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***‘Down with the devil, Forward with Christ!’
A study of the interface between religious
and political discourses in Zimbabwe***

Abstract

The relationship between religion and politics in Africa has been approached from a multiplicity of angles. Many commentators have analysed the role of churches in democratisation processes in the postcolonial period, while others have examined the impact of religion on ethnic imagination. African Traditional Religions and their contribution to African liberation struggles have also received considerable scholarly attention. This article builds upon the available reflections on religion and politics. It examines the interface between religious and political discourses in Zimbabwe from the late 1990s. While many scholars adopt a deterministic interpretative framework, I argue that there has been a dynamic interchange and free borrowing of phrases, catchwords and ideologies between the religious and political arenas. I also maintain that as the social, political and economic climate worsened in Zimbabwe, religious and political rhetoric became pronounced. Religion and politics influenced each other in ways that call for a rethinking of traditional formulations, I argue in the conclusion.

Introduction

Most studies on religion and politics in Africa adopt a mono-dimensional perspective on the subject. A review of the literature indicates a tendency to isolate the political appropriation of religion from the religious critique of politics. How religious ideas are manipulated by shrewd African politicians is a dominant concern (Pobee 1992; Muyebe and Muyebe 1999). Other scholars examine the role of the African church in politics (Ezeani 1998) or how the churches could enhance democracy and development in Africa (Mugambi 1997). In all these instances, researchers have been preoccupied with the question of how religion is a willing pawn in African political machinations. In tandem with this reading of the relationship between religion and politics, other writers prescribe a more assertive role for the African church as part of the nascent civil society. A few scholars have described the complex interaction between religious and political discourses, showing how there is constant mutual borrowing, adaptations and influences.

This article utilises the political and religious situation in Zimbabwe from the late 1990s to illustrate the malleable nature of the relationship between religion and politics. I maintain that instead of interpreting the interface in a deterministic manner, there is need to appreciate that religion and politics influence each other in a myriad of ways, some blatant and others subterranean. The first section surveys the political and religious climate in Zimbabwe from the late 1990s to the early months of 2002. It highlights the worsening economic and social conditions, as well as the international ostracism of Zimbabwe due to her radical approach to the land question. The second section provides a summary of church-state relations. It explores the creative interaction between political and religious discourses by analysing slogans, songs, pronouncements and myths by actors in the two arenas. In the third section I argue for an unfettered approach to the issue of religion and politics in Africa.

'Things fall apart'? Zimbabwe in the late 1990s

After the attainment of political independence on 18 April 1980, Zimbabwe became a favourite nation within the donor community and international organisations. As the country scored spectacular successes in education, health, agriculture and other areas (Chitando 1998: 223), it was touted as one of the few success stories in postcolonial Africa. Its leader, Robert Mugabe, confounded critics by proclaiming a policy of national reconciliation. Such was the goodwill towards Zimbabwe that the international community chose to downplay the vicious state repression in Matabeleland during the 1980s. The overall promise that Zimbabwe showed was deemed greater than the cries of anguish, brutal murders and systematic persecution of a significant part of its population. Violence and memory (Alexander, McGregor and Ranger 2000) have haunted inhabitants of the southern region of Zimbabwe where the state resorted to extreme measures to suppress dissent.

In line with the projected national goals of reconstruction and development, the state avoided meddling with the Lancaster House Constitution. This compromise document recognised private property rights in land. While land had been one of the popular grievances during the liberation struggle, the ruling party avoided this highly emotive issue while it sought to consolidate its grip on power. For most of the 1980s, the land question was strategically de-politicised (Tshuma 1997:124). In line with its socialist pronouncements, the state also promoted the rise of a labour movement to defend the rights of workers.

As the euphoria of independence waned, the ruling party increasingly found itself under attack from various angles. In 1988 University of Zimbabwe students staged a massive anti-corruption demonstration. They accused ruling party officials of lining their pockets amidst increasing poverty. With the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) being implanted in 1991, the black majority began to question the dividends of political liberation.

An opposition political party, the Zimbabwe Unity Movement (ZUM), emerged and it attracted many urban supporters.

