



St Mark's **Review**

A journal of Christian thought & opinion

No. 204, March 2008 (1)

Perspectives on Church, Society and Politics

Church-State Relations and Civil Unrest in Kenya

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Introduction

In late 2007 Kenya was plunged into bloody civil strife after the incumbent government announced that President Mwai Kibaki had been returned to power amid allegations of intimidation, vote-buying and electoral fraud. In a country where sixty per cent of the population is poor and unemployed, Kenyans turned on one another in reprisals that left hundreds dead or injured and thousands displaced from their homes and families. The brutality and the mindlessness of rampaging mobs shocked Western commentators and unnerved local politicians as the country appeared destined for social chaos and possibly even genocide. In a country where popular culture is infused with Christianity and the Churches exert substantial influence, why was the presence of religious convictions unable to stem the tide of political violence? The answer might be, in part, the legacy of colonial rule in Kenya and the unhealthy relationship that existed at that time between church and state.

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This review essay examines the claims made in two recent books – Caroline Elkins' *Imperial Reckoning* and David Anderson's *Histories of the Hanged* – that the Churches were complicit in the British Government's attempts to preserve its hold on Kenya by allowing Christianity to be used for overtly political purposes. It concludes by arguing that Church and State must remain distinct entities and that a respectful separation needs to be maintained between them whatever the historical legacy or the cultural setting.

The British Legacy

It is fifty years since British authorities in Kenya executed the last of the indigenous Mau Mau rebels in a bloody uprising that began in 1952. The methods used to suppress the Mau Mau were brutal and ruthless. In addition to the forced relocation of thousands of potential rebel sympathizers into cordoned villages and the internment of suspected 'terrorists' into detention camps, more than 1090 Kenyans were hanged over a six year period for crimes ranging from murder to possessing weapons for the purpose of committing acts of terrorism. Even as debate raged in the House of Commons about the abolition of the death penalty with the abolitionists steadily gaining the political upper hand, the Imperial Government resorted to the gallows on more occasions in Kenya than in India, Palestine, Cyprus and Malaya combined.

In Kenya, the colonial pretence of civilising the 'dark continent' gave way to the savagery of imperial self-preservation. The six-year 'war' drained whatever remained of colonial altruism and led the young Tory politician Enoch Powell to wonder whether Britain deserved an empire at all. Within a few years, Kenya had gained independence without further bloodshed. The British acknowledged local sentiment and simply walked away leaving the Kenyans to face the world with their own leaders at the helm. There have recently been stirrings of a South African-style 'truth and reconciliation movement' in Kenya as those caught up in the Mau Mau rebellion approach the end of their lives and face the enduring legacy of the dreadful past. There is so much to be forgiven among so many things that cannot be forgotten.

The Origins of the Mau Mau

Like a number of African countries, Kenya is named after its most prominent geographic feature – a mountain. It did not exist as a nation until

Europeans began to deal with a number of diverse East African peoples as a single political and legal entity. The largest tribal group, the Kikuyu, comprise approximately one quarter of the population. They inhabit the south-western region of the nation where the climate is more temperate and the land conducive to plantation farming. When they were confined to reservations by the British colonial administration to provide territory for white settlement in the early part of the twentieth century, they deeply resented being alienated from their ancestral lands. (Although the Masai actually lost more land in total area, land possessed greater significance for the Kikuyu.) Many native Kenyans nonetheless volunteered for military service with the Imperial forces during World War II and believed that acknowledgement of their sacrifices on the battlefield would help to improve their plight at home. This proved to be anything but the case.

With a new wave of European immigration to Kenya after 1945 (largely British ex-servicemen and their families), Kikuyu grievances became more acute and the demand for change more urgent. The restless Kikuyu formed a secret society that the British called the 'Mau Mau' (its proper name was 'Land and Freedom Army') which evolved within Kenya's largest nationalist organisation, the Kenya African Union. Members of the Mau Mau were bound to each other by elaborate blood oaths and exacting local discipline. They renounced alcohol and cigarettes, pledged support for female circumcision and declared a determination to resist the colonial authorities until the end.

