

YOUTH AND MORALITY IN KENYA: THE ROLE OF SCIENCE AND RELIGION

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ABSTRACT

Morality is said to be beliefs or ideas about what is right and wrong and about how people should behave. It refers to a system of beliefs and values concerning how people should behave, which is accepted by a particular person or a group. In short, it can be seen as a standard of behaviour. Since it has to do with right and wrong, it is evident that any group of people or society would desire to follow or do what is morally right and avoid what is morally wrong. In this context, every society would strive to inculcate and nurture what it upholds as morally good to its members. The youth are an important section of this membership as it is in them that the future of any society and its morality abound. It thus follows that the morality of the youths should be emphasized for a moral society tomorrow. Nonetheless, it is claimed that today there are tangible and visible changes in the realm of morals among the young people. There is an outcry about the deterioration of moral values among the youth in Kenya. This poses a great challenge as regards the future. Therefore, there is an urgency to address this situation in order to rebuild the moral standard of our youth, hence the nation of tomorrow. This paper analyzes the role of religion and science in addressing the problem of youth and morality in Kenya. The basic assumption in this paper is that both science and religion are unique realities in our life, and that each can contribute uniquely in combating societal problems, hence bringing about an upright society. The paper further asserts that neither science nor religion can solely address such societal problems without involving the other; they are complimentary realities, hence the need for dialogue. The ideas advanced in this paper will be significant and an addition to the already established approaches to the problem of youth and morality in Kenya. The paper also poses a challenge to the conflicting relationship between science and religion, hence re-thinking the approach towards one another.

Key words: Youth, morality, science, religion.

Introduction

Today, morality of the Kenyan youth is totally different from that of yesteryears. The modern youth seem not to uphold the moral values prescribed and lived by our parents and grandparents. The society thus seems to have taken a totally different direction from the way things were to what they are now. Nevertheless, it is hard to ignore the fact that an individual's ways and moral choices of conduct matter in his or her life in relation to that of the community. Therefore, it is inevitable to look for moral standards by which to measure the worth and direction of one's moral life.

The present society seems not to adequately prepare the youths for a responsible moral adulthood. The irresponsible behaviour in the lives of many people today can be attributed to the weakening of moral formation in their respective backgrounds. Demands are therefore made to the bodies in the society entrusted with moral guidance to urgently respond to the declining level of morality in these areas of concern. Failure to properly read the signs of the times and their impact on families and communities is perhaps what brings about the increase in immorality in the Kenyan youths.

In this paper, we therefore seek to evaluate the position of science and religion in the deteriorating moral standards among the youths. The paper

looks at the importance of moral conscience in the Kenyan social setting and how both religion and science can assist in promoting moral standards. The paper thus assumes that the dialogue between science and religion will inevitably lead to a moral society.

Morality as a Basis of Society

There is no doubt that morality is what makes up a community. Through moral system, the young people are prepared to become useful and productive members in society. By morality is meant “beliefs or ideas about what is right and wrong and about how people should behave”¹ It is also “a system of beliefs and values concerning how people should behave, which is accepted by a particular community or a group.”² Hence, it can be said that morality is a “standard of behaviour.”³ From the concept of right and wrong, it is evident that any group of people or society would desire to follow or do what is morally right and avoid what is morally wrong.

Morality has to do with what is very important and right in our dispositions, manners, and conduct. It arises only when the interests of other people besides the moral agent are put into consideration or when the community puts some special kind of rules or restrictions on all its

¹ The Longman Dictionaries, *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 3rd ed. Essex: Longman Group Ltd., 1995.

² *ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

members to conform to a given way of life.¹ Morality seeks to guide human beings in choosing the right acts. It is thus morality that brings order in society. G. Parrinder observes that every tribe has its own moral norms which govern and direct conduct and behaviour. The social relationships in which people live in their communities are links of authority indicating the proper courses of conduct for them. He continues to observe that a person lives in a moral community and his or her behaviour is prescribed by relationships.² Therefore, morality is the norm which directs the manners and customs of a community. One would agree with Bennaars whose argument seems to agree with Parrinder's that morality has to do with norms that guide human conduct.³ The basis of morality thus is the norms and standards that serve as guidelines to moral action. Morality is therefore seen as the basis of society.

