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### 3 SIGNS OF THE TIMES – THINKING ANEW CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM IN ZIMBABWE

#### *Abstract*

While the prevalence of modernity has altered religious ideologies in Zimbabwe, Christian proselytisation continues to grow. Religion and spirituality are distinctive traits providing meaning to the life of Zimbabweans. From an African Christian perspective, human life and all fundamental needs draw meaning from religious and spiritual convictions. Religion and spirituality permeate life's socio-political and economic issues. Although historically, there is an ambivalent relationship between church and state to solve the problems bedevilling Zimbabweans. However, the standstill of life in the world brought by the Coronavirus pandemic has opened new avenues for Christian nationalism. Through diverse conspiracy theories, Christian leaders have proffered explanations about the source, meaning, and solution(s) to the virus. A seemingly symbiotic relationship existed between the church and the state to deal with the coronavirus pandemic. The church used coronavirus as 'the signs of times', which has created room to redefine the intersection of religion, politics, and health. Besides exploring the new forms of religiosity created by the church to stay relevant during the pandemic, this paper analyses how the church's health solutions promote nationalism. This study used the de-secularization theory as a theoretical framework. The paper qualitatively analyses data from document analysis from social media, newspaper articles, news channels and text-based research. This paper concludes that the church's adaption to Coronavirus through creating churches without walls, virtual worships, online giving and spiritual prophetic healing declarations not only show that religion in Zimbabwe is not declining but continuing to surge and build the nation.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, de-secularization theory, new world order, conspiracy theories, politics, new religiosity.

## Introduction

The relationship between the church and state has been historically regarded to be ambivalent as the two institutions thrive to solve the problems bedevilling humanity. With the advent of COVID-19 and the subsequent imposition of national lockdowns, banning of social gatherings and practicing of social distance, the relationship of the two institutions was at first strained because such moves were a blow pricking the heart of the church. The state seemed to be predicting an imminent death of religion. The severity of the pandemic and how it swept away life in various nations of the world had only one pointer that the world has now approached the end times. From evidence on the ground, the world was in a dilemma and the church was foreseeing doom on its existence. The echoes of biblical messages that the end of times will be announced by wars, conflict and untreatable diseases were coming to reality. Religious leaders from all divides were in a panic mode as nations went on to roll out vaccinations. This saw some of the religious leaders publicly confessing that they will not partake the vaccines since they were a mark of the beast. Such a mentality was pointing to the view that we have arrived at the end of the times because rumours were spreading that those not vaccinated would not be allowed to buy and even go out their nations. The words by governments which were meant to enforce people into accepting the vaccines were religiously interpreted to mean forcing people to accept the mark of the beast and were echoing the message of the book of Revelation in the bible. However, the standstill of life in the world brought by the COVID-19 pandemic opened new avenues for favourable relationship between the church and state. COVID-19 made the two to realise that they are core workers and not enemies. This chapter presents the role played by Christian nationalism in fostering the government efforts to contain the deadly disease. Efforts are made to explain in this chapter how the coming of the COVID-19 was first interpreted by the church as the end of the times and how the church took the government and science as enemies in their mission before realising the importance of the two in the service of the Church. The purpose of this chapter is to buttress the role played by Christian nationalism during the surge of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe.

## Methodology

The study adopted the qualitative research paradigm which is relatively appropriate in exploring multifaceted religio-political behaviours and factors contributing to Christian nationalism in Zimbabwe. The qualitative research paradigm facilitated to comprehend variances in perceptions on the concept of Christian nationalism and offers exhaustive acquaintance of the innumerable eloquent factors that underlie the issue of the relationship between the church and state during the COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe. The use of document analysis, social media, key informants including religious leaders and their followers allowed the researchers to capture imperative evidence from first hand informants. This research used the de-secularisation theory to understand how the pandemic has shaped the way religion has contributed both positively and negatively to the discourse on Christian nationalism in Zimbabwe. De-secularisation theory is defined as diverse of manifestations of the worldwide resurgence of religion (Berger, 1999). Put in other words, de-secularization is a counter-secularization showing the vitality of religion vis-à-vis global modernity (Reaves, 2012). De-secularization is a process of social change associated with religions' resurgence and their expanding societal influences. This then implies that de-secularization is defined as a process of counter-secularization (Kapro, 2010:238). Secularization is generally considered as a multi-faceted social transformation in the course of which religion's influences on society decline. This being the case, therefore, it becomes logical to cogitate de-secularization as a process of social change that develops in the opposite direction (Kapro, 2010:238). So, basically de-secularization is the revival of religious content in a variety of its symbolic sub-systems, including the arts, philosophy, and literature, and in a decline of the standing of science relative to a resurgent role of religion in world-construction and world maintenance (Berger, 1990:107). This research argues that the church's adaption to COVID-19 protocols through creating churches without walls, virtual worships, online giving and spiritual prophetic healing declarations clearly indicated that religion in Zimbabwe is not declining and is continuing to surge and play a significant role in nation-building. More so, Christians in Zimbabwe continue to find relevance in deadly situations which calls into practice the concept of Christian nationalism.

