



# LOSING MY RELIGION: The cross, the lynching tree and Kenya's post-colonial enterprise

By Christine Mungai



*"My kingdom is not of this world..." John 18:36*

When we were children, our mother took us to St. Andrews Church in Nairobi every Sunday. A grand, cavernous cathedral-style building on the right side of Uhuru Highway, it was there that she and my father had had their wedding ceremony in 1983.

The Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) was founded by Scottish missionaries but would soon be known for what the Kikuyu called *mutaratara* - a liturgical style of worship that is composed, outwardly decorous and predictable. That was how my mother, Rose Wanjiku, had always done church. She was in charge of our spiritual formation; my father was largely irreligious - I now realise that this is not unusual, and perhaps the norm, in most Kenyan families.

In my teenage years, I met some cool kids who went to Nairobi Pentecostal Church, and I followed them there. The youth fellowship there was nicknamed Fortress, and for a 13-year-old raised to be a dignified mini-adult in church, the unbridled energy and chaotic emotionality of a Pentecostal service was enchanting. I loved Fortress. We had day (and night) concerts, youth camps, picnics and

movies. I led praise and worship and preached on occasion. We went on “missions” where we proselytised to strangers, prayed in tongues and we baptised in the Holy Ghost.

My mother was not entirely pleased with my new spiritual commitments. I suspect that they seemed a little too ecstatic to her. She resisted my formation of a whole lifestyle that was outside her supervision or control. I would argue that at least I was spending my time in church, not “out there” like other girls. This would usually placate her.

I spent the rest of my teenage years being highly active “in the ministry” as we called it, both at my boarding school and at Fortress when I was home on vacation. And far from being a drag on my social life, church was actually fun. It was not only a sanctuary but also the place where I grew up, developed my own personality, and made deep and meaningful friendships, some of which remain to this day.

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The 1980s and 1990s were a time when Kenya’s Christian institutions were undergoing a profound change, whose effects remain with us today. Purportedly, Kenya is a Christian nation; census data indicates that nearly four in five Kenyans self-identify as Christian.

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The Catholic, Anglican and Presbyterian churches accounted for 70 per cent of Christian congregations in Kenya by the time Daniel arap Moi became Kenya’s second president in 1978. Christianity was a colonial project in most of Africa. The missionaries may have been welcomed in individual communities, but the machinery of the colonial state followed very soon after, enforcing and accelerating the winning of (bodies and) souls.

In England, Lambeth Palace on the south bank of the River Thames is the official London residence of the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Houses of Parliament are less than 400 metres away, on the opposite bank. The British colonisers diligently replicated this spatial intimacy of church and state. In the capital cities of most former British colonies in Africa, the official residence of the Anglican archbishop was next to, or across the street from, the Governor’s Mansion.

In Nairobi, the Anglican archbishop’s residence, even today, is at the T-junction of State House Avenue and State House Road, right across the road from the official residence of the Head of State and Commander-in-Chief.

Because of their colonial roots, the mainstream churches had an uncritical relationship with the government, even after independence when both institutions were “Africanised”. The churches were firmly pro-establishment, preferring to “keep out of politics” and focusing on providing social services.

The Anglican and Presbyterian churches were formally organised under the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK). Formed in 1966, NCCCK was an umbrella of 37 church organisations

affiliated to the Anglican and Presbyterian churches. In 1978 (the year that Moi became president) NCKK was commissioned to undertake a theological study of three words: “peace, love and unity”. Peace, Love and Unity was the slogan underlying President Moi’s new political philosophy of Nyayo, as he called it. But Moi’s regime would end up being anything but peaceful, loving or uniting.

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Moi was vice president when Kenya’s first president, Jomo Kenyatta, died in 1978. The constitution directed that the vice president take office upon the death of the president, but in the years that Kenyatta’s health began to fail, politicians close to Mzee had tried to sideline Moi – ostensibly because he lacked the political clout of Kenyatta, and was ethnically Kalenjin, whereas those establishment politicians were mostly Kikuyu.

