Religiosity and Human Rights: The Consequence of Kavonokya Religious Sect on Education and Healthcare

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Abstract

Religion as understood by religionists is a complete way of life. It not only generates the norms and pre-eminently values that should characterize people’s behaviour, but also guides through principles on whose basis they resolutely interact with the society. One of the major antagonisations that has befallen humanity in this 21st Century is the extreme religiosity that has eventuated the clouding of its rationality. The devastating effects of this occurrence is now more than ever pronounced in the Kenyan society. Kenya identifies education and health care as critical areas that need urgent attention and provides the necessary impetus through policy and programs being key human rights. Despite this awareness there are notably widespread setbacks, obstinately championed by warped religious dogmas. This paper seeks to bring to light and increase consciousness on how kavonokya as a religious sect incites controversy through practices that militate the infringement of the rights to education and access to health care of its adherents. It examines the religious views against health care access and education in kavonokya; whether they constitute religious deviance, a sign of religious degeneracy or a surreptitious violation of human rights on a veiled religionism platform and its implications on the respect for and observance of human rights.

Keywords: Human rights, Kavonokya, Policy, Religion, Sect

1. Introduction

The term sect denotes small religious groups often offshoots of established religions. It gained common usage in centuries of Christian history for depicting groups whose teachings were deemed to be heretical. The historical usance of this term in Christendom had disparaging connotations that referred to movements subscribed to teachings and practices considered heretical, having strayed from mainstream groups that were considered orthodox. The heretical schism from orthodox beliefs and practices provides the point of divergence between religious sects and
denominations.

Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch in their church-sect typology describe religious sects as newly formed religious groups that are formed to protest their parent denomination. These protests are basically anchored on the reprehension of the liberally inclined denominational development and the advocacy for the return to true religion, Weber and Ernst (1912). As sociologists Stark and Bainbridge (1979) assert, sects hold to the claim that theirs is an authentic, and true faith, a variation from the faith which they split. Thus, sects in contrast to churches have a much higher degree of tension with the surrounding society. These tensions can exist in the context of co-religious tensions, or with the whole society and not necessarily with the progenitor church.

2. Discussion and Findings

“Everyone is influenced and persuaded daily in various ways, but the vulnerability to influence varies. The ability to fend off persuaders is reduced when one is rushed, stressed, uncertain, lonely, indifferent, uninformed, distrusted or fatigued...” writes (Margaret, 2011). There has been a significant growth in the number of sects since the late 1960’s and the number of their adherents. Poverty and oppression tend to draw people into joining sects as Troeltsch has noted. These people have a feeling that they are deprivileged and believe that they do not get their justful social economic status in the society. Thus, sects in lucid terms, manipulatively offer religious-based explanations for this deprivilege; the theodicy of deprivilege. This theodicy projects the misfortunes as a test of faith, coated with a futuristic promise for rewards for keeping the faith. Though most of adherents do not live within the economic margins, they perceive the world as devoid of morals, emotional and authentic values and this in turn draws them to sects for a sense of community, (Wallis, 1975).

It is not uncommon for the deprived to underscore the Christian claim that it is harder for a rich man to enter heaven than a camel pass through a needles eye. This might not be popular with the affluent but the deprived will want to emphasize it. Religious sects capitalize on this claim. Religious sects are characterized by features that manipulate the vulnerabilities Margaret Singer outlines in “Group Psychodynamics,” in The Merck Manual of Diagnosis and Therapy. Sects are very
selective in their interpretations of the bible. They employ a cafeteria style where they pick and choose scriptures with minimal or no regard to their context. Through proof-texting, these verses are used to prove a particular doctrinal point that they advocate for, and thus the doctrinal beliefs end up being founded out of segments of the bible. For instance, the kávonokya will derive and base their detestation for medicine and access to medical healthcare selectively from the biblical authority given to the eleven disciples: to lay hands on the sick and they will recover. Ignorantly, they therefore eschew the learning and application of the general biblical knowledge for their religious expediency.