## Conceptual Analysis

The major purpose of this chapter can only come to the fore if we first come to terms with the meaning of the concepts like nationalism, Christian nationalism and end times. This being the case, therefore, it suffices to analyse the terms before we delve into the issue of how Christian nationalism helped the state in fighting COVID-19.

### **Nationalism**

The history of humanity is awash with people who are attached to their native soil, to the traditions of their parents, and to established territorial authorities. The concept of nationalism started to be popular in the 18th century and it became a recognised sentiment moulding public and private life (Yael, 2019). The American and French revolutions have been considered to be the first powerful manifestations of nationalism. In the early 19th century, nationalism spread to central Europe and from there, toward the middle of the century, to eastern and south-eastern Europe (Özkirimli, 2017). At the commencement of the 20th century, nationalism blossomed in Asia and Africa. This is the reason why the 19th century has been called the age of nationalism in Europe, while the 20th century witnessed the upsurge and brawl of powerful national movements in Asia and Africa. The term nationalism implies the identification of the state or nation with the people (Grosby, 2005).

Nationalism has also been defined as people's loyalty and devotion to a nation especially as expressed in the promotion of its culture and interests (Philip and Wollman, 2002). Yack (2012) defined nationalism as an ideology that emphasises loyalty, devotion, or allegiance to a nation or nation-state and holds that such obligations outweigh other individual or group interests. This implies that nationalism is a strong attachment to a particular country, or nation and is also called patriotism. Be that as it may, nationalism is erected around a shared language, religion, culture, or set of social values (Kuznicki, 2008). Thus, in essence there are three key types of nationalism which are language nationalism, religious nationalism and post-colonial nationalism. This implies that nationalism is all about the attitude that the members of a nation have when they care about their national identity, and the actions that the members of a nation take when seeking to achieve or sustain self-determination (Nielsen 1999:9).

Given the diverse definitions of nationalism it is not surprising, therefore, that during the COVID-19 pandemic, many citizens particularly Christians were very loyal to their country. People were feeling strongly about belonging to the nation and having a role to play to stop the spread of the pandemic. These feelings led to the creation of a new sense of Christian nationalism in Zimbabwe.

### ***Christian Nationalism***

The other term worth of analysing in this chapter is Christian nationalism. Christian nationalism is a cultural framework or a collection of myths, symbols, narratives, and value systems that seek to elevate an ethno-traditional, identitarian version of Christianity with civic culture (Gorski, 2017). Whitehead and Perry (2020) defined Christian nationalism as an ideology that idealises a fusion of civic life with Christian identity and culture. Christian nationalism is positively associated with identifying Christianity as the determinant factor of all activities in human life of any nation (Miscevic, 2010). Christian nationalism is also positively associated with believing that the nation is on the brink of moral decay and that God requires the faithful to help the nations to sustain the good (Whitehead and Perry, 2020:12). Christian nationalism is a cultural ideology that wants civic life to be permeated by a particular form of nationalist Christianity. This entails that Christian nationalists demand that their brand of Christianity be the sole source of moral authority for the nation and reject all competitors including science. Net of other factors, Christian nationalists significantly reject evolution and view scientists as hostile to faith, they respond incorrectly to scientific questions on topics that are religiously contentious and they hold anti-vaccine attitudes using pre-pandemic information (Whitehead and Perry, 2020).

Whitehead and Perry (2020) further stated that Christian nationalism had the second largest association with anti-vaccination attitudes and was the strongest predictor of believing that vaccines cause autism, that children are given too many vaccines and that vaccines do not help protect children. Rather, Christian nationalism from its history did not respond favorably to scientific recommendations regarding how to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Even before the pandemic, Christian nationalists expressed belief that as God's chosen people, Christians would be protected and privileged if they uphold their identity as a Christian nation and adhere to biblical principles (Kelly, 2015). Be that as it may, Christian nationalism is merely a heightened form of religious ethnocentrism' it is a

species of theological fancy dress dedicated to self-aggrandisement. It is a theological defence of Christian hegemony in politics (Breen and O'Neill (eds.), 2010).

Christian nationalism, or the synthesis of religious and national identities and goals, is a progressively striking aspect of nationalism. Instead of secular nationalism solely replacing religious identities and allegiances, Christian and national identities coexist and even reinforce each other. Christian nationalism has become a powerful force in buttressing popular religiosity and attitudes, empowers religious organisations in influencing policy across a wide range of domains, and shapes the patterns of inter- and intra-state violence (Grzymala-Busse, 2019). The implications of this research are that we should invest in better measures and operationalisation of Christian nationalism and reconsider the lucidities of state- and nation-building.

