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Theological Reflections on the Novels of Ngugi Wa Thiongo

John Anonby

As a student of both theology and literature, I have attempted to gain insights on the role of Christianity in East Africa as well as to explore some of Kenya's social and political aspirations as distilled in its literature. Teaching at a theological college attended by students who represent many denominations has enhanced my awareness of some of the struggles as well as opportunities and challenges of the Church in a dynamic, changing society. My decision to commence my research into Kenyan literature through a careful reading of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's writings is, however, a more delicate matter that requires an immediate preliminary explanation: Ngugi, regardless of one's personal response (which may range from unqualified admiration to total antipathy), is widely known as "Kenya's best-known writer"¹; he has, in fact, achieved international recognition. Ngugi's novels have spanned the crucial period just prior to Kenya's independence up to the present, and they focus on many of the conflict-laden issues of this entire era.

Although Ngugi is currently living in self imposed exile in England, alienated from a Kenya that has not embraced the Marxist-socialist views he has persistently advocated, Ngugi's novels nevertheless provide the Christian reader with an opportunity to scrutinize anew his or her own beliefs and ideals. As an evangelical Christian with a strong northern European heritage as well as a Northern American upbringing, I have found Ngugi's novels a fascinating challenge to some of my most cherished values. A student in a missionary school prior to his enrollment at Makerere College in Uganda, Ngugi had absorbed much Christian learning, which is reflected in the plethora of Biblical allusions and motifs which permeate his novels. It is important to recognize, then, that Ngugi's rejection of Christianity was not facilitated by a superficial encounter with Christian beliefs, but emerged after a profound awareness of the incompatibility between certain essential points of Christian doctrine and his personal views of ultimate reality. This problem was compounded (and perhaps even initiated) by what he regarded as discrepancies between institutionalized and Biblical Christianity (or "mere" Christianity, to borrow a term from C. S. Lewis).

A convenient introduction to Ngugi's disenchantment with Christianity can be found in his widely publicized speech to the Fifth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa in Nairobi on March 12, 1970, which appeared in an essay entitled "Church, Culture and Politics" in Ngugi's

*Homecoming*². In this address, he makes a number of sweeping indictments against Christianity, two of which are pertinent. He sees, first, a "contradiction" between Christianity, "whose basic doctrine was love and equality between men" and what he regards as its unholy alliance with colonialism, "which in Kenya was built on the inequality and hatred between men and the subsequent subjugation of the black race by the white race."³ His second caveat is that "Christianity set in motion a process of social change involving rapid disintegration of the tribal set-up and the framework of social norms and values by which people had formerly ordered their lives." He thus laments the loss of "primitive rites," traditional African dances and the "images of our gods," all of which, he feels, "robbed people of their soul."⁴ These concerns are given eloquent literary treatment in his first novel, *The River Between*, which describes the invasion of Kikuyu land by foreigners "with clothes like butterflies" and traces the fulfillment of the prophecy of the old man, Chege, that "these followers of Joshua [a zealous convert to Christianity] would bring so many divisions to the land that the tribe would die."⁵

While it is necessary to point out that Ngugi's speech to the Presbyterian Assembly had been launched by a public denial of Christianity ("I am not a man of the Church. I am not even a Christian")⁶, the two issues mentioned above deserve at least a modest response by any reflecting Christian believer living in present day Kenya. The past history of both colonial and missionary activity in East Africa cannot, of course, be altered. Undoubtedly, many European settlers, whether ostensibly Christian or not, treated the nationals with condescension, contempt, and even cruelty. The extent to which this was the case can only be regretted. It is also true, however, that many Christian missionaries, by their message of salvation and the example of their self-sacrificing lives, made an enduring social, educational, and spiritual contribution to this part of Africa. Ngugi's cynical comment that it was "the desire of the missionaries not to bring light to the African souls, but to wrest political power"⁷ from them is, at best, a hasty generalization and, at worst, a myopic distortion.

Ngugi's second articulated concern -- the rapid social change and the subsequent loss of traditional tribal values brought about by the intrusive impact of Christianity -- is a more complex matter, with ramifications that extend beyond the scope of this essay. While it can be convincingly argued that Christianity was not the only disruptive element in East African tribal societies (and one might well wonder what "imperialism" would have produced without some of the modifying features of genuine Christianity), Ngugi's distaste over the dilution or negation of tribal traditions cannot be fully assuaged. The reason for this stems from the nature of the Gospel itself: true Christianity is intrinsically and irrevocably intrusive. (We are here reminded of the paradoxical utterance of the Prince of Peace: "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth...I came not to send peace, but a sword" (Matt. 10:34).

