

CHAPTER 18

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Studying the United Family International Church in Zimbabwe

The Case for applying multiple approaches to the study of religion and religious phenomena

Introduction

From 2010, Zimbabwe was reeling under a prophetic wave which led to the popularity of such figures as Emmanuel Makandiwa and his United Family International Church (UFIC). UFIC has emerged as one of the most significant religious movements in Zimbabwe in the past three years. The upsurge in prophets and prophetic activity in Zimbabwean Christianity requires careful analysis. Prophetic activities have been present in Zimbabwe from the rise of the African Initiated Churches (AICs) in 1930s and were adopted and adapted by mainstream Pentecostal churches such as the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM), the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa, Forward in Faith (ZAOGA FIF) and the Family of God (FOG) Church. However, prophetic activity scaled new heights owing to the great charismatic renewal around 2007 and 2008 which saw the birth of indigenous mega-churches (Gunda 2012:342) led by individuals christening themselves “man of God,” “prophet,” and “the anointed one of God.”¹

¹ These titles are widely used by members of Pentecostal churches to refer to the central authority in the respective churches. Individuals such as Ezekiel Guti, Andrew Wutawunashe are among the pioneers of this labelling. In the contemporary situation, the “gospel of prosperity” preachers have become the major recipients of these titles. Their followers call them as such and they frequently (explicitly and implicitly) hint at their holiness, chosenness and anointedness. Figures like Makandiwa, Angel, Wutabwashe, Chipunza, Passion and many others belong to this latter group of mega-church superstars who label themselves and are labelled by their followers with these titles and many others including “papa” for father.

According to Phiri (2012:6), “within a relatively short period of time Prophet Emmanuel Makandiwa has established one of the biggest Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe.” The UFIC continues to receive a lot of attention, uproar and intense media coverage. For example, almost every day in the months of March and April (2013), there were articles on Makandiwa in most of the daily newspapers (see also the chapter by Mateveke, Mukenge and Chivandikwa in this volume) . The movement has attracted considerable media attention because of its capacity to attract large crowds, sometimes alleged to be large gatherings of over a hundred thousand for a single event. For example, the “Judgement Night” event at the National Sports Stadium in Harare during Easter of 2012 was supposedly over-subscribed, with people sitting in the terraces and on the pitch, giving rise to claim that there were one hundred thousand people. While the figures cannot be independently verified, it is not disputed that multitudes of people have flocked to these events. Since the UFIC has become such a significant part of the religious, social, economic and political landscape of Zimbabwe, it is necessary for scholars to investigate its history and character. One of the major challenges, however, lies in selecting the most appropriate approach that would do justice to such a complex phenomenon. We are, therefore, under no illusion as to what is possible, we are aware that the methods and approaches we propose here may not exhaust these complex organisms. We, therefore, take this as a step in addressing the question of method.

This study contends that employing multiple approaches to the study of the UFIC is likely to yield more effective results than applying one exclusive approach. It explores how biblical studies approaches, religious studies approaches as well as theological and feminist approaches would facilitate a deeper understanding of this church. It argues that these approaches to the study of religion and sacred texts must be understood as complementary. The chapter maintains that the separation between “biblical studies” and “theology” on the one hand and “religious studies” on the other is artificial. The separation between these can be traced back to developments in modern Germany where biblical studies or *Biblische Theologie* now widely understood to be *Bibelwissenschaft* was and continues to be a discipline under Faculties of theology (Catholic or Protestant) while religious studies or *Religionswissenschaft* was and remains a discipline under social sciences or humanities faculties. The fundamental difference between *Biblische Theologie* and *Bibelwissenschaft* lay in their emphases; the former appreciated the religious and theologi-

cal nuances of the text, while the latter paid attention to the history of the text like any other text. This German tradition has been central to the development and understanding of religious studies and biblical studies in Zimbabwe, especially *Bibelwissenschaft*.² We argue in this chapter that it is profitable to find the common ground among the three approaches. This is particularly true where the Bible is studied not simply as literature but as sacred (religious) literature seen as giving Christianity (a religion) its grounding. It argues that both biblical studies and religious studies must be utilized to clarify religious phenomena such as prophecy. The phenomenon of prophecy itself demands this kind of approach because it is a contemporary religious phenomenon, yet the believers, including the leading figures like Makandiwa, understand themselves as following in the footsteps of biblical prophets such as Elijah and Elisha (Mabhunu 2010:70, Gunda 2012:343).

