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THE DEATH OF GOD AND THE AFRICAN RELIGION: AN AFRICAN VIEWPOINT

Where is God gone? . . . I mean to tell you
We have killed him you and I! We are all
his murderers! . . . Do We not hear the noise
of the grave-diggers who are burying God?
. . . *God is Dead! God remains Dead!*

Fredrick Nietzsche (1871)

This article intends to explore the impact of the death of God theology in Africa, particularly among the Christianized Africans. The author raises a fundamental question whether an African who is Christianized can make the same claim that some American and European Christians have made that God is dead. In order to test this claim, I have used the conception of God among the Agikuyu of Kenya and compared that conception with the Christian conception of God. I have done this by first discussing briefly what the death of God theology is. I say briefly because the literature on the death of God theology is so immense that it cannot be covered in an article of this size.

The death of God theology is a theology that makes the claim that "there once was a God to whom adoration, praise and trust were appropriate, possible, and even necessary, but that now there is no such God."¹ It can also be considered a theology of existential despair, a theology that makes a categorical claim that the modern twentieth century man cannot experience the presence of God except in His hidden, absent and silent form.

1. Thomas J.J. Altizer and William Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, (The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., New York: 1966), p.x.

According to Altizer and Hamilton, the two great exponents of the Death of God theology in the United States in the 1960, Jesus Christ was the first person to experience the death of God when he cried out on the cross "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" and God never came to his rescue. Bishop Robinson has supported this claim by stating categorically that "even Jesus himself had to go through the process of the death of God, of the *One who allowed it all to happen* with a million angels watching and they never (moved) a wing."² (Italics mine) The death of God can, therefore, be considered an event in the history of Christianity in which God *willed* to die in his son Jesus Christ. As William Hamilton has put it, "death of God should not be taken as a symbolic rhetoric . . . It is an experience that is not peculiar to a neurotic few nor is it private or inward. Death of God is a public event in our history."³ Just as God *willed* to die so is a Christian called upon to accept and even *will* the death of God in his experience. It is only when he does this "can he be liberated from a transcendent beyond, an alien beyond which has been emptied and darkened by God's self-annihilation in Christ."⁴ Thus Death of God simply means "an acceptance of God's total identification with Jesus."⁵

In other words, the death of God starts when a Christian radically accepts the *willingness* of God to be incarnated in his only begotten son, Jesus Christ. He *willed* to be incarnated so that he could experience what it means to be a finite man, a man existing in time and space. The doctrine of *Incarnation* makes Christianity a unique religion. Throughout the history of Christianity there has been an attempt to *double speak* (to use 1984 language) about the Incarnation of God. This double speak regards Christ as the second highest Godhead and God, the Father, as the highest Godhead. This has distorted the Incarnation of God for when God became Incarnated in Christ he "ceased to exist or to be present in his primordial form."⁶ The movement of Incarnation is from God to Jesus and not from Jesus to God.

2. John A.T. Robinson, "Can a Truly Contemporary Person not be an Atheist" in *The New Christianity*, Edited by William Robert Miller, (Dell Publishing Co., New York: 1967), p. 307.

3. Altizer and Hamilton, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

4. Thomas J.J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, (The Westminster Press, Philadelphia: 1966), p. 136.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

This movement is not once and for all. It continues its kenotic movement and direction by moving from historical Jesus to the Universal body of humanity thereby undergoing an epiphany in every human hand and face. The New Humanity becomes the Eternal Great Humanity Divine as William Blake (1757-1827) once described it. If, therefore, a Christian truly accepts the doctrine of Incarnation, he cannot talk of God, the non-incarnated God. He can only talk of Christ. Indeed Christians talk more of Christ than they talk of God. According to Christians, God, the non-Incarnated God is not the one who saves man from sins. It is Jesus Christ who saves man. Christ is the Saviour, not God!

