

## **Management of Religious Conflicts in Kenya: Challenges and opportunities**

By

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### **Abstract**

This paper reflects on the need for faith communities in Kenya to pull together in order to promote harmonious coexistence among themselves and within the country at large. Considering that Kenya is more affected by inter-ethnic conflict, one may be tempted to think that this country is totally devoid of inter-religious conflicts. It is the assumption of this paper that the general development and welfare of a country is, to some extent, a reflection on the state of religion in that country. There is peace and tranquility in a country when such peace and tranquility exists also among the religious groups operating therein, and the reverse is also true. Most of the faith communities in Kenya may lack the capacity to tackle the problem of inter-religious and intra-religious conflicts that confront them from time to time, though rarely reported in the media. This paper is geared towards investigating the measures that can be taken to strengthen the capacity of religious organizations to deal with conflicts be it internally or externally. The paper further seeks to interrogate the preparedness of religious organizations to lead the war against negative ethnicity in contemporary Kenya. The paper adopts Kung's hypothesis that the effective management of Inter-religious conflicts could provide a necessary ground upon which to found the effective management of inter-ethnic conflicts. (Inter-ethnic conflicts are a common feature in this country, particularly during the time of elections.) Harmonious coexistence is envisioned in Kenya's constitution as well as its development goals such as Vision 2030. It is also a key component in the sustainable Development Goals. The paper focuses on five objectives as stated below: to determine the root causes of religious conflicts in Kenya to describe the nature and pattern of religious conflicts in Kenya, to examine the impact of such conflicts on Kenya's socio-economic development, to assess the challenges encountered in managing these conflicts and to determine opportunities available for enhancing effectiveness in the management of these conflicts. A literature survey was conducted to collect data for this paper. This was supplemented by personal interviews and discussions with some religious leaders drawn from the Christian, Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim faith communities as well as from the Indigenous African religion. Purposive sampling and key Informant techniques were utilized to pick the participants. Among the key findings for this paper include the fact that religious conflicts are largely motivated by such factors as historical, social, economic, cultural, environmental, religious and global trends. The paper also observes that religious conflicts whether located at the intra-communal level or at

inter-communal level, have devastating effects on the socio-economic and religious development in this country. Among the challenges facing the management of religious conflicts in this country include hardliner positions taken by the conflicting parties, the infiltration of national politics into religious institutions, the projection of various and sometimes mutually conflicting ethnic interests among others. The opportunities include the fact that all religious groups embrace the virtue of peace, love and unity, peaceful co-existence, social cohesion, social justice and social inclusion among others. The paper therefore recommends for, among other things, the institution of measures to ensure the cultivation of a sense of cooperation within and between the various religious groups as well as the need for increased member participation in inter-religious dialogue and peace-making initiatives.

### **Key words**

Social justice, social inclusion, conflict analysis, inter-religious dialogue, conflict resolution

### **1 Introduction**

The need for peaceful cohabitation of all Kenyans despite their ethnic and religious backgrounds is a subject that dominates not only conference proceedings but also religious sermons throughout this country. Intercommunal harmony has variously been expressed as a necessary pre-condition for any effective and meaningful development process. Intercommunal conflicts have, however, become a common feature in Kenya, and sometimes religion is at the core of such conflict, be it directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly, consciously or subconsciously, deliberately or accidentally, by design or by default. Religious hostility and suspicion is a matter that is fuelled by the sheer diversity of religious expression in Kenya and sometimes this can flare out into an outright conflict. The reason for this work is two-fold. First to interrogate the extent to which religious organizations have established internal mechanisms to address inter-religious conflict whenever it occurs. Second is to investigate the preparedness of religious organizations to lead the way against inter-communal conflict within the larger society.

In Kenya, religious conflict happens at intra-communal and intercommunal level. It is sometimes connected to the demographic and political organization of the country.

### **2. General overview**

Religious conflicts have been known to exist ever since the beginning of humankind, with those religions that follow the Semitic tradition espousing the belief that conflict within the human society emerged as early as the Garden of Eden –humanity's first habot- where Adam and Eve are said to have violated one of the commandments and were handed a punishment by God for their disobedience (Genesis Chapter III). The first violent act, however –according to this tradition, occurred through Adam's foremost offsprings; Abel and Cain., when latter is said to have slain the former for religiously-related conflict. This indicates that, somehow, there is a link between metaphysical and cosmic harmony.