The United Family International Church: Background and insights into methodological complications

Founded by Emmanuel Makandiwa, the United Family International Church (UFIC) started off as a lunch hour Interdenominational Ministry in late August 2008 in Harare, Zimbabwe's capital city. The fellowship began by using the Anglican Cathedral Hall, along Nelson Mandela Avenue. Due to a huge response, the fellowship moved to the bigger State Lottery Hall at the corner of Rezende Street and Robert G. Mugabe Way in Harare. Even the larger Hall was soon small such that people were forming an overflow and following proceedings from under the foot bridge which crosses over Julius Nyerere Way linking L. Takawira and Innez Terez streets. This forced the Ministry to be moved to the City Sports Center, which continued to be the main place of worship for the UFIC at the time of writing (Phiri 2012). The founder was himself a Pastor in the Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe (AFM) until he launched his UFIC. He was/is regarded as a highly charismatic young pastor.

What attracts the followers to this church among other things is the gospel of prosperity, sometimes called the "health and wealth" gospel or the

² In order to appreciate this understanding, it is interesting to read the "Biblical Studies responses to Canaan Banana's call for a New Bible in Mukonyora, I et al (eds), "Re-Writing" the Bible: The Real Issues, Gweru: Mambo Pr., 1993.

“faith gospel.” While the gospel itself has origins in the United States of America, where it may have developed as an apology for wealth already acquired, especially under questionable moral environments (Koch 2009:3), its context in Zimbabwe has changed. Togarasei (2011:336-7) argues that widespread poverty across the African continent may explain why charismatic Pentecostalism is the fastest growing brand of Christianity in Africa, especially because it is seen as promising wealth and health to those who do not already have it. This explains why two of the defining characteristics of the ministry of Makandiwa are: his supposed ability to perform ‘miracles’ and his proclamation of ‘prophecies,’ especially as they effect physical and spiritual healing to the afflicted. His supposed ability to perform miracles that can lead to believers becoming materially rich has resulted in significant controversies between believers and skeptics (Ngwenya 2011, Mawarire 2011).

Amongst the controversial miracles, the prophet is alleged to have raised the dead, enabled a barren woman to conceive and deliver within three days, and most recently (early 2013), gold and diamonds are alleged to have miraculously appeared in congregants’ pockets and handbags, while miracle money was allegedly deposited in bank accounts as well as in pockets of followers attending service (ZBC News 5/02/2013, Mthombeni 2013, Majuru 23/05/2013). While the ‘miracles’ and ‘prophecies’ remain controversial among Zimbabweans regarding their authenticity, it is apparent that prophets like Makandiwa “see their functions and mandate as biblical, that their prophecies and what they do are authenticated by the Bible, the Word of God” (Gunda 2012:344). Not only do these prophets use the Bible, they encourage and instill a reading culture among their followers who must read the Bible as well as other pieces of literature, especially those written by the prophet or other approved “men of God” who share the same perspective as the Prophet.

African Christianity prides itself as being essentially biblical Christianity because of the emphasis it places on the Word of God. At a time when the white messenger (the missionary) was being rejected across Africa, the Bible was being embraced as the authentic Word of God! Africans, according to Mbiti (1986:26), were hearing their stories being retold in the Bible. The importance of the prophet (such as Makandiwa) today is that he interprets the biblical text and makes it accessible to his followers both in word and deed. Prophetic narratives among other biblical narratives are given a new lease of life by these prophets. The

prophets proclaim the Word of God to their followers, highlighting not what God did for ancient Israelites, but what God is doing and will continue to do for those who believe today. These prophets actualize the Bible. Similarly, the prophets also act out the Bible such that they themselves become a continuation of the biblical narrative while legitimizing the biblical text. As Gunda (2012:347-48) observes, prophetic narratives and other biblical texts are widely used by these prophets in Zimbabwe such that:

[T]he narratives serve to legitimize what contemporary prophets are doing, the show of power through predictions, miracles and healings. The texts are also legitimized by the prophets who do things to show that the unbelievable is actually believable. These texts show that Israelite prophets were understood as representatives of Yahweh, the God of Israel, they were set apart to act as a privileged channel of communication between man and the supernatural. They were mouthpieces of Yahweh. To this, contemporary Christian prophets in AICs and Pentecostal-Charismatic movements place themselves as being in the line of these great Israelite prophets.