In fact, that group had tried to change the constitution to block the automatic succession of a president by his deputy. Though they failed in that regard, Moi nevertheless began his tenure with a deep sense of political insecurity.

By 1982 that insecurity had turned into a fully-fledged political crisis. In the early hours of August 1st of that year, a group of Air Force officers commandeered state radio and declared a coup. Within hours, forces loyal to the incumbent president had crushed the coup attempt, but it would be the pivotal point in the downward repressive spiral of the Moi regime, with increasing surveillance, detentions, arbitrary arrests and imprisonment intensifying in the mid- to late 1980s.

The “Peace Love and Unity” study coordinated by David Gitari (who decades later became Kenya’s Anglican archbishop) was intended to provide a theological interpretation of the Nyayo philosophy. The ultimate goal was to get the [Nyayo](#) philosophy incorporated in religious education in schools and also among church congregations. The study was published in 1983 as a book called *A Christian View of Politics in Kenya: Love, Peace and Unity*.

But as the political space became more constricted in the mid-80s, the NCKK became more vocal against the Moi regime. It must be said here that NCKK and the Catholic churches were ethnically disproportionately Kikuyu and Luo. This was possibly for historical reasons, as the early Christian missionaries were most active in areas dominated by Kikuyus and Luos.

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Possibly to counter the rising malcontent, Moi created an alliance with a number of Pentecostal and evangelical congregations who would come together under the Evangelical Fellowship of Kenya (EFK) – and whose ethnic composition happened to be closer to that of Moi and his allies. Congregations, such as the African Inland Church (AIC), the Reformed Church of East Africa, Kenya Assemblies of God and the African Gospel Church were part of this evangelical fellowship; Moi himself was said to be a very religious man, an AIC faithful, whose habit was to wake up at 5am for prayer and reading the Bible.

Because of their closeness to the seat of power, the evangelical churches now came to occupy a privileged place in 1980s and 1990s Kenya.

The position taken by the EFK during that time was one of consoling the State rather than confronting it; the image of the President as “God’s anointed” became a frequent one.

Meanwhile, NCKK and Catholic leaders continued to speak out against government excesses. The most vocal of these leaders were Rev. Timothy Njoya of PCEA (who for a time headed my mother’s congregation at St. Andrews), as well as Bishops Alexander Muge, David Gitari and Henry Okullu, all Anglican. Among the Catholics, the most outspoken was Bishop Ndingi Mwana a’Nzeki of the Nakuru Catholic diocese.

As the university community was harassed and diminished, especially after state repression, detentions and surveillance were ramped up in the 1980s, the NCKK became the major institutional challenge to Moi’s regime. The churches had the organisational network and national infrastructure to mount and sustain a form of protest politics in what was then a one-party state.

In turn, government politicians adopted a defensive stance and challenged the legitimacy of the church in discussing matters of politics. The evangelical fellowship, for its part, led by Bishop Ezekiel Birech of the AIC and Bishop Arthur Kitonga of Redeemed Gospel Church, often denounced NCKK in vehement Sunday sermons that were then printed in state-leaning newspapers. Kenyan churchgoers saw the acrimonious split along denominational lines, but few saw its ethnic and political dimension.

Moi won the 1992 election against a badly fractured opposition and on the back of state-sponsored gangs that suppressed the vote in much of the country. But by this time Kenya was in dire economic straits, with decay everywhere you looked – uncollected garbage, spiraling inflation and crumbling public services.

I was just a child at this time, but I remember the panic that seemed to seep into my parents’ conversations when they talked about money; the faint disgust with which my father handled the newly minted Ksh500 note (previously, Ksh200 was the biggest denomination). He said that this new note was a sure sign that Kenya was going to the dogs.

