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RELIGION AND POLITICS: EXAMINING THE LIFE AND CONTRIBUTION OF BISHOP ALEXANDER MUGE TO THE STRUGGLE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE IN KENYA IN THE 1980s; BIOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

The late Bishop Alexander Muge, of the Diocese of Eldoret, made remarkable contribution to the struggle and attainment of social justice in Kenya in the 1980s. The unexamined life and contribution of Alexander Muge, who risked and eventually lost his life in the struggle for political reforms and social justice in Kenya in the 1980s under the regime of KANU Government, is the problematic area. Using a historical perspective and applying liberation/salvation theology as understood and used by Latin America liberation theologians and Black South African theologians, the paper examines the early life of Bishop Muge and particularly focuses on his contributions to political reforms, socio-economic empowerment of the society and the entire social justice issues. Right from independence the KANU government of Kenya lost its legitimate role and mandate of being a representative and responsive government whose chief function is to ensure justice for all citizens prevails. By the 1980s, the government had become so dictatorial that the issue of social justice in Kenya was of great concern. The clergymen, the Law Society of Kenya and the civil society spearheaded crusades against social injustices. The Anglican Church of Kenya clergymen led by Bishop Muge fronted the quest for social justice. Alexander Muge dedicated the better part of his priesthood life in the struggle for justice and good governance for the Kenyan society. In fact, it is believed that his death was an attempt by some powerful forces to silence the struggle for social justice. On the basis of full study findings of a Masters defense thesis, the paper argues and concludes that Bishop Alexander Muge left a strong and positive impact and legacy and that the many socio-economic and political transformations and changes that took place in Kenya from the early 1990s, just immediately after the death of Muge, had a direct link with the Bishop's struggle for social justice in Kenya.

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INTRODUCTION

Alexander Kipsang Muge was born in 1948, a fourth-born child in a family of six siblings. Muge was born and brought up in an ordinary rural set up and attended Tangaratwet and Kapkoimur primary schools between 1959 and 1964. He proceeded to Uganda for secondary education in 1965 and his education was cut short by the political upheavals in Uganda in 1966. In 1967, Muge joined the General Service Unit of the Kenya Police force. He served for six years before he retired to join priesthood in 1973. Muge was ordained as an Anglican in 1976, served shortly in the Diocese of Nairobi before

proceeding for a Bachelor of Arts degree in divinity in the UK. Upon completion of the degree, he worked shortly in the Diocese of Nairobi and when the Diocese of Eldoret was opened, Muge was elected as the head of the diocese in June, 1983 thereby becoming the first bishop of the Diocese of Eldoret. The struggle for independence in Kenya was centrally driven by an aim to decolonize and establish an African government that is representative and accountable to the people and with respect for citizens' civil rights, individual freedoms, economic development and social welfare. To realize such liberty, independent political institutions that comprised of elective legislature, responsive presidency, independent judiciary, autonomous and trustworthy public service, and independent electoral bodies was imperative. However, up to the 1980s and even to the present, the desire has not been fully realized. The goal of all this institutions was

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to ensure justice for all. The governance inadequacies witnessed in Kenya in the 1980s originated from the previous political regimes, especially the reluctance to embrace change amid considerable public awareness of civil rights, liberties and obligation on the one hand and government obligation and responsibility on the other. The 1980s and the early 1990s witnessed long standing public controversy between clergymen and politicians in Kenya over the relationship between religion and politics and the role of the church in national development. Politicians became critical of clergymen who commented freely on national political issues, accusing them of misusing the pulpit and even asking them to resign their church ministry and join politics instead. Church leaders, on the other hand maintained that the church cannot be blind to social evils. Vocal clergymen saw their role as complementary to, rather than conflicting with that of politicians in the development of a free and just society. Churches stood their ground that justice and peace are among the major objectives that the churches seek to promote in human societies. The churchmen saw it a duty and calling to advocate for justice and peace in the society. To majority of politicians of the time, the church ought not to speak of anything touching politics and for that, they resisted strongly.

Clergymen have, over time, played important roles and contributed to socio-economic, political and spiritual development of humanity. Because of their expertise in values and integrity, and owing to their extensive presence and reach, faith institutions and their networks offer potential forces in raising government standards in the work of development. Throughout history, faith leaders have raised some of the most courageous and effective voices in effort to combat corruption and promote good governance. In the developing world today, there are many contemporary faith leaders who have devotedly worked hard to fight for social justice and stood for truth. For example Archbishops Desmond Tutu and Njongonkulu Ndungane of South Africa, cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maridiaga of Honduras and Bishop David Gitari, Henry Okullu, Rev. Timothy Njoya and Alexander Muge, of Kenya. Social science theories, just like other sciences' theories help to explain social phenomena. In this case, the theoretical framework applied to explain Muge's struggle for social justice in Kenya in the 1980s is liberation theology.

