

**Machingura, Francis ; Kalizi, Cecil Samuel**

The Bible in Politics in Zimbabwe

**In:**

Gunda, Masiwa Ragies ; Gies, Kathrin ; Chitando, Ezra ; Hock, Jana ; Janneck, Lena (Eds.), Going the Extra Mile : Reflections on Biblical Studies in Africa and the Contributions of Joachim Kügler, Bamberg : University of Bamberg Press, S. 145-164. DOI: 10.20378/irb-95726

**Beitrag im Sammelwerk - Verlagsversion**

DOI des Beitrags: 10.20378/irb-96592

Datum der Veröffentlichung: 29.07.2024

**Rechtehinweis:**

Dieses Werk ist durch das Urheberrecht und/oder die Angabe einer Lizenz geschützt. Es steht Ihnen frei, dieses Werk auf jede Art und Weise zu nutzen, die durch die für Sie geltende Gesetzgebung zum Urheberrecht und/oder durch die Lizenz erlaubt ist. Für andere Verwendungszwecke müssen Sie die Erlaubnis der Rechteinhaberinnen und Rechteinhaber einholen.

Für dieses Dokument gilt die **Creative-Commons-Lizenz CC BY**.



Die Lizenzinformationen sind online verfügbar:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

## **6 The Bible in Politics in Zimbabwe**

### *Abstract*

The Bible was used in politics during both the colonial and post-colonial eras in Africa. This chapter shows that the Bible was and is still being used to promote the political agenda of the elite. This is the predisposition by regimes to employ popular religions in their interaction with constituencies to promote their political objectives. Yet the application of the biblical message on national issues, including politics must be within the parameters of sound exegesis and hermeneutics. The chapter shows examples of debatable and controversial use of the Bible in Zimbabwe and South Africa by politicians such as Robert Mugabe, Emmerson Mnangagwa, Nelson Chamisa, Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma. Furthermore, the controversy includes the clergy making the matter even weightier and worthy of academic interest. We demonstrate in this chapter that if the church spoke with one united voice and become apolitical in its engagement with the state and spoke with authority on matters of national development and national interest it would be the true salt and light of the world. While that would not eliminate the controversies and abuse of the Bible in society, it would serve as a good standard to the society.

***Keywords:*** *Bible, Politics, Hermeneutics, Zimbabwe, South Africa*

### **1. Introduction**

The Bible in Politics is a topic that suggests and alleges the abuse of the Bible to achieve a given political agenda. With relevant examples from Zimbabwe and South Africa, the discussion explores the factors leading to the abuse of the Bible to achieve a given political agenda, that is, the relationship between the Bible and politics, the extent to which the Bible is deliberately and controversially used in politics and the Church's role in the public use of the Bible. This paper's discussion targets scholars,

clergy, Christian leaders, Christian politicians, or Christians and non-Christians who feel they have a calling to national politics. The Bible has become a public book that is not easy to regulate. Both believers and non-believers use the Bible as a reference point for moral conduct, though in a number of cases, respective audiences may not understand its contents. Believers take the Bible as a connection to God. The abuse of the Bible is not only in relationship to national politics but other spheres of life, even though this paper focuses on the Bible in politics. This paper categorically condemns the inappropriate use of the Bible for ulterior motives.

## 2. The Bible and Politics

The New Zealand Bible Society (2022) describes the Bible as “a remarkable collection of ancient writings which Christians believe to be God’s revelation to people. It is a library of books and letters bound up in one.” The New Zealand Bible (2022) further claims that “the Bible tells the story of God’s relationship with the masterpiece of his creation (people)”. The description rightly describes the Bible as a collection of many books in one and the holy book used by Christians for guidance. The description highlights the historical aspect of the Bible in relation to God, the creator. This paper restricts the use of the term Bible to imply the Christian holy book. However, in the case of Zimbabwe, even non-believers use the Bible for guidance and edification. The celebrated book has also been evoked in politics and any discussion on governance issues. Boswell defines politics as a battle of ideas to bring about cultural identity, recognition, and a system through which material resources are allocated within a community or society (Boswell, 2020). Politics applies to different levels and contexts of human interaction, which involves the battle of ideas, cultural identity, recognition, and allocation of material resources. Cultural identity refers to contestation about values and lifestyle. African politics have been characterized by different phases of socialization, that is, the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial phases. This paper focuses on the colonial and post-colonial phases. The African colonial era ranges from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries or from 1800 to the 1960s in most countries (Parker & Rathbone, 2007; Ocheni & Nwankwo, 2012, p. 46). The last colony to be liberated was South Africa in 1994. The post-colonial era in Africa

began for most of the countries in the 1960s when several African nations gained independence. Interestingly, the Bible has continued to influence African politics, as shown in some selected African nations such as South Africa and Zimbabwe.

## **2.1 The Use or Abuse of the Bible in the Public Sphere**

We concur with Gunda, who postulates that the Bible

“has been extensively used in the public sphere by politicians, judges, industrialists, and religious functionaries. Its public use has raised critical questions about the nature of development we aspire for as Zimbabweans.” (Gunda, 2012, p. 22).