Various studies have indicated that ESAP resulted in untold suffering for most of the vulnerable sections of the Zimbabwe populace (Gibbon 1995; Mlambo 1997). The socio-economic circumstances of most people deteriorated (Mupedziswa and Gumbo 2001:107), while many professionals became economic refugees within the Southern African region or further afield. Under the economic reform programme, professionals also became more militant and confrontational in their relations with the government (Gaidzanwa 1999:81).

As it dawned on the masses that political independence had not been translated into the economic miracle that many had anticipated, discordant voices became more pronounced. While popular music had called upon all Zimbabweans to pull together, in the 1990s protest music became more nuanced. Artists challenged the official version of progress and democracy, with some songs affecting a renegotiation of the meaning of independence in the late eighties and nineties (Vambe 2000:78). Various artists protested against the grinding poverty, deteriorating health delivery system, unfulfilled promises and other concerns. Some creative writers like Chenjerai Hove contested the foundational myth of national victory (Sibanyoni 1995).

It is against the background of an assertive labour movement, a restless peasantry and a worsening economy that Mugabe's appeal to the land issue in the late 1990s should be understood. He encouraged farm invasions, charging that blacks should claim back their land from white settlers. Dismissing concerns from the United States of America and the European Union as racist postures, Mugabe dubbed his quest to recover stolen ancestral lands a third *chimurenga* (revolution). According to the ruling party, 'land is the economy and the economy is the land' (Moore 2001).

By January 2002, Zimbabwe was truly a nation in crisis. Within the Southern African region, neighbours were wary of the consequences of a possible economic melt down. Many donor agencies had withdrawn from the country, while global media networks beamed images of exaggerated chaos and upheaval. With ruling party militias wantonly terrorising civilians in the run-up to the March 2002 Presidential elections pitting Mugabe against Morgan Tsvangirai of the Movement for Democratic Change, one would concur that there has been a lack of commitment to democratic principles in post-revolution Southern African states (Melber 2001:18). As many professionals left the country in frustration and the government enacted oppressive pieces of legislation in an effort to further entrench itself, Zimbabwe mirrored the case of a country where so much promise was betrayed.

It would, however, be historically unsatisfactory to limit Zimbabwe's turmoil in the late 1990s to developments in the political and economic arenas. Events in the social sphere also contributed significantly towards the national pessimism. Like her Southern African neighbours Botswana and South Africa,

Zimbabwe faced a devastating HIV/AIDS epidemic. The economically active age group was being decimated, and funerals became commonplace in the 1990s. Illness, disease and death combined to create cynicism and despair. Bryan Callahan has catalogued the hardships and tragedies that have shaken the country:

Since independence in 1980, Zimbabwe's citizens have staggered under the weight of multiple burdens, including economic recession, IMF sponsored structural adjustments, government corruption, political violence, ethnic tensions, land scarcity, drought, and an HIV/AIDS epidemic that has killed many of the country's brightest and most productive people (Callahan 2001:85).

It is within this context of where all imaginable 'evils' have coalesced to make existence so burdensome that religious individuals and politicians tried to be relevant. Amidst the anxiety and exodus of skilled personnel, political functionaries and sacred practitioners employed an array of images, slogans and myths to capture the prevailing reality. In the late 1990s, politicians and preachers included songs, pithy sayings and cliches in their repertoires. How to name reality, prescribe solutions and project a more promising future when the country was undergoing troubled times became major themes in religious and political discourses in Zimbabwe.

Shared horizons: Religious and political discourses in Zimbabwe

Although Zimbabwe is home to a multiplicity of religions and worldviews, Christianity, African Traditional Religions and Islam tend to dominate the spiritual market. Due to its association with modernity and the colonial project, Christianity in its myriad forms largely defines the credoscape (Lundby and Dayan 1999:405). As in most Southern African states, Christianity dominates the media, leaving adherents of African Traditional Religions to protest against the lack of respect for autochthonous traditions (Mndende 1999).

Christianity succeeded in capturing popular imagination in Zimbabwe due to the high profile it enjoyed during the colonial period. African nationalists received their education at mission scholars and they have felt greatly indebted. According to Revd Ndabaningi Sithole of the American Congregation Church, 'it was the Christian Church that first introduced literacy which was to give birth to African nationalists, medical doctors, advocates, businessmen, journalists and graduates' (Sithole 1970:98). Although some African intellectuals have attacked Christianity as a foreign ideology, millions of Africans have embraced the religion.