Conceived based on their exclusivist view of salvation is a persecution complex that acts as fodder to religious sect’s paranoia. To them, they are the only chosen people of God and consequently bear the true message of God. This message is a product of the selective interpretation of the Holy Scriptures; that “Christ is coming only for them!” This mentality creates an “us-against-the-rest” perception based on the imagined idea that they are subjected to some form of persecution because they have the truth and are the custodians of that truth. This therefore puts them in conflict with government policies that appear to them as compromising their beliefs and values. Adherents of religious sects categorize other denominations and churches as recreants and consider themselves as the only true representation of the church. They perceive themselves advocates of the re-establishment of the primitive faith of Christianity. This patronizing attitude by the sects towards other religious groupings encourage them to believing that all other churches are wrong but them. There exists a general condescension for education as offered by the society. Majority of the sects’ advocate for “self-teachings” with the ultimate authority to decide what is important to study and that which is not important to study. The reluctance for and the consequent lack of formal education leads to heresy owing to the lack of a broad spectrum of education. This lack is necessitated by the bypassing of the cumulative knowledge and wisdom of people in the “secular society” and marks the height of intellectual and religious snobbery.

Religious sects therefore in their consideration of the world and its policies as secular, denies its adherents the opportunity to develop academically and be able
to make sound, and rational decisions which is in itself a loophole that the former exploits to stifle its adherents. This however does not mean that sect’s followers are not intelligent, rather they exhibit a dislike for formal education which is considered “worldly”. The followers are discouraged to think for themselves and their lives are dominated.

Any form of questioning by the followers is considered disloyalty to the leadership and its decisions which are the guiding principles in the practices of the sects. Discontented followers are viewed as a menace or threat to the ‘uniformity’ of the religious sects. Blind, uncritical and unquestioned allegiance to the leadership. The decisions by the leadership are followed to the letter to the extent of followers willing to die to show loyalty to the decisions of the leadership. This unwavering loyalty aims at proving that the decisions of the leaders are true and legitimate. The devoted followers will try to justify their beliefs and practices even when they result to costly ends, including probabilities of death. The unfavourable ends are considered a test of faith and serves to strengthen their resolve to upholding what the leadership roots for. Leaders in religious sects will hold claim to having a spiritual connection with God and being the representatives of God. Communications are conveyed by these ‘representatives’ of God to the followers and they insist that the source is the Holy Ghost. The Kavonokya for instance will claim that leaders receive visions on who is fit to marry who and when, when and where to evangelize and which ‘team’ has been chosen to carry out the task of evangelizing.

2.1 The Kavonokya Sect

The Kavonokya sect in Ukambani and Kitui started at around 1914. Its emergence is tied to the coming of a man called Mwololo wa Nzau to Kitui from Masaku, modern day Machakos. The intertwining idea between his coming and the emergence of kavonokya was a rampant practice in the traditional Kamba community where they tied events to peculiar happenings in the society i.e. children born during famines would be named after the natural occurrence. The sect was started by a group of people in Mwingi who ‘got tired’ of the religious confusion from the various religious denominations which interpreted the bible differently to the chagrin of the followers.
There exists little documented history on the *kavonokya* sect as most of its information, practices, and beliefs are passed from one generation of adherents to another in the form of oral traditions. The group of persons who founded the sect based their fundamental religious belief on the biblical idea that God cures and thus believe in the power of healing prayers. *Kavonokya*- loosely translated to that which saves- does not believe and subscribe to modernity: including ‘worldly’ education and medicine.

Freedom of worship is a basic human right, alongside other rights including rights to education and healthcare. It is therefore quite unfortunate that some religious sects abuse the right to worship based on unclear concerns. By simply looking at the *kavonokya* adherents, they, just like the rest are ordinary looking bible-believing Christians however, they are people living their lives on a knife’s edge on the belief that a whimsical god wants their loved ones to die of curable diseases. *Kavonokya* adherents maintain that they live by the faith of the prophets akin to the bible and miracles by Jesus. Followers believe in a supreme being’s power to heal through proclamation of faith. In the preceding section on the features of religious sects, one notable feature is the persecution complex that sect’s adherents embrace. This siege mentality emboldens their resolve on the basis that they are under intimidation by government to compromise their beliefs. The *Kavonokya* have several practices that are informed by their supposedly strict religious observance. To them, believing is doing, without questioning what the Holy Scriptures say. Citing harassment by the authorities they stand firm that they will abide by their faith come rain or shine, and that the ‘persecution’ meted out on them by the ‘worldly’ governments will soon come to an end as divine intervention will bail them out.

2.2 Religious Deviance on Health and Education

In an attempt to find out why the adherents would rather have their members lose lives rather than going to the hospital, Charles (2016) points out that in 2011, eleven children died after measles outbreak and that despite these many uncalled for deaths, the adherents claim that the outbreak was a result of “satanic forces” and that it was okay if God willed them to die. David Mulei says: “We are the chosen few, true believers of God through his son Jesus Christ. God says we pray to Him and He will
heal us from all evils including diseases.