Such public use of the Bible, whether correctly or wrongly, is attributable to the spread and entrenchment of Christianity within Africa. As a result, the Bible has arguably become part of people’s lives, irrespective of whether they are regular Church attendants or not, believers or unbelievers alike. The abuse of the Bible in politics entails either the quotation of biblical scriptures during a political address or invoking the name of God to support a given political position. Examples of abuse of the Bible are discussed below.

### **2.1.1 Example 1: Emmerson Mnangagwa and Religion**

Both Robert Mugabe, the former president, and Emmerson Mnangagwa, the incumbent president of the post-colonial Zimbabwe, claimed to have been ordained by God to lead Zimbabwe. To that effect, Emmerson Mnangagwa declared that “the voice of the people is the voice of God” in response to the mass demonstration of Zimbabweans in November 2017 against the rule of Robert Mugabe (Mudzaniire & Banda, 2021, p. 2). What Mnangagwa meant with the statement, “the voice of people is the voice of God” is not clear, but Mudzaniire & Banda give two possible meanings of the statement (Mudzaniire & Bnada, 2021, p. 3). Mnangagwa took the mandate to rule the country as given to him by the people seriously. Firstly, it may have meant that God worked through people to elect Mnangagwa to rule Zimbabwe, and anyone resisting or rejecting Mnangagwa was resisting or rejecting God. The second possible meaning also implied that if Mnangagwa refused to take up the president’s position in Zimbabwe,

he would be disobeying God. Anyone who then goes against his leadership as president would be labelled as serving the devil and going against God.

Most likely the second meaning was consistent with Mnangagwa's perception of his ascendancy to power. The perception seemed to have been an opportunistic one in which one rode on the popularity of religion, particularly Christianity in Zimbabwe, and chose to appeal to the citizenry through religious Christian rhetoric, "the voice of people is the voice of God." Zimbabweans in general and Christians in particular had been praying for God's intervention in the Zimbabwean crisis which was getting out of hand towards the end of Mugabe's reign. Most Zimbabweans were looking forward to another messiah after Morgan Tsvangirai failed to dislodge Mugabe (Machingura, 2012). Several people were looking forward to the positive response to the Zimbabwean crisis. Critics take Mnangagwa's rhetorical statement as some form of religious manipulation for citizens to accept him without question as the ordained leader of Zimbabwe. The statement removes any talk about political contestation through elections or the existence of opposition political parties.

Chiminge describes the God in Mnangagwa's speeches as ambiguous and different from the God of the Bible (Chiminge, 2019, p. 47). Chiminge's assertion above is justifiable because of the lack of consistency between Mnangagwa's claims of being God ordained and the alleged government's human rights violations. Human Rights Watch (2020) describes Zimbabwe under the leadership of Mnangagwa as "highly intolerant of basic rights, peaceful dissent and free expression." Zimbabwe's second republic has been allegedly characterized by the detention of citizens without trial, the banning of opposition parties' political rallies, and instances of political violence whose investigations by police were done in an opaque way to mention just a few examples. Interestingly, Mudzanire & Banda observe some syncretism in Mnangagwa's perception of God, particularly between Christianity and African Traditional Religion (Mudzanire & Banda, 2021, p. 4). For example, Mnangagwa equated Mbuya Nehanda, Zimbabwe's first Chimurenga war heroine, and Jesus Christ in his speech to commission the former's statue by bringing at parity the death of the latter on the cross with the former's contribution to Zimbabwe's liberation struggle (Machivenyika & Ziwira, 2020; n.d.).

Mudzanire & Banda, however, think that there were some shades of belief in the Christian God in Mnangagwa's utterances as exemplified by his reference to "God's sovereignty and humanity's powerlessness in controlling the events of the world" (Mudzanire & Banda, 2021, p. 3) when he reacted to the impact of the cyclone Idai. Mudzanire and Banda's analysis of Mnangagwa's faith as syncretistic resonates with the observation that syncretism is characteristic of the expression of the Christian faith in Zimbabwe and Africa where it is common to mix Christian beliefs with African traditional ones. It is common for people to identify with one Church or the other and at the same time involved in African Traditional Religious practices and beliefs.

For critics, the above scenario of President Mnangagwa is a clear example of the abuse of not only the bible but the Christian faith in a bid to present oneself as a democrat. The statement, "the voice of God is the voice of people" would only be applicable where clear democratic processes were followed, and a leader was inaugurated as a choice of the majority of the people of any given nation. It is not perfectly applicable in the case of Zimbabwe's second republic where the removal of the then president, Robert Mugabe from office was through military action.