In Zimbabwe, Christian nationalism has become so powerful that it has shaped the very definition of legitimate citizenship, delineating the nation and privileging some political actors and visions in making public policy, obtaining electoral support, and building states. Rieffer (2003:225), defined Christian nationalism as the fusion of nationalism and religion such that they are inseparable. Greenfeld (1996:170), clearly stated that religion and nationalism are order-creating cultural systems. Brubaker (2011:4), avers that Christian nationalism is a form of social identification and modes of social organisation and segmentation. All what these scholars are implying is that Christian nationalism relies on religious identities and myths to define the nation and its goals. In turn, the term nationalism according to (Gellner, 1983:1), is the principle that holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent (Wald & Wilcox, 2006).

Spohn (2003:269) argued that despite the various forms of secularisation, religion remains a constitutive basis of national identity and nationalism. For him, religion and nationalism may coexist, either as separate projects or intertwined, with language and symbols borrowed from each other. Rather, there has been an inter-relationship between religion and nationalism from time immemorial. Religious doctrines, symbolic language, and narratives to nationalism have immensely shaped nationalistic perspectives for a long time (Brubaker, 2011:16). Smith (2008) argued that religious narratives and symbols justified and infused nationalist projects. More approximately, nationalism has roots not in religious decline but rather in moments of religious fervour and renewal (Zubrzycki, 2006:19; Calhoun, 1993; Gillis, 1994; Gorski, 2003; Marx, 2003). Typical examples

of tenacious coexistence of religious and secular nationalisms flourish in history of nation states. Religious doctrine and religious conflict can justify the exclusionary nationalism that allows elites to build both powerful states and compliant subjects (Marx, 2003). Religion, oriented around a fiery Protestantism, has been and is central to nationalism and national identity (Grzymala-Busse, 2015; Haselby, 2015; Kurth, 2007; McKenna, 2007; Morone, 2003).

Colley (1992) contends that the central element of nascent British identity was Protestantism and its intolerance of Catholicism as foreign and corrupt. Friedland (2001:129) has also posed that the national identities of Iran, Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Palestine are all suffused with religious narrative and myth, symbolism and ritual. This implies that the supremacy of religion to national identity remains both striking and robust, even when multiple denominations compete for allegiance. Nationalist projects further borrow religious language and symbols. Religious symbols and rhetoric have been superimposed on the mobilisation of nationalism by political entrepreneurs. Rather, religious beliefs are associated with new ethno-national projects, to which they have brought a feeling of historical continuity with the pre-colonial past. Religious symbols, banners and icons have appeared in mass political rallies, giving legitimacy to pro-independence movements and their leaders (Grzymala-Busse, 2015).

Religiosity defines the nation and nationalism reinforces religiosity, leading to unusually high rates of national identification with a given religion and high rates of religiosity itself. Religious nationalism, thus, enhances religiosity, which then helps to further consolidate the nation and its boundaries. Religion's durability, that is, its resistance to secular onslaught has reproduced a strengthening relationship between religion and nation. In almost every nation of the world, believers are not repressed, and religious organisations are not as easily abolished as trade unions, newspapers, political groups, and student organizations (Sahlilyeh, 1990:13). Education and indoctrination within the family and religious community have also played a role in cementing the equation of nation with religion (Grzymala-Busse, 2015). Political entrepreneurs explicitly link religion and nationalism (Hibbard, 2010). Organized state campaigns can foster a godly nationalism, as in Indonesia (Menchik, 2014). Religious nationalism also lends itself to the influence of religious groups on public policy, especially when a specific church or denomination can claim the mantle of a representative of national interest (Grzymala-Busse, 2015,

2016). Religions have been enormously influential in shaping national policy debates and influencing the final outcomes of public policy areas that include education divorce, stem cell research, same-sex marriage and abortion rights. All this shows that Christian or religious nationalism has been at play from time immemorial. Rather, religion is a useful resource to national leaders. Since religion is a powerful source of identity and one that can unify a group and create loyalty to the national movement, national leaders try to draw on religion to create a cohesive public body. So, religious nationalism is the relationship of nationalism to a particular religious' belief, dogma, or affiliation. A shared religion can be seen to contribute to a sense of national unity, a common bond among the citizens of the nation. Another political aspect of religion is the support of a national identity, shared ethnicity, language, or culture. Hence, the influence of religion on politics is more ideological. In this chapter, Christian nationalism simply means the amalgamation of religious and national identities, goals and aims for a common cause.