Thus through Incarnation God revealed himself to man and became the very opposite of his original identity. Jesus Christ then is the name of God who has become fully and totally incarnate. His name is divine. But his name is totally meaningless apart from the Old Testament background, for it is the God of the Old Testament who *wills* to be Incarnated, thereby becoming actualized and historically real in Christ. Christ becomes the Lord of history and takes on—through Incarnation—the attributes of God. The primordial and transcendent forms of God are emptied in Jesus Christ through the process of Incarnation. God, the Incarnated God, becomes Jesus Christ.

Christianity, has always celebrated death as the way to redemption. Of course, death is a universal motif in all religions but it is Christianity alone that proclaims the death of the holy one, Jesus Christ. It is only in Christianity that we find a concrete experience of the finality of death of God. It is only Christianity that calls on man to share and co-experience Christ's death. Thus death is very important for a Christian. A Christian dies and thus experiences death in Christ while he is still alive. His old primordial and sinful self dies and the new self, the sacred self emerges through the experience of death in Christ. Through this death, a Christian experiences the Incarnation process. Physical death is no longer a bother to him. He has overcome it through his death in Christ.

The death and the resurrection of Christ has often been misinterpreted. It has meant the resurrection of Jesus in the form of an eternal and primordial God and thus nullifying the reality of his death

by either reducing the reality of his death to a higher state or retrogressively conceiving it as an abolition of his human situation. This has brought inconsistencies in the understanding of Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection. As Altizer has observed, it is in the Crucifixion that "the Word, (God himself) finally dies to its original form losing its transcendent glory primordial holiness, while fully becoming flesh . . . the Incarnation is only truly and actually real if it effects the death of the original sacred, the death of God himself."⁷ It could have been wrong for God, the Word, the Logos, to save Christ from dying, when Christ cried out "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" God could not have come to his rescue. To do so, it could have meant that God could not have fulfilled his promise of being incarnated and fully dying. How could God experience death in his son Christ if he saved him from death? If he had saved Christ from death, then he could have negated his Incarnation and, therefore, retained his primordial and transcendent being. As Altizer has put it, "So long as God is known in his primordial form as an eternal and unchanging Being, he can never be known in his incarnate form as self-giving or self-negating Being (Who negates himself in order to become fully flesh)."⁸ A Christian cannot, therefore, speak of existence of God because "God has negated and transcended himself in the Incarnation and thereby he has fully and finally ceased to exist in his original or primordial form."⁹ The many philosophical debates on the existence of God are therefore futile and meaningless to a Christian. They only bring more confusion in the understanding of Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection. They have also helped in maintaining the nature of God in his primordial and non-Incarnated form. For if God emptied himself by entering into the world, then his own essential and original Being was left behind in its empty and lifeless form.

Christians do not talk or celebrate the "Risen God." They celebrate the "Risen Christ". The Christ who rose from the dead was the same Incarnated Christ who lived among men and was later crucified on the cross. To say that the "Risen Christ" was the "Risen God" is to deny the continuous process of Incarnation of God in Christ. It is to say that God Deincarnated himself in Christ on the day of

7. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

Resurrection and by so doing regained his primordial and original Being and that when we talk of the "Risen Christ," we are, in fact, talking of a "Risen God." This would amount to a contradiction. Indeed, to say that it is the power of God that helped Christ to rise from the dead is tantamount to saying that the Incarnation process ended on the cross. It is to say that the Incarnated Word, Logos, God got out of the body of Christ, regained his primordial and original Being and watched painfully the death of Jesus Christ on the cross so that he could use his original transcendent power to resurrect Jesus Christ. If this is the case, we can neither talk of Incarnation nor of the Divinity of Christ. Jesus Christ becomes a non-incarnated being like anyone of us. We know this is not the case. Christians have never and will never consider Jesus Christ an ordinary human being.

Accordingly, a Christian must reject "a non-redemptive God who by virtue of his very sovereignty and transcendence stands wholly apart from... historical presence of the Incarnate Word."¹⁰ This means a non-Incarnate God cannot be a redemptive God at all. He must, therefore, be rejected. A Christian must, therefore, refuse and reject "the God who alone is God and give himself to a quest for the God who is Jesus."¹¹ I shall discuss the theological implication of this statement in section two of this paper.

