RELIGION AND "GODLESS" NATIONALISM IN COLONIAL NIGERIA: THE CASE OF THE GOD’S KINGDOM SOCIETY AND THE N.C.N.C.

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This paper sets out to show one of the roles that religion played in the nationalist struggle for independence in Nigeria in the early 1950s. The religion I am speaking of is that represented by the God’s Kingdom Society (hereafter, the G.K.S.). The role it played as epitomized in the life of the founder, Gideon Meridere Urhobo, can be set out in three main stages developing from friendship with the nationalists to disagreement and later polemics with some of them:

a) Gideon Urhobo’s interest in Nigerian politics as a result of which he befriended and supported Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe (hereafter, Zik) in his leadership of the nationalist movement.

b) God’s Kingdom Society’s disagreements with Zik and the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (N.C.N.C.) when the leadership of the party later denied the Jehovah of the Bible any role in Nigerian nationalism.

c) God’s Kingdom Society’s political efforts for the Action Group, a rival political party to the N.C.N.C. formed by Chief Obafemi Awolowo “and God fearing people,” and the outcome of the General Elections held in 1951/52.

The disagreement centred on whether the God of the Bible had any role in Nigerian nationalism. The nationalists came to believe that there was no God and that the Jehovah God of the Bible was a Jewish tribal god. The sun was seen as the god of Africa.¹ Urhobo disagreed with the nationalists:

To say the God of Africa was different from the God of other continents... was another capital foolishness and spiritual derangement. The God of Africa was none other than Jehovah....²

If the nationalists had condemned some whitemen’s brand of Christianity which Urhobo himself described as “supporting imperialism
in its mad exploitation, there would have been no contention, but they did not stand for black theology or liberation theology. God and Christianity were regarded as alien to Africa. Urhobo therefore described their stand as "godless," and directed his preaching against them. His concern was to see how the nationalists could be deprived of leadership of God's country, Nigeria. And to fight the nationalists, he assisted a rival political party in the impending elections. In all this he saw himself performing the role of a religious leader.

It is well known that Christianity has played an important role in the development of a nationalist consciousness in Nigeria. As E. A. Ayandele says, "the church was the cradle of Nigerian nationalism." The church provided not only an important part of the leadership of the nationalist movements but also powerful emotional symbols of group identity which have bound people together in opposition to foreign rulers. Religion also offers legitimation for resistance to established rule, foreign or indigenous, whenever necessary. Even Jesus Christ has been identified by some writers with the nationalist faction known as the Zealots who engaged in subversive activity against Rome's imperial rule. One may note that the people to whom Jesus was most clearly opposed were the Sadducees and the Herodians, people who were collaborating with Roman rule. In a colonised situation, therefore, religion and nationalism have not only been interdependent but may also act as partners in progress, especially concerning political freedom.

There has, however, been little detailed work on the relation between religion and politics in more recent times, especially on any specific part played by religion in nationalist struggles with colonialism. Adrian Hastings has published a typology of ways in which church and state or society may relate, over and above his extensive history of African Christianity in modern times illustrative of the latter's place in political and social history. James Coleman's important study, Nigeria: Background to Nationalism included religious and other protest movements, and presented white Christian missionaries as willing to help Nigerians attain political freedom. But the missionaries could not be open critics of government policy for they were receiving aid to get land, and protection for their missionary work. Other writers, like G. O. Olusanya and Chinweizu, who have written copiously on Nigerian nationalism, have not found space for the religious dimen-