Completion over scarce resources continues to underpin most of the conflicts currently raging on in various spots throughout today's world, and Africa in particular. Religious conflicts are further prompted by a variety of factors which shall be examined in the next section. Semitic religions

hold it that intercommunal conflict can only be avoided if believers observed a life of unrelenting commitment to God. In addition, Christians and Muslims ascribe to the teaching that the believer's life should be governed by love for God, love for self and love for others. In the tradition of oriental religions, conflict is considered an end result of (selfish) desire and the only way to overcome such conflict is by striving first to overcome desire itself. Desire is overcome by cultivating a high level of self discipline that encompasses such aspects as speech, personal conduct and relationship with others. In Buddhism, this self-discipline entails observing the Buddha's Four Sacred Truths followed by a strict adherence to the Eight-fold path of righteous living. In Confucianism, intercommunal harmony is the ultimate goal of self-discipline as emphasized through the five key principles contained in Confucius's teaching which can be summarized as "doing unto others that which you wish them to do unto you". It is to be recalled that during Confucius' life, conflict was widespread in the Chinese society with powerful clan warlords contending each other to exert their own supremacy.

In Africa, conflicts are commonly linked to competition over scarce resources, whether natural or otherwise. The effects of such conflicts on the socio-economic development of this continent need not be over-emphasised. Jeff Malureke, a renowned South African musician declared (in one of his famous songs Kilimanjaro) that conflict within human society militates against the divine will or plan. In the words of Jicko, another South African singer, conflict promotes violence and that if a nation thrives on violence, then its citizens will always remain backward and primitive. He further appears to adequately capture the ramification effects of violence by stating that 'violence begets violence' and that 'an eye for an eye makes the world blind'. By application, conflict within the religious sphere compromises the peace and stability of a nation since religion is widely believed to be an important source for morality.

### **3. Causes of Religious conflicts in Kenya**

Religious conflict in Kenya is in most cases linked to general intercommunal conflict and follows almost synonymous pattern as that of inter-ethnic conflict. As a general rule, the process of conflict outbreak involves three key stages, background, escalation and trigger. In relation to these three stages, there are, therefore, background factors, escalating factors and trigger factors behind every conflict within and between some faith communities in Kenya. These factors are however not custom-made and a background factor in one context may become a trigger or escalating factor in another. The factors are as discussed below.

#### **i) Historical factors**

These would include such factors as the historical roots of the various faiths, mode of introduction in Kenya, sons or groups associated with the origin of such religions as well as where the religion is dominant within the country. Historically, most of the alien religions trace their origins to areas outside this continent. Christianity came mainly from Europe and America while Islam and the oriental religions came from Asia. Islam and Christianity have differences that predate the introduction of these faiths in Kenya. The differences may not be merely doctrinal but also a derivative of attitudes and character of the people with which these religions are closely associated. People from Europe, where Christianity passed through on its way to Kenya, view

Arabs (the presumed pioneer followers of Islam) as posing a challenge to the power and influence of western culture. The Arabs, on the other hand, consider the west as people who are overwhelmed by their triumpharist and expansionist, empiricist aspirations. Hinduism is also oblivious of Christian intentions coming from a background (in India) where Christianity was largely associated with gross violations of human rights during the era of British raj (reign). Hindus therefore consider Christian a religion patronized by violent elements. It is such historical backgrounds that form a major basis in the pattern of relationships that these religions tend to maintain between each other in this country.

Interdenominational animosity is not very pronounced in this country, although it erupts time to time through management of various religious-sponsored institutions in this country. There are instances of managers being appointed to head certain religious institutions not purely on merit but on religious affiliation. In such a case, the desire to get a person from the same religion to run its institution overrides the ideal of meritocracy. Interdenominational differences in Kenya are most conspicuous within Christianity than any other religion. Various denominations became popular in certain regions and are even mainly associated with specific communities due to their predominance in those demographic areas. The Akamba and Kalenjin are, for instance associated mainly with AIC, Kikuyu-Ameru with Presbyterian, the Abagusii with SDA, the Ameru with Methodist and so on. This kind of denominational mapping is sometimes considered to promote inter-ethnic hostility. In recent decades, however, most of these denominations have made an effort to expand to other regions thus slowly losing the ethnic tag with which they have for long been associated.

