
Faith, Power and Propaganda: The Ethics of Intergenerational Dialogue in Times of Gen Z Activism

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Drawing from John Mbiti's conception of religion in Africa as a "way of being,"¹ this study examines the ethical and theological implications of the Kenyan Church's entanglement with political power, with particular focus on Gen Z activism as a catalyst for institutional reform.

Methodology: The research employs a qualitative approach through analysis of literature, public records, and case studies. Primary cases examined include the Occupy Church protests and public reactions to political donations. The study is grounded in three theoretical frameworks: prophetic theology, social contract theory, and intergenerational justice theory.

Findings: The research reveals that political donations and public displays of giving have significantly compromised the Church's moral authority and prophetic voice. The study identifies patterns of selective silence on critical social issues, particularly when involving political donors. Gen Z-led movements like "Occupy Church" have emerged as significant forces challenging the Church's complicity in corruption, while financial entanglement with politicians has led to erosion of trust among congregants, especially younger generations.

Conclusion: The Kenyan Church faces a critical challenge in balancing its historical role as a moral authority against its increasing entanglement with political power. This has resulted in diminished credibility among congregants and compromised its ability to serve as a prophetic voice for social justice and spiritual formation.

Recommendations: The study proposes implementing transparent financial reporting systems for donations, establishing clear boundaries on political influence during services, creating platforms for intergenerational dialogue, and strengthening partnerships with ecumenical networks. Further research is recommended on the role of ecumenical networks in fostering accountability and the long-term impact of youth activism on Church governance.

Keywords: *Faith, Power, Propaganda, Ethics, Intergenerational Dialogue, Gen Z Activism*

INTRODUCTION

Like many African communities, Faith has for a long time been the cornerstone of the Kenyan society with the Church historically playing the role of salvation, path to forgiveness and reconciliation and from one community to another a tool for addressing moral and social wrongs. Rooted in African communal traditions, the Church continues to be a common space for uniformity in matters of spirituality and ethical values of the Kenyan people. In articulating the centrality of religion in Africa, John Mbiti refers to it as a ‘way of being’ which is inclusive of all factors of feeling alive, including governance and the welfare of the community.¹ This sacred institution has however found itself entangled in a complex interplay of power and politics throughout the recent years. Rather than being a prophetic voice of justice and accountability, the Church in Kenya has from time to time found itself being wielded as a tool for fearmongering, spreading propaganda and in some contexts sanitizing corruption.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

From one election season to another, political leaders turn to the pulpit to bolster their public image promising voters divine favor while contributing large sums of money offerings, making donations in millions of shillings and participating in Church harambees. Those who don’t participate in such activities are called out as being mean and non-believers hence not trustworthy as they are not blessed of the Lord. These financial contributions are often derived from questionable sources leading to the Church’s moral authority being compromised. Wealthy politicians secure Church endorsements making it nearly impossible for the clergy to critique immoral actions such as corruption and embezzlement of public resources. According to Nyambura Njoroge, such complicity undermines the Church’s prophetic role thus diminishing the capability of the Church to advocate for the poor and marginalized communities especially women and the youths.²

¹ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 1.

² Nyambura J. Njoroge, “The Missing Voice: African Women Doing Theology,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no. 99 (1997): 77.

The number of politicians coating the Church to gain political endorsement is vast. President William Ruto leveraged the Church to ascent to power. He centralized his campaign message on being a believer who is ‘God’s chosen leader’ and portrayed his competitors as non-believers. President Ruto’s closest allies regularly make publicized donations of millions to various Churches across the country creating an image of piety and generosity.³ It is however not just the current political class that has rooted their agenda at the heart of the Church. Historical precedents demonstrate a similar pattern with the former presidents Daniel Moi and Mwai Kibaki and Uhuru Kenyatta falling under the same vice.⁴ For decades, the Church has continued to face increased tension with its traditional mission of evangelism, healing and social transformation on one end and the financial dependence on political patrons on the other.