Alongside African Independent/Initiated Churches that epitomise indigenous responses to Christianity (Daneel 1971), the Catholic Church, various Protestant churches and Evangelical/Pentecostal churches constitute the main branches of Christian expression in Zimbabwe. While these movements had complex responses towards the armed liberation struggle, a number of scholars

have highlighted the contributions of the different churches. These studies include the role of the Catholic Church (Linden 1980), the Evangelical Lutheran Church (Bhebe 1999), African Independent Churches (Daneel 1998) and other churches in the struggle for Zimbabwe.

An appreciation of the Christian contribution to the independence of the country facilitates an understanding of the largely cordial church-state relations in independent Zimbabwe (Hallencrutz and Moyo 1988). The formation of the black ruling elite in Christian contexts and its continued identification with the religion can also be explained against this general background. President Mugabe's pronouncements against homosexuality and the support he received from ZANU-PF members in parliament is informed by a specific reading of Christian ethics (Dunton and Palmberg 1996:13-14). However, as I shall illustrate below, it is the main-line version of Christianity that has dominated civil religion in Zimbabwe.

While Christianity has enjoyed a high profile in Zimbabwe, African Traditional Religions have met with mixed fortunes. During the liberation struggle (1972-1979), indigenous religions experienced a revival (Lan 1985). The quest to recover stolen ancestral land was sometimes given a spiritual dimension whereby territorial spirits like Nehanda and Kaguvi were deemed patrons of the revolution. However, with the attainment of independence in 1980, there was a gradual retreat from indigenous religions to Christianity. The religious symbols of African Traditional Religions were superseded by those from Christianity (Bourdillon 1984).

During the first decade of independence (1980-1990), there was a tendency for religious leaders to co-operate with the state. Apart from protests against state brutality in Matabeleland, the rhetoric of nation-building, reconciliation and progress succeeded in bringing together politicians and people from religious institutions. The appointment of Rev Canaan Banana as ceremonial President between 1980 and 1987 also symbolically indicated church-state partnership. With the adoption of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme in the 1990s, a cleavage was affected between the church and the state. Many church leaders and preachers openly and strongly criticised the government of Zimbabwe for condemning many black Zimbabweans to a life of misery. The government accused such individuals of engaging in politics while hiding behind the pulpit. However, when the Zimbabwean crisis boiled over in the late 1990s, religious and political rhetoric went up by several decibels. The ensuing section analyses the metaphors and signifiers that were interchangeably employed.

Political and religious slogans in Zimbabwe

During the armed liberation struggle, combatants on the battle front and propaganda personnel in Mozambique, Zambia, Tanzania and other stations actively employed slogans as a mobilising strategy and to raise morale. These were

short, precise declarations that demanded the response of the audience. Slogans sought to forge a common identity between the combatants and peasant supporters, as well as to articulate the goals of the struggle. Such slogans included:

- Forward with Unity: *Pamberi neKubatana*
- Forward with Bravery: *Pamberi neKushinga*
- Forward with the War: *Pamberi neHondo*
- Forward with ZANU: *Pamberi neZanu* (Krieger 1992:98)

In the postcolonial period, the slogans shifted from the militancy of the war to the struggle for peace, unity and development. Politicians began to exhort the nation to redefine national goals and aspirations. In the run-up to the June 2000 parliamentary elections, ZANU-PF propaganda chiefs began to focus on the land issue. They portrayed the seizure of white-owned farms as the outpouring of revolutionary anger. The following slogan was coined:

Mover: Land *Ivhu*

Response: To the people *Kuvanhu*

Mover: To the people *Kuvanhu*

Response: Land *Ivhu*

This slogan communicates the aspiration that land should be returned to the people (defined and understood as blacks) and that the people should be reunited with their land. Central to this ‘third uprising’ is the conviction that ancestral spirits remained angry that the land had not gone back to its original owners. As in the liberation struggle, the slogan seeks to evoke deeply rooted and dearly held spiritual convictions. Political objectives are pursued using religious ideas in the ruling party’s application of slogans about the land.