It should be observed that one should avoid the fallacy of generalization, which has also been a significant source of inter-religious conflict. During this era of increased international terrorism, individuals should be held responsible for their actions rather than pointing fingers to the entire group from which the criminal emanates. An example in mind is the 2013/2014 burning of churches in Mandera and Garisa where Muslim leaders came out to urge their Christian counterparts not to regard the incident as a muslim-sponsored act but rather simply as an act of terrorism, even if the culprits were muslims. When the government of Kenya introduced stringent measures to deal with terrorists, Muslims in this country came out to speak against it on the basis that the government had generalized the problem as being a muslim sponsored act which was not true.

#### **ii) Political factors**

The politics of the day can sometimes lead to conflict within religious organizations. It is often said that political leaders can choose to meddle in the leadership of religious groups to suit their desired interest. In creating divisions with the ranks of religious leadership, the religious fraternity becomes a divided lot and cannot speak with one voice to condemn political sins of omission and commission. Political leaders are in such a circumstance cushioned by the absence of unity among the religious leaders to continuing perpetuating their offences.

In extreme cases, political party affiliations are played out within the precincts of religious polity thus creating cracks in the unity and stability of the affected religious entity.

### **iii) Economic Factors**

Economic factors are the most common reason for religious conflicts, particularly at the intra-communal level. Most religious organisations tend to operate with relative peace and tranquility in times when they do not own much property but would slide into chaos and infighting in times of financial strength. A good example is the standoff that broke out in the latter part of 2017 at St Mary's Hospital in Karen (Nairobi) bidding two opposing groups within the Catholic fraternity. Such conflict emerges when various groups compete for control over the institutional resources. The extent to which such conflict could rage depends on the kind of systems in place to handle conflicts, be it at the internal or external level.

### **iv) Social factors**

One of the key challenges facing

religious communities in Africa is the question on how to tackle the inter-ethnic hostility that sometimes spills into the precincts of faith communities. The ethnic balkanisation of believers sometimes affects the operations and quality of service delivery systems in religious communities.

More often than not, disagreement occurs within the polity of a religious organization on issues of persons appointed or elected to occupy leadership positions within the group. In general, the principle of democracy demands that the majority should have their way. In the real sense, however, the African context requires that such issues be handled with great delicacy. The way leadership positions are distributed in a faith community can be reason for uprising or even schism if not handled with care. There must always appear to be fairplay within the backdrop of quality. This calls for a balancing act that places the competing interests at a given spectrum and tries to calculate the possible effects of any decision on the people being led.

More importantly, lack of information is largely to blame for this kind of standoff. When believers are given little training, they may not know what to expect out of a leader and thus consider ascendance to leadership positions as a function of ethnic representation within the community, which may not always be the case. It is also clear that the level of faith within a given group may contribute to how members of such a group interpret leadership roles and the way to fill them. Faith is a function of spiritual maturity, and spiritual maturity is an end result of concerted and systematic education programmes. Thus when there is a dispute within a religious organization, the level of spiritual maturity of such an organization is always brought into question.

### **v) Cultural factors**

Cultural clash is a trait that has always characterized the way new religious organizations have landed in this continent. Most of these religions have come to an already existing religio-cultural formation. The problem of cultural clash is usually higher at the beginning when the new faith is being introduced into an area. This was the case when Christianity, Islam and Hinduism were being introduced into this country. This trend has, however, continued to be replayed each time a new

faith community is planted or introduced in an area. There is often a given measure of resistance which if not handled well can lead to a conflict.

In some regions in Kenya, the culture of the recipient community may conflict with that of the missionaries. A good example is the issue of female genital mutilation that is conducted by some communities yet it militates against some religious teachings such as Christianity. There is also the treatment of gender division of labour which may clash.

#### **vi) Location of facilities**

**Environmental factors** are among the leading causes of inter-religious conflicts. Sometimes there erupts a dispute between two opposing groups concerning the location of say a church building, or a Mosque, or a temple. This can escalate into an all-out violent confrontation between the disputing groups. Competition for scarce resources such as pastureland or watering points may cause a rift within a given locality and this could be carried over into the politics of the local religious community, thus causing a split.