In May 1952, the Mau Mau embarked on a campaign of terror which forced the British to declare a state of Emergency on 20 October after the prominent loyalist, Senior Chief Waruhiu, was assassinated. The violence was ostensibly directed at whites but actually inflicted greatest suffering on other Kikuyu. (The Embu and Meru peoples were also subject to the Emergency but suffered less at the hands of Mau Mau adherents.) Although only 32 white settlers were killed in the rebellion, estimates of Kikuyu deaths exceed 11,000. Most were slaughtered at the hands of their tribal brethren who were keen to rid Kenya of those sympathetic to British rule. The foremost chronicler of Kenya's white settler society, Elspeth Huxley, called the Mau Mau rebellion a 'yell from the swamp'.

The complete suppression of the Mau Mau took just over four years although a state of emergency continued until 1960. It involved 10,000 Imperial soldiers and around twice that many Kikuyu auxiliaries serving

as police or militia. The British approach was similar to the counter-insurgency strategy first employed with such success (but with tragic consequences for non-combatants) in South Africa against the Boers and more recently against communist infiltrators in Malaya. 'Concentration camps' were established to separate rebels from their support base and to deprive them of food and munitions. Anyone roaming the countryside was deemed a rebel and was either captured or killed. Official estimates put the number of internees at around 80,000.

When Kenya achieved independence under the leadership of Johnstone Kamau Nguni (better known as Jomo Kenyatta) the political leaders of the new nation sought to distance themselves completely from the Mau Mau although it had accelerated Britain's withdrawal. Kenyatta, who was sentenced to gaol on questionable evidence in April 1953 for 'managing' the rebellion, denied instigating the violence. He maintained this denial after independence and did nothing to rehabilitate either the movement or its members during his long presidency. He called it 'a disease which has been eradicated and must never be remembered'.

Historians have long regarded the suppression of the Mau Mau as a necessary response to a bloody, sadistic uprising characterised by senseless violence and mindless recrimination. But this interpretation of Britain's 'dirty little war' has now been challenged. Caroline Elkins' *Imperial Reckoning* is subtitled 'The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya'. It took ten years to write and involved research in three continents, drawing upon personal interviews with those involved on both sides of the conflict. Her book won the 2006 Pulitzer Prize for non-fiction. This was worthy recognition of quality prose and powerful narrative. Elkins has produced an unadorned horror story featuring episodes of unrestrained human evil. It is graphic and disturbing. Oxford University historian David Anderson has examined the same period in *The History of the Hanged*. A former lecturer at the University of Nairobi, he also began his research in the 1990s. His book, sub-titled 'Britain's Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire', is based on a thorough examination of the transcripts produced during hundreds of Mau Mau trials that resulted in 1,090 executions. Anderson remarks that 'there is nothing to glorify in this retelling of a tragic story, but there is much to be reckoned with, on both sides'.

Although neither author deals in detail with religious aspects of the conflict, the role of the Churches in the colonisation of Kenya and in

disturbing tribal senses of identity and in disrupting traditional forms of belonging looms large.

The Church in Kenya

Prior to the arrival of the European settlers, the coastal region of modern day Kenya was influenced by Arab traders who were predominantly Muslim. There were few Christian converts from Islam or tribal religions during the two centuries in which the Portuguese dominated the East African coast in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Christian history of Kenya began in 1844 when Dr Johann Ludwig Krapf of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) settled in Rabai, near Mombasa. He was joined by the Reverend Johannes Rebmann two years later. But it was not until the 1870s when a settlement for freed slaves was established at Freretown that a Christian community evolved. The first Kenyans were ordained in 1885. Most of the larger Christian denominations sent their representatives to Kenya following its incorporation into the British Empire as a protectorate in 1895.

With the construction of the Uganda Railway in 1896 there was much improved access to the central highlands and the missionaries headed west. The Kikuyu were especially suspicious of the missionaries whom they believed acted in concert with the colonial authorities who had earlier confiscated their land. Indeed, Imperial authorities believed the spread of Christianity would help to 'civilise' East Africa and ease its incorporation into the Empire. By the end of the Great War of 1914-18, the leading denominations had divided the country into religious 'spheres of influence' to focus their energies and avoid unseemly competition. In the Kikuyu districts the two largest groups were the Anglicans, represented by the CMS, and the Presbyterian Church of Scotland Mission.

