perceived intolerance, hypocrisy, and condemnation, have estranged young people from the church.

These challenges are surfacing in several Nairobi churches, which are now struggling to bring back the youth to the church. Most of the young people locate the source of spiritual authority within each individual rather than in the church's authority. The emphasis from majority of young people is that one ought to have the freedom to decide their beliefs. Therefore, for several youth, universal truth or belief does not make sense. The problem emanates from the way the church has packed her theology. It raises the question of how the church can re-conceptualize her theology to make it intelligible to postmodern youth in Nairobi.

The Shape of foundational Theology

Grenz and Frankie (2001:23) argue that the quest for information was affected profoundly by enlightenment foundationalism in the modern period. In its expansive sense, foundationalism is simply the information that not all beliefs have equivalent centrality in the structure of knowledge. Foundationalism argues that some beliefs are more significant than others; hence they are basic and foundational. At the core of the foundationalist, the plan is the longing to

conquer the vulnerability produced by the inclination of fallible people to error and the unavoidable differences and disputes that follow. Foundationalists are persuaded that the best way to take care of this issue is to discover methods for establishing the whole structure of human information invincible certainty (Grenz and Franke, 2001:27).

As indicated by Murphy (1996:40), there are two models in distinguishing proof of foundationalism: first, the supposition that knowledge framework must incorporate a class of beliefs that are some way or another not challengeable, and second, the presumption that all reasoning within the framework continues one way, only from a set of distinct unquestionable beliefs to others. Murphy (1996:100) argues that beliefs "must be universal, objective and discernable to any rational person apart from the particulars of varied situations, experiences, and contexts." This notion of knowledge came to dominate theology as the theologians shaped their understanding of Christianity per its dictates and possibly context.

In the postmodern context, this is not the case. The core of the postmodern expedition for a berated rationality lies in dismissing the foundationalist way of dealing with knowledge. Higgs and Smith (2006:137) argue that postmodernism offers a dream of the universe, which is uncertain and dynamic by its very nature. This perspective on the advancing nature of the universe makes fundamental knowledge outlandish in the Christian sense. Furthermore, Higgs and Smith (2006137), "unquestionably from a human perspective, the world is indeterminate and dynamic." However, the church influenced by foundational epistemology would disagree that indetermination applies to Christian doctrines and beliefs. This is because they believe that the traditional interpretation of the Bible is the absolute truth, and it is from the Bible that all doctrines and beliefs are constructed traditionally. Therefore they are constant and universal not relative as others refers to the Christians faith. Postmodernism raises two questions, is such a theology possible? Moreover, second, is it desirable? Murphy (1996:111) notes that foundational universalism is an impossible vision for finite human beings whose viewpoints are frequently restricted and shaped by the particular context from which they emerge. Similarly, Joseph Cheah (2016:306) posits that:

> …institutional identities are constructed within a particular social, cultural, and historical context. An institution that does not respond to new developments in the broader sociohistorical and cultural context will cease to exist. An institution cannot be expected to survive if it is still operating according to a set of identities and values it had thirty years ago. A healthy institution identity is dynamic, constantly fine-tuning its identity to the changing social, economic, political

and cultural contexts.

Therefore, as alluded above, this calls for a postmodern theology that is appropriate and suitable for postmodern Kenyan youth church. Postmodern public theology does not assert doctrines and beliefs that are immune from critics; instead, all doctrines and beliefs are subject to critical scrutiny through various means of interpretation that is inclusive and sensitive to the reality of the audiences, in this context the youths in the church and outside.

Christian Doctrines and Beliefs as Historically Conditioned

According to Roger Haight (2001:43), theological statements, doctrines, and beliefs of the Christian community need to be continually reinterpreted. There is a distinction between faith and the expressions of its objects, which are called beliefs. History demonstrates that beliefs can and do change. In this regard, when religious words, concepts, and propositions are received in new historical contexts, their meaning and significance always change. Haight (2001:37) further posits that beneath the historical change, Christians recognize a communion with Christians living in other cultures with practices and systems of meaning different from their own. For him, this communion cannot be determined by a single factor alone or a foundational belief or doctrine. It resides instead in a much more diffuse reality that may be called a way of life.