### **2.1.2 Biblification of the Public Sphere in the Colonial and Post-Colonial Eras**

Gunda calls "the widespread use of the Bible in the public sphere," "the biblification of the public sphere." (Gunda, 2012, p. 25). He is convinced that the phenomenon is common in Africa and that there is continuity in its prevalence between the colonial and post-colonial eras. Gunda observes that this was prevalent in the colonial era as exemplified by Dutch sailors who identified South Africa as "the promised land, given to them by God" (Gunda, 2012, p. 25). They packaged colonialism as a blessing from God for Africa and as part of the trinity of colonialism, civilization and Christianity; and the use of the Hamitic myth to rationalize and sanitise "the mass victimization of the indigenous Africans" (Gunda, 2012, p. 25). The trinity of colonialism, civilization, and Christianity was used by the colonizers to demonize every aspect of African cultures while the European cultures and traditions are presented as Christian.

The above development played a major role in the biblicization of the public sphere in Africa where the Bible ended up being part of peoples' gatherings. The use of the Bible in the public sphere became popular to the extent that the Bible became a public book. While the development is applaudable for promoting the growth of Christian faith in Africa, it is regrettable that the same phenomenon was used to pacify the African indigenous people so that the oppressive system of colonialism would be perceived as holy. Gunda concludes that while the African liberation struggle

“was packaged as a new ‘Exodus from the oppression of Pharaoh’ to the ‘promised land flowing milk and honey’, it turned out to be an exodus to bewilderment in which ‘honey and milk have turned out to be agony’.”  
(Gunda, 2012, p. 25).

While the colonizers used the Bible to justify their oppression of the African indigenous people, the African liberation movements used it to package both their liberation strategies and post-colonial political messages. The postcolonial era saw several African leaders mentioning God or even making claims of having been ordained by God as leaders of their respective countries.

The abuse of the Bible in Africa has its origins in the colonial era. In the case of Zimbabwe and South Africa, the colonizers abused the Bible and the Christian faith by bringing the European cultures to parity with Christianity while they demonized the African cultures and traditions. On the other hand, the indigenous African people packaged their struggle for freedom as a new exodus, in application of the biblical history of the liberation of the Israelites from Egypt. However, the Zimbabwean postcolonial context, just like most African states, is still far away from the promises made by the African liberators during the struggle. The African status quo raises questions on whether the liberation struggle was a new exodus or not because those perceived or alleged to be against those in power get persecuted. The Bible is then evoked to support such actions.

### **2.1.3 Example 2: Robert Mugabe and Religion**

For example, in Zimbabwe, either Mugabe or his supporters were quoted several times referring to the Bible or replacing the name of Jesus with Mugabe on some of the Christian songs. Mugabe who at the burial of his

late former chief secretary of state, Charles Utete and in reference to Evan Mawarire's online campaign for a national shutdown said;

"I don't know if he is a man of religion. A man of religion, we would hope, would preach biblical peace. First Corinthians, what does it say? Love one another. Not destroy one another, fight one another. So, beware these men of cloth [...] not all of them are true preachers of the Bible. I don't know whether they are serving God. Well, we spell God, G.O.D., they spell God in reverse." (Mugabe, 2016).

Mugabe used the Bible to castigate a minister of religion who led an online campaign for a national shutdown. The national shutdown was to express the citizens' disgruntlement over their continued suffering due to Zimbabwe's economic meltdown. Surprisingly, Mugabe did not say a word about the negative economic, social and political circumstances affecting Zimbabwe's citizens as claimed by Evan Mawarire and yet used the Bible to attack the one who claimed to fight for the cause of the poor.

The above-quoted speech ties in very well with speeches by Mugabe's supporters and allies. Hungwe reported that the then Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) youth leader, Kudzai Chipanga declared that "Mr. Mugabe will die in office. It was written in the Bible that he would not just rule the country but would die in office." (Hungwe, 2016). One wonders which Bible or biblical texts Chipanga referred to. It is another example of abuse of the Bible to promote political agenda and interests. The political agenda then was to keep the then 92-year-old Zimbabwe's president, Robert Mugabe in office even though, he was struggling to discharge his duties effectively due to old age.

News24 reported that Grace Mugabe, the then Zimbabwe's first lady, declared Robert Mugabe irreplaceable as Zimbabwe's leader and that he would continue with his leadership even from the grave in the event of death. Grace Mugabe's speech had no direct reference to the Bible but presented Mugabe as a supernatural being who would defy health challenges and even death to continue to rule the country (News24, 2016). The speech goes a long way in demonstrating the extremes that political leaders go just to promote their political agenda. Mawawa (2016) quoted Nehemiah Mutendi, the bishop of the Zion Christian Church, saying Mugabe was greater than the biblical Moses because while he (Moses) did not manage to take the Israelites to Canaan (Exodus 3:10–11; Deuteronomy

34:5), Mugabe had managed to deliver Zimbabwe from the colonial regime and had continued to lead the country in the post-colonial era. In this case, the Bible was manipulatively abused to shower praises on a political leader. The political expediency that warranted bootlicking by a clergyman turned out to be a hermeneutical exercise in which the biblical narrative about Moses was exploited. Conclusively according to Mutendi, Moses was inferior to Mugabe notwithstanding his (Moses') aptitude to speak with God face to face as one who spoke with a friend (Exodus 33:11). On the other hand, Constantino Chiwenga, the vice-president of Zimbabwe, in yet another example of abuse of the Bible, likened Mugabe to "the biblical Moses, who successfully rescued his kinsmen from oppression, but failed to deliver them to the land of milk and honey because of delinquency" (Bulawayo24 News, 2018). The same Mugabe who was described by Mutendi as greater than Moses was now being likened to one who was described delinquent biblical Moses by Chiwenga. Chiwenga was now showering praises on Mnangagwa whom he described as the Joshua of Zimbabwe, called by God to take the nation into the Promised Land (Bulawayo24, News 2018; Deuteronomy 31:1–32:47; Joshua 1:1–18).