This was also the time that the “prosperity gospel” began to explode in Kenya. With a roughly evangelical stance, the prosperity gospel churches offered a version of Christianity that was both appealing and logically consistent with the political mood of the day, one that presented spiritual practice as a site for claiming back some power in a country where things were falling apart. Like the Pentecostal congregation that I was a part of, they were radical, emotionally speaking, in terms of an ecstatic worship experience. But politically, they were solidly conservative – they offered a privatisation of solutions in the face of public dilapidation that seemed beyond hope. Claim *your* miracle. Reap *your* blessing. Accept Jesus as *your personal* saviour.

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As I grew older and became more politically conscious and intellectually mature, my faith began to be a source of deep internal strife. I was increasingly uncomfortable with interpretations of Scripture that seemed to be obsessed with meticulous sexual policing, which of course was always directed at the girls (“be careful not to cause a brother to stumble!”) but made almost no demands on the boys.

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country where things were falling apart.

Perhaps it wasn't incidental that many of our fathers were disinterested in the church - except when they were looking for a good woman to marry. Church was a place women learned, practised and refined their marriageability. Men didn't need to. We were discouraged from dating casually, unless the relationship was headed towards marriage. That produced an incentive to declare things more serious than they actually were, or needed to be. And then the power play began - it fell upon the boys to proclaim whether that relationship was indeed headed towards marriage and upon the girls to demonstrate how wifeable they were.

One of the major traits of wifeability was the maintainance of the "purity" in the relationship. So we (the girls, mostly) expended enormous amounts of energy discussing "how far is too far" in relating to the opposite sex (Holding hands? Kissing? Petting? Actually, what exactly is petting?). And then, it seemed the boys would adjudicate whether the girl had adequately maintained the collective purity of the relationship or had fallen short of the glory of God. It was a bizarre dance that rested upon the presumption that a woman's body was a kind of blank slate with no innate desires of its own.

This was during Mwai Kibaki's first term as president. In the course of just five years, Kenya's political mood made a full about-turn - from the joy and optimism of the 2002 election in which democracy had triumphed to the violent aftermath of the 2007 election.

Kibaki's first swearing-in ceremony was the first, and I believe the last, political meeting my mother attended in her life; she walked from our home in South B to Uhuru Park to join the celebratory throng and watch a new democratic government take power. (Throng is a word I like. It is dense and heaving, as though people's bodies were compressing and purging themselves, and each other, of the weight of dictatorship and failed dreams.) By then I was in my early twenties, and the friction between my mother and I would increasingly shift from being a dispute over denomination into one over politics.

Kibaki quickly consolidated power around his own Kikuyu elite, which seemed to me an obvious betrayal of the multi-ethnic and popular mandate that had brought him to power. But at family meetings, funerals and weddings, I would hear my relatives proclaim quite categorically that Kenya was much better off under a Kikuyu president. In fact, Kibaki was God's anointed. At home I would constantly challenge my mother on those kinds of declarations, my voice shrill and my manner emphatic. How do we know that whoever is in power is God's anointed? What is godly about chauvinism? Are we now saying that Anglo Leasing is the will of God? She would only wearily listen to me and wave me off.

Just five years later, in the aftermath of a disputed 2007 election, I watched in horror the smouldering remains of a church in Kiambaa, where a mob shut dozens of people in a church, blocked the door with a mattress and set the sanctuary on fire. As the smoke billowed on the television screen, my mother turned to me and calmly said the most cutting words she had ever said to me. "Do you think that when they come for you they will ask you who you voted for?"

It was clear what she meant. Kenya was a country where your ethnicity was everything. It could be the difference between life and death. And I hated to admit it, but she was right.

That day I was unconvinced that the personal holiness that we were taught to aspire to as a mark of the Kingdom would save me from a political system that was so depraved and unjust that I could be summarily executed for having the wrong last name. My piety would not save my body. Thirty people died that day, and so did most of my faith.