#### **vii) Leadership and Governance**

One of the most common causes of intra-communal conflict within religious organizations is leadership and governance. In most religious organizations, particularly Christian churches, there exists weak governance systems and leadership structures. Some religious entities are run more or less on a sole-proprietorship leadership structure. In such a case, the leader is viewed as the sole decision maker and whatever he or she says carries the day. Members do not have the right to question, and if they do, they are branded as rebels and 'agents of the devil', bent on sowing seeds of discord among the faithful believers. Within Christianity, this problem is common among charismatic churches but is also detectable in some mainstream churches.

In non-mainstream churches, the founder leader is regarded as the prophet or apostle and therefore has the right to govern over the group according to his standard and regulations. Members are educated on the key regulations of the group and by continued stay the assumption is made that such members are in approval of those rules. The problem with this kind of structure, however, is that it does not accommodate variety of opinion. Thus when members start expressing displeasure in the manner in which they are governed, the outcome is suspension, expulsion or dismembership to be slapped on any such an antagonistic member. It is true that some founder leaders are focused and remain faithful to their call even after successfully starting a congregation. In some cases however, immediately cash flow trends improve, the leader tends to take a path that is, by and large, questionable. Even those instances where the leadership is acceptable to members, problems sometimes emerge at the expiry of such leaders, for example through death. If the deceased leader had not put in place clear succession plans or moderates of appointing a new leader, the group may end up in conflict as several individuals seek to the right to ascend to office.

Among those things that may compromise leadership include corruption, inequality in the distribution of resources (where such distribution may favour or be biased against some segments of the group based on such factors as gender, ethnicity, geographical or educational background), moral conduct, mismanagement of resources, among others.

**viii) Marginalisation and ethnic profiling**

It is often assumed that since religious organizations are run on a non-profit making basis, they portend no particular direct benefits to the members. The truth of the matter is that such organizations and even expanding their numbers are full of benefits that members draw from them and that is the key basis of maintaining membership. Principal among these benefits are financial assistance, charity work, employment opportunities, tendering and procurement of items and services, spiritual nourishment and pastoral visits or homilies. Access to these resources is meant to be open to all members on an equitable basis depending on their varying needs. When bias and discrimination in the distribution of such resources sets in, conflict may emerge. It is also dangerous for group stability when ethnic profiling and ethnocentrism become rampant, its unity and harmony is compromised. In such a case, divisions may arise that breed the ground for conflict. Some individuals who qualify to occupy a particular office may be prevented on the basis that they come from a minority ethnic group, or a disadvantaged geographical area.

**ix) Contemporary world order**

The effect of globalization could also contribute to inter-religious conflicts. Information tends to travel with greater speed today than it was in previous centuries. Unfortunately, this information sometimes comes even in its unedited form. There is the menace of cyber crime whereby some individuals gain unauthorised access into organizational websites and leak sensitive information. The possibility of people reacting and turning violent on the basis of what they have read, heard or seen in the internet without due critical assessment thereof poses a real danger to social organization and control. Social media is, nowadays, providing a huge and readily available platform for negative messages bent on destroying rather than building strong moral character and responsible citizenship.

**4. Nature and pattern of religious conflict in Kenya**

The most dominant religious groups in Kenya (based on the criteria of numerical strength) are Christianity, Islam, African Traditional Religion, Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism and Confucianism. Bahaim and Shintoism are also practiced but with a small number of followers each.

There is no direct relationship between inter-ethnic conflict and inter-religious conflict. Inter-religious conflict in this paper is used to denote conflict involving two or more religious systems. It is therefore applied synonymously with inter-faith conflict. The term inter-denominational or sectarian conflict is used to denote conflict within a single religious system while intra-congregational, intra-denominational or intra-sectarian denotes conflict within a given congregation, denomination or sect respectively. Whereas no direct relationship could be found between inter-ethnic and inter-religious or interfaith conflict, it was however noted that a good number of inter-denominational and intra-communal conflicts sometimes reflect the general trend in inter-ethnic and political relationships in the country. For example, in the wake of the politically and ethnically instigated violence in the 2007 general elections, a Church was attacked in Eldoret and those who had sought refuge there were killed. Those who participated in this act that attracted worldwide condemnation were largely people from Christian background. Reports of

intra-congregational feuds between members of the same Church or congregation also sometimes happen as a result of the influence of political and ethnic interests.