As the slogans became known by many people, some enterprising Christian preachers adopted their form but changed the words. By applying slogans in their sermons, preachers from mainly Evangelical/Pentecostal churches were demonstrating their contextual sensitivity and creativity. However, by critically engaging with the content and thrust of the slogans by ZANU-PF strategists, they sought to undermine nationalist rhetoric on land. Maintaining that land was not a priority, the young born-again preachers placed emphasis on moral adjustment and getting people to heaven. Although the Evangelical/Pentecostal movement in Africa has declared politics to be a ‘wicked game’, its closeness to the political terrain can be discerned from its appropriation of slogans. Where the slogans noted above focus on getting land to the people, born-again preachers dwelt on the need to get people to heaven. Thus:

Mover: People *Vanhu*

Response: To Heaven *Kudenga*

Mover: To Heaven *Kudenga*

Response: People *Vanhu*

Given the reality that knowledge of the ZANU-PF slogans was a survival strategy for many Zimbabweans in the run up to the March 2002 presidential elections, one can appreciate the popularity of slogans during the particular historical period under review. The opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) also employed the medium of slogans to win popular support. Operating in a context where slogans were utilised to impart ideas concerning political programmes and to elicit commitment to specific aspirations, the Movement for Democratic Change also found it necessary to adopt the technique. For example:

Mover: MDC

Response: Is it *Ndizvo*

Respondents affirmed that 'MDC is it', effectively portraying it as an opportune replacement for ZANU-PF. However, born-again preachers also deconstructed the slogan. They interrogated and repudiated the claim that a political party could change Zimbabwe's fortunes. Amidst the turmoil that engulfed Zimbabwe in the late 1990s, young preachers undermined the authority of both older politicians (Van Dijk 2000: 17) and emerging ones. Where the MDC portrayed itself as the saviour of Zimbabwe, young preachers reiterated slogans that only Jesus had the answers. Thus:

Mover: Jesus *Jesu*

Response: Is it *Ndizvo*

While some Christian preachers reinterpreted slogans that were in vogue in the political field, some politicians combined concepts and ideas from the religious and political arenas. The desired effect was to bring religious people over to the side of politicians. Addressing the Day of National Prayer service held at the International Conference Centre in Harare on 12 January 2002, President Mugabe sought to strike a chord with the sensibilities of Christians, while seeking to achieve clear political goals. Cognisant of the fact that he was operating in a religious context, he altered the traditional slogans to suit the occasion. Where he had previously asked his audience to recognise the need for 'moving forward with revolution' and to 'put down stooges and surrogates', he was proposing a revised vision. He prefaced his speech thus:

Mugabe: Forward with Praying/*Pamberi Nokunamata*

Response: Forward/*Pamberi*

Mugabe: Down with the Devil and his demons/*Pasi naSatani nemadhimoni ake*

Response: Down/*Pasi*

In political rallies however, Mugabe denounced the MDC as a party possessed by demons from Europe and North America. He called upon both traditional-

ists and Christians to project his party as a righteous movement fighting 'darkness'.

Sacred sounds, profane improvisations: Religious and political songs

Songs have played an important role throughout human history. They evoke emotions, create a common sense of belonging and communicate dogmas effectively. Alongside slogans, political parties in Zimbabwe used songs to appeal to voters. During the liberation struggle, nationalists had used music to instil a sense of pride and interest in indigenous arts and culture (Turino 2000: 188). Songs were also utilised as a propaganda tool to encourage more young people to take up arms to fight the settler state. As the socio-economic conditions in Zimbabwe deteriorated from the late 1990s, political songs found their way back. Many of these songs were improvised versions of popular hymns and choruses, as the paragraphs below seek to highlight.