The principles of liberation theology as articulated by the founders and proponents of the theology, especially in the Latin America, claimed and pursued a holistic approach in addressing socio-economic and political challenges in society. Liberation theology had notable achievements. One, it was able to commit the Latin American Church to the defense of the poor and oppressed. The movement trained some of the leaders on new democracy in Brazil, encouraged grassroots community action, provided dignity and self-respects to thousands of the marginalized and the oppressed. The theology gave support the policies that promoted the struggles for the poor. In Nicaragua European women composed songs in praise of, and thanksgiving to liberation theology. In Africa, the theology was able to unite theologians of various appeals to have a common approach to apartheid. The theologians were able to share the country's historical experience, and that of colonial Africa as a whole. The movement pursued a wholesome approach, that is, liberation from all forms of

socio-economic, political and spiritual oppressions. The relevance of liberation theology was evident in the manner in which Bishop Muge, the NCCCK and the clergymen as a whole approached the issue of social justice. Muge applied a holistic approach in addressing and articulating for social justice. He upheld the principle that issues of socio-economic and political governance should not be left to the politicians alone. The Bishop strongly believed that the church should firmly and positively participate in all aspects affecting human life and that the church should be a moral compass of the society. The liberation theology was therefore relevant and useful in exploring the contribution of Alexander Muge and the struggle for social justice in Kenya in the the 1980s. Keeping the above theoretical perspective in mind, the objectives were: To examine Muge's role and contribution in the fight for social justice in Kenya in the 1980s and to evaluate Muge's efforts in empowering the Kenyan society socio-economically and politically.

Data collected included primary data through interviews. Examination of archival data, manuscripts, newspaper clippings and minutes and photographs. Secondary data comprised of magazines, newspapers and documentaries. Despite the nature of Muge's public life that made his active life widely documented, interviews constituted an integral source of data. Purposive sampling was used. Using snowballing, the study identified. Interview schedules were used to elicit data from fifty interviewees drawn equally from the clergymen, local residents (villagers), close friends of Muge, the family and relatives, and politicians. The method works effectively even among the illiterate groups and produces satisfactory results due to personal contact. The interviewer had the opportunity to ensure questions are understood. Interview approach also provided room for the researcher for further probing of the interviewees. Additional questions were applied when an interviewee deliberately or unconsciously avoided some questions. Notes were taken in the course of the interview.

Sampling Procedure

The study used purposive sampling method. Purposive sampling method was applied to identify an informed representative sample of fifty informants. Using snowballing, the researcher interviewed fifty respondents that comprised of ten members drawn from five categories of respondents namely; the clergymen, local residents (villagers), friends of Muge, the family and politicians. Snowballing was equally used to arrive at the ten informants from each of the five categories of respondents. In identifying Muge's close friends, the widow of the late Muge was consulted. The researcher also consulted the identified friends who named the next. Finally, the identified respondents were rated leaving only ten most informed and reliable in each category. The same approach was used to identify locals knowledgeable about Muge's life history. Regarding politicians, snowballing was applied in a manner that gave five politicians that were pro-Muge and five who did not agree with Muge's approach to politics. The purpose was to reduce biases and strike a balance. Regarding clergymen, the same procedure was applied which gave knowledgeable clerics who served during Muge's tenure. The five categories covered the content area of the study. On the

issue of analysis the study employed the narrative analysis. The researcher examined the spoken and written texts about the Bishop. In the study, Muge's struggle for social justice and democracy was examined. Out of the collected data, texts were selected, organized, connected and evaluated in order to realize meaningful solution to the problem of the study.

Findings of the Research

Bishop Muge and the struggle for social justice in Kenya

Bishop Muge spent the better part of his priestly life fighting for social justice, and the empowerment of society socially, economically, spiritually and even politically. Right from the early times when Muge served as a priest in Nairobi, he proved himself a crusader for social justice. It is at this level of Muge's life that his contribution to the struggle for social justice in Kenya came out clearly. He stamped out his authority as a fighter against all forms of injustices in society, whether in the Church, the government or the secular world.

Muge devoted his life entirely to advocacy and the proclamation of social truth. The bishop strongly believed in the power of the pulpit to transform and reform the society. He defended the poor and the oppressed from the greed of corrupt government officials whose desire was just to enrich themselves at the expense of the poor. So much was his commitment that Muge declared his personal security as secondary compared to the mission of spreading the gospel. He condemned corruptions of all forms ranging from land grabbing, embezzlement of public funds and bribery among others. He often turned to and warned the church in Kenya against involvement in corruption.

The bishop maintained that the Church as the nation's conscience must rid itself of anything that could rob it of its moral authority and as such, the study found Muge to have been the conscience of the society and greatly influenced social justice in Kenya in the 1980s. Away from corruption, Muge advocated for a democratic society. Despite dictatorial tendencies exercised during the one-party era politics, Muge stood courageously and openly condemned practices that undermined true democracy. In the late 1980s, Muge had become the most outspoken among a few clergymen who could dare take the KANU government by its horns. The democracy issues articulated by Bishop Muge included electoral laws and procedures, freedoms of expression, thought movement and association, the rule of law, separation of powers that have checks and balances and human rights.