Conflict also sometimes flares out between Muslims and Christians in the counties of Nairobi, Isiolo, and Mombasa that could indirectly be linked to ethnic and political differences. On the overall, however, inter-religious conflict between Muslims and Christians is fuelled by purely religious differences as well as competition for converts. Inter-religious conflict between Hindus and Christians is mostly the result of competition over natural resources, such as land and business interests.

Inter-religious conflict between ATR and the alien religions is usually motivated by cultural or doctrinal differences. Inter-ethnic conflicts between Sikhs or Jains and other religions such as Hinduism, Christianity and Islam is very rare or non-existent. This could be due to the fact that members of these relatively small and predominantly alien religions consider themselves a minority and will not come out to confront other groups for fear of repercussions.

Intra-Muslim conflicts hinge around doctrinal and leadership differences. In Kenya these differences are not as heightened as in some other counties but when they occur, they basically revolve around denominational differences between Sunnis and Shia'ites. It may also involve disagreements between different schools of thought in regard to the extent of application of the Islamic Sharia laws.

## **5. Effects of inter-religious conflicts**

Inter-religious conflicts lead to a number of adverse effects. The foremost is loss and destruction of life and property. There are times when religious conflict flare out into an all-out violence and results in the loss of lives and destruction of property. The 2016 attack on Garisa University is believed to have been motivated by religious factors. During this incident, in which many people lost their lives, victims were asked their religious affiliation and only Muslims were spared. Religious conflicts can thus breed extremism and radicalization. The problem of religious extremism is a major concern for security organs in this country. The Mungiki initially began as a puritan group within African traditional religion before they generated into a militant and extremist organization. They have since operated as an underground movement, whose mercilessness in dealing with their victims is dreaded by virtually all Kenyans.

In the Garisa university incident, property running into millions of worth was destroyed. The Kiambaa Church incident in Eldoret, during the aftermath of the 2007 general elections is also something to reckon with. Not only was some property destroyed but many lives were lost as well. These occurrences are outcomes of religious extremism and radicalization.

Radicalisation has, in itself, caused the Kenyan government dearly as it is forced to deal with groups of radicalized youth who are ready to die as they attack certain targets. Some of the incidents associated with religious radicalization include the Westgate mall in Nairobi and the 2013/14 attacks on Churches and non-locals in parts of Mandera and Garisa counties.

Religious conflicts also lead to international terrorism. Terrorist networks that operate globally have their origin in religion. The al-Shabaab network is one such network that has been associated with terrorist attacks in this country, including the 1998 bombing of the US embassy in Kenya, attacks in Tana River and Lamu counties and some killings and destruction of property in Mombasa and parts of North Eastern Kenya.

## **6. Challenges faced in the management of inter-religious conflicts in Kenya**

The challenges facing the management of religious conflicts in this country are manifold. In this section, some of the major challenges are discussed.

### **i) Hardline positions taken by the conflicting parties**

Management of religious conflicts in Kenya, is often hampered by the hardline positions taken by the involved parties. Some of these positions are conscious to the parties involved while others are not. Such hardline positions may be evident in the manner in which various religious organizations plan and conduct their business. The naming of a Church as Kiambaa in Eldoret after a name associated with a competing community, may have created the impression among the locals that the immigrant community was disrespectful of the host community. Derogative comments that are made by members of either side of the conflicting parties can also lead to misinterpretation of the really goal of peace resolution efforts.

### **ii) the infiltration of national politics into religious institutions**

It is said that politics is potentially divisive, particularly in an open democracy system as the one Kenya currently espouses. In Kenya, the national politics is conducted along ethnic lines. During the electioneering period, the stakes are always high as various ethnic and clan political heavyweights clamour for strategic positions in the government. This competition often leads to divided loyalties along tribal lines. Such political differences sometimes find their way into religious organizations and thus it makes it hard to manage religious conflicts.