It is morality which binds relationships between people, and between them and the world. It regulates human behaviour and ensures that there is order through restrictions (for wrong) and rewards (for the right behaviour). It gives a code of conduct and draws a line between "dos" and "don'ts." The function of morality is generally the approval and

¹ Hare R.M. *Moral Thinking* (London: Oxford University Press, 1981), 81

² G. Parrinder, *Religions in Africa* (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 88.

³ Bennaars G.A., *Ethics, Education and Development* (Nairobi: African Educational Publishers, 1993), 26

disapproval of the community's behaviour expressed in reward and punishment respectively. In line with this, Bolaji Idowu maintains that:

The individual person belongs to the society, having been born, brought up nurtured, and trained with provisions made for his/her life without adequate safeguards to make sure that his/her personal choices would not jeopardize the very being of society itself. Society therefore had to devise or invent a means of keeping rebellion-prone man in check so that its machinery may run undisturbed. The means was achieved by the invention of certain codes of behaviour: these codes crystallized into a principle in consequences of which each person find him/her impelled, compelled, or constrained to life in conformity with a norm laid down by society.¹

Implicit here is the fact that ones choices which reflect one's moral standing and behaviour has a direct link to the societal way of life. Unfavorable or immoral behaviour thus jeopardizes the entire society.

Moral Status of Kenyan Youth

According to Constance Bansikiza,

Today there are tangible and visible changes in the realm of morals among the young people. There is an outcry about the deterioration of moral values among the youth. The tradition set of the value of responsibility is minimally cherished and upheld among the young.²

Lack of responsibility can be reflected in promiscuous behaviour such as premarital sex, prostitution, abortion, drug abuse among others. This reflects a rejection of moral principles which have the purpose of guiding

¹ Bolaji I. E., *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM Press, 1973), 44.

² Constance Bansikiza, *Restoring Moral Formation in Africa* (Eldoret: AMECEA Gaba Publications, 2001), 50-51.

human behaviour. Thus, Eunice Kamaara comments that there is lack of sincere commitment and respect for human dignity in such permissive way of living.¹ An example of this is the diminishing physical virginity before marriage which was stressed in most traditional African communities. This was a great honour to an individual, the parents and the community at large. The emphasis on virginity until marriage was the best way of controlling sexual promiscuity which is rampant and cancerous today. It is estimated that more than 700 women in Kenya die daily due to abortion.² Most of the victims are aged between 16-25 years.³ From this, it is clear that young people in Kenya are sexually active. As Perry Cotham aptly puts it, spiraling rates of abortion, illegitimate births and rampant venereal diseases indicate that a great deal of and/or causal “love” is being made.⁴ This way of life compared to the past in which sex was considered sacred and abortion unheard of, indicate some change in moral behaviour and standing. Michael Pennock and James Finely aptly points out that.

Sexual attitudes have changed since (our) parents’ day, and have changed very dramatically since the days of (our) grandparents. What was formerly done in secret is now done openly, and the mass media and public opinion condone

¹ Eunice Kamaara, Gender Relations and Sexual Activity Among the Youths and the Role of the Church in Kenya. (Unpublished) Thesis, Moi University Eldoret, (2003), 157

² Nation Correspondent, “Review Laws on Abortion, State Urged” *The Daily Nation*, Saturday May 20th 2006.

³ Dennis, Lumiti, at al., “There are 700 illegal abortions daily in Kenya.” East African Standard-The Big Issue (Nairobi), 26 August 2002

⁴ Perry C. Cotham. *Christian Social Ethics: Perspectives and Problems*. Baker Book House Grand Rapids, Michigan (1979). 130

such action by their lack of criticism, or even promote the “new morality” by presenting it as up-to-date and glamorous.¹

Religion and Science and Question of Morality

The underlying issue that we deal with in this section is to establish the basis for morality. Traditionally, morality has been associated with and seen to be derived solely from religion. In this understanding, morality has been associated with the existence of a superior being, namely God. Morality has been seen as a requirement generally stemming from a particular relation to God. This relation can be represented as one of love, or awe or respect.² What is termed moral is that which is considered as pleasing to God, whereas the immoral is that which displeases him. Morality, therefore, is associated with the existence of God, in that “if God existed, there might well be special and acceptable reasons for subscribing to morality.”³ Morality in this perception is teleological. Behaving according to accepted moral norms is rewarding, and immoral behaviour is not. Morality thus in Christian terms has to do with righteousness and wickedness.