Muge strongly fought against the queue voting system introduced by KANU in the 1980s, disobedience to and the breaking of the law by senior government officials, the mutilation of the law to suit KANU's desires and policies such as removal of the security of tenure of the Attorney general and the Chief Justice. Muge also opposed the suspension of MPs from KANU for exercising their democratic freedoms of expression and the restriction and control of movement according to the degree of one's loyalty to the ruling party; a demonstration that he cherished and fought for freedom and democracy for all. Despite a barrage of condemnation and threats from politicians and other KANU loyalists, Muge stood firm, focused and resilient; and for that matter

encouraged other members and bodies of the society to rise up and fight for their constitutional rights and freedoms. In fact, it is during the late 1980s when Muge had become very outspoken for championing freedom and democracy that the country witnessed wide spread demonstration against dictatorial tendencies by the one party, KANU. Muge persistently reminded politicians and the government as a whole of democratic trends in the world and particularly the wave of change that was sweeping across Eastern Europe. The KANU regime under president Moi finally bowed down to the waves of social reform and change. Owing to Muge's contribution Kenya realized and witnessed democratic changes and other social reforms in the early 1990s. Democratic reforms such as the repeal of Section (2a) to make Kenya a Multiparty State, the formation of Inter-Party Parliamentary Group (IPPG), the need for constitutional changes and the freedom of the press are some of the things Muge effectively articulated for.

Muge's Socio-economic empowerment of the society

Muge did not restrict himself to issues of politics and governance but made great contribution in empowering the Kenyan society socio- economically, particularly the Diocese of Eldoret. The history of the growth of the Diocese of Eldoret owes a lot to Muge's efforts. It is due to the bishop's exceptional commitment and vigour that the diocese grew tremendously in terms of spreading the gospel, human resource recruitment and development, infrastructure development and innovation and service delivery to the society. For example, despite being among the youngest dioceses in Kenya then, it was rated to be the most computerized and effective in growth and communication. The bishop inspired, mentored and harnessed the youth to spreading the gospel to remote and un-entered areas of the diocese; for which he was elected the Kenya Anglican Youth Organization (KAYO) chairman from 1984 to the time of his death.

Bishop Muge played a big role in the fight against poverty, disease and ignorance in the Diocese of Eldoret. Muge initiated a battery of socio-economic community projects aimed at empowering and emancipating humanity from poverty and disease. To that end, Muge demonstrated his believe in a holistic approach to the gospel. He stood for the principle that for humanity to live a dignified life that God purposed, humanity should be liberalized and freed from poverty, diseases and ignorance. As articulated by many people who interacted with him either directly or indirectly, Muge was totally against human suffering or oppression and did all within his efforts to bring liberty. Muge underscored the importance of education as an avenue of getting rid of poverty and other sufferings. Many educational institutions in the Diocese of Eldoret, be they primary, secondary or other levels of institutions of education; benefitted a lot from Muge's support. The support was material as well as human resource; and included books, infrastructure, water supply, finance, teachers and pastoral care. Health facilities such as Kimng'oror Health Centre, Kapsabet CITC, Kibagenge Conference Centre, small-scale business facilities and loans, Maize mills for women groups among others were some of his efforts to empower the society.

The study observed that the diocese organized for entrepreneur and farmers training seminars to sensitize and create awareness about modern trends of the same in the world. The projects have had invaluable and long lasting positive impacts in the society. By any standards, Muge as a person and as a clergyman achieved much beyond what ordinary men and women can achieve. Though human and humble, as testified by those who worked and interacted with him, Muge had exceptional courage and conviction for truth and justice that could not yield to pressure, threats; or sink to the cheap and sensational waves of politics, falsehoods and corruption. He was not a conformist, an attribute which made him be wrongly termed as controversial. Muge practiced a philosophy of life free from, and way above tribalism, religious inclination, denomination and social class. He believed that all human beings are creatures of God and equal before Him. Muge's outstanding achievements on issues of peace and justice informed and prompted the NCKK to set an award to be given to any person, who personifies Muge's spirit for the struggle for peace and justice; given every 14th August of each year. Across the world, Muge had friends who admired and cherished the integrity, enthusiasm and vitality with which he served the Diocese of Eldoret and the entire Kenyan society at large. In that connection, Muge was honoured with membership of various distinguished bodies and was often invited to international events and functions such as the inauguration of Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa and many others in America and Europe.

Conclusion

Bishop Alexander Muge left a strong positive impact and legacy which will inspire and encourage the society for many years to come. The many socio- economic and political transformations and changes that took place from the early 1990s, just immediately after the death Muge, have a direct link with the bishop's struggle for social justice in Kenya. The study concludes that due to the bishop's concerted efforts against injustice, with some few other clergymen, not only inspired and encourage others, but gave many hope and determination to fight on. On the other hand, the persistent and resilient fight by Muge and accomplice finally broke the camel's back thereby making the KANU government yield to the wave of change, freedom and democracy. Muge's struggle for democracy and the many subsequent changes that occurred in Kenya in the early 1990s, were rightly attributed to the Bishop's efforts together with a few other clergymen civil society activists.

In fact, most of the issues raised and articulated by the Diocese of Eldoret in the memorandum presented to the Kanu Review Committee looking into electoral issues, chaired by the late vice president, George Saitoti, were implemented between 1990 and 2002.

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