The missionaries preached the Christian message with the Evangelical emphasis on conversion. Their proclamation was met in many places with an enthusiastic response. The Churches steadily established places of worship and schools. The principal influence they exerted over the Kenyan population was through primary education in which they enjoyed a near monopoly. By the early 1920s, the Churches had managed to produce their own literate Christian elite who aspired to 'progress and modernity'. As the colonial government had invited missionaries onto the Legislative Council to represent 'African interests', it was not surprising when the Churches

encouraged Africans to form their own associations to represent shared interests and common aspirations. But, as both Elkins and Anderson point out, the tone set by the Churches was consistently sympathetic to the continuation of colonial rule. This was consistent with a resolution passed in June 1950 by the European Electors Union who urged the British Government 'to issue a restatement of colonial policy which will make it clear beyond all question or doubt that the British people will remain in East Africa as builders of a Christian civilisation, and that it will be the privilege of the British people for a very long time ahead to be the controlling directing force in East Africa.'

By this time, three distinct blocs had emerged in Kenyan native society. The first were the conservatives who had benefited from Imperial patronage and who exerted their authority through a variety of Church agencies. The second were the moderate nationalists who had been encouraged by the notions of democratic equality and political liberty propagated by religious education to question the benefits of colonial rule and to seek greater self-determination in the hope of securing a better future for the native peoples. The third group consisted of militant nationalists with limited Christian education who begrudged the subversion of Kikuyu social norms and tribal values by the cultural baggage that accompanied Western religion. The militants deeply resented Christian campaigns against witchcraft, ancestor worship, polygamy, burial practices and, most controversially and divisively, female circumcision or clitoridectomy.

Anderson explains that the female circumcision question had split the Christian churches in 1929 when Kikuyu leaders accused the missionaries of mounting a frontal attack on Kikuyu culture. This led to the formation of independent indigenous churches and the demise of the monopoly enjoyed by the missionaries on how the Kenyan people would receive the Gospel. By 1935 there were only 35 independent church schools with 1500 children but their symbolic value in the Kikuyu struggle for political liberty was enormous. The principle at stake was ultimately not about the preservation of social or cultural traditions but who would determine what was and what was not acceptable in the Christian ordering of society. Would it be the European missionaries or African Christians? Although it was not the Churches' intention, the issue of female circumcision served in many minds to define those who were Christians and those who were not. To

many Kikuyu it was further evidence that Christianity was hostile to tribal customs and needed to be opposed as a feature of Western imperialism.

By the time the rebellion began in late 1952, the religious divisions in Kenyan society had hardened considerably. All of the 'European' Churches opposed practically every aspect of the Mau Mau movement from its oath-taking ceremonies to its assassination policy. While Mau Mau beliefs and practices were inconsistent with Christian principles and left Christian leaders little option but condemnation, the Churches were either ill-prepared or unwilling to deal with the underlying issues that provoked the rebellion: the demands for land reform and agitation for political representation. Senior clergy did publicise examples of social injustice and protested the mistreatment of accused persons but failed to raise the much larger question of the colonial government's political legitimacy.

Elkins notes that the most vocal opposition to the methods employed by the security forces in the suppression of the Mau Mau was Canon T.F.C. Bewes, a former CMS missionary in Kenya from 1929 to 1949. He had ministered among the Kikuyu, knew their culture well and was highly respected throughout the colony. In January 1953 he returned to Kenya briefly to gain a first-hand glimpse of both the uprising and the official response. At a press conference held on his return, Canon Bewes, by this time African Secretary of CMS, claimed to have evidence of torture and beatings. He announced that together with the Archbishop of Canterbury he would present this evidence to the Colonial Secretary, Oliver Lyttelton. Bewes lamented the need for such action but claimed he had no alternative because the colonial authorities would neither listen to his concerns nor take appropriate action.

It proved to be an ineffectual gesture. The Governor of Kenya, Sir Evelyn Baring, said he would look into the matters Bewes had raised. Nothing of immediate benefit was gained. It was also a costly gesture because it risked a partial withdrawal of colonial patronage for the major missionary organisations, including CMS, and increased the possibility that the Governor might use the powers he was granted during a State of Emergency to remove controversial missionaries from the Colony. Thereafter, lobbying was done in private. Meanwhile the native population continued to suffer wholesale and systematic violations of fundamental human rights. In his annual letter to the CMS Executive in London, Canon (later Archdeacon) Peter Bostock reported on 30 November 1953 that:

Evil seems firmly entrenched ... Europeans on the spot back one another up, don't report things, lie readily to cover up investigations, and there seems no way of breaking through this... The European lies and says the African was trying to escape, but reports are too numerous and too varied for us to be able to give credence to the bona fides of the Europeans in many cases.