I spent the next eight years of my life vaguely describing myself as an agnostic, “spiritual but not religious”, or generally avoiding matters of faith. It increasingly seemed absurd to me that one could be an African and a Christian, and even less a self-respecting, or at least politically conscious African, with any kind of serious commitment to social justice. *Christianity is a white man’s religion*, I thought. *I don’t really know any African religions, so I will have none.*

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First-century Judea was a colonial project. The land itself brought in little revenue to the Roman treasury, but by controlling it, Rome could control the land and sea routes to Egypt, which was the breadbasket of the empire.

Judea was also a border province against the Parthian Empire (in modern day Iraq and Iran), a rival of Rome in the east. The Bible records that the Jews had been taken into exile in Babylon some centuries before, and though they had returned to their homeland, the Jews were viewed as suspicious and potential fifth columnists by Rome, because of that lengthy exile to the east.

It was here that the New Testament records that God became incarnate into man. Jesus, as described in the Bible, was not only from Judea, but from a town in Galilee called Nazareth. Jesus of Nazareth. The Christian faith now reflexively associates Nazareth with the power, awe and authority of the Divine, but in the first century Nazareth was nowhere to be bragged about.

The historic Nazareth was an area of entrenched poverty in the ancient world. The people of Nazareth were on the bottom of society. When Herod the Great - the Jewish king who was little more than a Roman colonial administrator - died in 4 BC, the Roman armoury in Sepphoris, just outside Nazareth, was robbed. The Romans retaliated by crucifying 2,000 Jews as a public warning against such revolts. Sepphoris was burned to the ground, and its inhabitants were sold into slavery.

Less than a decade later, there was another revolt, this time against paying taxes. Another Roman crackdown followed, with many more crucified. The place earned a reputation for being a hotbed of unrest; young Nazarenes were labelled gangsters and thugs.

The elite one percent in Jerusalem - the priests, teachers of the law and Sadducees - looked upon those from Nazareth as uneducated and uncultured; Nazarenes were subjected to slurs on their purported lax morals and were policed for their lack of manners. The people of Nazareth were considered a Problem People.

One can thus understand the disciple Nathaniel’s jaded statement when Philip excitedly tells him that he has met the Messiah: “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” In fact, we ought to consider “Jesus of Nazareth” a politically loaded statement, akin to *Jaymo kutoka ghetto*. In the gospel of Luke, the birth of Jesus is spoken about in this metaphor of Empire.

The Mediterranean world called Caesar *sôtêr* (saviour of the world). Caesar was the one who brought Peace, Love and Unity, *Pax Romana*, to the ancient world. So when the gospel writers used the word *sôtêr* to announce the birth of Jesus: “To you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord,” (Luke 2:11) they were essentially undermining the authority of the

empire.

Crucifixion was a public execution that was carried out as a warning for those who rose up against the state, for those who refused to know their place. Jesus was executed for sedition, a political offence, and not blasphemy, a religious one – the inscription on the cross mockingly said “This Is The King Of The Jews”.

The way the Roman State tortured and executed Jesus and his early followers was not incidental. It tells us who Jesus was in relation to the state – crucifixion was done publicly, as a warning, in response to a perceived offence against the authority of Caesar.

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More than 4,000 black men, women and children were lynched in the American South between 1900 and 1950. Lynchings were public events, sometimes announced in advance. Photographs were taken and used as postcards. Bodies were dismembered and parts handed out as souvenirs.

Both the cross and the lynching tree were symbols of terror, instruments of torture and execution, reserved primarily for slaves, criminals and insurrectionists, writes American theologian James Cone, who passed away this April. According to Cone, Jesus and blacks in America suffered a similar fate: both were publicly humiliated, subjected to the utmost indignity, unfairly tried and quickly condemned, tortured and left to die as a public warning.

During colonialism, several Kenyans experienced similar indignities. Otenyo Nyamaterere was killed by a British firing squad in Kisii in western Kenya for resisting the advance of the colonial state in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was beheaded and his headless body left on a bridge. Waiyaki wa Hinga, the Kikuyu chieftain who resisted harassment and forced taxation, was buried alive at a prison camp in 1890. Koitalel arap Samoei, the Nandi chief who fought British occupation for eleven years, mounting guerrilla attacks on the railway and colonial forts, was shot at point blank range by a colonial official who had asked him to meet and discuss peace; Koitalel’s skull was then carried off to Britain.