One of the death of God theologians who has literally become like a saint in the Western Protestant theology was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was born in 1906 in Germany and was hanged by the Nazis in April, 1945. He was taken away to be hanged just after conducting a Sunday worship service for his fellow prisoners. Bonhoeffer believed in a religionless Christianity, a type of Christianity in which Christ was central and the language of God was unnecessary. There was no use for churches and religious worship as long as one acted and lived like Christ. For Bonhoeffer, Christ was not an object of religion, he was the Lord of the World. He, therefore, did not feel comfortable talking about an archaic God, a wholly other God and a God who stands apart in man's activities. Such a God was no more.¹² In other words, God who alone is God had no place for

10. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

12. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, (Macmillan Company, 1953), pp. 161-166 and *passim*.

Bonhoeffer. Only God who is Jesus was meaningful to him. Bonhoeffer's works and life have immensely influenced Christians in the Western world who prefer to live in a religionless world, a world without God who alone is God but a world where God is Jesus, the Incarnate God in Christ. What Bonhoeffer taught the Christians was that one does not have to pronounce the death of God who alone is God, the primordial and wholly other Being. Such a pronouncement has no theological meaning in a world in which God who alone is God has died. Man must learn how to solve his own problems without God. As Bonhoeffer put it, "religious people speak of God when human perception is (often just for laziness) at an end, or human resources fail: it is really always the *Deus ex Machina* they call to their aid, either for ... solving of insoluble problems or as a support in human failure ... (To such people) God becomes superfluous as a *Deus ex Machina*."¹³ With Incarnation *Deus ex Machina* died in Christ! So it is no use appealing to him!

Having discussed briefly the Death of God as expounded by the Christian theologians, let us see whether the Death of God theology is applicable to an African who is either a Christian or a non-Christian. As I have indicated above, this hypothesis will be tested by using the Agikuyu concept of God. Agikuyus live in the Central part of Kenya. They are the largest African community in Kenya. In discussing their concept of God, I shall attempt to show how Christianization of the Agikuyu people has contributed to the death of God among the Agikuyu Christians particularly those of the post-World War II generation. I shall also try to show that the non-Christianized Agikuyu cannot make the claim that God is Dead.

The Christianization of the Agikuyu people was started at the beginning of the twentieth century by the missionaries mainly from England. According to Murray, these missionaries "would have been regarded (and would have regarded themselves) as conservative evangelicals (and as) fundamentalists in the American sense. For all of them a personal 'conversion experience' and not merely a period of formal Christian teaching followed by baptism was necessary for church membership."¹⁴ A personal conversion meant accepting Jesus

13. *Ibid.*, p. 165.

14. Jocelyn M. Murray, "The Kikuyu female circumcision controversy with special reference to the church missionary society sphere of Influence" Ph. D. Thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1974, p. 45.

Christ as a personal Saviour, discard Agikuyu concept of God and abandon Agikuyu culture and religion. As far as the missionaries were concerned Agikuyu and, indeed, Africans had no conception of God, and, if they did have one, such a conception was very vague. The missionaries thought that Africans believed only in spirits, divinities, ancestors, magic, and witchcraft. An African conception of a supernatural Being was either lacking or vague. Africans had to be initiated into the belief in God. There is enough evidence to show that the missionaries believed that the Africans were generally groping in the dark, waiting for the full revelation in Jesus Christ. To them African traditional religious beliefs and practices were a preparation for the gospel. This view is still held to-day and has influenced some African Christians. Professor Mbiti, a post-World War II Christian has expressed it thus: "Christianity should be presented as the fulfilment after which, in all its richness African religiosity groped."¹⁵ Writing about the religion of the Agikuyu and Akamba in 1922, Hopley observed that "the religious beliefs of the tribes of Kikuyu and Ukamba generally consists of a rudimentary conception of a high God . . . To the bulk of the peasantry this idea is naturally very vague and practically subconscious."¹⁶ Mrs. E. Scott of the Church of Scotland Mission described Agikuyu concept of God as "a nebulous and vague being called *Ngai* . . . who lives in a cold and uncomfortable place."¹⁷