This study explores the ethical implications of this dynamic tension focusing on the rising friction between the Church’s alignment with political power and the growing rejection of this status quo by Kenya’s younger generation. The study focuses on the Gen Z in particular as a generation that has emerged as a vocal force that not only challenges the Church’s complicity in sanitizing political corruption but also one that demands the Church takes its rightful place in calling out moral wrongs. Through protests such as the ‘Occupy Church’ movement and public rejection of dubious financial practices, the Gen Z have redefined citizen activism in Kenya demanding a return of the Church’s spiritual and moral mission.⁵

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The Kenyan Church today finds itself at a crossroads between its historical role as a platform for political agendas and the urgent demand for reform led by a disillusioned younger generation that is hungry for systemic change and transformation in political leadership and moral growth. This study examines how political influence has transformed the Church into a vehicle for propaganda and systemic corruption. The study explores the ethical implications

³ Kenyan media reports, speeches and Church donation data from the 2022 election period.

⁴ Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Petals of Blood* (London: Heinemann, 1977), critique on corruption and power structures.

⁵ Reports on ‘Occupy Church’ protests, Gen Z activism, and statements from the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.

for both the institution and the society. By focusing on intergenerational dynamics, the study highlights the potential for Gen Z activism to restore the Church's prophetic voice and integrity.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- i. To analyze the ethical implications of political donations to the Church by analyzing how financial contributions from politicians impact the Church's moral authority and credibility.
- ii. To explore the role of the Gen Z activism in challenging the Church's complicity in corruption by investigating how youth-led movements such as Occupy Church influence religious accountability and transparency.
- iii. To assess the Church's silence and selective vocality on societal issues by identifying religious patterns in response to corruption, governance and social justice concerns
- iv. To propose strategies for reclaiming the Church's prophetic voice and integrity by recommending reforms that enhance transparency, ethical leadership and intergenerational dialogue.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- i. How do political donations impact the ethical integrity and moral authority of the Church in Kenya?
- ii. In what ways has Gen Z activism, particularly movements like *Occupy Church*, influenced the Church's accountability and transparency?
- iii. Why does the Church remain silent or selectively vocal on key social issues such as corruption, governance and social justice?
- iv. What strategies can the Church implement to reclaim its prophetic voice, enhance financial transparency and engage in meaningful intergenerational dialogue?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The intersection of religion with politics and activism calls to life a strong theoretical reference to the ethical dilemma through which the Church is entangled. This study employs the prophetic theology, social contract theory and the intergenerational justice theory. The three frameworks are crucial in providing the insights that speak into the Church's role in society, the congregations and also the generation gap that is increasingly widening.

Prophetic Theology

Rooted in liberation theology, the prophetic theology brings to light the Church's moral duty representing the truth, advocating for the oppressed and being a pillar for social justice. The prophetic theology posits that religious institutions represent a moral conscience of the society and a mirror through which corruption, injustice and systemic oppression and confronted. This is in line with Nyambura Njoroge's assertion that the Church should be a prophetic voice that holds political leaders accountable rather than being co-opted into the Church's power structures.⁶ This assertion speaks into the context of this study where the Church in Kenya finds herself increasingly becoming aligned with political elites through financial donations and pulpit endorsements which in turn result in silence on social issues like abductions and corruption.

Social Contract Theory

Social contract theory suggests institutions and the society operate under an implicit agreement to provide moral guidance, justice and accountability to each other. The Church as an institution is therefore expected to serve as a neutral moral authority that besides upholding ethical principles also protects the interests of the general public. When the Church is entangled with political figures, it therefore finds itself in positions that violate this social contract, making it lose its credibility as a moral institution.