## The end times

The subject of “end times” is quite controversial in both religious studies and theology. The phrase refers to the events that will take place towards the second coming of Jesus Christ. The Bible teaches that before Jesus returns to establish His kingdom on earth, there will be a 7-year period known as the Tribulation or the Day of the Lord. Most Christians across the divide are convinced that we are now in that period of tribulation or end times. The bible has a list of corollary events associated with the signs of the end times or the tribulation period. Earthquakes, famines, and terrifying signs in the heavens are mentioned in Luke 21. Revelation 6:12-14, describes the 6th-seal judgment which will take place in the first half of the seven-year tribulation (violent earthquakes, cosmic signs in the heavens, and the uprooting of mountains and islands). The events of the end times according to Christian teachings would also include plagues and untreatable diseases. The other sign of the end times is the appearance of the man of lawlessness. In 2 Thessalonians 2:3, Paul speaks about the “man of lawlessness implying the coming of a world dictator. The other predictions signalling the end times include the coming of a false messiah who is also called the antichrist (1 John 2:18) and the appearance of the beast from the sea (Rev. 13:1-10). It is believed that Israel will sign a covenant with the future false messiah. Daniel 9:27 indicates that the



end times or the seven-year tribulation will begin when this future false messiah makes a treaty with the leadership of Israel. With the onset of the worldwide pandemic of the coronavirus, many Christian leaders linked COVID-19 pandemic with the Biblical signs of the “End Times.” Specifically, some preachers pointed to the mentioning of “pestilence” and “plagues” in the book of Revelation as biblical evidence that the end was fulfilled by the advent of the coronavirus. So, the New Testament speaks of “great tribulation,” an unprecedented time of global suffering at the end of the age, that is somehow related to the Second Coming of Christ. It speaks of war and violence, famine and persecution, suffering, tribulation and apostasy.

The Bible teaches that immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. After all these the signs, the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. (Matt 24:29-30; Mark 13:24-27). It is vital to note that Biblical interpreters see these passages differently in terms of the timing of these events. Interpreters also differ on whether or not God’s people will even be around when this “tribulation” happens. COVID-19 presented Christians with a difficulty in finding spiritual answers and solutions and thus, they labelled it a sign of the end times. This was caused by the conviction that the events and the actual date of the second coming of Christ remain undisclosed to humanity and Jesus himself. Some prophets perceive the coronavirus as a spiritual issue rather than a medical or even scientific phenomenon.

Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, several conspiracy theories were peddled on social media on its origin and cause. Two books fuelled the speculations and these are *The Eye of Darkness* (Koontz, 1996) and *End of Days* (Browne and Harrison, 2008). The two books gained instant popularity as the pandemic terrorised the nations. Both books predicted the outbreak of a flu-like pandemic around the year 2020 (Browne and Harrison, 2008). The *End of Days* details a number of calamities that were to plague the world in 2020 and beyond. The assumption was that the coronavirus fits the flu-like virus described in the book and hence, the end of times was imminent. The *Eye of Darkness* describes a Chinese scientist Li Chen who absconded to the United States with a diskette that contained key and perilous Chinese new biological weapon in the decade. The content in the diskette as narrated by the book, is called ‘Wuhan 400’.

Interesting to note is the view that as these conspiracy theories continue to gain traction, some Christian leaders developed their own theories which dovetails into these popular but dubious narratives (Ibrahim, 2020). The generality of the perceptions zeroed in to the conclusion that the coronavirus is the mark of the end times.

## **The Advent of COVID-19 and the Church's perception**

The advent of the coronavirus pandemic with its intense impact on the global village seems to have extremely slackened religious activities in the world. COVID-19, which was first discovered in December 2019 in Wuhan city in China, has recently become a global challenge to health, economic, social and religious systems. It has reshaped the Christians' focus and altered the existing status quo in the religious order — showing a new world with the unprecedented macro religious challenges. Given that the COVID-19 pandemic has rapidly encircled the globe and consequently affected almost all nations, it has been regarded as a pandemic which has engendered a shift of focus by the World Health Organisation (World Health Organisation, 2020). According to Gorbalenya et al. (2020), International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses (ICTV) named it a severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The policy measures and interventions adopted by governments as the pandemic surged, resulted in unavoidable religious downturn across the globe. While the measures of lockdown and social distance introduced by countries to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus seemed to be necessary, the short-run downside effect was inevitable (McKibbin & Fernando, 2020). The COVID-19 virus did not only threaten human existence, but it also affected their spiritual belief. In order to tackle the further ill consequences of the pandemic, governments across the globe imposed travel bans, curfews and movement restrictions. Most countries closed their borders to foreign visitors to control its spread.

As the pandemic continued to heave, everyone in Zimbabwe and the world over was plunged into a period of uncertainties, despair and expectations. During this period, everyday activities such as selling and buying, schooling, religious gathering, footballing, clubbing among others ceased indefinitely. Voluntary and involuntary actions such as sneezing, coughing, loud laughing, talking and shaking of hands became strictly controlled (Forsu-Ankrah and Amoako- Gyampah, 2021). Adding to the list of restrictions was the need to constantly wash hands from every point of

entry or contact. This situation created uneasiness, and anxieties about when such restrictions and the virus would end.

