

A Christian Look at The "Occupy" Movement In Kenya

By Reuben Kigame

Is the "occupy" movement antithetic to the Christian faith?

Can the Church be "occupied?"

Should Christians be involved in the "Occupy" demonstrations?

To answer the first question, in order to decide whether the "Occupy" movement enhances or diminishes Christianity, one would need to look closely and honestly at the aims of the movement. My reading of the movement, and especially as summarized in Noam Chomsky's 2012 book, "Occupy" (Zuccotti Park Press) makes me conclude that the movement enhances and promotes biblical Christianity more than it diminishes it.

What is Noam Chomsky's main argument in the book? He argues that "occupy" is not anarchist. It desires Reform rather than Revolution, advocating governmental support for economic growth over austerity measures. Chomsky discusses the importance of getting the corporate sector out of politics and how to introduce greater democracy in nations. In my estimation, inclusive democracy is not antithetic to biblical democracy. God is interested in the care for the Quartet of "the poor, widows, orphans and refugees (strangers)" and, through the prophets, condemns the capitalistic exploitation of people by a rich elite, e.g. in the book of Amos where He calls for justice to roll down like water." (Amos 5:24).

Chomsky discusses how the Occupy movement could hope to influence and control the Foreign Policy of nations, directing it away from its support for autocratic regimes and military interventionism. he argues that the protests of the 1930s led to the formation of the "New Deal", and that the protests against the Iraqi war although unable to stop the conflict – helped to moderate the use of weaponry utilized by the U.S. I hold the same opinion for resistance to the Vietnam War as well as the events of the Glasnost and Perestroika in Russia under Gorbachev leading to the fall of the Berlin Wall. I believe in the nonviolent resistance of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr, the fight against Nazi madness by Christians like Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Germany as well as the anti-apartheid resistance by Nelson Mandela and his Umkhonto We Sizwe. For the same reason, the Mau Mau movement was good for everyone in Kenya, including Christians. My opinion is that this is not antithetic to Christianity.

In recent years, my heart has been deeply warmed as I have studied the nexus of music and social justice. Although there have been only lone voices in the church singing songs of social transformation, their work has been phenomenal. My favourite social justice musician remains Anglican priest, Canon Garth Hewitt with a diskography of more than 40 albums, civil rights voice of Louisiana-born and bred Mahalia Jackson and Kenya's Juliani. The efforts of these Christian voices in defending people-centred godly transformation are in keeping with Noam Chomsky's social vision.

So, we move to the second question: Can the Church be "occupied?" My straight answer is "no." I have three reasons for my stand. First, we must understand that the word "church" does not refer to buildings and edifices, hence Church is not merely institutional. The word "Church" is translated from the Greek "Ecclesia" which means "those who are called" out of the paganism and secularism of a corrupt world into a

union and fellowship with God through the knowledge of and obedience to the teaching of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the Church is a community of faith. It is people, and not sanctuaries. Christians are a community that crosses the limitation of geographical or national boundaries. The cry for justice and truth by Kenyan Christians is the same as that of Christians in Asia or Syria. Followers of Christ can meet and worship in a huge cathedral, but they have also been known to worship under trees, in tents and even online. Therefore, to "occupy" Church would be synonymous with occupying people, and, to my knowledge, only Jesus, the Holy Spirit or demons can do that. Secondly, nobody can "occupy" the Church because all authority in heaven and on earth is ultimately in the hands of Christ (Matthew 28:18-20) and one of these days the kingdoms of this world will become the Kingdoms of our God (Isaiah 11:1-9). We sing it at Christmas that the "government will be on His shoulders." (Isaiah 9:6). It is Jesus who told His disciples that He would build His Church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. (Matthew 16:18). Thirdly, it is absurd to occupy or seek to reform an institution or movement that supports equitable distribution of resources as seen in Acts chapter 6 and many Old Testament Scriptures.

Last but not least, should Christians be involved in the "Occupy" demonstrations? My answer is "yes they should." I must add that I have personally been involved and so I am not asking you to believe or do what I have no commitment to myself. My reasons for involvement include the call in Proverbs 31:8-9 which says, "Speak for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor." I do this with all my heart and strength in obedience to God to whom I owe my highest allegiance. I do so on social media but also on the streets. I have marched and chanted with the Gen Z's in Eldoret, Nairobi and Mombasa. I have driven to police stations, court rooms and the office of the DPP to plead for the

release of protesters. It is tough and dangerous to do all this, especially as a blind man, but challenges must bow before God's call. Proverbs 21:13 says whoever closes his ear to the cry of the poor will himself call out and will not be answered. In Genesis 21:25, Abraham protested against king Abimelech because of a waterhole which Abimelech's servants had snatched from him by force. Leviticus 19:17 cautions against bitterness in protests but encourages them: "Let there be no hate in your heart for your brother; but you may make a protest to your neighbour, so that he may be stopped from doing evil." Solomon further states that "A word of protest goes deeper into one who has sense than a hundred blows into a foolish man. He adds in 27:5: "Better is open protest than love kept secret. I could go on and on.

Of course, there are those who will look at one side of Scripture such as Romans 13 and argue that we should obey government no matter how wicked it is because all authority of government is from God. If we were to accept this kind of reasoning and interpretation of Scripture, it would lead to the justification of dictatorship, murder, abductions and torture as the will of God. In that case, nobody should resist the devil or run away from sin because they exist in a world God made. Not all authority is from God. Jesus and the first disciples lived under the tyranny of the Roman empire. Herod in fact wanted to kill Jesus when he was a child. Later as a grown up, Jesus likened Herod to a fox. (Luke 13:32). Yes, God will allow the installation and removal of rulers, but it does not mean that all these rulers do is under God's license and blessing. God, in fact, reserves sovereign power to Himself and, regarding the Church, we must remember what we said earlier, viz, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Christ (Matthew 28:18-20). Even in a permissive sense where human governments are allowed to have power, what they do with that power is not arbitrarily the work of God. Indeed, in the days of Prophet Samuel, when Israel wanted to have a king, God allowed them to

but warned that kings would oppress and mistreat the people. Saul, the first king of Israel, failed the test of obedience to God, but David succeeded to please God by being "a man after God's own heart." (1 Samuel 13:14). We must have a balanced view of Scripture and apply everything within a broader understanding of the whole Bible and not just parts. So, let us meet at the next protest. As long as it is peaceful, I am in. In most cases, it is the government that sponsors goons and encourages police brutality in demonstrations. I believe God is always on the side of truth and justice, hence it is our spiritual mandate to join protesters who fight for these things.

In conclusion, I have one piece of advice to the "Occupy Movement." It is very easy to picket and demand for governments and individual leaders to be just and accountable. What about us ourselves? How are we performing on that scale of justice and accountability? I think it is very common for us to want to remove the speck in the eye of someone else when there might be a log in our own. So, I insist that before we occupy the statehouse, parliament, court houses, religious institutions etc., we should occupy ourselves. We need to occupy our thought-life, our emotions, our mouths and the way we speak, our actions and relationships, but most of all, we need to occupy our hearts.

God bless you.