But when Anglican authorities in London tried to intervene through personal advocacy, they were not supported by the local clergy.

The most public instance followed the resignation of Colonel Arthur Young, former Commissioner of Police in the City of London, who was sent to Kenya to serve as Commissioner of Police in February 1954 in an attempt to deal with the misconduct of the local constabulary. Young resigned within 12 months of being appointed in protest at the unwillingness of the colonial administration to deal with the criminal behaviour of police officers. To make matters worse, the colonial government declared an amnesty for all crimes committed before January 1955. This was too much for the CMS which issued a pamphlet entitled, *Kenya – Time for Action*. Its Executive Committee, still concerned about the conduct of the security forces, was dismayed by the amnesty arguing that 'an amnesty does not itself make bad men good'. It also regretted the resistance Colonel Young had encountered in reforming the local police force. But the Society faced deep embarrassment when the Anglican Bishop (later Archbishop) of Mombasa, Leonard Beecher, criticised the document for being 'one-sided and particularly unfortunate' despite having earlier called for a full public explanation of Young's resignation.

As Elkins concedes, Beecher was in a difficult predicament. His preferred approach had been to influence the conduct of colonial administration through personal representation. In a private letter he told the Governor: 'I have repeatedly made it clear that the Church desires to cooperate wholeheartedly and to offer its fullest support to the Government. I should hope that there might be sufficient reciprocity'. The bishop's dealings with the administration were complicated by the personal pastoral interaction between Beecher and Baring. The Governor was an active Anglican who received Holy Communion from the bishop each day before breakfast.

A further complicating factor was the faith of Beecher's assistant bishop, Obadiah Kariuki. He was a member of the Kikuyu tribe but said publicly that the spiritual commitment demanded in the Mau Mau oath could only be given to Jesus Christ. He was considered by some to be an Imperial loyalist and a Kikuyu traitor. This was unfair. Kariuki visited Kenyatta in detention during August 1957 and petitioned the Governor for his release, which finally occurred in 1961. (There was another dimension to their association: they had each married a daughter of Senior Chief Koinange of Kiambu.) Although there is no evidence that either Beecher or Kariuki ever sought political advantage from their associations with Baring or Kenyatta, these personal associations tended to confirm the prejudices of some suspicious observers that they 'sided' with whoever maximised the Church's self-interest. Consequently, many Kenyans renounced their Christian profession while others refused to become Christians as a consequence of the Mau Mau rebellion. This sentiment remains active in parts of the country.

Learning Lessons from the Mau Mau

There are many lessons to be learned from the Church's experience in Kenya in the decade before and after the Mau Mau rebellion. The most significant arise from the fusing of Christianity and citizenship and the merging of Church and State.

When the European missionaries arrived in Kenya, they were unable to dissociate the social values and diplomatic aspirations of the nations from which they had come from the distinctive message of Jesus Christ. To many Kenyans, the proclamation of an everlasting gospel of salvation was intertwined with an invitation to abandon African traditions in favour of becoming more Western in outlook and appearance. Notwithstanding the many contextual complexities, the missionaries failed to appreciate the intricacies of Kenyan tribal culture and the ways in which the gospel redeems every society irrespective of its time and place.

The fusing of Christianity and citizenship in the 1950s made both expatriot and indigenous Christians appear anti-Mau Mau and, consequently, pro-British, irrespective of whether they actually opposed or supported the movement's objectives. (There is no doubt that the vast majority of Christians condemned the movement's harsh and brutal methods.) The belief that all Christians were pro-British was reinforced when European

missionaries worked with the colonial government in screening Kenyans interred on suspicion of having Mau Mau sympathies. When it became clear that becoming a Christian increased the likelihood of early release from an internment camp, those who could not face prolonged detention were tempted to opportunistically convert to Christianity. Beyond the camps, food and medical aid was distributed by missionaries to areas deemed most loyal to Britain. Meanwhile the independent Church schools that had fostered radical Kikuyu sentiment were closed leaving the major missionary schools to prosper without competition. This inflamed local resentment.