In this example of the abuse of the Bible, both political and religious leaders are found wanting. It portrays a great appetite for appeasing the political leader at the helm of Zimbabwe by both type of leaders. They summoned all their biblical knowledge just to shower praises on the national leader. While it is a common trend among Zimbabwean politicians, it goes without saying that it is the least expected of the clergy who should actually be speaking truth to power and where it is necessary to apply the Bible. The use of the Bible in both private and public spaces has not spared members of the opposition.

### **2.1.4 Example 3: Nelson Chamisa and Religion**

Tarusarira claims that Nelson Chamisa, opposition leader and former president of the Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC), an opposition party was the first politician to claim that his politics were guided by his Christian faith (Tarusarira, 2020, p. 31). Apart from his "God is in it" slogan and other religious inclinations in his political activities, Chamisa employed a pastoral approach which saw him declare a seven-day fasting and prayer programme from the 29<sup>th</sup> of July to the 4<sup>th</sup> of August 2019 guided by such

scriptures as Psalm 68:31; Psalm 11:3 and 2 Chronicles 7:14. Nelson Chamisa's bid for the presidency in the August 2023 election put God at the centre. Chamisa's CCC manifesto mentioned God 19 times. While faith is a critical aspect of life, critics argue that Zimbabwe's politicians' use of the Bible for political mileage is often a well-calculated practice. We concur with Tarusarira's conclusion that "religious politics remain strong and influential within Zimbabwe" and that it has the risk of dividing the nation and the electorate.

Nelson Chamisa, being a product of a theological seminary and a Christian perhaps follows the footsteps of other Zimbabwean politicians in the mould of Ndabaningi Sithole, Canaan Banana and Abel Muzorewa who were clergy men. Without casting a shadow of doubt on his faith, he must avoid falling into the same trap as Zimbabwe's liberators who promised Zimbabweans a Canaan that was never experienced over forty years after independence. While politicians must be free to express their faith, they must refrain from abusing the Bible and Christian faith, particularly by putting their own words into God's mouth or speaking on behalf of citizens.

## **2.2 Churches' Support of the Political Establishment and Status Quo**

While the above approach by politicians could be tolerated because to a certain extent, it was expected of them to behave in that way, ZANU-PF found allies in the broader Church and some faith leaders. Nkala (2022) quoted Andrew Wutawunashe, Family of God founder and leader, speaking at a war veterans conference, comparing Mnangagwa to the biblical Joshua and declaring that he was God-sent. Critics argue that, Wutawunashe's sentiments raise a lot of questions, particularly when Church leaders close their eyes to political leaders' violation of human rights and perpetration of injustice. It also raises a lot of questions when the Bible is used to sanitize a political agenda despite the suffering of the poor and marginalized. Chidakwa (2023) reports that Wutawunashe, who is also the chairman of the *Zimbabwe Indigenous Inter-Denominational Council of Churches* (ZIIC), led church leaders (from Roman Catholic, Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe, Pastors4ED, *Vapostori* and Zion4ED, Lutheran and African Apostolic Church Mwazha in the post 23 August 2023 disputed

election period to congratulate president Mnangagwa on his victory. *Vapostori*, and Zion4ED refer to a group of *African Independent Churches* (AICs) which openly supported ZANU-PF and Mnangagwa in the run-up to Zimbabwe's August 2023 elections. While the gesture to congratulate the one elected president would have been noble in a normal situation, in this case, it was questionable because diplomatic and political engagements to resolve the electoral dispute were still underway.

The defense of the clergy who support those in political power in Zimbabwe often cited Romans 13:1–7 (Magezi & Tagwirei, 2022, p. 3). This is a New Testament biblical text which acknowledges those in authority as God's servants, exhorts everyone to submit to those in authority, acknowledges those in authority as ordained by God to bring wrath to those who do wrong, and justifies the payment of tax to those in authority. However, Gusha dismisses the defense as a misinterpretation of scripture (Magezi & Tagwirei, 2022, p. 3). Stott identifies four models of state and church relations and these are

“Erastianism (the state controls the church), theocracy (the church controls the state), constantianism (the compromise in which the state favours the church and the church accommodates the state to retain its favour) and partnership (church and state recognize and encourage each other's distinct God-given responsibilities in a spirit of constructive collaboration).” (Stott, 1994, p. 339).

