

NEWS & OPINIONS

Interactions Between Science and Religion in Kenya: Opening Remarks by the Chief Guest

Mwenda Ntarangwi

Introduction

In August 2018 I was invited to be a chief guest at a Regional Conference organized by the Christian and Scientific Association of Kenya (CSAK). The conference, with the theme of “Interaction of Science and Religion in Africa: Current and Future Perspectives,” drew in participants from universities and research institutes in Kenya and the UK as well as administrators from diverse backgrounds. CSAK started in 2016 as a professional, non-political, and non-sectarian organization aimed at bringing together science and religion into a synergetic interaction. As a Christian and a practicing cultural anthropologist, the conference piqued my interest, and I was eager to participate and share my thoughts on the topic. Here are the remarks I shared at the conference.

The Address

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.
Good morning!

It is a great honor to join you today for this Christian and Scientific Association of Kenya (CSAK) Regional Conference on the current and future perspectives on interactions between science and religion in Africa. I want to note that I have personally been interested in this interaction and I am quite pleased with the steps taken by CSAK to bring the two together in a way that I know will help prosper our communities.

In 2013, I hosted a lunch conversation in Nairobi for a group of pastors, academics, students, theologians, and laity on the topic of faith and science. I wanted to hear from these people what kind of conversations or language, if any, existed in the broader Kenyan academy (among Christians) on matters of faith and science. I knew in my days of undergraduate education at Kenyatta University that there was this assumed “truth” stating that if a born-again Christian took courses in philosophy, for instance, he/she would backslide and leave the faith. This “truth” must have been premised on the

assumption that the art of asking questions which one learns in philosophy was a dangerous undertaking for Christian faith.

At that lunch meeting there was no opportunity provided to the participants for paper presentations or prepared remarks. Instead participants were asked to share what was in their hearts or what we term in Swahili “*kufungua Roho*” (opening your heart). The plan was to minimize any hints of academic hierarchy that can often come with scholarly presentations in an audience of mixed abilities. The meeting was scheduled for two hours but we found ourselves going on for over four hours. I knew I had touched an important nerve.

During the conversation, someone asked, “now that we can use science to explain certain phenomena that were considered complex in Old Testament culture, such as epilepsy, what happens to my faith?” Another one asked, “we prayed for someone who was sick and later she went to see a doctor and got healed. What healed her? Modern medicine or our prayers?” Another talked about a Sunday school class of twelve-year olds that was told of the miracle of Jesus feeding five thousand people, and the class stunned their teacher by shouting in unison “*uongo! uongo!* [lies! lies!] in response to the biblical story.

That lunch meeting unearthed for me a shared experience that many Christians in Kenya have but is hardly acknowledged—that we all question, sometimes even have doubts about our faith, and that we need to have safe spaces to not only ask but process questions and collectively seek answers. We cannot ignore the role science plays in shaping our worldview and how it infiltrates our faith. Many pastors today proclaim the word of God to congregations living in a world shaped mostly by science, from medicine, to cell phones, to distance travel. Science and its assumptions and methods have shaped our thinking too. When a pastor uses potassium permanganate to show his power of deliverance in Nairobi, he is using the scientific thinking of material evidence for proof of spiritual

phenomena.¹ Science is such a part of us that we have often taken it for granted.

Another participant at the lunch meeting said she left the church many years ago because she found it a closed space to an inquisitive mind. I too can relate to that kind of experience, but thank God, I never left the church. I was helped by my understanding that God's revelation comes to us through two books—the written book of the Bible and the created book of the natural world. We all have questions and we all are participants in the complex worlds of science and faith. Sometimes we live as if they are separate worlds. I am reminded of an example that Dr. Chip Kingsbury from Daystar University gave regarding applied knowledge. He said that a nursing student is taught the causes of the common cold, learns the complex science behind viruses, bacteria, and germs. At the end of the course he/she takes exams, passes them and goes on to practice as a nurse. But when he/she has a child who wants to play outside with others he/she makes sure he/she has lots of layers of clothes on so that the child does not catch a cold. Maybe you and I know of others who have these two separate realities—the world of science and the world of faith.

But ladies and gentlemen we are gathered here because we see both worlds as interacting all the time and also that these two worlds are not at all opposed to each other. It is probably our fault as practitioners that we tend to create the dichotomies and tensions we assume exist between the two. This conference is one way to say that science and religion are not only compatible but are companions.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we are aware that the current push in our education and training is in STEM—Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics—as the engine that will unlock Africa's development challenges. Interestingly a while ago Katherine Marshall, who worked for the World Bank on many development projects in Africa, concluded that faith is critical for Africa's development. Marshall was showing that the two go hand in hand. It is, therefore, encouraging to see that CSAK has recognized this fact and is working towards breaking the assumed dichotomy between science and religion. The establishment of CSAK as a platform for facilitating the discourse between science and religion in the African context is an important one not only for Kenya but also for the region.

Interestingly, there seem to be no such dichotomies in many traditional African cultures and thought. Both religion and science are blended in everyday life and thinking. Many African cultures, for instance advocate

for conservation of sacred areas such as forests that facilitate mediation of the natural and supernatural worlds of plant and animal life. Growing up, we knew of the value of many plants and animals. Many had taboos tagged onto them for protection. It is only much later that I learned the medicinal value of some of the plants that were taboo to destroy. These natural areas remain biological hotspots teeming with all kinds of creatures and plant cover that help conserve the environment and attract rainfall. This kind of interaction between cultural and natural phenomena is important for understanding our world and solving our challenges.

This is the era of interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary work. It is an era that says my faith shapes my professional work and vice versa. We cannot be two separate individuals—one a scientist on Monday through Friday and a religious person on Saturday or Sunday. Thank you.



Dr. Mwenda Ntarangwi is the CEO and Commission Secretary for Commission for University Education (CUE) in Kenya. He holds a B.Ed. (Language Education) and MA (Swahili Cultural Studies) from Kenyatta University and a MA and PhD (Cultural Anthropology) from the University of Illinois. Dr. Ntarangwi has taught anthropology and other related courses for two decades and carried out administrative work in different capacities including serving as Vice President at Theological Book Network in Grand Rapids, MI; as the Executive Director IAPCHE and Associate Director Office of Off-Campus Programs at Calvin College in Michigan; as the Director, African and African Diaspora Studies (AADS) at Calvin College; and Director and Assistant Professor St Lawrence University—Kenya Semester Program. Dr. Ntarangwi, an Associate Professor of Anthropology, is widely published on popular culture, youth, and the practice of anthropology. His publications include *The Street is my*

¹ In 2014 Victor Kanyari, a self-proclaimed prophet and pastor in Nairobi, was reported to have used potassium permanganate when praying for some of his congregants as a way of showing he had the power to remove evil spirits from their bodies and displayed the red substance (blood) that was coming out of their limbs.

Pulpit: Hip Hop and Christianity in Kenya, 2016, University of Illinois Press; *Reversed Gaze: An African Ethnography of American Anthropology*, 2010, University of Illinois Press; *Jesus and Ubuntu: Exploring the Social Impact of Christianity in Africa*, 2011, Africa World Press; *East African Hip Hop: Youth Culture and Globalization*, 2009, University of Illinois Press; and, *Engaging Children and Youth in Africa: Methodological and Phenomenological Issues*, 2015, CODESRIA Books (co-edited with Guy Massart).

Author email: mwendantarangwi@gmail.com