In addition, Haight (2001:39) argues that "faith remains constant while beliefs are refined or changed." For him, beliefs aid in defining not only the self but also the communal identity which they are to be known. They serve as social bonds that hold the community together and give the community a public identity of who they are and what they uphold unto. Religious beliefs express the content of the community's faith to the world in that they generate a sense of security that distinguishes one community from the other. Furthermore, the nature of faith indicates that beliefs are derivative. However, this status does not limit their intrinsic importance or generative role in the community of faith and individuals' life of faith (Haight 2001:39). Therefore, all theological affirmations, all beliefs, and doctrines are socially generated and historically conditioned, and this implies that they are not absolute but are limited and relative based on context (Haight 2001:39). In the same way, Richard Niebuhr (2006:55) maintains that doctrinal beliefs define a Church and a variety of other social and historical elements. According to him, religion, the origin of people, ethnicity, race, language, social practices, and ethical convictions are crucial factors in the church's identity and therefore, doctrinal beliefs are simply one more

factor added to others; they are not an exclusive bond.

Riggs (2003:97) observes that the study of beliefs and doctrines of the past, especially in their genesis, uncovers both the uniqueness of the circumstances in which they came to be, and the human and relative quality of the argument and reasoning established these conclusions. Therefore, through a historical consciousness, one appreciates that Christian beliefs, even though under the influence of ultimate concern, are human productions, social works, and human expressions of faith. Social, historical consciousness contains within itself an experience of the relativity and therefore makes all particular beliefs and doctrine relative. They are formulated in historically specific terms, categories, and languages of the day. These, in turn, depend on contemporary pre-understandings, suppositions, and worldviews that are peculiar to a particular culture (Riggs 2003:99). Each belief and doctrine is a production of an inference that accepts this or that data as a sufficient warrant for the conclusion. Therefore, statements, beliefs, and doctrines are functions of multiple factors and thus are constructed based on these relations within a given community.

Niebuhr (2006:59) asserts that beliefs as interpretations of faith arise out of interpreting this world's knowledge in any ordinary sense. Since knowledge of this world is historically conditioned and changing, conceptions of the past may lose their usefulness as expressions of faith later. Doctrines formulated in the past eras' language may lose their intelligibility when the presupposition, the issue to which the doctrine responds, the evidence, and the reasoning no longer appear applicable in a new intellectual culture. Beliefs and doctrines are relative to the culture in which they are generated (Riggs 2003:101; Haights 2001:39). This relativity characterizes all human expressions of belief, including those of scripture and dogma. There is no absolute expression of faith in history and, therefore, no doctrine in the past or the present to identify Christian faith in an absolute and adequate way.

According to Haight (2001:39), if beliefs and doctrines are not consciously and contextually reinterpreted, members of such a community get confused and threatened by the world's changes due to new knowledge being generated. Therefore, these external forces drive a wedge between a community of beliefs perceived as absolute and results in many people relapsing or leaving the church. Then, what is left is a community of eviscerated and impoverished faith from the world based on outdated beliefs and practices. The above argument resonates with what the youths in

Nairobi are grappling with. They are questioning the church's claim that beliefs and doctrines are universal and absolute.

Appropriating Postmodern Public Theology within Nairobi churches

In postmodern theology, all beliefs and doctrines are open to criticisms and reconstruction since the society is dynamic in nature. That mean a static beliefs and doctrine will be challenge due to the nature of the changing society which is postmodern in its approach to realities and religion. Raschke (2017:65) posits that postmodern theology does not avoid beliefs; it maintains that such beliefs, even the most outstanding and transparent, "are subject to critical scrutiny and therefore, potentially to revision, reconstruction or even rejection." One of the most significance in postmodern theology is its intrinsic obligation to contextuality that requires the launch of theological conversation between the church and the society (LeRon Shults, 1999:21). It keeps up without reservation that no single human point of view, be it of an individual or a particular community or theological custom, is sufficient to do full justice to the reality of God's revelation in Christ (Myron B. Penner 2005:93). For instance, Matthew 5:17 states that "think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them (RSV)." This shows that even Jesus during his time on earth recognized the facts that time changes and approach also, which was why the approach of Jesus to the people appears different from the prophets of old. Instead of sticking to the status quo of preaching in the synagogue or temple he teaches the people outside in order to reach everyone with the Good News of the salvation of God.

Additionally, Julius Nyerere (N.D:115) avers that people are ought to be involved and engaged by the church during effective decision making failure to which, they become Christians in anything but name. He further argues that their church membership simply becomes another method by which they seek from a consciousness of their misery. Therefore religion becomes a kind of opium for people. This calls for reflection and critical thinking about our own cultures and how we have occasionally blurred the boundaries between what is indispensable to Christian message or God's revelation and the doctrines and frameworks we have borrowed from western theology and culture. The appropriation of a postmodern approach to theology mandates a critical awareness of the role of the public and culture in the process of theological reinterpretation and reconstruction. Therefore, this calls for a construction of a postmodern

public theology that is appropriate for the Kenyan Church that resonates with the realities of the young people.