It was during the period of uncertainties that Christians became expectant and remained in a period of waiting in anticipation of directions and solutions to the pandemic. The church and the nations could not find immediate solutions to the pandemic and this gripped people with fear (Fosu-Ankrah, 2020). Gripped with fear, panic and uncertainties, religious leaders started to see the danger in having their followers uninformed, unreached and not attending church services. Resultantly, they started to come up with alternatives, interpretations and ideologies which would safeguard the faith of their followers.

In Zimbabwe, some Pentecostal and white garmented church leaders interpreted COVID-19 as a spiritual blitz or retribution on humanity and thus, had to be addressed spiritually. It is interesting to note that in times of crisis like the COVID-19, religion and faith serves as a source of individual security and community resilience. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe created an amplified tension between Christian leaders and science as well as between the christian denominations. Whereas some Christian leaders made conscious efforts to align their church activities with advice by medical experts and governments to help curb the spread of the virus, others invoked religious ideology to confront the virus, assuring followers and devotees that faith offers adequate protection (Lichtenstein et al., 2020). Christian leaders from the Apostolic Church of Johane Masowe Wechishanu (JMC), Apostolic Church of St John (ACJ), African Apostolic church of Paul Mwazha (AAC), Independent African Church (IAC) and the Johane Marange African Apostolic Church (JMAAC) were encouraging their followers to pray for divine protection since we are in the end times. This entails that they considered the advent of the COVID-19 as a mark of the end of the times and that the parousia was indeed at hand.

One informant from the AAC said that *“chiporofita chakange chataura kuti kuguma kwenyika kwaapedyo. Nekudero pakauya korona takabva taudzwa kuti tishinge kunamata nokuti Nyika yaakuguma. munamato pamwe chete nekutsanya ndochete zvataiudzwa kuti zvichatiraramisa munguva yekupedzisira”* (the prophecy had already been proclaimed that the end of times has come. So by the advent of COVID-19, we were encouraged to be strong in prayer since the end of times had come. only prayers and fasting were the only solutions in such end times). The informants from the JMAAC were clear on noting that the end of the times have

come. One church leader said that “*Bhaibheri rakataura pachena wani kuti kana kuguma kwenyika kwosvika kuchava nezvirwere zxivisingarapike. Zvimwe zvacho takatozviona zvakaita seAIDS, asi apa kufa kuri kuita vanhu ndokutoguma kwenyika*” (the Bible has already proclaimed that at the end of times there will be untreatable diseases and some of them we have already witnessed them like AIDS. Now that with the rate people are dying we are in the end of times).

Samuel Mutendi of Zion Christian Church (ZCC) was quoted saying to his followers, “I want to assure you that you are in the secret place of the Highest God and, no virus can come near your dwelling’. For Mutendi, the basic things like washing of hands, keeping the environment clean and adhering to basic hygienic measures have been their day to day routine and them being spelt out now is a bit too late since his church has been doing it, hence were ready for the coming of the pandemic and his followers were accustomed to the measures. In a way, Mutendi was saying that by calling for the measures like washing of hands, sanitisation, social distancing among others, the government was indeed copying his church because that is what they are used to do on a daily basis. For him, each congregant has to be sprinkled with holy water and salt as they enter the church building for services. This implies that for the ZCC, accepting and adhering to COVID-19 protocols was not new, hence there was nothing wrong in following them religiously. He articulated that his church has to follow the dictates of the state since we are in the last days. He called his followers to remain pure, holy and prayerful because they are living in the last days. One of the leaders in the ZCC said that *Bhaibheri rinotaura kuti munhu haangararami nezvekudya chete asi neshoko rinobva kunamwari. Manje Mwari vazozviratidza simba ravo kupfurikidza nekuhunza chigwere chaakutituma kuvhara miromo. Ukavhura muromo nemhino uchida kudya wotofa. Ndokuguma kwenyikazve uku. Vanhu vangararama sei vasingadyi nekuti hapana kwatinosvika takavhara miromo yedu* (the Bible says that man cannot live by bread alone but by the word of God. Now God has showed his power through COVID-19 which is forcing us to mask up. When you unmask for eating you die. This is really the end of times because people cannot live without eating).

The generality of the AICs interpreted the coming of COVID-19 pandemic as the sign of the end of times. They were sure that the world was truly coming to an end. For them, the only option was to offer prayers of supplication for the forgiveness of sins. The AICs believed that the virus was from God and humanity were being punished for their sins. This is

the reason why they were encouraging their followers to pray for the protection of their lives.

