

**‘Religion and Politics in Kenya’
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1 The religious culture of the Kenyan imagination

28 July 04: Bishop of Liverpool, James Jones, was reflecting on religion and the environment in Radio 4’s ‘God Slot’, i.e., ‘Thought for the day’ in the morning’s news magazine, the Today Programme. He remarked that the only place he had ever heard the Lord’s Prayer said with the correct pronunciation by a mass congregation was in All Saints Cathedral, Nairobi, where, without a pause at the end of the line after ‘on earth’, the people prayed ‘Thy will be done on earth—as it is in Heaven’. Bishop Jones speculated that that was because Kenyans lived closer to the soil than did Britons, who, not seeing the connection between God and the environment, always leave a pause between God’s will and the earth on which it should be seen to be done.

But it is not only in the Cathedral that Kenyans get their religious imagery correct, or where they produce their religious imagery. It is everywhere.

The sergeant of police who took my statement after I was mugged, 1994: ‘And then a Good Samaritan came by. . .’ Those were his words, not mine, making his own sense of my narrative.

The correspondents to the newspapers who compared KANU rule to Israel’s Babylonian exile.

Or Mr Mburu from Murang’a, who wrote to *The People*, (‘Fair, Frank and Fearless’) 9 Sept 2002, warning the Luo people that their popular leader Raila Odinga had made a mistake in taking his party, the National Democratic Party into a merger with KANU: ‘You are being taken back to Egypt by your Joshua. Your Joshua has feared to cross [the] River Jordan, unlike the Joshua of the Bible.’ But Mr Mburu had no trouble in switching to a less Biblical, more vernacular, political image in his next paragraph:- ‘I am asking you not to be misled by Raila and his bunch of eaters while you have no bone to chew.’ In Kenya, as in most of the rest of Africa, political power is expressed in the imagery of the belly, of eating and being eaten, or of being famished by political failure. Joshua and the belly are each as homely as the other.

One could go on. But the pervasiveness of Biblical imagery and metaphor raises the question: is this because Kenya is predominantly Christian (as it is)? Or because the Bible has become the nearest thing to a national narrative, a storehouse of universally recognised moral and political images? Ngugi wa Thiongo, an avowed atheist, has complained that he simply cannot escape it if he wishes to make himself understood in his novels.

This is a question that applies not only to contemporary Kenya. Writing back to the CO in 1941 about a possible federation of the 3 British East African territories, the Governor of Kenya called them a possible Trinity, with Kenya as God the Father, Uganda as God the Son, but with Tanganyika, then with the rather special legal status as a League of Nations Mandated territory, a very reluctant God the Holy Spirit, indeed as more often the ghost at the feast. Even the Governor of Kenya admitted he was no theologian, but fell naturally into this mode of speech. We would certainly be

unwise to conclude from his imagery that theology ruled the colonial official mind. It would be equally unwise to conclude similarly about contemporary Kenya.

2 Nonetheless, the problem:

As in much of the rest of Africa, Kenya's 'second independence' in the early 1990s, with the return of MPD, owed much to a growing Christian critique—and clerical critique, not necessarily the same thing—of authoritarian, corrupt, and inefficient one-party rule that was condemning ever more Kenyans to poverty and misery—especially disturbing after nearly two decades of some economic growth since independence, and political stability, had given rise to talk of Kenyan exceptionalism.

As I say, the churches were important. That is, the 'mainstream' churches, Catholic, Presbyterian, Anglican, heirs of churches which were and are more or less 'established' in their western homes. Who used a standard incarnational theology, which holds that while the realms of God and Caesar may be autonomous, and while secular authority can be said, echoing St Paul to the Romans, to be divinely authorised, nonetheless there are Biblical and Christian justifications for insisting on consultative government (Isaiah 18: 1), on the protection of the human rights of God's children, and that the more abundant life such as Christ said he had come to bring requiring more personal moral responsibility than an authoritarian state would permit.