Though we can all agree, as we adopt a retrospective view, that missionary activity frequently reflected the social, economic, and political predilections of its devotees, the fact remains that Biblical Christianity cannot embrace every cherished tribal custom or belief. Some of the "primitive rites" and "images of our gods" which Ngugi wishes to preserve must be

relinquished by the individual who enters into a personal relationship with Christ; this applies equally to the pre-Roman Druids of Britain, the Vikings of pre-Christian Scandinavia, and the Kikuyus (or any other tribal group) of Africa. Attempts either to divest Christianity of its cultural accretions or endeavours to preserve the unique features of one's own tribal, regional, and national customs are legitimate on going activities, provided that Biblical truth is firmly adhered to without dilution, diminution, or compromise. At the most profound level, to employ the phrase of Byang Kato, "Christianity is absolute."⁸

All of Ngugi's novels depict, in one form or another, the underlying criticism that Christianity, at least in its historical manifestations has failed to come to terms with man's basic social, economic, and political needs. Ngugi attributes this failure to two apparently unrelated but nevertheless closely connected tendencies in Christianity: the ostensible otherworldliness of Christian piety on the one hand and its juxtaposition to the earthly expediency of institutionalized Christianity on the other. Ngugi unrelentingly portrays these tendencies in relation to Kenya, where, he contends, the missionaries propounded the doctrine that "the poor were blessed and would get their reward in heaven" along with the concomitant admonition "to obey the powers that be", i.e. the colonial administration as a result, he maintains, "the Church became the greatest opponent of the African struggle for freedom."⁹ The economic counterpart is reinforced in Ngugi's recounting of the popular anecdotal story of the people who were told by the invading settlers to close their eyes in prayer, only to discover afterwards that their land had been taken.¹⁰

The ineffectuality, perniciousness, and ultimate absurdity of Christian otherworldliness is a persistent theme in Ngugi's novels. In *The River Between*, the Kikuyu leader of a tribal Christian faction, Joshua, repudiates the worldly "Egypt" in his single-minded quest for "the promised land" in Heaven (p. 31) while his own home disintegrates around him. The protagonist of *Weep not, Child*, Njoroge, is initially confident that if he remains faithful to God, "the kingdom of Heaven"¹¹ would be his, but he is unable to maintain his faith when confronted personally by harsh realities of the Mau Mau struggle which involves members of his immediate family. In *A Grain of Wheat*, another Joshua-like "Christian soldier" emerges in the character of Jackson, who preaches that "politics [is] dirty, worldly wealth a sin"¹² He later pays for his political detachment with his life as a group of angry Mau Mau hack him to pieces with pangas. Ngugi regards Christian otherworldliness as an aberration in his satiric treatment of Lillian, a white-robed charismatic evangelist who had previously achieved notoriety as a prostitute who persistently avowed her virginity. Though a minor character in *Petals of Blood*, a novel in which Ngugi focuses on the political and economic disparities in a newly independent Kenya, Lillian has significance as a symbol of the power of "religion" as "a weapon against the workers",¹³ some of whom have abandoned their responsibilities in a newly formed union to embrace Lillian's eschatological message of the imminence of the "kingdom of God" (p. 305). Ngugi's ideological protagonist in this novel, Karega, who represents the "working and peasant masses", has an alternative vision of an earthly "kingdom of man and woman" in a society freed from "imperialism" and "capitalism" (p. 344).

Ngugi's contempt for the otherworldly stance of the Christian gospel is reinforced by an even harsher criticism: institutional Christianity is primarily motivated by a this worldly self-interest diametrically opposed to "the primitive communism of the early christian church."¹⁴ Unlike the Mau Mau patriot, Kihika, portrayed in *A Grain of Wheat* as a dominating Christ-figure who lays down his life to bring justice to the poor and needy, the Christian establishment is represented by characters such as Rev. Jerrod Brown in *Petals of Blood*. A black man highly respected in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, Brown is approached by a destitute and bedraggled delegation whose members have trekked on foot to Nairobi to get government assistance for the starving people in their distant constituency. Instead of attending to any of their physical needs (one child, for instance, is critically ill,) Brown dismisses them with a perfunctory offer of the spiritual "bread and fish of Jesus" and a platitudinous prayer (p. 149).

The priority Jerrod places on his personal prestige and comfort at the expense of his own people is reflected on a much larger scale by the organized and politicized "Christian" community depicted in *Devil on the Cross*, Ngugi's most recent novel.¹⁵ Instead of emulating the prototype of self-sacrifice, Christ on the Cross, whose name they bear, modern Christians are portrayed as callously and ruthlessly pursuing their economic interests in the guise of traditional Christian trappings. In this chilling work, replete with inversions, parody, and satire, Ngugi presents a picture of an international conference of financiers conducted in the form of a Sunday church service. Large "bottles of whiskey, vodka, brandy and gin" have been provided for the occasion ---a parody of a Christian communion service---as they celebrate "the democracy of drinking the blood and eating the flesh of...workers"(pp. 89, 92). Their rationalized mandate for their colossal enterprises takes the form of recurring appeals to Christ's parables of the talents in Matthew 25, in which the greatest rewards are disseminated to the servants who have multiplied their master's money. The celebrated "Savior," however, is not Christ but rather the god of finance: "Money rules the world" (pp. 89-90).