Stott finds partnership as resonating with Paul's teaching in Romans 13:1–7 (Stott, 1994, p. 339). Clearly, both the state and the church have different roles. Also, Christians have obligations to both God and the state as implied by Jesus Christ in his statement, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's” (Matt 22,21). However, Stott's comment on the applicability of the passage is plausible, that is,

“We need to be cautious, however, in our interpretation of Paul's statements. He cannot be taken to mean that all the Caligulas, Herods, Neros, and Domitians of New Testament times, and all the Hitlers, Stalins, Amins, and Saddams of our times, were personally appointed by God, that God is responsible for their behavior, or that their authority is in no circumstance to be resisted. Paul means rather that all human authority is derived from God's authority so that we can say to rulers what Jesus said

to Pilate, ‘You would have no power [*exousia*, authority] over me if it were not given to you from above.’” (Stott, 1994, p. 340).

The Church leaders in question in cahoots with Zimbabwe’s incumbent president maintained the colonial and post-colonial trajectory of manipulatively abusing the Bible to promote the political agenda of the ruling class.

Mnangagwa’s response to the gesture by the clergymen as reported by Chidakwa is worth noting when he said

“as Government, if you are leading a nation that is Christian, what else do you want? All that is left for you is to create a philosophy which makes everybody feel they have a responsibility to build their own country.” (Chidakwa, 2023).

It is not surprising that several clergy, Christian organisations, and politicians endorsed Mnangagwa’s presidency despite controversies around the elections and the declared results. Biblical verses were cited to legitimize his chosenness by God (Mushanawani, (2023), *The Manica Post*, 21 July 2023; Parker-Kwinika (2017), *The Herald*, 14 November 2017; Share (2018), *The Herald*, 06 March 2018; Zinyemba (2018). *The Sunday Mail*, 22 July 2018). On the other hand, clergymen, Christian organisations, and politicians disputed that and cited the Bible to delegitimise Mnangagwa as chosen by God and declared Nelson Chamisa as anointed by God to be the president of Zimbabwe (<https://www.theafricareport.com>). In some cases, some of the clergy have condemned President Mnangagwa’s election considering the human rights abuses (Amnesty (2023); Reporter, S. (2023). The description of Zimbabwe as a Christian nation might be a politically motivated one and is a gesture of appeasement to the clergy while at the same time, aimed at largely Christian population to identify with a head of state who acknowledges the common faith. Otherwise, one of Zimbabwe’s founding values and principles is the nation’s diverse cultural, religious and traditional values. This is a value that is contrary to the nation claimed to be Christian (Zimbabwe 2013). In other words, Zimbabwe has freedom of worship in line with its constitutional provision of “freedom of assembly and association” (Zimbabwe 2013). In that regard, Zimbabwe constitutionally was not yet a Christian state but a secular one despite the various political leaders across the political divide citing the

Bible in the day-to-day socialization. It is not only about Zimbabwe but other African nations such as South Africa, hence the example that comes later in this paper.

The response of some of the Zimbabwean churches to their nation's situation as described above is testimony to the lack of coherence and awareness of their role in nation building. Partnership is the most ideal model of church and state relations. The church must be radically apolitical and play a prophetic role in a manner that earns it respect from both the ruling and opposition political players. The church must speak on behalf of God and demonstrate justice and impartiality in its prophetic role. This is difficult when the church speaks with many conflicting voices. Above all the church must demonstrate the correct way to apply the biblical message on national issues in such a way that it becomes the authority in matters of theology, morality and society. The Zimbabwean church has a lot of work to do to attain the above. Interestingly, the abuse of the Bible in the public domain has a long history in South Africa, the neighbouring nation of Zimbabwe.

### **2.3 Abuse of the Bible during the Colonial Era in South Africa**

Struby found out that Christian rhetoric, which includes using the Bible in the public sphere, was used as a political tool by both proponents and opponents of Apartheid during the colonial era in South Africa (Struby, 2018, p. 16). Richard argues that Apartheid was a product of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) because their theological underpinning was that the Afrikaners were sent by God to South Africa (Struby, 2018, p. 16). Apartheid was a phenomenon replicated in different forms and ways in the different African countries during the colonial era. The common denominator in the different forms of Apartheid in different African countries was, in the words of Martin "keeping the blacks in their place" (Struby, 2018, p. 16). What place was that? It was a place of subjugation, poverty, disease, and hunger which in the perception of the proponents of apartheid was ordained for the African Indigenous people by God while the colonizers were the favoured ones. The Bible and Christianity were used during the colonial era to promote the selfish interests of the ruling class, that is, the colonizers.