¹ Michael Pennock and James Finley, *Christian Morality and You: Right and Wrong in an Age of Freedom*, revised ed. (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1966), 146.

² Bernard Williams, *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 71.

³ Ibid.

Science, on the other hand, has been excluded from what can be termed as moral endeavors. From its discoveries and technological advancements, science has been seen as opposed to the moral norms and hence propagating and supporting immorality. Considering what such discoveries and technologies have resulted into, one would realize that the outcome of scientific discoveries and technological advancement have interfered with the natural course of events in many ways. For example, the discovery of nuclear energy has interfered with human life due to the technology of nuclear bombs and their use. Discoveries in medicine have seen an increase in sexual immorality such as abortion. In addition, such discoveries have seen a change in the way events happen naturally, to the artificial ways as propagated by science as in the case of test-tube babies, human cloning, and artificial family planning. From such trends, one wonders if in any way science is governed by the same moral values that govern our everyday actions. Science would be seen to be governed by totally different and independent moral values. Since our daily actions are supposed to be governed by positive moral values, then science could be said to be governed by negative morality as it is seen to be countering what is our daily experience.

The important question that arises from the above cases however is whether science should feel responsible for the potential unethical or immoral use of its work by others. This question automatically points to

the intention of scientist as they go about their scientific discoveries. If science will be responsible for the potential use of its work, whether moral or immoral, then this responsibility can also be linked to the intention of any discovery that science comes up with. If the application will be immoral, then it necessarily follows that science is immoral as its initial intention would attest; but if it will be moral, then science is moral by the virtue of the same reason.

Science, in its discoveries and technological advancement is said to be governed by a simple principle, “knowledge is good.”¹ From this, science can be said to pursue knowledge for its own sake. Knowledge, in itself is good and its pursuit cannot be linked to any foreseen reason. Knowledge, therefore, is amoral; it is neither morally good nor morally wrong. Morality, by definition is a “quality of human acts by reason of which some acts are called good and others bad.”¹ In order for a human person to act, he or she should have some knowledge about the action he or she intends to perform. Such knowledge can either be scientifically given or received through revelation as religion believes. It is how this knowledge is utilized to produce an act that can be said to be immoral or moral. If knowledge is rightly used to produce general good and acceptable results by all, then it can be termed moral, but if it is wrongly

¹ “Morality of Science” http://www.provenanceunkown.com/archive/2002/03-19_morality_of_html as retrieved on 5/05/06.

used to produce minimal good unacceptable to many, then it is immoral. According to Odera Oruka, “morality is a system of conventional rules that guide the conduct of people in society.”¹ These conventional rules are accepted by the whole society, and if any action is performed in accordance to them, then it is accepted by the whole society and thus moral. In relation to this, science cannot be accused of being immoral neither can it be obliged to be responsible for the immoral application of its work. It is the whole society which is both religious and scientific that should be blamed for the immorality in any of its members. Scientists are not different entities from religious; they are one the same people.

Religion and Science: Approach to New Morality

In this section, the attempt is made to evaluate the role of religion and science in the changing morality within Kenyan youth, and the role of both in improving the same. One of the fundamental point to note is that the changes experienced in the moral realm in the Kenyan youth is both a personal and individual youth’s problem, and at the same time a societal affair. It is therefore both an internal and external problem. It is internal because changes are taking place within an individual person; and is external as these changes are externally contracted and manifested. This realization thus is the starting point in evaluating both religion and science and their role in moral change.

¹ Michael V. Murray, *Problems in Ethics* (NY.: Henry Holt and Co., Inc., 1960), 150.

Role of religion

Shift from traditional religion (way of life) to Western religion

John Samuel Mbiti points out that “an African is notoriously religious.”²

Implicit in Mbiti’s observation is the fact that in the traditional setting, an African did not make any distinction between the sacred and secular, but religion permeated the entire departments of life. In this context, an individual was born religiously in a religious setting and grew up as a religious person. Mbiti further notes that,

whenever the African is, there is his religion: he carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony: if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician, he takes it to the house of parliament.³

In this way, all functions and roles associated with religion were easily accomplished as an individual could not conceptualize himself or herself devoid of religion. It therefore follows that since morality was associated with and seen as the responsibility of religion, high moral values and standards were inevitable as going against the societal moral expectations was going against religious code of conduct.