Prophet Emmanuel Makandiwa, the founder and leader of the United Faith International Church (UFIC) in a sermon titled, 'Bible Politics, Technology and Plagues II', uploaded on YouTube affirms that COVID-19 emerged from the sea. For him, the disease is a demonic spirit on the rampage, and that nothing can stop it. YouTube video on November 2016 pictures Prophet Makandiwa claiming that:

'There is a deadly disease more dangerous than cancer or HIV originating from the sea. Thousands of people, if not millions, will die. There will be no cure. Only prayers will slow it down. It will be very fast and most people will seek God's intervention while some will insult him for the deadly disease. I said, it is a plague and it moves by air. There is a creature that I saw, it's the virus, faster than any disease known to man. It will make the educated people cry. It is a bird of the air because it moves by air. Covering your nose won't help because it can get into your ears, because it is a fowl air. (Christ TV, 2020a).

Makandiwa in his sermons on Covid-19, alluded to what he calls the 'mark of the beast' and cautions his congregation and followers against a 'microchip implant' in the vaccine (Makandiwa, 2020b).

Makandiwa further alleges that the outbreak of the coronavirus will usher in the creation of microchips implant to be implanted into human beings. He quoted Genesis 3 and Revelation 13 as his points of entry to this discussion. For him, the microchip is the handicraft of the beast and it is its final ploy to deceive mankind and to control the entire world. He said that the microchips would be pushed into the market through the activities of women. He added that "with 5G technology, information about individuals would not be hidden and he calls it the highest level of nakedness. He said that nations fight the 5G technology because it uncovers all individual secrets. All this implies that 'Prophet' Makandiwa was teaching that there is a direct link between the outbreak of COVID-19 and 5G technology (Christ TV, 2020b). In the sermon, Makandiwa highlighted the connection between politicians whom he dubbed serpents, pharmaceutical companies, and the technology industry whom he referred to as the agents of the beast in the outbreak of COVID-19. For him, the connection is meant to improvise a grand scheme to control the world through the pandemic.

Makandiwa alleged that 5G technology is championed by a satanic agent who will introduce a COVID-19 vaccine composed of microchip

which would to be implanted in people. Humanity therefore, will no longer have agency, and they would be manipulated into serving Satan instead of God. He further explained that the ban on religious gatherings was orchestrated to disrupt believers from getting together to pray as this would stop the agenda of the new world order. He then directs all believers to pray against the spirit of the new world order and to scatter the agenda of the anti-Christ. For this reason, Makandiwa vowed that he would go against the government when it imposes the vaccination exercise since he regarded it as accepting the mark of the beast (the microchip).

However, the interpretations of the Christian leaders on the COVID-19 changed as the pandemic continued to wage war on human lives. The government of Zimbabwe continued to extend the lockdown measures as it tried to contain the spread of the virus. The move by the government left the Church with limited options for its survival. The subsequent rolling of vaccinations and the pronouncement by the government that only the vaccinated would be allowed to board buses and attend church services made some church leaders to make a u- turn on their earlier ideologies and interpretations about the pandemic. The urge to congregate and the clearer understanding of the virus as more information was coming through discoveries and studies about the pandemic also contributed to the revisiting of some earlier thoughts by Christian leaders.

## **Christian nationalism on the prevention of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe**

The spread of COVID-19 to all nations of the world made World Health Organisation (WHO) to come up with guidelines which all nations were to follow in order to help halt the spread of the disease. The following were the guidelines (WHO, 2020):

- People should avoid contact with anyone, especially if they have cold or flu-like symptoms by practising physical distancing of at least one metre.
- Cover mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing into your elbow or use a tissue and discard it into a bin with lid straight away.
- Avoid touching eyes, nose and mouth.
- Wash hands with water and soap regularly for at least 20 seconds.

Every nation was compelled to follow the guidelines, which were set by WHO. With the COVID-19 pandemic gathering momentum, in Zimbabwe there was need for political leaders to persuade the religious community to play an important role in responding to COVID-19. The government of Zimbabwe called for Days of National Prayers where political leaders conceded space to religious leaders to lead the nation in prayers of supplication and to mobilise their constituencies to respond to the pandemic (Chitando, 2021). Such programmes like national days of prayer helped in crafting a good rapport between Christian leaders and the government. There was a creation of a cordial relationship between the Church and the government. To further cement the cordial relationship with the church leaders, the government of Zimbabwe, gave them prominent positions at the meetings to respond to COVID-19, acknowledged their role in social transformation and sought to make them feel relevant and appreciated.

Equipped with authority from the government Christian leaders particularly from the mainline churches, started to uphold and promote the COVID-19 protocols that were being popularised and enforced by the government. In the connections between government and religious leaders, the zeal to prioritise the good of the Zimbabwean communities became the prime action. Thus, both the politicians and religious leaders became selfless and were keen to promote human security (Tarusarira and Chitando 2020) in the wake of a devastating pandemic. As a way of showing their allegiance to the national and WHO demands church leaders from the Pentecostal and mainline churches in Zimbabwe started to teach their followers to mask up, sanitise, practice social distance among other preventative measures to contain the spread of COVID-19.