As recently as 1953, Bewes described the Agikuyu religion as animistic and went on to argue that the Agikuyu idea of God is a curious mixture of the personal and impersonal."¹⁸ Rev. Barlow had expressed similar views in the early 1900s. He accepted apprehensively that the Agikuyu believed in some vague supernatural Being called

15. See John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, (Nairobi: 1969), and Ronald Dain and Jac. Van Diepen, *Luke's Gospel for Africa To-day: A School Certificate Course based on the East African Syllabus for Christian Religious education*, (Nairobi: 1972), p. 6.
16. C. W. Hopley, *Ethnology of the Akamba and Other East African Tribes*, (London: 1910), p. 22.
17. See Samuel Kibicho "The Kikuyu conception of God, its continuity into the Christian Era, and the Question it raises for the Christian idea of Revelation", Ph. D. Thesis, Vanderbilt University, Tennessee, 1972, p. 83.
18. T. F. C. Bewes, *The Work of the Christian Church among the Kikuyu*, (London: 1953), p. 317.

Ngai. They had however, no concept of revelation and, therefore, Agikuyu prophecies claimed to have been received from *Ngai* "are of doubtful authenticity and lacking in religious purpose."¹⁹

It is quite clear that the missionaries were convinced that the, Agikuyu and, indeed, Africans hardly knew who they worshipped. and if they knew, it was only a yearning, a feeling that there was a supernatural power whom they vaguely called *Ngai*. When the Bible was translated into Kikuyu, the term *Ngai* was adopted for God but the content had to be biblical.²⁰ This means that the *Ngai* who is found in the Kikuyu bible is not *Ngai* who alone is *Ngai* rather he is a *Ngai* who is Jesus Christ. In other words, he is a Hellenized *Ngai* and for this reason the Agikuyu were to be taught about this Hellenized *Ngai*. Songs were composed to specifically summon the Agikuyu to come to this new *Ngai* who is Christ.

1. Agikuyu people come to *Ngai*
 Agikuyu people, please come to *Ngai*
 Agikuyu people come to *Ngai*
 Come to see our Lord

Please, come to pray to himx3
 He is the only our Lord

2. Believe in *Ngai* in order you
 may preach to others
 All those who do not know *Nagi*
 to hear His voice
 Let them know the good
 news of the Lord (*Mwathani*)
 In order they may get out of
 the darkness and come to light

Believe in *Ngai*x3
 And trust in Him only.²¹

19. See unsorted *Barlow Papers*, University of Nairobi, African Section.

20. Bewies, *op. cit.*, p. 317.

21. See *Nyimbo cia Kuintra Ngai*, (A Book of Hymns in the Kikuyu Language), 1956 edition, Hymns Nos. 60 and 50.

The hymns imply among other things that the Agikuyu had not God before Christianity and that any Mugikuyu who heeded the Christian call had to make a total break from the Agikuyu conception of *Ngai*. This total break was not religiously and culturally possible for the pre-World War II Agikuyu Christians. To them the *Ngai* they worshipped in Christianity was the same *Ngai* their forefathers had worshipped under the *Mugumo* (fig) tree. When the Europeans insisted that they should not worship that *Ngai* they categorically refused to obey in 1929, during the height of the female circumcision in the Agikuyu land championed by the European missionaries, the majority of the Agikuyu Christians broke from the mission churches and formed *Karing'a* churches where they would worship *Ngai* who alone is *Ngai*. The same people and their children would later sing in the 1950s:

Hoyai ma

Thaithai ma

Ni amu Ngai no uria wa tene

(Pray on, beseech truly,

for *Ngai* is the same

one of old times).²²

The big question is this: Could the descendants of the *Kirore* group (the group that decided not to break away from the mission churches) affirm positively that they too continued to worship the same *Ngai* of old times? I think it is an illusion to think that the post-World War II Agikuyu and, indeed, African Christians in general have continued to worship the same *Ngai* of old times, *Ngai* who alone is *Ngai*. It would be stretching the point too far if one imagines that the post-Independent generation worship the *Ngai* of old times and not *Ngai* who is Christ. The concept of *Ngai* for most of us to-day is biblical and not traditional. It is above all Christian in its theological content. Many of the African parents to-day, particularly the educated ones, have not the slightest knowledge and experience of *Ngai* who alone is *Ngai*. Most of them have known and experienced *Ngai* who is Jesus. This is why the death of God theology is very important for African Christians to-day. They too can claim that *God is Dead*.