Kenya's evangelical churches, with a conservative theology, were more preoccupied with a call for the personal brokenness of being born again to a salvation that did not depend upon political activism but upon faith. Coincidentally, thanks to the accidents of the missionary politics that carved out 'spheres of influence' for evangelism in the early 20th century, these evangelical churches, heirs to American congregationalist and baptist nonconformity, are strongest among those pastoralist peoples who provided the core political geography of the then ruling party, KANU. By contrast, the Presbyterians are confined almost entirely to Kikuyuland, the core of the then opposition, while the Anglicans too are a largely Kikuyu and Luo church, although in recent years they, like the Catholics before them, have become a much more 'Kenyan' church. The regional character of Christian denominationalism in Kenya—as also of Islam—makes it peculiarly difficult to distinguish between theological principle and ethnic or regional frustration as spurs to clerical pronouncements on political matters.

While many other interests in civil society were also mobilised, while political rivalry had its own factional bases and a self-interest in more open political competition, while international pressure from donor states was also important, perhaps in the end decisive, nonetheless the mainstream churches can indeed claim to have acted as defenders of the people of God against dictatorship. Still more, the Christian critique of unjust rule and efforts at voter education could be said to have raised the people's hopes of just governance and constitutional reform (to defend against such bad governance in future) that brought the landslide victory of the Rainbow Coalition in 2002 that ended 41 years of increasingly kleptocratic KANU rule.

And yet the Kenya political class appears to be just as corrupt as ever. The BHC Edward Clay became a popular hero to Kenyans when he complained last month that the greedy over-eating of the new govt was causing it to vomit over the shoes of its donor partners overseas. A former student of mine, a devout Adventist

but with a Cambridge PhD, e-mails me to the effect that only God can save Kenya from its present fate: *he evidently* saw no future in political anger fired by godly indignation.

Why then can a religious critique of governance in Kenya be said to have both so much effect, and yet so little? Is the pervasiveness of Biblical imagery, then, profoundly misleading as an indicator of political culture? I rather think it may be.

For who are God's children in Kenya?

3 God's children: class and ethnicity

3 points:

a) Kenya's political elite formation has been historically based on mission schooling in the vernacular. These elites, formed within ethnic groups and subject to ethnic expectations of ethnic sones, were the inheritors of state—that is, national—power at independence. The prevalence of the sons of chiefs has been noticeable in all the independence governments. But these elites have also been subject to grave popular, ethnic, suspicions: of their cultural cringe, of their loss of moral agency thanks to their educated lack of respect for the disciplines of tradition, of their vulnerability to being bought by outside interests. The Kenyan political class is an elite with all the authority of education, and subject to all the inherent ethnically taught suspicion of power that lacks social rootedness in the local community. It is an elite both formed by and crippled by ethnic pride and envy. Nor have the churches escaped a similar elite formation. Kenya's children of God are rarely Kenyans at large—unless they be Roman Catholics, of whom I know all too little.

b) But, there is another Kenya and another Christianity. The Kenya of towns and pentecostalism (Ranger 1999). Pentecostalism cuts its converts off from their ethnic pasts and culture, calling them the works of the Devil; it appeals to individuals in the multi-ethnic urban crowd, not to cultural communities. Its children of God are Kenyans, speakers of Sheng. But where does Pentecostalism provide a critique of governance? Dr Njoya, I believe correctly, describes it as a 'survival strategy for the poor', allowing them to live in individual hope rather than in collective despair (interview, 30 viii 04).

c) So the churches with potentially political voices are the churches of the rural areas and ethnic regions—just as most powerful politicians are careful to nurse rural rather than unnervingly multi-ethnic and volatile urban constituencies. This rural foundation to Kenya's mainstream Christianities has important implications for their political theologies, with respect to class and community.

i) Kenya's ethnic moralities stressed obedience to elders (who knew how to survive and produce a posterity) and the hard labour of household management and production that proved one's adult maturity. In what was once a resource-abundant (if fickle) environment, self-discipline brought material security while poverty, on the same logic, was the consequence of fecklessness. It is not by accident that Kibaki has called Kenya 'a working nation', just as Kenyatta demanded *uhuru na kazi*. Njoya's concept of human dignity is founded on work, whether crossing sweeper or President. Kenya's churches are ill-equipped by culture and theology to call for a politics of redistribution, even if they are nonetheless clear that a kleptocratic state stands condemned for its creation of joblessness.