To prevent the spread of the pandemic, churches were instructed to avoid gatherings. Church leaders had to embrace this call by the government and this ushered in a new christian nationalistic mentality. Instead of seeing the government as moving against the mandate of the church, the church leaders started to see it as a key player in the church's existence. It seems the church started to realise that the call by the government to observe COVID-19 related protocols made it to de-secularise. It was due to lockdowns, banning of gatherings, call for social and physical distancing that the church started to use the once regarded secular systems to hold their services. The church, thus, started to regard the government as a core- worker rather than an enemy. Christian leaders which include Makandiwa of UFIC, Mutendi of ZCC, David Masuka of Zion Apostolic

Church (ZAC), Jameson Andreas Shoko of Zion Apostolic Faith Mission (ZAFM), Amon Madawo of Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe (AFM), Cosam Chiyangwa of Apostolic Faith Mission of Zimbabwe (AFMoZ) started to embrace a new perception about the government and thus, they started to work alongside the government to help fight the COVID-19 pandemic. So, as COVID-19 infections continued to rise throughout Zimbabwe, many church leaders started to work in cohorts with political leaders to disseminate information about COVID-19 through various social media platforms. Religious institutions commenced to extremely cogitate the viability of intensifying the use of online preaching, prayers, giving and healing (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015) in times of COVID-19. This was a rebirth of a new Christian nationalism. In this regard, the church was complementing both the public health and government protocols in COVID-19 infection prevention. Christian leaders complied with the government call to avoid gatherings by even banning their main gatherings like Easter, general conferences and even church services. So, by helping in promoting public health messages to mitigate the impact of COVID-19, religious leaders in Zimbabwe were contributing to the ideology of religion-state partnership which in itself shows Christian nationalism. In the same process, the issue of de-sacralising the relationship between church and state was also coming in.

Church leaders like Samuel Mutendi of ZCC considered the COVID-19 messages of frequent hand washing, sanitising and keeping social distance as God's own strategy of shielding humanity. Such a move was indicating a new wave in the relationship between church and state. Rather, the inherent conflict between religion and science was defused by the strands that were taken by the church. The preaching and dissemination of health related messages by religious leaders made many people to quickly embrace and implement them since it was coming from people they trust. Thus, for example, staying at home and not going to a religious gathering became a sign of obedience to a divine command, and not only accepting public health messages. In keeping with the dynamics of upholding COVID-19 protocols, many religious activities moved online (Chitando, 2021).



## Christian Nationalism in the Management of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe

Due to Christian nationalism in the era of COVID-19, religion joined with science as people would “pray and wash” (VOA News 2020). Rather, instead of magnifying the conflict between faith and science, the theory of religion and science as dialogue partners became rampant in the mind of many Christian leaders and their members. Church leaders were also not restricting their followers to use traditional methods of fighting ailments which further show how nationalistic Christians had become in the era of COVID-19. So, instead of solely relying on biomedical strategies to manage COVID-19, attention was also given to the use of traditional medicines and remedies to understand, manage and reduce the impact of the pandemic (Dandara et al. 2020). Church leaders were encouraging their followers to practice isolation when any one has contracted the virus. The use of other remedies which were once taken to be traditional, primitive and devilish was another way Christians were using to manage the virus. All these practices were traditionally forbidden by the church but in the era of COVID-19 their use became accepted by the church.

However, even though some Christian leaders showed nationalism by taking heed to the call by government and were ready to work together the researcher of this paper concede that there were some religious leaders who refused to listen to government calls in the prevention and management of COVID-19. As noted earlier, some “ultra conservatives” within the AICs refused to put on masks, take medicines, quarantine and continued to have their open air meetings in different sections of the country. For instance, the JMAAC in Zimbabwe has been castigated for flouting COVID-19 gathering restrictions by holding their Festival at their national shrine in July 2021 (News Day 2021). The Apostolic Church of St John (ACJ) in Domboshava were reported to have not stopped gatherings in the whole of the national lockdown periods in Zimbabwe. “One of the participants during interviews said that, our leader is a man of faith, we never stopped gathering, neither did we wear face masks during the surge of COVI-19 but none of us got sick”. Members from both the African Apostolic church of Paul Mwazha (AAC) and Independent African Church (IAC) clearly said that they never observed any of the COVID-19 protocols. in their own words they said *Isu hatina kana chimwe chatakatevedzera pazvinhu zvose zvatainzi itai kudziviira korona. kutenda kwako ndiko kunoraramisa kwete kufapfeka masiki nekugeza maoko* (We did not observe

any of the protocols that we were asked to observe because what protects one's life is faith).