22. W. Scoresby Routledge and Katharine Routledge, *With a Prehistoric people, The Agikuyu of British East Africa*, (Frank Cass and Co. Ltd., London: 1968), pp. 225-226.

The introduction of the biblical *Ngai* cum Christian *Ngai* among the Agikuyu was not easy in the beginning but it became increasingly easier after World War II. First, the number of African Christians had increased making it easier for Africans to evangelize amongst themselves. Second, the number of literate Africans had similarly increased making it easier for them to read the Bible without the assistance of the missionaries. Third, it had become fashionable to be a Christian and an educated African.

Several methods were used to introduce the Christian *Ngai* to the Africans. First, force and persuasion were used. Through the use of gifts such as beads, blankets, sugar etc., the Africans were lured into the Christian missions where they would be taught about this new Christian God. If they resisted the teachings, force was used. Second, the missionaries set out mission estates where the youth lived while undergoing the indoctrination process. These young people were thereby separated from their religious and cultural atmosphere. They would grow knowing Christian *Ngai* only. Third, the missionaries conditioned the new converts into believing that they were a "special people of Christian *Ngai* who would be the future leaders of the "pagan" Africans. Fourth, the use of audio-visual aids such as the cross, rosary, pictures of Jesus Christ, Virgin Mary, the saints, etc.

The new Christian *Ngai* was introduced as a blue-eyed white man with long, brown and sometimes blonde hair and beard. The eyes would be piercing giving the impression of a man with hope, purpose and direction, a man of the people and for the people and a man who is perfect and sinless yet a man with power to command absolute obedience. This middle-aged white man was introduced as Jesus Christ, the son of God (*Muru wa Ngai*). His mother, Mary was introduced as a young, innocent looking white woman in her twenties. She was pictured as a very motherly, very loving white woman. The son of *Ngai*, Jesus Christ, the white middle-aged man would be surrounded by the white angels with wings looking like those of white flamingoes. The disciples of Jesus Christ would also be white. However, the Devil was introduced to Africans as a black man with ugly face and horns.

The above conception of God in Judeo-Christian religion was and is totally different from the Agikuyu conception of God. Agikuyu

had no myths, stories, experience, and prophecies of a God who willed to be born and to die on the cross, nor did they conceive of God who has a son. According to the Agikuyu conception of God, God is not fully a man nor is he fully an animal. He is a mixture of the two. This explains why the Agikuyu use the pronouns "It" and "He" interchangeably when they talk about God. In addition, the Agikuyu believe that *Ngai* has no father, or mother or wife or children. He is all alone. He has no messengers. He does all his own work. *Ngai* does not eat. He is neither a child nor an old man. He is the same to-day as he was yesterday.²³ These descriptions indicate among other things that for the Agikuyu *Ngai* is a mysterious being. It is difficult to know his nature. He is what he is. (*Ngai ni Ngai*). Attempts to interview the Agikuyu on the nature and attributes of *Ngai* by this author have been fruitless. Agikuyu simply do not entertain the idea of rationalizing and intellectualizing about *Ngai*. As a matter of fact, such abstract terms as Supernatural Being, Omnipresent, Omnipotent and Omniscience are non-existent in the Agikuyu language.²⁴ *Ngai* is perceived in very concrete terms.

As we can see from the above, the Agikuyu conception of God differs a great deal from the Judeo-Christian conception of God. This is why the non-Christianized Agikuyu cannot claim that God is Dead or will die or died some time in the past. We can also assert with equal force that the Christianized Agikuyu who have stubbornly refused to abandon their culture and religion cannot claim that God is dead. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that the modern Agikuyu and, indeed, the modern Africans are beginning to experience the death of God. Many African writers are beginning to express the same mood of existential despair like the one we find in a number of European and American writers. They feel an emptiness of life, an absence and silence of God. Africa is beginning to have her first outspoken atheists, sceptics, and nihilists—a phenomenon that never existed in the pre-European era. We can rightly, therefore, say that some Africans are already experiencing the death of God in their lives.