Intergenerational Justice Theory

Intergenerational justice theory explores the ethical responsibilities that different generations encounter towards each other. This theory argues that it is the mandate of the older generations to create systems that uphold justice, equity and sustainability for the future generations. In the same manner, older religious leaders have a mandate to uphold such moral values, failure to which the younger generations like the Gen Z activists arise. The Occupy Church movement and other Gen Z led initiatives represent a younger generational call for reforms, demanding that the Church leaders reject corrupt practices and reclaim its prophetic mission.

⁶ Nyambura J. Njoroge, "The Missing Voice: African Women Doing Theology," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no. 99 (1997):80.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Occupy the Church Protests

The emergence of the Gen Z as a socially conscious and politically active force has shaken the political environment and sparked questions on the place of the Church within the society. It has introduced a new dynamic in the relationship between the church and its congregants. Frustrated by the Church's silence on critical issues such as corruption, abductions, embezzlement of public resources and moral failures, Gen Z has spearheaded movements such as the 'Occupy the Church' protests. These movements have highlighted a growing disillusionment with an institution that is perceived to have been complicit in political wrongdoing. In his critique of power structures, Ngugi wa Thiong'o asserts that silence in the face of injustice is itself a form of complicity.⁷ These views are further emphasized by Kuzipa Nalwamba who posits that silence in the face of injustice equates to moral failure, eroding trust in religious leadership.⁸

Brown Envelops and Financial Protests

During the June 2024 protests against the controversial Finance Bill, Gen Z activists symbolically called out the hypocrisy of Church leaders whom they accused of accepting multimillion-shilling donations from politicians. These 'brown envelops' are mostly funds that have been sourced from public coffers or corrupt dealings by public officials. They represent a moral failure by the government officials to prioritize ethical standards over financial gain.⁹ When the Church accepts funds gained through corruption and questionable means, it undermines the integrity of the traditions of the Kenyan people. Such practices must be questioned, abolished and eradicated for the sake of righteousness and justice. The Gen Z

⁷ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1986), 45.

⁸ Kuzipa Nalwamba, *Christ's love removes borders: The transformative pedagogical location of the Global Ecumenical Theological Institute 2022*. ResearchGate.

⁹ Reports on Finance Bill protests and Gen Z activism, various Kenyan media sources.

protests therefore reflected a broader societal demand for the Church to reject illicit funds and reclaim its role as a moral authority.

The Silence of the Church

Acknowledged historically as the voice for the oppressed, the Church's silence on issues like over taxation and youth unemployment, poverty and climate change, embezzlement of public funds and public display of flashy lifestyles to a population that is increasingly seeking financial reprieve has been criticized by scholars and activists alike. Nyambura Njoroge and the Circle of Concerned Women Theologians emphasize that the Church must actively address these pressing issues to maintain its relevance.¹⁰

Pulpit Politics

The intersection of religion and politics in Kenya dates back to the colonial era. Missionaries played a pivotal role in shaping the governance and paving the way for colonialism and construction of social norms. This relationship has however evolved into a complex entanglement of faith and power as witnessed during the presidency of Kenya's second president Daniel Moi when the Church was both a political ally and a critic depending on the alignment of interests.¹¹

President William Ruto's 2022 campaign exemplifies the modern dynamics of political influence on the pulpit. Ruto's narrative of being a 'God's chosen leader' resonated largely with a deeply religious electorate thirsty for moral leadership, systemic transformation and dynasty change. It positioned him as a morally superior leader compared to his competitors. Through publicized donations and Church endorsements, his legitimacy as the ideal presidential candidate was cemented. These occurrences are in line with Jesse Mugambi argument that the role of the Church becomes compromised when entangled with power

¹⁰ Nyambura J. Njoroge, "The Missing Voice: African Women Doing Theology," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no. 99 (1997):80.