Interestingly the same Bible and Christianity were also used by the opponents of apartheid to promote the liberation struggle, making liberation theology more popular. This is probably why Farisani is convinced that the Bible is prone to abuse by the powerful, to “legitimize economic and environmental exploitation, racism, sexism, and other forms of abuse” (Farisani, 2014, p. 208). Richard, a study participant, intimates that “people who led the struggle were driven not only by their political commitment but also by their religious faith” and therefore “they found themselves in the scripture” (Struby, 2018, p. 16). Jeffery-Schwikkard narrates how ANC in the 1980s “increased its formal engagement with religious institutions” (Jeffery-Schwikkard, 2022, p. 1087), leading to the establishment of a special department of religion, public acknowledgment of liberation theology and public pronouncement of shared objectives with Church organizations. Apart from the fact that Christian organizations like ecumenical Church bodies and individual Churches rightly used the Bible to correct the theological errors of the proponents of apartheid, the move gave “moral legitimacy to the liberation struggle” (Struby, 2018, p. 17). Sadly, after the liberation movements in Africa, like ANC and ZANU-PF, got into power they to a certain extent borrowed the colonial template and expected, a “subservient and non-threatening Church” (Struby, 2018, p. 18) as opposed to one that demands accountability from government for its actions. It therefore turned out that the selfish political agenda of the post-colonial governments in Africa took precedence over the need to serve the people in the same manner as colonial governments behaved. Such is the trajectory that determined the use of the Bible in both colonial and post-colonial eras in Africa, that is, the Bible as a political tool rather than a genuine standard or measurement for faith, development and life. Ultimately what we can conclude is that humanity, irrespective of race, skin colour or creed, is depraved in its default settings such as injustice, prejudice, selfishness and unlimited crave for power. The centrality of the biblical message in both the colonial and postcolonial African societies is highly questionable because of the extent to which the Bible was abused by both political and religious leaders despite the deteriorating situations where people cry for help. While abuse of the Bible by political leaders

might be excusable though not commendable based on pressures associated with their vocation, abuse of the Bible by the clergy is inexcusable as they should set the correct image for society.

## 2.4 The Bible, Christianity and Postcolonial South Africa

West (2012) provides an assessment of the African National Congress (ANC), South Africa's ruling party's use of the Bible in nation building. He observes a shift from Nelson Mandela, the first independent South Africa president's total refusal to use the Bible or religion in politics. His successor, Thabo Mbeki's prolific use of the Bible was amazing as he would justify its use in the public sphere. In one instance Mbeki quoted Matthew 4:18; 19 which narrates a story in which Jesus encountered Simon Peter and his brother Andrew fishing at the sea of Galilee. Mbeki's interpretation of the text was as follows:

“Perhaps taking a cue from this, some in our country have appointed themselves as ‘fishers of corrupt men’. Our governance system is the sea in which they have chosen to exercise their craft. From everything they say, they know it as matter of fact that they are bound to return from their fishing expeditions with huge catches of corrupt men (and women).” (Mbeki in West, 2012, p. 116).

According to West, Mbeki used the image of fishing for men in the Matthean text to refer to stereotyping of Africans by former colonizers as corrupt, liars, thieves and people with a tendency to enrich themselves through immoral means (West, 2012, p. 116). The appropriateness of the text is highly questionable, and it sticks out as one of the examples of using the Bible in the public sphere to promote a political agenda without due care. The application was not sensitive to the context of the passage. Jesus called the two brothers for his evangelistic and salvific mission not corruption. Such use of the Bible in the public sphere isolates and violates scriptures from their context.

West accuses Jacob Zuma, the former president of South Africa of “returning religion to the public realm, albeit in a more popular form than the initiatives by Mbeki” (West, 2012, p. 136). One of the most controversial tendencies of Zuma was his claims to be like Jesus Christ. The Sowetan quoted Zuma saying he was like Christ and that the media, and his

detractors wanted to nail him to the cross (West 2012, p. 136). Most probably Zuma was looking for sympathy from South Africans by comparing himself to Jesus Christ. The comparison ignores the realities of Jesus Christ being sinless and divine. Yet Zuma is human and prone to sin. While Jesus was executed unjustly, it may not be the same issue with Zuma who likely had issues to account for to the South African citizens. The comparison is yet another example of the use of the Bible in the public sphere in pursuit of a political agenda. According to West, Zuma also likened himself to Jesus Christ when he described a breakaway political party, Congress of the People (COPE) as Jesus' donkey and himself as Jesus in reference to the biblical story in which Jesus rode on a donkey as he entered Jerusalem (West, 2012, p. 136). Zuma went further and explained that the people were waiting for the son of man, that is, Zuma who was on the donkey, that is, COPE. The donkey, that is, COPE, did not understand that the songs of praise were for Zuma and not COPE. Clearly, Zuma's rhetoric had no respect for the biblical scriptures but was riding on them to communicate his political message to an audience assumed to associate with the Bible in one way or the other. The political message was more important to Zuma than the scriptures even though he probably assumed that the scriptural images would be more appealing to his audience, hence their use.

West highlights Zuma's utterances in which he claimed that Jesus or God would bless those who voted for ANC and that ANC would rule South Africa until Jesus came back because ANC was the only organization blessed by God when it was formed, and that Jesus Christ supported it or Jesus was a member of ANC (West, 2012, p. 137). The above appears to be an attempt to popularise ANC as a party and its politics by appealing to the most popular religion in South Africa, that is, Christianity. Jeffrey-Schwikkard observes that ANC's political strategy is one in which it "mixes religious rhetoric and a secular policy agenda" (Schwikkard, 2023) but it is not a religious party. Jeffrey Schwikkard's observation is critical to this conversation as it authenticates the supposition that religious rhetoric or the use of the Bible in the public sphere by politicians in Africa is more of a political strategy than anything else. Though some of the political leaders may have personal religious convictions or religious backgrounds,

their use of the Bible in politics may be more political than religious. Religion and the Bible are only evoked to serve politics and political leaders. Zuma's religious rhetoric to push a political agenda is not uncommon in Africa.