23. For more details on the Agikuyu conception of God see Kamuyu-wa-Kang'ethe "The Role of the Agikuyu Religion in the Development of Religion-Political Movements, 1900-1950" Ph. D. Thesis, University of Nairobi, 1981, pp. 85-132.

However, before the experience of the death of God can spread like wild-life in Africa, the Christianized Africans must realize what the logic of death of God is. I shall illustrate this logic by using the following example.

The logic of the death of God in Christ revolves around the concept of a dead father—may be Freud can be of some help here. First, Daddy is Daddy whether he is black, white or yellow. The concept of Daddyism or fatherhood is a universal concept. If Daddy of X dies, this does not mean Daddy of Y dies too nor does it mean that the concept of Daddyism dies. Let us put it in a more concrete manner. If Daddy of John dies, this does not mean that Daddy of Peter, who is his friend is dead too. But if John can convince Peter through some kind of tricky logic that his Daddy is dead too and that Peter must join John in suffering the agonies of living without a Daddy, then John will have become a master of trickery. His friend, Peter will have become the most stupid person.

However, John might have a lot of power over Peter. He might use the power of persuasion or the gun or he may simply lure Peter to leave his home and live with him in an isolated locale, where Peter will be cut off from his family and kinsmen as it happened in the early missionary enterprise. There John can even convince Peter that he never even had a father and if he had, it is only a creation of his own imagination. Gradually, Peter will accept John's story that indeed he had no father and if ever he had one, he probably died a long time ago and that the concept of Daddyism is only limited to John's concept of Daddyism.

However, the fact that John has managed to convince Peter that his father is dead just because his father is dead does not in any way make Peter's father dead nor does it make the concept of fatherhood dead. Even if Peter out of his love for John wants to imagine seriously that his father is dead, there is no way that his father is dead, there is no way that his father will die. He will still be alive and well. In fact, he will be longing that one day Peter, his son, will come back home.

It should also be pointed out that even if Peter has been fully conditioned that his father is dead by John, this does not hide the fact that Peter's father is Richard and John's father is Paul. *Paul is dead*

but *Richard is alive*. It is as simple as that. Second, the two fathers are different. Each has a different personality which in turn has moulded the behaviour of their respective sons. So no matter how hard Peter tries to behave like John, he cannot.

This then is the simple logic of the Death of God in Christ as this author sees it. We Africans agree with the Christians that the concept of supreme Being is Supreme Being whether he is conceived of by Christians, Africans, Moslems, or Chinese. The only thing we categorically reject is that the supreme Being universally *Willed* at one time in history to be Incarnated in his son called Jesus Christ so that he could experience what it means to be a man. We also categorically disagree that this Supreme Being who is known by many names throughout the world *Willed* to die so that he can experience *Death* and that he died in Jesus Christ and that he rose from the Dead. Well, if there was such a Supreme Being he must be the one known by the Englishmen as God, by the German as *Gott*, by the Frenchmen as *Deus*, by the Romans as *Dei* and by the Greeks as *Theos*. But the Supreme Being who is known by the Gussi as *Engoro*, by the Luos as *Nyasae*, by Luyia as *Were*, by the Agikuyu as *Ngai*, by the Maasai as *Engai* by the Akamba as *Mulungu* and by the Waswahili as *Mungu* has never died nor has he ever *willed* to die nor *willed* to be Incarnated in some son called Jesus Christ nor was he born of some woman called Virgin Mary nor crucified on the cross nor wore a Crown of Thorns. It is at this juncture that the African must begin to rediscover the God and the faith of his forefathers. This rediscovery will lead to the ongoing ecumenical spirit among peoples from different religions in the world. It is in this spirit that I have written this article and it is in this spirit that I welcome the Christian community of faith to have a meaningful dialogue with the African community of faith.