ii) If a theology of class does not come naturally to Kenyan Christians, nor does a theology of nationhood. Kenyan Christianities are rooted in ethnic moralities that in stressing individual (rather than structural) responsibility for wealth and poverty also emphasise faithfulness to tradition and (local) hierarchy as the guarantor of social discipline. Kenyatta was not alone in arguing that each community had a responsibility to fight its own struggle for freedom, that to organise a national front, led by a vanguard group or ethnicity, was to deny less angry communities the self-mastery that alone made them worthy citizens of Kenya.

iii) This very Kenyan theology was founded upon the notion that social continuity was best seen in a 'good death', of an elder laden with years and the material fruits of his own and his children's self-disciplined labour, someone who by virtue of their example of 'straight' living would in time become an honoured ancestor. This theology, both traditional and Christian, is most radically challenged by the great catastrophe of HIV/AIDS. A challenge that neither traditional nor Christian theology seem willing to face up to.

General belief that death from AIDS is a bad death, the result of sin. Christian burial very difficult, therefore. > secrecy, social death: cut off *both* from the community of saints *and* from future ancestry. Eg:- Boniface, a Protestant priest (53):

'If people are using all possible means to conceal HIV or AIDS, I would doubt that any family would be willing to name a child after that person. You see, if you die of AIDS you are already an outcast, just like a witch, and our society believes that the one you name bears the personal traits of the dead. For example, if your grandfather was a great chief or warrior, many of the grandchildren would be named after him. I, for one, cannot imagine naming my child after a person who dies of AIDS. I know that's superstition, but that is also culture.'

[Nzioka, in *Culture Health & Sexuality*, 2, 1 (2000)]

Finally,

4 Religion and the state: five concluding points:-

a) I start with a critique of the dominant trend in western political science about African political thought. Scholars like Michael Schatzberg, in *Political Legitimacy in Middle Africa: Father, Family, Food* (Indiana UP 2001) or Jean-François Bayart, in *The State in Africa*, argue that Africans are particularly vulnerable to authoritarian government, because Africa lacks any tradition of the separation of powers; African chiefs and presidents, they argue, tend to monopolise 'the only one word' of legitimate authority. But that is what Presidents argue in their own self-interest (eg. Moi's *Kenya African Nationalism: Nyayo Philosophy and Principles* (Macmillan 1986). And of course it is not true. Long traditions of the (contentious) separation of powers between kings and priests in Buganda, Zululand, Asante, Ethiopia, etc; between invasive newcomers and 'native' communities 'who know the land' (cf Kopytoff, *The African Frontier*); and within Yorubaland's Aladura churches, with the tripartite leaderships of prophet, priest, and chief (Peel, *Aladura*). So let nobody

deceive the Kenyan churches into believing that there is something un-African, or constitutionally improper, about ecclesiastical comments on political issues.¹

Nonetheless (b), insofar as Africa can be said to have a liberation theology, it is generally favourable to independent state power, as in *Romans 13*. Gideon Githiga argues—in *The Church as the Bulwark against Authoritarianism* (Regnum, Oxford 2001) and in a recent e-mail—that Kenya’s Christians, both missionary and native, have four times in the past century regarded the state as providential liberator of God’s people, only later to wake up to each successive state’s defects in that role. Missionaries regarded colonial rule as infinitely to be preferred to the slavery and violence that had characterised pre-colonial Kenya, and were slow to protest against forced labour and other policies that helped to subject Africans to white-settler supremacy. African churchmen welcomed the Presidency of Kenyatta as liberating African moral agency from alien rule, and were reluctant to recognise the evil of, for instance, the ‘oathing crisis’ that followed Mboya’s murder in 1969 (cf, Lonsdale, Booth-Clibborn and Hake). Similarly, the ‘nyayo’ regime was for long given the benefit of the doubt, since it had initially set out to reverse some of the growing social inequalities of the Kenyatta era. And the Rainbow government has today had a honeymoon period in the opinions of Kenya’s Christians. Moreover, with free and fair elections in 2002 that brought a landslide victory for a coalition of opposition parties, many church leaders will feel, with justice, that their critical work has been done. They can rest, like God, on this Sabbath day, while secular multi-party competition and a free press can play their proper role in defending God’s people in Kenya against the potential tyranny of state power (Bp Stephen Mwangi).