Kalu asserts that "in Africa, the political realm is sacralized or enchanted and politics is a religious matter precisely because it is a moral performance; it is about the undergirding values that determine how we govern ourselves or exercise power in the task of wielding the authority given to us." (Kalu, 2003, 1). In the same vein, Ellis & Ter Harr (1997) avow that religion is an important and indispensable aspect of human life even when it comes to politics in Africa as opposed to Western thought. The influence of religion and the use of the Bible in the public sphere is a major religio-political factor in Africa.

Such use of the Bible as exemplified above tends to violate sound hermeneutics and twist the biblical message to suit people's political and religious agendas hence the manipulation and abuse of the Bible. The South African example was included here for comparison's sake and to prove that the abuse of the Bible goes beyond Zimbabwe. The abuse of the Bible by African political leaders in the postcolonial era is testimony to the fact that they were products of the European missionary efforts to propagate Christian faith in Africa. While the European missionaries did a great job in their propagation of the Christian faith in Africa, some of their products had no sufficient depth in their articulation and application of the biblical message. This conclusion raises a very critical gap that the African church needs to fill, that is, holistic discipleship of its members so that they may be Christians before, for example, they become politicians.

### 3. Conclusion

The discussion of this paper highlights the extent to which the Bible has been abused during the colonial and post-colonial eras in Africa. There is continuity in the abuse of the Bible in the public sphere between the two eras in Africa. In both eras, the Bible is used to promote the interests of the elites or the ruling class at the expense of the poor, vulnerable, and downtrodden. What exacerbated the situation was the fact that some of

the clergy who were supposed to guide politicians as well as their congregations in the appropriate use of the Bible tended to participate in the abuse of the Bible to promote political agendas of the elite. We hope that the conversation raises awareness among the clergy, politicians, Christians, and citizens in general so that ultimately the Bible may be used with care in people's lives.

## References

- Amnesty (2023). Zimbabwe: Mnangagwa's inauguration marred by arrests, abductions and torture of political activists, 4<sup>th</sup> September 2023. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/09/zimbabwe-election/>, 21.05.2024.
- Boswell, C. (2020). *What is Politics?* The British Academy. <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog/what-is-politics/>, 26.10.2023.
- Chidakwa, B. (2023). President Mnangagwa Meets Church Leaders. *Herald*, 26<sup>th</sup> October 2023 Issue. <https://www.herald.co.zw/president-mnangagwa-meets-church-leaders/>, 26.10.2023.
- Chimininge, V. (2019). "The Voice of the People is the Voice of God": A critical Reflection on the Use of God in Promoting Political Legitimacy in the New Dispensation in Zimbabwe, *Journal of Politics of Politics and Religion*, 32, 2, pp. 37–59, [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu), 26.10.2023.
- Ellis, S. & Ter Harr, G. (1997). *Religion and Politics in Africa*. <https://scholarpublications.universiteitleiden.nl>, 18.20.2023.
- Farisani, E. B. (2014). Interpreting the Bible in the Context of Apartheid and Beyond: An African Perspective, *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 40, 2, pp. 207–225. [www.scielo.org.za](http://www.scielo.org.za), 18.10.2023.
- Gunda, M. R. (2012). "Rewriting" the Bible or De-bibliifying the Public Sphere? Proposals and propositions on the usage of the Bible by public figures in Zimbabwe. In M. Gunda & J. Kügler (Eds.). *The Bible and Politics in Africa* (pp. 22–41). Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press.
- Human Rights Watch (2020). *World Report 2020: Rights Trend in Zimbabwe*. [www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org), 26.10.2023.
- Hungwe, B. (2016). *Mugabe will Rule "Until he Dies"*. BBC news 20 July 2016 twitter post. <https://x.com/BBCAfrica/status/755774524277358592>, 26.10.2023.