This 'power' in terms of biblical interpretation and biblical actualization gives the prophet ultimate authority over his followers.

In terms of the quest for approaches to investigate these new movements, these observations raise two fundamental questions from a biblical studies perspective: how do these prophets and their followers interpret the Bible? In other words, what exegetical and hermeneutical techniques and principles are being used in these movements? The second level of inquiry has to focus on the intersection of the understanding of the Bible and the obtaining social and historical environment within which the movement has developed. In other words, can a socio-historical approach assist us in further understanding their understanding of biblical narratives? It is also apparent that these approaches from a biblical studies perspective cannot exhaust all there is to these movements, which are not simply biblical but religious. There are historical (history of religions) questions that require attention and these relate to the emergence and growth of specific Pentecostal movements such as the UFIC. In addition, there are also sociological, psychological, phenomenological and gender dimensions that must be explored in order for one to get a fuller and more rounded picture of the UFIC. In noting these approaches, we are simply reiterating our earlier position that we

think no one approach will be enough to understand a complex movement such as UFIC.

Multidisciplinary Approaches to studying a New Religious Movement: The case for UFIC

As intimated above, we are advocating a multidisciplinary approach to the study of new religious movements such as the UFIC. By multidisciplinary approach, we mean a deliberate collaboration by specialists from different disciplines. While we are all products of specialized studies, even within departments of religious studies, we are convinced that bridges must be built between and among different disciplines such as biblical studies, theological studies and mainstream religious studies. This call is an acknowledgment of the complexity of these new movements, with their vibrant deployment of sacred texts, both ancient and contemporary. The same movements are equally engaged in multiple rituals and rites of passage, acting on the psyche of the multitude of the followers and have become, over a short space of time, living social organisms. Gender relations in these churches must be investigated; for example, is the submissive wife being extolled or does the wife of the prophet assert herself as a companion and partner or a prophetess in her own right? There is so much that surrounds these movements that a single hole to peep through will only show a tiny fraction of what lies inside. Our response, therefore, is to propose a raft of approaches that should be used in a complementary manner in order to expose a bigger part of that which makes these movements tick. We turn on to the possible methods and approaches applicable to the study of the UFIC. We start by examining the role of biblical studies perspectives.

Biblical Studies Perspectives: Some Suggestions

We have already highlighted the rationale for considering the study of UFIC and other related movements under the banner of biblical studies, alongside mainstream religious studies approaches. While we recognize the presence of biblical studies in religious studies departments, we acknowledge that “biblical studies” has nonetheless enjoyed some autonomy because of its specialized focus on the Bible. In this section, therefore, we concentrate on how biblical studies assist in clarifying new

religious movements such as UFIC. This is necessary because the Bible is the foundational text upon which the UFIC has been grounded. To begin with, the self-understanding of the movement is such that the Bible and the prophet become the two determinative pillars in the lives of the members. The existence of such movements is dependent on the understanding that God has chosen the founder to lead a group of believers into the abundance of God's wealth and health. This choice of the 'man of God or woman of God' is authenticated by the ability of the 'chosen one' to act out biblical narratives through the performance of miracles and the prediction of hidden things, to show their followers and others that they are not mere mortals (Gunda 2012:348).

The effect of specialization in academic studies is that scholars tend to focus on specific aspects of the whole; in this case, biblical scholars will direct their focus especially on the Bible and its relationship to the founder and the movement at large. Also, focus could be directed on how the Bible is used to attack this new breed of prophet and their movements (Roberts 2011:1). On a lot of controversial subjects within the church and in society at large, there is contestation of interpretation of the Word of God (Gunda 2009:76-94). The same could be said about the authenticity of figures like Makandiwa as well as their gospel of prosperity. In other words, scholars attempt to clarify how contestation around the authenticity of prophetic movements such as the UFIC is expressed within the realm of biblical interpretation.