¹¹ Kapinde, A. Stephen, *The Church and Constitutional Reforms in Kenya, 1992-2002: A Retrospective-Historical Analysis*. European Scientific Journal, 14(5), 216.

structures leaving it unable to critique systemic injustices.¹² History has in a similar manner illustrated how political figures have sought to leverage the pulpit as the ideal space for electoral gain, from national to local political campaign periods.¹³

Implications for Church Credibility

The consequences of political engagement are far reaching. By aligning with political figures, the Church risks losing its neutrality and moral authority. As Kwame Bediako notes, the prophetic role of the Church is compromised when it becomes entangled with power structures leaving it unable to critique systemic injustices.¹⁴ The erosion of trust among congregants, particularly younger generations threaten the very foundation of the Church's influence in Kenyan society.

Silence and Vocality in Offerings and Donations

Selective Silence

Why has the Church in Kenya faced increased criticism for being silent amidst state malfunctioning? Why has the Church been silent when questions are raised about the source of weekly millions donated by political players? Why has the Church been silent when asked to substantiate the writing of Mathew 6:3-4?

“But when you give, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be your secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

For Jesus, giving is largely about intent. Some Churches in their defense have however come out to question the intention asking if Jesus meant we should never give publicly. Some have gone further to argue whether the Church should never tell stories of those who give what they have given. Other have raised concern with regards to who will tell stories of those who receive

¹² Jesse N. Mugambi, *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2003).

¹³ Kenyan campaign archives, church speeches, and donation data from the Moi, Kibaki and Ruto eras.

¹⁴ Kwame Bediako, *Theology and identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Regnum, 1992).

if not the Church. But isn't Jesus' story of giving similar to his views when it comes to prayer? And didn't Jesus Himself pray publicly?

“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, for into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”

Intent. Giving and praying according to Jesus is founded on the pillars of intent. What is the intent of politicians and state officials when they publicly donate millions of embezzled public funds on the Pulpit? Is it for God's glory or for selfish popularity gain? What is the intent of the Church when it's silent during such occurrences?

The silence is most pronounced among evangelical groups that maintain close ties to political leaders. Instances like the National prayer breakfast and the public cleansing of the State House by the office of the First Lady's prayer team in addition to the endorsement of government initiatives through religious blessings reflect a troubling normalization of financial transactions tied to politics.¹⁵ Is the Kenyan community so evil that the office of the First Lady needed a prayer team salaried through hard earned tax payers sweat? By sanitizing questionable funds through public ceremonies and pulpit blessings, the Church is not only compromising its prophetic voice but also indirectly endorses corruption and immorality.

Instances of Vocality

While the Church has often remained silent on controversial donations, there have been notable exemptions when the voice of the Church has been heard. Most notable is the recent statement by the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK) stating that they condemn the use of

¹⁵ Nyambura J. Njoroge, *Beyond the Scandals: Rethinking African Christianity* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2009), 54.

the pulpit for political gain.¹⁶ In addition to this, the Catholic Church stated that they returned a donation of Ksh 5 million from President Ruto.

In its defense, the Catholic Church cited concerns over the ethical implications of accepting such funds whose source is unknown.¹⁷ The Church has also been acknowledged for coming out to speak in solidarity with the Kenyans against the rising cases of abductions, especially targeting the youth. While these moments of vocality are crucial, they are inconsistent and often come out after significant public pressure as in the case of the returned donation which was reportedly solicited by the Church itself before public outcry forced its return.¹⁸

Ethical Considerations and Implications

Accepting political donations raises profound ethical questions. From a theological perspective, the act of giving should align with the Biblical principle of humility.

This is well articulated in Mathew 6:3. To publicly announce donations whether large or small contradicts the principle of fostering a culture of spectacle and promotes inequality within the Church. It affirms that some minorities are more privileged than the majority of citizens, cementing the social class difference that exists in society. Kwame Bediako argues that such practices erode the spiritual and integrity of both the giver and the institution, reducing acts of charity to mere transactions for political or social capital.¹⁹

Impact on the Church and Congregants

Trust Erosion

The financial and political entanglement of the Church has led to a significant erosion of trust among its congregants. This has caused public perception of the Church as a source of moral

¹⁶ National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK), "Statement on Church and Political Neutrality," Nairobi, 2023.