- Jeffery-Schwikkard, D. (2022). Religion and Political Parties in South Africa: A Framework and Systematic Review, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 48, 6, pp. 1077–1097. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03057070.2022.2136820>, 26.10.2023.
- Jeffery-Schwikkard, D. (2023). God and Politics in South Africa: The Ruling ANC's Winning Strategy. *The Conversation*, 28<sup>th</sup> February 2023 Issue. <https://theconversation.com>, 26.10.2023.
- Kalu, O. (2003). *Faith and Politics in Africa: Emergent Political Theology of Engagement in Nigeria*. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/FAITH-AND-POLITICS-IN-AFRICA%3A-Emergent-Political-of-Kalu/8153e1bbe61e4e3516756808bbac87f839f2f9da>, 26.10.2023.
- Machingura, F. (2012). *The Messianic Feeding of the Masses: An Analysis of John 6 in the Context of Messianic Leadership in Post-Colonial Zimbabwe*. Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press.
- Machivenyika, F. & Ziwire, E. (2020). We Honour Nehanda's Heroic's – President. *Herald*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2020 Issue. <https://www.herald.co.zw/we-honour-nehandas-heroics-president/>, 26.10.2023.
- Magezi, C. & Tagwirei, K. (2022). A Critical Assessment of Church and Political Engagement in Zimbabwe under the New Dispensation, *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 43, 1, <https://verbumeteclesia.org.za/index.php/ve/article/view/2527>, 26.10.2023.
- Matiash, F. S. (2022). Zimbabwe: Churches are a battleground for politicians seeking to entice voters, *The Africa Report*, 4 May 2022, <https://www.theafricareport.com/197927/zimbabwe-churches-are-a-battleground-for-politicians-seeking-to-entice-voters/>. 21.05.2024.
- Mawawa, T. (2016). Mutendi: Mugabe is Greater than Bible Icon Moses. *Zimeye*, 4<sup>th</sup> of March 2016 Issue. <https://www.zimeye.net/2016/03/04/mutendimugabe-is-greater-than-bible-icon-moses-2/>, 26.10.2023.
- Mudzanire, S. & Banda, C. (2021). Mocking the just God? A Theological Critique of President Mnangagwa's use of the Name of God to Justify his Rule in Zimbabwe, *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 42, 1, [https://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S2074-77052021000100056](https://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2074-77052021000100056), 26.10.2023.
- Mugabe, R. G. (2016). Address by His Excellence, Cde R. G. Mugabe, on the Occasion of the Burial of Dr Charles Munhamu Botsio Utete, at the National Heroes Acre, Harare, 19 July 2016. *Herald*, 20<sup>th</sup> July 2016 Issue. <https://www.herald.co.zw/dr-utete-was-a-tireless-champion-of-land-reform/>, 26.10.2023.

- Mushanawani, C. (2023). Vapostori nedorse President Mnangagwa, *Manica Post*, 21st July 2023 Issue. <https://www.manicapost.co.zw/vapostori-endorse-president-mnangagwa/>, 22.05.2024.
- News24. (2016). “Irreplaceable” Mugabe will still be leader when he’s dead – Grace. *News24*, 26<sup>th</sup> May 2016 Issue. <https://www.news24.com/news24/irreplaceable-mugabe-will-still-be-leader-when-hes-dead-grace-20160526>, 26.10.2023.
- Ocheni, S. & Nwankwo, B. C. (2012). Analysis of Colonialism and its Impact, *Africa in Cross-Cultural Communication*, 8, 3, pp. 46–54. [www.tralac.org](http://www.tralac.org), 26.10.2023.
- Parker, J. & Rathbone, R. (2007). *African History: A very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University.
- Parker-Kwinika, S. (2017). ED: A presidency foretold, *Herald*, 14<sup>th</sup> November 2017 Issue. <https://www.herald.co.zw/ed-a-presidency-foretold/>, 22.05.2024.
- Reporter, S. (2023). Catholic Bishops throws [sic] a tauntrum over Mnangagwa win, *The Zimbabwe Mail*, 31st August 2023 Issue. <https://www.thezimbabweemail.com/zimbabwe/catholic-bishops-throws-a-tauntrum-over-mnangagwa-win/>, 21.05.2024.
- Share, F. (2018). Churches endorse ED, *Herald*, 6<sup>th</sup> March 2018 Issue. <https://www.herald.co.zw/churches-endorse-pres-mnangagwa/>, 22.05.2024.
- Stott, J. (Ed.). (1994). *The Message of Romans: God’s Good News for the World* (The Bible Speaks Today). Nottingham: InterVarsity Press.
- Struby, C. (2018). *Church and State: The Impact of Christianity on South African during and Post-Apartheid*, an unpublished paper. <https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/>, 18.10.2023.
- Tarusarira, J. (2020). Religious Politics in Africa: Fasting for Politics, or Political Fasting in Zimbabwe? *Exchange*, 49, pp. 31–52. <https://drill.com>, 26.10.2023.
- West, G. (2012). *The ANC’s Deployment of Religion in Nation Building: from Thabo Mbeki, to “The RDP of the Soul”, to Jacob Zuma*. In M. Gunda & J. Kügler (Eds.). *The Bible and Politics in Africa* (pp. 115–145). Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press.
- Zimbabwe (2013). Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act 2013.
- Zimlive (2023). Placing God at the Centre of Bid for Presidency, Chamisa Lays out Plan. *The Zimbabwean*, 8<sup>th</sup> August 2023 Issue. [www.thezimbabwean.co/](http://www.thezimbabwean.co/), 20.03.2024.

Zinyemba, F. (2018). *Chosing between good and best: God has to speak*, 22 July 2018 Issue. <https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/choosing-between-good-and-best-god-has-to-speak>, 22.05.2024.