And there is no doubt that the power of the state has again and again be seen by the churches as fundamentally beneficial, a bulwark itself against widely feared tendencies that Kenyans see in themselves towards social violence, generational and gendered tensions, and inter-communal conflict. Authority is to be preferred to anarchy. And successive governments have returned the compliment. The colonial govt welcomed missionary supervision of schooling as some insurance that African traditional disciplines, eroded by social change, would be replaced by religious restraints. The Kenyatta govt’s Ominde commission on education, soon after independence, took much the same view. Daniel arap Moi was often seen in church; and Kibaki makes no secret of his Catholic Christianity, despite the embarrassment of a possible charge of bigamy.

Church and state in Kenya are therefore closely entwined, each to some extent complicit in the providential authority of the other. There is—in a general and perhaps growing fear of the potential for violence among the poor, the ill-educated, and the unemployed—good reason why Kenyans should yearn for the security and comfort of ‘only one word.’²

Moreover (c), Kenya must remain a carefully secular state, not visibly swayed by sectarian pressure or prejudice. By no means all Kenyans are Christian. Islam is by far the largest and potentially most aggressive religious minority. East African Muslims have recently undergone a fascinating intellectual revival (in no way related to ‘9/11’) in which they have taken on an alleged Christian supremacy since the coming of independence, if more in Tz than in Kenya, on the very Biblical grounds

¹ See Chesworth paper; A Haugerud, *Political Culture of Kenya*; Lonsdale, Kikuyu Historiography; CKRC hearings, for the Kenyan tradition of public debate.

² Cite recent press reports on the horrific rise in cases of personal violence, including rape.

that are Christianity's own foundation. In practical political terms this new Muslim self-confidence has the potential to inspire a coastal federalism that could raise serious, and explosive, questions about the legal status of upcountry Christian migrants working in Mombasa (cf., John Chesworth papers). So Christian critics of government must recognise the strict limits that are set by multicultural prudence and courtesy.

But (d), this is a secular state with very grave defects of governance. Kenya's government, like others in Africa, is a government of men as much as a government by laws and institutions. It goes under the name of neo-patrimonialism. And neo-patrimonialism has its own moral logic of reciprocity and responsibility that makes it difficult to respond to universalist ideas of human rights and citizenship. The logic is based, rather, on networks of personal patronage and clientage—an insecure means of organising support, admittedly, and one that is constantly at risk of raising general costs in order to fund private benefits—but it is the only basis of mobilising widespread political support that Kenya has, likely to gain in its purchase on political practice as the economic decline that it abets makes it more and more difficult to share social goods more widely. And, with the number of Anglican dioceses, but not the number of Anglicans, doubling in the last decade, this is a defect from which the churches are themselves not immune (Mwangi thesis).

So what then is there to hope for in the future political culture of Kenya?

(e) Democracy in 'the west' depends not so much on political theory or turbulent priestly theology as on competitive advocacy by self-interested and corporately organised social, professional, and economic groups. Historically, it was organised lawyers, not political theorists, who eventually established a rule of law.

Kenya's churches first protested against abuses of power by the Nyayo regime on behalf of their clerics in the 'queueing election' of 1988, not on behalf of a Kenyan citizenry at large (Githiga: ch 5; Sabar Part 3). But the churches' self-interest was also propelled from below, by endangered congregations who expected the support of their institutional patrons (eg., Gitari's emperor Darius and Naboth's vineyard sermons). A combination of clientelist expectation from below and institutional self-regard on high can have quite radical effects in promoting a vigilant culture of critical democracy. If to this is added the outraged service ethic of Kenya's trained professional classes (DK Leonard, *African Successes*, for their formation; Bishop Mwangi, oral info for their telephoned anguish), then the basis of a future Kenyan democracy looks much like that, not more than a couple of centuries or more back in many cases, of many democracies in 'the West'. And when that basis is established, and perhaps only then, will the theologians turn to what preoccupied the Church of England in the 19thC, what one could call 'the condition of Kenya question' in which the poor and outcast children of God may take the centre of conscience's stage.