¹⁷ Reports on the Catholic Church's return of donations, various Kenyan media sources.

¹⁸ Public discussions on solicited funds, Kenyan media archives.

¹⁹ Kwame Bediako, *Theology and identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Regnum, 1992).

authority to diminish due to its association and endorsement of corrupt and opportunistic individuals.²⁰ **Jesse Mugambi** argues that when the Church aligns itself with political power, it loses its capacity to serve as a sanctuary for the oppressed and the marginalized.²¹ Such a growing mistrust gives birth to a far reaching implication particularly in rural and low income households and communities that have historically relied on the Church for guidance, support and moral direction.

Perceptions of Gen Z

When younger generations particularly the Gen Z are the forefront of questioning the Church's integrity, it raises concern about the morals of the social fabric and questions about whether the country is headed in the right direction or not. Raised in a digital era where information is accessible and scandals are widely publicized, they are less willing to overlook the Church's complicity in systemic issues like poverty, corruption and abductions.²² According to the Circle of Concerned Women Theologians, Gen Z's activism reflects a broader demand for accountability and justice within religious institutions.²³ The views of the youth is that the Church's financial ties to politicians or immoral standards is a betrayal of its spiritual mission. These further fuels their disillusionment.

Social and Spiritual Consequences

The Church's alignment with political and immoral financial agendas has disrupted communal religious stability and enforced an image of acceptance of social inequality and spiritual alienation as the status quo. In many communities, congregants observe the wealth of politicians celebrated within the Church while they themselves face worsening poverty and neglect. Politicians sell a narrative of the country facing harsh economic times on the pulpit while they themselves lead lavish lives surrounded with millions and bragging in public. This

²⁰ Jesse N. Mugambi, *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2003).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

²² Reports on Gen Z activism and Church criticisms, various Kenyan media sources.

²³ ²³ Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. (2019). *Mother earth, mother Africa and mission*.

disparity fosters a sense of disempowerment among the faithful.²⁴ Theologically, the Church's behavior contradicts the Biblical mandate to advocate and be the voice of the poor and the marginalized. As Nyambura Njoroge notes, the Church must resist becoming a space where wealth is idolized and instead reaffirm its commitment to justice and equity.²⁵ By prioritizing financial gains over spiritual integrity, the Church risks alienating the very communities it is meant to serve.

Reclaiming the Prophetic Voice

Strategies for Ethical Pulpit Practices

It is important the Church recognizes and prioritizes ethical practices that reflect Biblical principles if it is to reclaim its prophetic role. Mathew 6:3 emphasizes humility and discretion in giving. Politicians' donations should be treated with the same discretion as those from ordinary congregants to ensure that there is no special announcements or publicity stunts regardless of the amount or affiliation unless the intent is to glorify God as explained in John 11:41-42.

“So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.”

Publicity in Church prayers and announcements of donations and offerings should only be when its intent is to glorify God's purpose. God does not send corruption and embezzlement of public funds and certainly is not a God of bragging or social inequalities. Why should politicians claim to be 'Chosen by God' yet engage in such acts? Treating everyone as equal within the Church is the foundation of social transformation. Such an approach reinforces the principle of equality before God and eliminates the culture of spectacle surrounding political offerings. The Church should also establish clear boundaries to limit political influence during services. It is crucial that politicians are not allowed to address congregants in religious settings as it undermines the sanctity of worship by shifting focus away from spiritual matters to

²⁴ Kenyan case studies on poverty and Church-political alliances, local media archives.

²⁵ Nyambura J. Njoroge, *Beyond the Scandals: Rethinking African Christianity* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2009), 45.

individualistic gratifications. Instituting these measures helps the Church to root out the culture of worshiping politicians on the pulpit and societal inequality.