Due to the high death rate attributable to HIV/AIDS, funeral songs dominated the air waves in Zimbabwe during the period under review. Hymns and choruses that consoled the bereaved and promised to reunite the living with the dead were electronically recorded and became well known in the country. Sociological studies of gospel music in Zimbabwe demonstrate a preoccupation with death (Chitando 1999:337). Since Christianity is the dominant religion, even funeral ceremonies for traditionalists are sometimes accompanied by hymns and choruses, thereby extending the area of Christian influence. One widely circulating chorus was the following:

I will never cry *Handimbochemi*
When Jesus is there *Kana Jesu aripo*
To cry is cowardice *Kuchema utera*

Funeral songs in Zimbabwe are not traceable to specific denominations and they are truly ecumenical. The chorus referred to above featured at funerals for members of the Catholic, Protestant, African Independent and Pentecostal churches. It seeks to empower the living and to remind them of the permanent and comforting presence of Jesus. Calling for courage in the face of the sting of death, the chorus instils a sense of tranquility amongst the mourners. In the emotional turmoil instigated by death, the bereaved take solace in the love and compassion of Jesus. This chorus was appropriated by the ZANU-PF Women's League. They substituted Mugabe for Jesus, confirming the controversial statement by the former deputy minister of Local Housing, Mr Tony Gara, that Mugabe was 'the other son of God'. Thus:

I will never cry *Handimbochemi*
When Mr Mugabe is there *Kana vaMugabe varipo*
To cry is cowardice *Kuchema utera*

The MDC also exploited the popularity of gospel music to convey its political agenda. Since the ruling party had a monopoly on broadcasting and only covered the opposition negatively, the MDC employed music as a communication strategy. They converted religious songs that addressed spiritual and material problems into commentaries on the Zimbabwean condition in the late 1990s. One such song was a popular track by the Methodist group, Rugare Ngariende St. Luke's choir. The song encourages people to call upon Jesus when they go through difficult times. However, it was changed to say that when things got bad and there was no peace in Zimbabwe, they had to call upon the MDC (Eyre 2001: 77-78). The Methodist choir sang:

When the load is heavy *Kana zvarema*
 Call upon Jesus *Daidzai Jesu*
 He is the good leader *Ndiye mutungamiri akanaka*

MDC supporters changed the words, replacing Jesus as the good leader with the purported visionaries of the party:

When the load is heavy *Kana zvarema*
 Call upon the MDC *Daidzai MDC*
 They are the good leaders *Ndivo vatungamiri vakanaka*

The deteriorating economic conditions also influenced the rise of protest gospel music in Zimbabwe. While Christian composers of the 1980s had released songs that dwelt on purely spiritual matters, a form-critical analysis of gospel music in the late 1990s demonstrates the recurrence of economic issues. Although they called for divine intervention, artists laid bare the economic crisis that had engulfed Zimbabwe. Various gospel musicians protested against the devaluation of the local currency, high inflation, unemployment, retrenchments, high medical costs and other economic ills. Such religious songs illustrated the close relationship obtaining between religion and politics, since the economy was being run by politicians.

However, protest gospel differed from popular protest music by established artists like Thomas Mapfumo, Simon Chimbetu and others. In proffering solutions to the 'Zimbabwean condition' gospel musicians put forward expressly religious formulations. Where the ruling ZANU-PF and the opposition MDC gave themselves a religious camouflage, gospel musicians effected radical desacralisation. Using the Christian trait of affirming that Jesus is Lord in the midst of other claims to lordship (Bediako 1995:61-62), gospel musicians have dismissed the contention that politicians can change Zimbabwe's fortunes. As audiences and congregations were bombarded with the theme that 'only Jesus is the answer' a profound questioning of the political relevance of individuals like President Mugabe was being effected.

To illustrate the mutual influences between religious and political discourses in Zimbabwe, some gospel musicians borrowed phrases and

slogans from political parties. After describing how the devil had held him captive in the spirit of poverty (Maxwell 1998), leading gospel artist Charles Charamba declared, 'Down with the devil' (*Pasi naye Satani*). The slogan to denounce political opponents had been taken to greater heights (or lowest depths) by President Mugabe during a campaign rally in Masvingo for the June 2000 parliamentary elections. Mugabe declared,

Down with Tsvangirai
 Down with his wife and children
 Down with his dogs
 Down with his cups.

In the Zimbabwean context to say, 'Down with ...' is understood as a call to utterly destroy that which has been denounced. By adopting the slogan in his song, the musician Charamba wanted to rally the Christian community together against the devil. Since militias trained by the ruling party actively sought to liquidate political rivals, the artist was urging the faithful to be equally zealous in defeating the prince of darkness. Whether such violent language in religious and political domains promoted national peace remained a simmering issue.