### **iii) The projection of various and sometimes mutually conflicting communal interests**

Some religious conflicts become difficult to manage as a result of an exclusive projection of communal interests. Conflicting parties in this case interpret the surrender of certain demands –which may be necessary for achieving peaceful agreement, as a betrayal of the larger religious community they represent respectively.

### **iv) Inadequate conflict management resources**

Most religious institutions have failed to establish conflict resolution and management systems. For this reason, they lack the capacity to conflict whenever it may arise. Even in areas where such mechanisms exist, the weak systems in place are unable to facilitate the handling of complex situations.

There is also limited personnel who have the capacity to serve as resource persons in conflict management assignments. Most religious organizations have not invested in training conflict management personnel, as they do not regard this their primary function.

### **v) The role of ICT**

With enhancement of Information Communication Technology, platforms with free access facilities have emerged. This means that the youth are exposed to all manner of information and they are also able to share through the various social media. This has tended to erode religious authority which in itself undermines effectiveness of conflict management strategies.

## **7. Opportunities for enhancing the management of inter-religious conflicts in Kenya**

Despite the challenges facing the management of inter-religious conflicts in Kenya, there exists enormous opportunities for enhancement which if well exploited can greatly improve the performance of conflict management strategies in this country.

#### i) Common principals or perspectives on faith

Almost all the religious groups operating in Kenya have shared or similar principles in regard to faith. They are basically theistic, meaning that they recognize the centrality of God in determining the history and destiny of human life. In line with this principle, these religions ascribe to the value and vitality of such virtues as peace, love and unity, peaceful co-existence, social cohesion, social justice and social inclusion among others.

#### ii) Shared goals

The religious groups in Kenya share some crucial aspects concerning their mission to the world. At the fore of such mission is the wish to transform society and uplift people's lives. For this reason, each of these religions have established social institutions such as schools, hospitals and rehabilitation centres to facilitate the empowerment of individual members of society. This can provide a good opportunity for the various religions to move closer to each other and establish collaborations, particularly in doing philanthropic work.

#### iii) Kenyan Constitutional dispensation

The Kenyan constitution accords equal recognition to all organized religions. The right of individuals to affiliate themselves to a religion of their wish is protected by the constitution.

#### iv) Globalisation

Globalization has led to increased social mobility throughout the world. People of various religious affiliation now find living next to each other at village level. This close range interactions could provide a platform through which a better understanding of other people's religious views is understood and better respected.

### 8. Recommendations

The paper therefore recommends that

1. the sense of cooperation within and among various religious groups.
2. It also recommends the need for increased member participation in inter-religious dialogue and peace initiatives.
3. There is also need to encourage conflict analysis initiatives
4. seek the establishment of early conflict detection and prevention mechanisms among the faith communities
5. There is also need for establishing member sensitization strategies that can provide a platform for disseminating information on the need for all Kenyans to cultivate and perpetuate the spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood regardless of religion, ethnicity, politics or social class.
6. There is need to vet the integrity of those officers charged with the task of conflict resolution and conflict management so as to ensure that the process is handled by reliable and dependable peace makers. In south Africa for example, two persons from the clergy were appointed from either side of the divide ie white and zvfican communities.
7. Peace building and conflict management in general should be an all-inclusive process. Un south African experience, the team that was appointed to steer the reconciliation process had a fairly propoe.rtionate representation from the parties involved

8. Use of appropriate strategy. Sometimes, peace negotiations in Africa fail simply because of using or employing inappropriate strategy. Eg reconciliation instead of resolution and vice versa/ for south African experience, reconciliation followed resolution. In some cases, peace negotiation may be the vital force etc
9. Need to train personnel and resource persons who are well versed with conflict analysis skills and the need to use them
10. Need to have an Africa-specific model for addressing interethnic and interreligious conflicts. There is need to look inwards and pick values that can form basis for creation of an African model for peace building and conflict management in Africa.
11. There is also need to encourage conflict analysis initiatives and seek the establishment of early conflict detection and prevention mechanisms among the faith communities.
12. There is also need for establishing member sensitization strategies that can provide a platform for disseminating information on the need for all Kenyans to cultivate and perpetuate the spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood regardless of religious association, ethnic affiliation, political status or social class.

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