¹ Henry Odera Oruka, *Ethics* (Nairobi: Nairobi University Press, 1990), 38.

² John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (East African Educational Publishers, 1969), 1.

³ *Ibid.*, 2.

The coming of Western religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, however, saw a shift in the way African conceptualized religion, behaved and lived. Mbiti further contents that,

... The source of severe strain for Africans exposed to modern change is the increasing process (through education, urbanization and industrialization) by which individuals become detached from their traditional environment. This leaves the in vacuum devoid of social religious foundation.¹

The change in youth morality can be linked to the shift from an everyday religion to a one-day-a-week religion introduced by the westerners. Since

in religion, moral issues are linked to the existence of God, it is evident that such also accompany and are taught during worship. It therefore follows that moral issues in the western religion are suspended throughout the week and only observed or taught either on a Friday,

Saturday or Sunday depending on the prescribed day of worship. This however is not satisfactory approach to moral issues as “it is not enough to learn and embrace a faith which is active once a week...while the rest of the week is virtually empty.”¹

The future of youth morality in Kenyan thus will depend on the re-shifting of the approach to religion. It is evident that it is not possible to go back to the past or to the so called traditional African religion as this has been completely overshadowed by the western religion and way of

¹ Ibid.

life. Nevertheless, changes can be introduced in which the past can be reflected in the modern. Among this should be the approach to and conceptualization of religion as part and parcel of an individual's life. This will not mean attending religious functions throughout the day on a daily basis, but will imply inculcating a sense of religiosity in the members, in that in their daily lives, people should live religiously and not only wait until the prescribed day of worship. The success of religion in Kenya in combating youth problems thus lies in its ability to provide and sustain a thoroughgoing critique of both Westernization and authenticity, while developing creative solutions to the same.²

Over-reliance on Religious leaders

The changes in youth morality in Kenya can also be linked to the tendency of over-depending on religious leaders for advice, guidance and counseling in almost all aspects of life. Religious leaders, such as pastors or priests command a high degree of influence among their followers and are often approached for advice on matters ranging from weather conditions, politics, and domestic matters, to spiritual issues. In short, they are approached on both spiritual and secular matters. In relation to this, parents, teachers and other community members have now absconded their duties towards the young and left them to the religious

¹ Ibid., 3.

² Tite Tienou, "Authentic African Christianity" in John Parrat (ed.) A Reader in African Christian Theology (London: SPCK, 1987), 92.

leaders. This implies that religious leaders are considered to be knowledgeable in almost all aspects of life including moral sphere. This however is not the case. The role of being a religious leader is said to be a calling and not a profession. In this context, most of our religious leaders do not possess the necessary knowledge in areas besides spiritual. Others do not command the desired moral standing worthy of their position, yet they are the people to whom the youth are entrusted for guidance and counseling.

Since religious influence has permeated all corners of the country, and its leaders command the same influence, it is reasonable that this should be the starting point in evaluating the role of religion in addressing youth morality. Whereas we do not contest the fact that becoming religious leader is call, such calling however should be complimented with knowledge besides the 'revealed' one. Of importance to the issue of the youth should be the knowledge in guiding and counseling. Also, there should be a criterion in determining the true calling from the false calling as pressures in life such as unemployment might force some individuals to 'call themselves' into the ministry instead of being called and therefore not contributing to the well being of a society in a religious way.

Role of science

Science, from the beginning, just like religion, abhors immorality.

Improved medical services as advanced by science are meant to promote human life and the general good of the society, and not vice-versa. For example, abortion was discouraged right away from the initial stages of medicine. The moral principle that guide scientist in the field of medicine is Hippocratic oath¹ through which medical scientists vow to promote and safeguard life and not to destroy it through. In this context, scientists do not intent to destroy life through immorality, but to promote

it. Even in sexual promiscuity, Brent Anderson points out that it is not in line with scientific belief. He thus contents that

Gratuitous sex when examined in the light of science reveals its many flaws with respect to natural law. Since the imperative established by our genes is that we survive long enough to procreate and provide a maximum opportunity for our offsprings to thrive; it is clear that any sexual activity that does not lead to an enduring union is counterproductive.¹

It therefore follows that science from its onset is focused on promoting morality and is governed by the same moral values that guide us in our daily actions. However, like religion, it can also be accused of failing in its endeavor to promote the same, thus the increase in immorality among the Kenyan youth. The one major way through which science has done

¹ Harold O.J. Brown, "Biomedical Ethics" in Perry C. Cotham, (ed.) Christian Social Ethics and Problems (Michigan: Baker Book House, 1979), 251.

this is by inventing without educating the populace on the proper use of its inventions. In this context, scientific discoveries have been wrongly utilized and thus resulted into an immoral society. For example, contraceptives such as condoms were intended for birth control to substitute natural methods which would sometimes be overtaken by passions and lead to unplanned-for pregnancies. Such knowledge on the intended use of contraceptives however can be said to be lacking and as they are now being used as safety against diseases among the youth.