'Thus says the Lord...' Religious and political mythologies in Zimbabwe

As the economic hardships in Zimbabwe became acute in the late 1990s, many young professionals began to leave the country. Specialists in the health, education, information technology, banking and other sectors departed in frustration at low incomes, an uncertain future and in pursuit of greater career opportunities. As the brain-drain worsened, a number of prophecies began to circulate in predominantly Pentecostal/Evangelical churches. Testimonies about visions and pronouncements from God that the country would become a successful model for Africa and the world became widespread. As such, the faithful were to remain in Zimbabwe, awaiting the fulfilment of divine prophecies.

One of the most popular prophecies circulating in Evangelical/Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe had to do with the reported prophecy of a seer from New Zealand. It was maintained that she had seen a vision in which Zimbabwe would prosper and become 'the Switzerland of Africa'. As the people became more faithful to God, fasting and confessing their sins, God would transform Zimbabwe into a rich country, the prophecy maintained. Intercessors, evangelists and street preachers constantly evoked this prophecy in their quest to 'stop suffering' (Chitando 2000:60). The purported revelation was used to give believers hope and courage in an environment characterised by angst.

On the political front, Mugabe's staunch support for the land redistribution exercise generated the myth that he was a Messianic figure, a Moses-like character who delivered his people to their Promised Land. Traditional headmen, chiefs, prophets from African Independent Churches and bishops from

main-line denominations united to portray Mugabe as the self-sacrificing and dedicated leader who would frustrate all imperialist manoeuvres aimed at derailing the final settlement of the land question. Madzibaba (elder) Nzira of the indigenous Johane Masowe weChishanu church claimed that he had a vision during the liberation struggle in which God showed him Mugabe parceling out land to ululating land-hungry peasants. What the Muyebe noted of President Banda and Malawi is thus also applicable to Mugabe and Zimbabwe. They wrote:

The Christian tradition is emphatic of the point that there is no other name, other than the name of Christ, by which human beings can be saved. This concept had similarities in the conceptual world of Malawian politics. An assertion was made to the effect that there was no other name, other than the name of Dr Banda, by which Malawi could have been liberated from the colonial regime (Muyebe and Muyebe 1999:72-73).

While some church leaders remained sceptical of Mugabe's 'fast-track' land acquisition programme for its negative consequences for Zimbabwe's economy, the state sought to promote those traditional, Christian and Muslim functionaries who supported its actions. From February 2000, the Johane Masowe weChishanu indigenous church began to receive extensive and favourable press coverage because its leader had declared Mugabe to be God's chosen instrument to bring the land back to its rightful owners. Whereas African indigenous churches had been previously cast as unsophisticated and backwards since they resisted the governments policies on education and immunisation, they were now being portrayed as bearers of true and revolutionary prophecies.

Church and state partnership during the crisis years in Zimbabwe also rallied around an oft-quoted biblical passage which calls upon believers to intercede with God on behalf of their nation. According to II Chronicles 7:14, 'If my people, who are called by name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and heal their land'. This divine promise, uttered to the biblical Israelites several millennia ago, became a statement of hope for millions of Zimbabweans. Ruling party officials pleaded with the church not to tire in their prayers for the country. Traditionalists and evangelicals maintained that the liberation struggle had seen the loss of too many lives, alongside generating curses and bonding with the devil. Zimbabwe's social and economic malaise at the beginning of a new century was attributed to negative spiritual forces. Exorcism and fervent prayer became key concepts in the search for solutions to national problems.

Appeals to religion in efforts to justify political power were also resorted to by the opposition MDC. Prophecies to the effect that Mugabe's reign no longer had divine approval became popular in opposition circles as the March 2002 presidential elections drew close. It was alleged that traditional spirit mediums had become possessed and issued oracles that proclaimed Tsvangirai as the rightful successor to Mugabe. Among the Shona people of Zimbabwe, oracles

have authority (Bourdillon 1990:101). Some Christian prophets and church leaders also portrayed the MDC as God's chosen instrument to cleanse Zimbabwe of corruption and to facilitate a fresh beginning.