To unpack the postmodern public theology framework, we first of all need to define the term public. John Benington (2010:43) describes public as "the web of values, places, organizations, rules, knowledge, and other cultural resources held in common by people through their everyday commitments and behaviors and held in trust by government and public institutions." The African value system upheld communalism or esteemed the concept of the public. This is blatantly seen in most of the African theologians' publications and also the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. Desmond Tutu (2005:27) aptly decodes the concept of *Ubuntu* as that which "has to do with what it means to be truly human ... that you are bound up with others in the bundle of life, for a person is only a person through other persons." Therefore, *Ubuntu* may well be described as an African communitarian philosophy. This is best encapsulated in John Mbiti's (1969:108-109) famous phrase, "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am." By implication, it is only in terms of other people that the individual becomes conscious of his being. Therefore, this shows how important the concept of public is to the African community and the urgency of constructing a postmodern public theology that will meritoriously engage the Kenyan youth. However, this paper did not employ the *Ubuntu* concept in full details but served as a reference point on the idea of public or the role of public to the African philosophy.

Public theology engages critically about the meaning and truth claims expressed or implied in religious faith. According to Sebastian Kim (2013), public theology is a "specific sphere of human life which deliberates formation of public opinion which has common good at heart and promotes human dignity and justice." Public theology has the intentional reflection on the interaction between the social systems and Christian faith. In a nutshell, it is the dialogue between Christian scholars with the society in dealing and interpreting the Bible within the given realities of the people which this paper upholds and used in bringing out the postmodern public theology to deal with the reality of the youths. In this sense, Kim (2013) asserts that theology ought to claim "postmodern public society with liberating and critical resources of the Christian tradition." He further posits that it seeks to contribute to the wellbeing of all and supports the common good. Therefore, postmodern public theology seeks to nurture an open and flexible theology that is local and contextual with the reality of the youths in mind as used in this paper.

It employs conversation as its method of constructing theology in the postmodern context. This constructive theological conversation involves the three publics: "church, academy, and society" (David Tracy, 1998).

The present young generation in Nairobi are daily being bombarded with transplanted theologies from the west that do not resonate with the issues that they are grappling with in these contemporary times. They are therefore no longer interested in the church. This calls for churches within Nairobi to reinterpret and reconstruct their theology to meet the postmodern youths within their context. The reinterpretation and reconstruction of theology should engage the young people and society at large. The church's theology should reflect on the interaction between the particular social systems, culture, and Christian faith. According to Jürgen Moltmann (1999), theology has to be "public, critical and prophetic complaint to God" and "public, critical and prophetic hope in God." The church in Nairobi ought to adjust, adapt, and blend with the postmodern approach to theology to remain relevant and attractive to the postmodern youth.

Postmodern public theology calls for the Church theology to be contextual and concern spaces in which God is presently working. As illustrated above, the church being a communion of social beings should be all-inclusive while determining and interpreting theology. Our spirituality is tested by the social harmony it creates; no believer is an island. Christians are called to season the community they find themselves living in (Acts 2:42). For this seasoning to be effective, it must be done with a sense of sobriety and love and exclude human characteristics and influences that negate godliness (Nwaomah, N.D:67). There is a need for the church to understand the generational change that is happening. Therefore, for the church to reach out to the young people, it has to reconstruct, reinterpret, and contextualize its theology to today's realities. The churches in Nairobi need to rethink and reimagine their theology in the era of postmodernism and to learn from it. The church needs to understand that change is constant and adapting to the dynamics of ministry is significant.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper was able to show how postmodernism has influenced the youth in the churches within Nairobi metropolitan city. The exodus of the youth from the church is due to several reasons, as discussed above. The paper has argued that there is a need for the churches within Nairobi to reconstruct, reinterpret, and contextualize their theology to fit in the postmodern time. The paper has also recommended that the church should rethink how they approach youth ministry in a postmodern society. Using the lens of postmodern theology in addressing the exodus of youths from the church, this paper has employed conversation as its method of constructing a postmodern public theology which is appropriate in a postmodern context. This constructive theological conversation involves the church and contemporary society. It aims main focus is on participatory engagement of society in hermeneutical and reconstruction of beliefs, theological statements, and doctrines for the church's transformative power.

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