Because contraceptives, if used rightly by couples to guard against unplanned-for pregnancies, abortion would only come about as a form of medication, in that if a pregnant woman who in this case married could not bring the pregnancy to term, then abortion was to be carried out to save her life. This however is not the case nowadays as abortion has been turned into a form of birth control. It is therefore right to point out that a major way through which science can contribute in restoring moral values in the Kenyan youth is through proper education.

The nature of science is that it always tries to search for reasons underlying each reality. In this case, science, through its method, can research into the human life with an intention of discovering the underlying causes of changes in youth morality. For instance, Charles

¹ Brent Anderson "Science and Morality" <http://www.xmission.com/~pba/science%20morality.htm> as retrieved on 5/05/06.

Sanders Peirce scientifically observed that, "changes have put certain organs at a disadvantage, and there has been an effort to use them in new ways. Such organs are particularly apt to sport in reproduction and to change in the way which adapts them better to their recent mode of exercise."¹ Implicit here is that since sex organs are specifically meant for sex, the changes make them increasingly suited for their function, and hence increased practice. If they cannot practice out, such organs might extinct or fail to function. This shows that science can come up explanation concerning the change in moral behaviour among the youth, and thus search for a viable solution for the same.

Conclusion

One major factor that has led to the failure of both religion and science in addressing moral issues in the Kenyan society has been the non-recognition of one another's vital role in the human life, and hence in society. The realization by both science and religion that each has a part in the human life is the first step in rebuilding a moral society, since man is both spiritual and material. The physical, material, or empirical orientation of science and the spiritual tendencies of religion can both be merged to address the problems of human person. Aristotle realized this early in time and thus contented that "we never find matter without form or form without matter in nature. Everything that exists is some concrete

¹ Charles Sanders Peirce, "Evolution" <http://www.textlog.de/4246.html> as retrieved on 5/05/06

individual thing, and every thing is a unity of matter and form. Substance, therefore, is a composite of form and matter."¹ This Aristotelian duality can be exemplified in both the human person and in the world in general. In this context, religion cannot talk of improving morality of a human person by attending to his spiritual being while neglecting the physical person. Neither science can attend to the physical person at the expense of the spiritual. Both physical and spiritual combined make up a human person.

From the above analysis, we realize that both science and religion have a very important role to play towards promoting or undermining morality of society. Nonetheless, we also realize that over time, society has assumed that its only religion which can be entrusted with matters of morality, and hence neglected the role played by science in the same.

This however has been one way through which morality among the youth has been undermined. In this context, the search for the way forward demand that religion should not claim sole and full prerogative over morality and society must stop excluding science from moral process. In the same manner, science should recognize that it also need faith to some point in order to be effective and convincing. It is only an interdisciplinary approach grounded in scientific method, and religious

¹ Samuel Enoch Stumpf, *Socrates to Sartre: A History of Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (NY.: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1982), 97.

belief can hope to develop moral norms appropriate to today's world. Far from being absolute and timeless commandments, our norms are social rules of behaviour designed to balance the needs of the individual with those of the large society, hence the need for a dialogue between science and religion. This dialogue will only be evident in the application of scientific method of investigation into moral sphere which will be grounded in religious faith and belief.

J. Maurus points out that "...when God was creating the world, he was approached by four questioning angels. 'How are you doing it? The first one asked... The fourth said, 'can I help? The first one was the question of scientists; and the fourth was the question of the religious one.'"¹ From this, one realizes that the question of the religious, "Can I help?" is never complete without the "how?" of the scientists. Neither can the "how are you doing it" be complete without the interest of can I help. It thus follows that religion and science are each asking questions about the same reality, and none can reach a satisfactory solution without considering the part the other has in the same the same. This complementarity is what is needed in the approach to youth and morality in Kenya.

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