Through the use of slogans, pronouncements and other communication strategies, political parties in Zimbabwe appropriated religious symbols. In turn, religions responded to developments in the political field in a myriad of ways. As the economic and political situation in Zimbabwe brought the nation under the international spotlight, religious personnel and politicians engaged in diagnosis and therapy, in efforts to find lasting solutions. However, this interface between religious and political discourses in Zimbabwe has methodological implications for our understanding of these fields, as I seek to argue below.

Religion and politics in Africa: A reappraisal

The dynamic interchange of slogans, songs and myths between the religious and political arenas in Zimbabwe calls for a reinterpretation of the relationship between religion and politics in Africa. As the study has shown, issues are more complicated than politicians simply using religion to gain political mileage. Religious people also appropriate communication strategies from politicians for their own concerns. It also emerges from the Zimbabwean case that the assertion that politics in Africa is expressing itself less in a political than in a religious discourse (Behrend 1999:38) is contestable. The political and religious discourses should not be reduced one to the other: in fact they influence each other in numerous creative ways and directions. As they seek to address the same human condition and to empower their followers to face an uncertain situation, religious specialists and politicians resort to the same techniques. While improvisation and critical application can be detected in both fields, it is clear that they apply similar strategies to name and tame the Zimbabwean reality.

While studies on prophets in African history are informative (Anderson and Johnson 1995), they tend to overlook the contemporary interpenetration of religious and political fields. Prophets do not just pose a religious and political critique of the ruling elites; their repertoire is sometimes embraced and enacted by the same politicians they seek to undermine. Similarly, although politics and the occult interact in ways that appear sensational in an African context (Geschiere 1997), a critical sociological analysis shows that the underlying factor lies in efforts to respond to economic pressures. In the Zimbabwean situation, heightened religious and political activities became pronounced from the late 1990s in tandem with a worsening economic environment.

The Zimbabwean case study also exposes the limitations of most studies on Evangelical/Pentecostal movements in Christianity in Africa. Emphasising the verbalised aversion of young African evangelicals to politics, some commentators have harshly concluded that theirs is an enslaving religion (Gifford 1990). However, this study has illustrated the extent to which evangelical preachers

critically and constantly interact with the political sphere. Although they ultimately recommended divine intervention, street preachers in Harare systematically exposed the social, economic and political paralysis that vitiated Zimbabwe's efforts to become a vibrant nation state.

However, more work remains to be done to establish whether African Independent Churches are more susceptible to political acquiescence due to their healing role. This study has shown the willingness of the Johane Masowe weChishanu church leaders to openly support the ruling ZANU-PF party. A more detailed analysis of how these leaders have influenced the politicians and how other prophets contest their credentials is necessary. In addition, the impact of variables such as gender, religious affiliation, education, race and others on religious and political discourses in Africa requires continued analysis.

Conclusion

In this article I explored the mutual influences that characterised religious and political discourses in Zimbabwe from the late 1990s to the period just before the March 2002 presidential elections. Eschewing a deterministic approach, I illustrated the extent to which slogans, songs and mythologies were freely transported between the religious and political terrains. Occupying the same tight corner and space that Zimbabwe had become, politicians and religious specialists often found themselves engaged in closely related discourses. Since most studies on religion and politics in Africa have tended to subordinate the former to the latter, I also called for a more open-minded approach to the interface.

In conclusion, it should be noted that studies on religion and politics in various African regions such as East Africa (Hansen and Twaddle 1995) or Southern Africa (Hallencreutz and Palmberg 1991) often create the impression that these two fields are sharply demarcated. This article questions such an approach to boundary distinctions by demonstrating the continuing flow of ideas and concepts between these imagined spaces. Indeed, another study could capture the extent to which actors and audiences constantly shift and blend across the religious and political terrains. In the specific case of Zimbabwe, the deteriorating social and economic conditions influenced the circulation of myths, songs, pronouncements and other communicative acts across the religious and political fields. Consequently, it became possible for evangelical preachers to reclaim the traditional African call and response formula and contemporary political slogans to proclaim, 'Down with the devil, forward with Christ!'

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