Challenging Political Worship on the Pulpit

The Church must confront its complicity in fostering a culture of worshiping politicians due to their large donations as it mirrors the societal tendencies of idolizing wealth and power in the face of poverty. Such a shift however calls upon the Church to return to its foundational mission of serving as a voice for the society, especially the vulnerable. As Nyambura Njoroge argues, the Church must reject financial practices that prioritize wealth over integrity and actively challenge systems of oppression.²⁶ In addition to this, the Church should adopt policies that ensure there is financial transparency especially when it comes to offerings and donations. For public trust, it is important that all financial contributions are documented and audited with results made accessible to congregants because they are the body of the Church. This demonstrates the Church's commitment to accountability.

Engaging with Gen Z Activism

The Kenyan Church has a unique opportunity to partner with Gen Z activists and the youth in general because they are the future and their demand for justice and accountable leadership aligns with the Church's prophetic mission. Consciously supporting youth-led initiatives, creating and leading intergenerational dialogue enables the Church to harness the energy of this generational while at the same time address systemic issues like poverty, corruption and climate change.²⁷ Engaging with the Gen Z also presents a unique opportunity for the Church to modernize its approach to Faith dialogue.

Rooting Out Corruption and Advocating for Justice on the Pulpit

Beyond internal reforms, the Church has a responsibility to advocate for broader systemic change. Desmond Tutu posits that stewardship and social justice is achievable when Churches work together with other ecumenical networks to challenge corruption and promote ethical

²⁶ Nyambura J. Njoroge *Beyond the Scandals: Rethinking African Christianity* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2009), 62.

²⁷ Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. (2019). *Mother earth, mother Africa and mission*.

governance.²⁸ The Church in Kenya can use such engagements to amplify its voice on issues affecting its congregants ranging from economic exploitation to environmental degradation.

CONCLUSION

The Kenyan Church is today caught up within the ethical challenges brought forth by its entanglement with politicians on the pulpit and their immoral practices outside. While the Church is historically reckoned as the beacon of hope and justice, it has increasingly been associated with sanitizing politicians and endorsing propaganda that results to injustice. Through a detailed examination of the political donations on the pulpit, Gen Z activism and the Church's selective silence, this study highlights the moral and social consequences of these dynamics. The demand for the Church to take back its prophetic mission by the Gen Z and Kenyans at large has left the Church's credibility at stake. The Church must not be silent selectively as it alienates congregants and undermines trust when it is only vocal after public outcry.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While the Church in Kenya navigates the turbulent times and acts on the demands post Gen Z protests, it is important that it embraces its responsibility as a moral and spiritual guide. Every stakeholder in the Church therefore has a role to play if the Church is to achieve its God given purpose.

For Church Leaders

It is crucial that the Church seeks out ways to establish clear boundaries that prohibit political figures from addressing congregations during worship. The mandate of the Church is and must remain to lead people to worship God and not to worship political figures. In doing so, the Church should enforce policies that require transparency and accountability in financial contributions prioritizing humility as taught in Mathew 6:3.

For Congregants

The society has a right to demand accountability and transparency from Church leaders regarding tradition and financial practices. As individuals however, the congregation has the

²⁸ Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (Doubleday, 1999).

responsibility to acknowledge that the clergy is not the Church. The Church is the individual. The institution merely reflects the individuals and therefore, the congregants must perform the practices they expect the institution to reflect. If the congregations stop worshiping politicians, the Church as an institution attains gains back its mandate and authority.

For Policymakers

Is the Church ready to have dialogue that calls for regulation of political donations to religious institutions to prevent misuse of public funds and undue influence? There needs to be a collaborative effort with ecumenical networks to promote governance reforms rooted in ethical stewardship.

For Further Research

This study shows that there is need to explore the role of ecumenical networks such as the World Council of Churches (WCC) in fostering accountability within local Churches and investigating the long-term impact of Gen Z or youth activism on Church reforms and governance. The journey towards visible unity must not just be pegged on Faith but also Church and governance as is among congregants.

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