Then there was General Baimungi Marete of the Mau Mau, a leader of the armed rebellion of the 1950s that fought for Kenya’s self-rule. General Baimungi and his lieutenants held out in forest camps as Jomo Kenyatta, who would become Kenya’s first president, negotiated an independence treaty with the British. The colonial structures were left intact; Kenyatta would now head this new expropriating state.

After independence, Kenyatta sent word to the Mau Mau fighters that they would receive land and compensation if they surrendered their weapons. They emerged from the forest and waited for their promised land, only to be killed by government agents. The bodies of Baimungi and two lieutenants were displayed publicly in Chuka for three days by an independent Kenyan government, and the Mau Mau was declared a banned organisation.

Kenyatta went on to publicly declare: “Mau Mau was a disease which was eradicated, and must never be remembered again.” The Mau Mau remained a banned organisation in Kenya until 2003. The colour of the administrators had changed, but the colonial logic remained intact.

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The fact that white colonisers would use the symbol of a Nazarene anti-colonialist to enforce and entrench the very project of colonisation is a testament to the twisted genius of white supremacy. But Jesus of Nazareth was no coloniser.

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There's a difference between priests and prophets, as religious scholar Jonathan Walton describes in his book *Watch This! The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism*. Priestly leaders believe that the structures of society are fundamentally good and that any political or social problems are the result of a few bad apples or degraded moral standards, as opposed to inherent flaws in the structures of society. Priests seek to nurture humility, patience and goodwill in their congregations in order to integrate them into the culture as productive and loyal citizens. By doing this, priests accommodate themselves and their parishioners to injustice without necessarily affirming it - at most, they encourage the congregation to endure those things that cannot be readily changed.

Priests generally seek to "stay out of politics"; whenever they do get involved in politics, it is usually to use their respectable social standing to have access to the ear of the powerful. Priests believe they can be a "good influence" to the ruling class, appealing to their moral goodwill to try and obtain justice. Pray for your leaders, they say. *Touch not God's anointed*.

Priests are uncomfortable with social protest or real reform because it might lead to a loss of their social capital.

But the prophet is different. "The prophet views society as neither fundamentally good nor bad, but as fundamentally flawed," Walton writes. Prophets have a clear theological and political conception of what those flaws are and an uncompromising declaration that if the injustice is not uprooted, the society will be destroyed.

The prophet is social reformer with no moral middle ground. No form of oppression is consistent with God's will, the prophetic witness declares, and is actually in opposition to the very physical form that God chose to be incarnated in first-century Judea. *Turn around!* the prophet declares. *You're going the wrong way!* It seems to me that Christianity's prophetic roots were never fully formed; they were prematurely twisted into an entwining conformity with colonial and neo-colonial states - Rome, Britain, America, Kenya.

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I now see that the focus on personal piety and private redemption that energised my formative years ended up obscuring calls for social justice. The uncritical embrace of society's unjust structures - especially the capitalist economy that has its colonial logic intact and the obsession with morals and



manners - reflects the non-confrontational stance of the priest rather than the radical reform of the prophet.

The prophet is never neutral in the face of oppression. The prophet doesn't want to "hear both sides", doesn't want to be "fair and balanced", cannot be "objective". The prophet is on the side of justice.

It is time for Kenyan Christians to live out their ministry for those caught on the underside of power today, for the "least of these". In the words of James Cone, we cannot find liberating joy in the cross by spiritualising it, by taking away its message of justice in the midst of powerlessness, suffering and death.

The cross, as a locus of divine revelation, is not good news for the powerful, for those who are comfortable with the way things are, or for anyone whose understanding of religion is aligned with power.

**Author's note:**

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