Religion and politics

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POLITICS AND ITS FUNCTION
Politics: What does it mean? It refers to the whole business of Government, those who govern: politicians, and those who elect to be governed by them: the citizens. Therefore the responsibility of Government resides first in the citizen, in you and me: it is our job to see that it does.

We speak of members of Parliament (MP's) and ministers as politicians who make and administer the laws of the country in keeping with the constitution. Among their duties are the following:

- To promote the common good of all. As everybody is equal before the law, those in authority must safeguard the rights of all citizens.
- To promote the right to life, to employment, to property, to education, to medical care, to personal security, to freedom from harassment and to one's good name.
- To promote the right to living conditions and amenities in keeping with one's dignity as a child of God.
- To promote the right to worship God according to one's conscience.
- To promote the right to educate one's children in the faith one professes or chooses.

These are all human and God-given rights which any state -- Democratic, Republican, Socialist, Communist, etc. is bound to protect and promote. A politician should devote his energies to the well-being of those who elected him. He is their servant. For the politician, whatever his rank, the citizen is his number one priority.

RELIGION AND ITS TRANSFORMING POWER
Being finite, man's arms even when extended to the maximum, reach only a certain distance, and his feet must be planted somewhere. There must be some ground on which he stands and from which his vision proceeds. Religion alone provides man with this foundation. It calls the person to the highest adventure he can undertake. The call of religion is to confront reality, to accept and to master oneself. Those who have the courage to hear and follow this call, soon learn the challenges and difficulties of this lonely journey.

Religion has to do with man's relation to God: the God who made him, preserves him in being, the God in whom he believes as Father, to whom he will give an account as Judge, with whom he will (hopefully) enjoy eternal life. There are many religions. A study of all major religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity, shows that each contains some version of the golden rule: 'Do unto others as you would want done to yourself.'

All major religions regard man's self-centeredness to be the source of his troubles and seek to help him to conquer this tendency. Each religion acknowledges a universal divine ground from which man has sprung, and in relation to which his true good is to be sought. In the final analysis our relationship with God determines the quality of our lives. Our moral life, our choices, our understanding of God's will, all depend on who our God is.

Today the world and its people have never before stood so desperately in need of religion, of a power that will overcome the dangers of arrogant nationalism and the doctrines of self-interest, hatred and violence. Authentic religion is the clearest opening through which the inexhaustible energies of man and his world can pour into human existence. What then can rival the power of religion to touch and inspire the deepest creative centres of man's being?

Every day the world grows smaller. We are here referring to the world as a global village. Understanding, acceptance, dialogue and love are the only bridge by which we can build a world of peace. Are we really ready to live in a world where distances are shortened or abolished? Who today stands ready to accept the equality of all nations? Who does not have to fight an unconscious tendency to equate foreign with inferior?

We live in a tremendous century. To reach the fullest development, the scientific achievements of this century must be matched by comparable achievements in human relations.

Those who desire and work and listen for peace, must desire a peace built not upon an ecclesiastical or a political empire, but upon understanding and the mutual involvement in the lives of others that this implies.

Understanding brings respect. Respect prepares the way for the higher power of love, the only power that can extinguish the flames of fear, suspicion and prejudice and so provide the means whereby all peoples of this earth can become one.

Understanding leads to love. But the reverse is true also. Love brings understanding, the two are reciprocal.

We must listen in order to further the understanding of this world so badly needs. But we must listen in order to practise love which our own religion (whatever it may be) demands.

MAN’S DOUBLE CITIZENSHIP

As a person I am a citizen of a state (Kenya) with its own boundaries and limits, and as a Christian I am a citizen of a kingdom that has no boundaries, that is not of this world but which extends to an unending life after death.

The same identical human person belongs for a time to this earthly kingdom or state and belongs now and for all time to come (eternity) to the kingdom of God which Christ established in founding his church. It is necessary, however, to make an important distinction here: While only Kenyans and their guests come under the control and authority of the Kenyan government, all people, rulers and ruled alike, politicians and citizens, come under the rule of Christ the King.

This calls us to awareness that we are pilgrims from God who created us, through the earth and back to him. This is the greatest religious awareness which characterizes every growth and action in man.

The sacred literature is full of calls for change: repentance, conversion. Thus human, personal growth and our religious growth make the same demands, move us in the same direction and aim at the same goal. There is no dichotomy in man between what is religious and moral, between what is finite and infinite. The finite helps us to attain the infinite.

Every human person has a conscience, an inborn awareness of right and wrong, of good and evil. God gave us that power of distinguishing right from wrong. When we say "Man is responsible for his actions" we mean that some day he must "respond," give an account of the choices he made, for good or evil, for truth or falsehood, for right or wrong.

The human person, who can be both a citizen and a Christian is free. He may never say (unless he is insane and therefore not responsible): "The devil made me do it," "bad friends made me steal." He is the captain of his own soul, the master of his own decisions and deeds. He is a responsible being. His personal freedom is the source of his dignity.

We have therefore a two-fold allegiance or loyalty: to the state of which we are for our lifespan citizens, and to the kingdom of God to which we belong by faith and love. The latter kingdom claims our total allegiance. No earthly ruler of any description may oblige us to do anything that conflicts with the values and demands of God’s kingdom. No human person is independent of the searching rule of Christ the King. Religion and politics, properly understood, cannot conflict. If any earthly ruler demands what is contrary to conscience and the Gospel, his demand must be resisted and ignored. Every ruler who claims to be a Christian or a believer in God, is bound by the Christian code, or by the code of his conscience.

Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of man. There, he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths. God is the only lawmaker who is above the law. A good politician should hold religion as central in life and sincerely and courageously practice it. Faith or belief demands the fulness of conscience. In faith, a man accepts gratefully the self-manifestation of God and he opens his deepest nature to him. Faith has the power to arouse and deepen conscience, but it must be faith in prayer, a faith that adores, a faith that surrenders to God and joyfully accepts his dynamic presence.

A politician who is not guided by clearly defined and professes religious principles can be a clever opportunist. Sincere practice of one’s beliefs should and must be clearly distinguished from religious fanaticism and intolerance. A good and wise politician while practising his own faith allows others to express their fundamental right of religious freedom, a freedom from control by what is less than man or entirely exterior to man. Such a politician, himself motivated by his religious beliefs, has a freedom and experience which leave him no longer fully and completely subject to the forces of nature, to his own bodily needs, to the merely external and human dictates of society, and to the pressures and trials of life.

Can a Christian be a politician? Yes! The more truly Christian he is the better he will serve his people as a politician. There is no conflict here but a beautiful harmony.

God created man to be a social being. This means that man forms a community with God and his fellowmen. Therefore the fact of living together in a community is a divinely instituted reality and reflects what we shall be like in heaven.

The principles of our political practices are founded on God’s commandment of love. The more sincerely Christian a man is, the better politician he will be. It means that the Gospel/Christian values of truth, justice, humility, pity, kindness and unselfishness will prevail in such a man. Is it not true that some politicians are rejected by the electorate because they lack these very qualities, and instead seek to enrich themselves, selfish-
ly disregarding the needs of those who elected them?

Of course there are many areas and subjects which touch both religion and politics, church and state. Such subjects are marriage, family, education, respect for life, human rights, social services, unemployment, wages, housing, freedom of speech, religious education, detention without trial, bribery and corruption, pornography, etc. In these areas both religion and politics, church and state show interest and concern. Many times, however, religion and politics are at loggerheads on these same subjects. Why? Because the political community and the church are autonomous and independent, though their common concern for man ought to bring them together and make them collaborate for the welfare of all. Oftentimes religious leaders are accused of interfering in politics when they make statements on matters touching both religion and politics. Such accusations arise, no doubt, from the lack of self-confidence and commitment on the part of politicians. It is the duty of the church, for instance, to identify moral elements in the way the state formulates solutions to certain problems, and to relate them to the Gospel values or to the lawmaker who is above the law.

The church is a universal moral teaching authority and exercises her prophetic office in the interest of human development and salvation. There is no guarantee that this prophetic mission will always be to the liking of the political authority. Think of the prophet Jeremiah and of John the Baptist. It is not the mission of the church (religion) and it is not proper for religion to engage in party politics, to sponsor a political party, or to make political choices for the laity. But it is within the church’s right and authority to give guidelines, e.g., on the qualities and virtues that a person aspiring to political office should possess and exercise. Of course a person has a choice ... to be a politician or a ‘Man of God’ -- to devote his time, his talents and energy, to promoting the material wellbeing of the people who elected him, or as a priest whose vocation it is to continue the work confided by Christ to his apostles, to preach the good news and lift man’s eyes beyond the horizon to the vision of the eternal. Water and oil do not mix. Likewise, politics and religion do not mix. See what has happened in countries where political leaders are also religious leaders and insist on barbaric punishments of an eye for an eye type, resulting in brutal mutilations of individuals for faults they committed out of human weakness.

THE VIRTUE OF HONESTY
In relation to tonight’s topic let me share with you my thoughts, ideas and vision on the virtue of ‘honesty’. Honesty is defined as “uprightness, faithfulness”, and an honest person as “one who is fair and upright in speech and act, not lying or cheating or stealing, a sincere person, chaste, virtuous.” An honest person’s life is a sign of contradiction. (Cf John 7:40-52; Mt. 13:53-58) An honest person is the one who knows the meaning of “Vox populi, vox Dei” — The voice of the people, the voice of God. According to Christian interpretation, this means that when many people honestly believe that something is true, it is then true as a rule. Whereas, in politics, the majority are right -- Mangi wape — even when they have arrived at their conclusions incorrectly. An honest person is one who speaks his mind and stands his ground. Both political and religious leaders should be honest.

Those people who brought political independence to Africa were honest in their political philosophy. Many of them, however, did not remain so after independence. This is a major cause of the unhappy situations found in many African countries. Today, those leaders who are charged with responsibility to bring about economic independence in Africa, are unfortunately not honest in many cases. This leadership seems to accept the principle of laissez-faire, interpreted in the past as: each one for himself and God for all of us. Their interpretation now seems to be: each one for himself and God for me; might is right, the majority are right; everybody is doing it, why not me; the end justifies the means. The scale of values is turned upside down. Cunning outweighs what is right, while political expediency obscures justice. Politicians and religious leaders should educate people to think for themselves, to act honestly, justly, to stand for what is right and reject what is false, even when the latter leads to suffering. If we are to do away with corruption, bribes and crooked and devious ways of acquiring property, we must be ready to suffer, to be thought of as fools. A religious leader must act as God’s prophet, especially with regard to human rights, and to freedom of conscience. Like John the Baptist he may have to tell property-grabbers and wealth-accumulators: “It is against the law to have your brother’s property.” (Cf Mk 6:18)

When law and order break down, honesty goes by the board. Then, those who are responsible for law and order, resort to extreme measures to restore it. A state of emergency is declared. Detention without trial is introduced. And it cuts across the most fundamental human freedom. A state of emergency and/or detention without trial is a sign of the inability of political power (leadership) to restore and/or maintain law and order. Honesty is a virtue we need to cultivate, both in private and in public life. If we are honest, there is nothing to fear.

1. A Kiswahili proverb which means that the majority are right, or that we should defer to the majority.