

Struggling with theodicy: Kenyan reactions to the Bombing

by [Andrea Useem](#) in the [September 9, 1998](#) issue

The bomb exploded on a busy Friday morning in downtown Nairobi, tearing through buildings, bodies, lives and the national consciousness. In its aftermath, Kenyans have been searching for explanations, and most often finding them in their Christian faith. In this ardently religious country which is about 70 percent Christian, people are more likely to discuss God and Satan than American foreign policy or armed extremism.

In the hours immediately following the August 7 blast, many spoke of God as a deliverer. In Ward 44 of Kenyatta National Hospital, family and friends crowded around the beds of survivors, listening to their stories of escape from shattered, smoking buildings. They shared a kind of faith-inspired buoyancy.

"We are happy that God is able," announced David Khaemba, a computer operator, sitting at the bedside of Joyce Kariga, her hands and face swollen with bloody lacerations. Khaemba and others from his church had searched the wards for Kariga, who was working in a building next to the embassy when the blast occurred.

Across town in Nairobi Hospital, Bernard Njoroge Mirangi, his head swathed in white bandages, said that he was collecting a check from the Cooperative Bank, right beside the embassy, when "something burst up and glass fell down" and a beam crashed on his head. Looking slightly dazed, he said, "Jesus is good. He saved me."

Hundreds of victims echoed these feelings of thankfulness for their deliverance. In an article titled "How we escaped hell unscathed," the Sunday Nation, Kenya's largest independent newspaper, carried stories of those who had survived the blast or left the area just moments before the bomb exploded. Said Francis Njenga Bedan, who was buried alive in the Ufundi Cooperative House: "Those who came out of the blast did so not because they were lucky, brave or rescued by the Israelis [who came to assist a day after the explosion]. God alone can rescue."

After the initial shock and confusion, Kenyans struggled to reconcile the horrifying event with their understanding of God. For many the conclusion was simply that God sometimes does not make sense to us. "God's ways are not our ways, God's thoughts are not our thoughts," said John Thairu, the pastor of an evangelical church, during a prayer meeting in downtown Nairobi. Drawing on Isaiah 55, he preached to more than 400 office workers who gather in a decrepit theater during their lunch hour every day to pray, sing and witness together.

This struggle to reconcile faith with tragedy was poignantly evident in a note tucked among the pile of wreaths and flowers in front of the empty space behind the embassy, where the five-story Ufundi Cooperative House once stood. Handwritten on yellow-lined paper, it read: "Dear Gloria and Caroline, I am sorry you had to leave us this way. Maybe it was because you were both so special and loved that God wanted you near him. Everything happens for a reason, even if at first we don't know why or can't really understand."

Ndingi Mwana'a Nzeki, archbishop of the Catholic Church in Kenya and a respected opinion leader, tried to channel this outpouring of spirituality into Christian forgiveness. "We must forgive the one who is the cause of this," he said during a special mass for bomb victims, drawing more than 2,000 worshipers to Nairobi's Holy Family Basilica two days after the bombing. "It doesn't matter how senseless, how mad [the act] was, we must forgive. I know it is difficult, but it is our Christian principle."

Despite the archbishop's prestige, however, this theme did not gain much momentum. The daily newspapers did not report on his sermon, as they often do when he speaks on national issues. His message seemed to lack resonance in part because the culprits were still at large and nameless at the time. "How can we forgive people when we don't even know who they are?" asked Zablon Obengo, standing beside red-eyed relatives of his cousin, a bank manager killed in the blast, just after identifying the body in Nairobi's stinking mortuary.

With the identity of the attackers unknown, anger fell on Americans instead. "The American embassy should be in a secluded place, where it can be bombed alone," said one young health volunteer at the scene of the bombing. "The war is not with Kenya. If people want to fight the U.S. they should go to Washington and bomb the White House, not poor Africans."

Political leaders, journalists and some rescue workers accused U.S. Marines of preventing local rescue workers from entering the embassy in the early hours after the blast, preventing them from reaching the injured. Americans focused only on rescuing and rehabilitating their own staff, Kenyans charged--allegations that Madeleine Albright sought to deny in her whirlwind trip through Kenya and Tanzania.

Many Kenyans, especially among the growing numbers who call themselves "born again," blamed Satan. "We do not put the blame on the person who did this," said Florence Githua after a lunchtime prayer meeting. "It was the devil who put the idea into his head." This accusation, echoed in many congregations throughout Kenya, irritated Timothy Njoya, the outspoken Presbyterian pastor who has pushed for sweeping reforms in the country.

"Something terrible about poor people, and about Africans in particular, is that they abdicate responsibility by citing God's will or blaming Satan. Instead of thinking rationally, they spiritualize the matter," he said three days after the bombing. He sees the bombing as part of the globalization process. Just as capital moves out of the control of the nation-state, so does security. In a later sermon to his congregation, Njoya condemned the notion that God had sent the blast to "punish" Kenyans for their sins.

For many leaders of Kenya's churches, the bombing remains a terrible puzzle. Said Jesse Kamau, moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Kenya, "We don't want to bring God in [to the tragedy], but he is omnipotent. Did he allow it? We want to see God as one who is delivering us from evil."

David Gitari, archbishop of the Anglican Church in Kenya, considered the bombing in the context of the centuries-old struggle with theodicy. "I won't accept that this is the work of God. That is bad theology," he said. "God is a God of good. All we can say is that sometimes God allows Satan to do his work."