The eloquence, potency, and ingenuity of Ngugi's unsympathetic treatment of Christianity in his novels are likely to arouse two divergent responses, depending on the predisposition of the reader. The non-Christian will be tempted to agree with Ngugi that Christianity is, at best, a fantasy and, at worst, a sham. On the other side, the committed Christian may be inclined to dismiss Ngugi's remonstrances out of hand, and thereby evade coming to terms with issues that deserve a hearing.

The otherworldly pose and the thisworldly expediency which Ngugi castigates in institutionalized Christianity are distorted manifestations of a profound paradox that lies at the very centre of real Christianity, which is simultaneously the most otherworldly and the most thisworldly of all religions. Christ stated unequivocally, "My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight" (John 18:36). Hence, neither the Christian nor the non-Christian who employs force to suppress others to serve his or her own ends is operating within the principles of the kingdom of God. As a mere economic system, neither capitalism nor communism is intrinsically more or less Christian than the other. When Ngugi appeals to "the primitive communism of the early Christian Church of Peter" as justification for "violence in order to change an intolerable, unjust order",¹⁶ thereby attempting to

exonerate the savage acts of Mau Mau, he is moving away from Biblical Christianity, the "primitive communism" in Acts was prompted by voluntary altruistic participation, not communal coercion or bloodshed. A similar departure from genuine Christianity is demonstrated by the capitalist who employs the parable of the talents to exploit others. On the other hand, those who have sacrificed their lives for the Christian faith, such as Jackson in *A Grain of Wheat*, are not fools, but have inherited an incorruptible crown. True Christianity is uncompromisingly otherworldly.

It is also adamantly thisworldly, for God's eternal program is inextricably tied to *this* earth and to our present responsibility to alleviate the misery of our anguish-laden planet. We are admonished to pray, "Thy will be done *in earth* as it is in Heaven," (Matt. 6:10), and are also warned by what C.S. Lewis terms as that "terrifying" 25th chapter of Matthew, where Christ expels from his presence those who have neglected to attend to the basic earthly needs of the deprived and the oppressed. There is no room for complacency here. Neither is there any place for the subtle transmutation of the biblical paradigm of altruistic thisworldliness into either individualized or institutionalized self-directed expediency, which has so frequently marred the face of Christianity, not only in Ngugi's East Africa but throughout the world, at different times and places.

Nevertheless, Ngugi's prolonged search for a just society, admirable as it may be, cannot be consummated by merely rearranging the foci of power and influence. His emphasis in all of his novels is on "what any political and economic arrangement does to the spirit and the values governing human relationships,"¹⁷ whereas the real issue is what man's spirit does to his political and economic environment. Capitalism without reference to God is just as insidious and materialistic as the dialectical materialism of atheistic Marxism. Only he whom the Son makes free is free indeed (John 8:36), and only such an individual can realize his or her full potential as a facilitator of lasting Uhuru-- but this responsibility must be discharged on earth.

Notes

¹G.D. Killiam, *An introduction to the writings of Ngugi* (London: Heinemann, 1980), p. 1.

²Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Homecoming* (London: Heinemann, 1972), pp. 31-36.

³ *Homecoming*, p. 31.

⁴ *Homecoming*, pp. 31-2.

⁵ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *The River Between* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1983 [1965], pp. 19, 37. This novel, though written first, was published subsequent to Ngugi's second novel, *Weep Not, Child* (London: Heinemann, 1964). Subsequent references to the novels are cited parenthetically in the essay.

⁶ *Homecoming*, p. 31.

⁷ *Homecoming*, p. 33.

⁸ Byang H. Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kisumu: Evangel Publishing House, 1975), p. 168.

⁹ *Homecoming*, p. 33.

¹⁰ *Homecoming*, p. 33.

¹¹ *Weep Not, Child*, p. 49.

¹² Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *A Grain of Wheat* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1984 [1967]), p. 36

¹³ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1977), p. 305.

¹⁴ *Homecoming*, p. 36.

¹⁵ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Devil on the Cross* (London: Heinemann, 1982).

¹⁶ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, "Mau Mau, Violence and Culture," in *Homecoming*, pp. 28-9, 36.

¹⁷ Author's Note, *Homecoming* p. xvi.