While these actions might have reflected a painful decision to choose between the lesser of two evils, they involved too many convenient compromises and must be judged mistaken. Although they might have contributed to ending the violence associated with the rebellion, these actions turned the Mau Mau and their sympathisers against Christianity and the Church. Rather than hearing Christ's calling them out of sinful darkness into heavenly light, many Kikuyu were led to believe that following Jesus required the denunciation of the distinctive features of Kikuyu culture and the denial of crucial elements of Kikuyu identity. Because an indigenous leadership had yet to emerge and given the multi-layered loyalty that many missionaries felt to their countries of origin, especially the British, the Christian response to Kenyan complaints was shaped by too many temporal concerns. This was, to some extent, the inevitable outcome of the European missionary age.

Anderson, and to a lesser extent Elkins, accept that this was an awkward time for the Christian Church. The colonial era was coming to an end perhaps before many indigenous leaders were ready to assume political leadership in the fledgling democracies that replaced the imperial administrations. Nor were home-grown administrations prepared to accept responsibility for the myriad problems besetting modern mixed economies. The rapid collapse of the Belgian Congo into civil war after the Belgian withdrawal was an example of what could happen when a colony was rushed towards independence or the colonial power departed with too much haste.

In Kenya, there were conflicts between Christian self-interest and native political advancement; between spiritual goals and ideological compromises. The Churches wanted to help the Kikuyu but not the Mau Mau.

They disdained the methods by which the rebellion was crushed but did not want to see the uprising succeed. The missionaries addressed infringements of human rights but did not extend this campaign to demanding an overhaul of the culture that had prompted criminal conduct and immoral behaviour among the security forces. The Churches wanted the benefits of State patronage even when the State conducted itself in a most unchristian manner. Both Kenyans and Europeans greeted the end of the Mau Mau rebellion with relief. Thankfully the people were spared the killing spree usually associated with the aftermath of a civil war. Once Kenya had gained independence, the Churches promoted reconciliation between all elements of society and enjoyed a substantial increase in the number of adherents and the strength of their faith. Kenya was on its way to becoming one of the most Christian nations in Africa.

Learning from history

This terrible episode in British and Kenyan history demonstrated the importance of separating Church and State, distinguishing religion from politics, differentiating Christian freedom from national liberation, and discipleship from citizenship. It also highlighted several important principles relating to Christian believing, belonging, and behaving. A person is a Christian because they have decided to follow Jesus. Although Christians have many of the same responsibilities as non-Christians in civil society and the Church is drawn from the world and is cut from the same cloth, Christian lives are animated by a different spirit and are oriented towards a different end. This means there are some things Christians cannot do and some things Christians would do differently, and some things Christians would do to which the rest of society was indifferent. This means the attitude of the Christian to society will occasionally be hostility, ambivalence or ambiguity. The need for this kind of prayerful discernment of these core principles was ignored or overlooked during the Mau Mau rebellion.

Fifty years on and in the wake of recent political violence, in parts of Kenya commitment to tribal loyalty proved to be stronger than adherence to Christian faith although the persistence of economic deprivation led many Kenyans to express their mounting frustration that the country's natural productivity has not been harnessed to provide national prosperity. But Church leaders in Kenya are now, in the main, united in their call for Christian solidarity and speak as one in demanding justice for all. They

have emphasized the importance of putting Christian fellowship ahead of sectarian spirit, and drawn attention to the comprehensive social vision outlined by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. There are signs that Kenya is slowly emerging from the dark night of the Mau Mau period in part because the Churches, now mostly led by indigenous Kenyans, are committed to promoting the common destiny of all human beings irrespective of tribe, clan or race. The January 2008 riots were a deep disappointment to those who long to see Kenya fulfill its potential as a stable nation-state. Despite this setback, Kenya has come a long way in the last fifty years because of the lessons learned from the bloodshed that accompanied decolonisation and this deserves to be acknowledged. While Christians maintain a vision of the Church as a community in which individuals are valued because of their identity rather than their hereditary or utility, there is reason to be hopeful that unity and justice will flourish in Kenya, beginning with local congregations and spreading to the whole nation. At the very least, such a hope will serve to redeem at least a little of the brutal rebellion that both the British and the Kenyans would now probably rather forget.

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