As believers we pray and when it is time for one of us to die, it is revealed to us by the Holy Spirit. Then we accept the God’s will” (Charles, 2016). The retrogressive beliefs have had far reaching consequences especially to children, the elderly and women. In discussing health and ignorance Ezra (2003) provides an appealing approach towards ending the outrageous loss of lives originating from ignorant religious beliefs. He opines that if people did some things a little differently, they could be healthier and less suffer from diseases. For instance, if children would be availed for immunization, and women embraced reproductive health, the health statuses would greatly improve. By viewing government’s efforts to subject them to healthcare as a way of investing in its citizenry, the Kavonokya sect’s leadership would play a big role in demystifying the misconceptions, confusion and apathy in its adherents regarding their stand against accessing health care.

Although there are no documented statistics, indications show that hundreds of lives are lost within the confines of rooms for ‘healing prayers’ where the elderly and children die awaiting healing from the prayers. To save face, Mr. Kiteme a member of the sect says that Kavonokya adherents are law abiding citizens except on the issue of medication and medical care. “This issue is pivotal in our doctrine and doctors and other professionals dealing in medicine and drugs are not allowed as members” (Paul, 2012). This situation is dire to the extent that health officials were treated to bizarre sight in Kitui when a mother refused to take back her child after forcefully being immunized against polio. The woman would defend her actions by arguing that the child had been defiled by the modern medication which was against the teachings of her church. While reproductive healthcare aims at reducing infant mortality rate, the sect adherents dismiss it as an attempt to challenge Gods directive and divine work; that of creating and giving live. This is echoed by their insistence of avoiding childbearing in the hands of trained medics. This practice is a violation of reproductive Rights. The new Kenya constitution provides that all people are entitle to the best attainable standard of health including reproductive health (Kibui et al., 2015, p. 130).

These religious challenges have hindered the government’s realization of the right to
health as outlined in Article 21 of the Constitution. This tense religiosity exhibited by the sect adherents complicates the implementation of the human-rights based approach to healthcare delivery that integrates human rights norms and practices including human dignity, attention to rights and needs of all with an emphasis on children, the marginalized and the elderly The Republic of Kenya (2010, pp. Article 53-47) and making sure that the healthcare services are rendered to all (Ministry of Health, 2014).

Education as established under the global treaties was formally recognized as a human right consequently establishing a compulsory and free entitlement to education. These conventions provide measures to ensure its accessibility to all children (Article 26, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948). However, the Kavonokya view the modern secular education system as exposing their children and adherents to the outside worldly moral decadence and they therefore strive to shun what’s ‘worldly’. This stance leads them to a collision course with the government authorities. The government is obligated to ensure the right of access to education to all. Amidst the obligations is to ensure respect for the right to education without any discriminations of any form or on any grounds. Every school going child has a right to attend school with providing the accessibility to school as the first step towards fulfilling this right. Even with the accessibility to education provided, there exists social, economic, cultural and religious factors- including religious hindrances that keep children out of school.

The Kavonokya is an example of this religious hindrance. The Kavonokya adherents are reclusive and a significant number of them do not take their children to school (Charles, 2016). He points out that they had not been taking their children to school prior to the introduction of free primary education in 2002. However, they still oppose, and resist payment of levies charged in schools thus forcing their children in and out of school. This significantly affects their learning process. In extreme cases, some adherents decline to admit their children to school citing that education is an imposition of ‘earthly governments’ totally locking them out of the education system and by this impeding the children’s cognitive growth that equips them to face life challenges. Such situations have eventuated the rise in insecurity in kavonokya dominated areas, increased infant mortality rates and apathy in participating in
important exercises like registration and voting.

3. Conclusion

There is need for a holistic approach to education, healthcare and freedom of worship reflecting universality and indivisibility of all these Human Rights. Religious teachings should not be held for purposes of misleading, molesting or oppressing the adherents to the extent of denying people the right to seek medical care when sick or disallowing school going children the opportunity to gain quality education on religionism pretext. Quality education cannot be achieved without regards to the rights to health and the general well-being of individuals and for this reason the government needs to develop policies and programs such as awareness campaigns that educate the Kavonokya on the importance of healthcare and education. This would non-violently resolve the long-standing conflict between the religious sect’s beliefs and its non-observance and respect the rights to education and health care of its adherents. A healthy and educated society plays a vital role in the social and economic development of a nation.

References