One the same note members from the Apostolic Church of Johane Masowe Wechishanu (JMC) said *isu taiita zvataudzwa nemweya mutsvene. Muporofita akange audzwa kuti ape vanhu huchi, maremoni pamwe chete nekumwa mvura inopisa kana chirwere chedzihwa chauya kare kare. saka ndizvo zvataiita munguva yose yekorona uye hatina kurega kuenda kuchurch* (We were doing what the holy spirit had informed our prophet well before the coming of COVID-19. The prophet was given instructions to give people honey, lemon, and to let people drink warm water when a flu like pandemic struck the earth. We never stopped to go to church).

The behaviour of these churches was congruent to the underlying AIC ideological perception that biomedical approaches are part of the Western, colonial agenda and are morally wrong. Rather, as noted by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020), the resistance to follow WHO COVID-19 protocols and government dictates by some AICs must be located within the discourse of decoloniality. AICs in reality would vociferously oppose the tendency to associate indigenous practices and church gatherings with the spread of pandemics (Jaja et al. 2020). Therefore, as Dein (2021) stated, while many religious leaders, governments and communities were taking pivotal measures guided by public health systems such as halting congregational services and offering private and public spiritual guidance, others, were generating and circulating messianic and apocalyptic messages, which downplayed the value of public health guidance, and offering religious panaceas that were running contrary to good public health practice.

Even though there have been AICs and other church leadership who were not complying with the dictates of the government in trying to combat COVID-19, in a way they were observing WHO measures to mitigate the spread of the pandemic. The only difference was on the methods and mechanisms used. Like what some of the informants were saying, the use of honey, holy water for washing hands, drinking hot water, taking *Zumbani* and offering prayers for protection were indeed African methods of fighting against the spread of COVID-19. This being the case therefore, AICs were indeed observing COVID-19 containment measures from a different angle. In doing this, the AICs were showing nationalism in that they were reserving the lives of their followers.

## **Diagnosis of COVID-19 and Christian nationalism in Zimbabwe**

COVID-19 clinical diagnosis has been mainly based on signs and symptoms evaluation and confirmed by nucleic acid amplification tests (NAAT). The RTPCR (Reverse Transcription Polymerase Chain Reaction) of nasopharyngeal or oropharyngeal swabs were basically used. PCR-based methods are simple, highly sensitive, and highly specific and, therefore, they are routinely and reliably capable of detecting coronavirus infection in patients. RT-PCR which is a gold-standard method to detect most coronaviruses, including SARS-CoV-2 was also used. Particularly, COVID-19 early infections' most common symptoms are fever, cough, and other respiratory issues. While these were basic diagnosis methods that were used from the onset of the pandemic, the church was not against it. The church leaders were encouraging their members with any symptoms of flu to go and get tested. Some of the church leaders like Amon Madawo of AFM had to make it compulsory for every pastor and their wives to be tested of COVID-19 fort nightly to safeguard the health of their congregants. One of the church members from the ZAOGA said that there is nothing wrong in being tested for COVID-19. He said "as leaders we need to make sure that we encourage our members to be diagnosed of the virus so that we do not put our flocks at risk." A member of the AFM said that "as a pastor having routine diagnosis of the virus helps the church and my family because I visit many followers at their homes and I interact with a lot of people hence, the need to be tested regularly." However, while church leaders from Mainline churches and Pentecostal movements were encouraging their followers to be diagnosed of COVID-19, the AICS perceived it as accepting the worldly help.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has managed to argue that the advent of COVID-19 rejuvenated the relationship between religion and state hence, Christian nationalism. The church acted as the mouth piece of the government during the era of the COVID-19 in Zimbabwe. In a situation where there was seeming to be a conflict of interest between the church and the nation state, the church obeyed the dictates of the government and started to have churches without walls, virtual worship, online giving and spiritual prophetic healing declarations. The research argued that despite the various

forms of secularisation, religion remains a constitutive basis of national identity and nationalism. This chapter has argued that in Zimbabwe, COVID-19 has made it plainly conceivable to re-think Christian nationalism. The church had its own interpretations on the coming of the pandemic and they had to inform their adherents on the course of action. Some Christian traditions regarded the coming of COVID-19 as the sign of the end of times and hence, supplication prayers were viewed as the only solution. The chapter argued that religion and nationalism will continue to interface no matter the situation and that religion will never die a natural death even in the face of science and modernity since religion utilises science for its nationalistic benefits. The once perceived as secular has been de-secularised at the advent of COVID-19 and hence, religion still has life in the modern scientific society in Zimbabwe. The chapter argued that basic Christian nationalism in Zimbabwe was seen through how the church embraced the prevention, management and diagnosis methods in the mitigation of the spread of the pandemic.

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