The quest to understand these new movements is, therefore, not entirely a quest to understand the history of the Bible, but the history of the usage of the Bible in the inception, expansion and sustenance of the movement. The focus is on the canonical text of the Bible, particularly those versions and translations that find favour among these movements, such as the King James Version or the New International Version. Biblical scholars should therefore consider the benefits of employing the "reception history approach to the Bible." This is an approach that focuses on "the documentation of the 'effects' and 'impact' of the Bible in particular communities" (Gunda 2013). Reception history is a scholarly enterprise consisting of collating shards of wealth of the various words and acts of interpretation of a particular text over its entire period of existence. This naturally implies that the reception historian must select and discriminate against the multiple shards of wealth depending on his/her interests (Roberts 2011:1). Whereas traditional ap-

proaches, according to Klint (2000:87), were “preoccupied with questions about how the Bible came to be, or even more typically with the intended meaning (by God or the author) of its different texts,” reception history interests itself in the actual history of how the Bible has been used by actual communities. By noting the importance of the contextual situations of different readers, reception history appreciates that “different readers, different situations, different reasons for reading the text, all yield different readings” (Carroll 2000:19). This helps to explain why Christians in Zimbabwe tend to evaluate these new movements in a contradictory manner, even though all may be citing the same Bible.

It is not for the reception historian to judge whether the usage is right or wrong, rather the focus at this stage is the ability to describe how the Bible has been and is being used by different movements such as the UFIC. Similarly, through the same approach, one can also describe how the Bible has been used and how it has impacted those who are skeptical about the authenticity of individuals like Makandiwa. In studying these new movements, greater emphasis will be placed on reception history of the Bible. However, the reception of the Bible is not limited to the text of the Bible only, but also to cultural phenomena that show the effects or impact of the Bible in specific communities. Are there practices within these movements that advertise themselves as biblical effects on the community? Here we can study titles such as ‘man of God,’ prophet, the ‘anointed one’ and other titles that are used to denote the leaders and those that denote the believers, as well as healing practices.

The second profitable approach to new movements like UFIC from a biblical studies perspective is by adopting a socio-historical approach to the transactions between the movement and the Bible. This approach allows the biblical scholar to investigate the social-history behind the text of the Bible as well as the social-history behind the formation, growth and relevance of the contemporary movement that is using the Bible. This allows a biblical scholar to interrogate how the social environment of the community compares with the ancient social environment that is credited with the ideas now forming the text of the Bible. Further, it will also help in interrogating the relationship between the social environment of the contemporary movement and the interpretations that are developed within the movement. This is particularly important because “those who have read the Bible throughout the centuries have usually read it in light of their own historical, social, and cultural backgrounds.

People use these backgrounds, or contexts, as tools to aid them in understanding and applying the Bible” (Langston 2010:1). In other words, the interpretations that are emanating from Makandiwa’s ministry and many others are socially and historically conditioned. It should be possible to highlight these dynamics through a socio-historical approach.

A socio-historical approach argues that religious phenomena, such as movements and institutions, are socially and historically conditioned, without undermining the religious claims made by believers and the founders. It therefore implies that any attempts at understanding these movements must necessarily attempt to understand the context within which they are thriving (Gunda 2012:337). Instead of looking at the UFIC as a proactive movement, a socio-historical approach will look at UFIC as a reactionary movement responding to the situation in Zimbabwe in the years leading to its formation. Not only the larger situation of the nation should be investigated, but equally important is the situation obtaining within the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) from where Makandiwa withdrew. These are dynamics that can best be investigated through a socio-historical approach.

To sum up this section, it is important to observe that the rise of new movements such as UFIC coincided with the years of economic meltdown, years of political challenges and social upheavals. The period from 2007 was particularly difficult for ordinary Zimbabweans and their desperation knew no boundaries. In that context, a new breed of prophets arose, who in the words of Burgess (2008:36):

[Sought] to understand local contexts and culture in the light of Scripture, but they do so by retaining a literalist approach to biblical hermeneutics. They look for correspondences between their own life situations and the Bible, and expect Biblical texts to have practical relevance and problem-solving potential. Thus they could be said to follow more contemporary reading strategies, which stress the role of receiving communities.

What these new evangelists, prophets or men of God have done is to inject life into a stagnating religious tradition by re-inventing the Bible as a contemporary text addressing the real distressing situation of the majority of ordinary Zimbabweans. They do so by not only diagnosing the problems but, most importantly, providing the remedial prescription for them. This is what Burgess means when he observes that biblical texts are seen as having “a practical relevance and problem-solving potential” for the followers of the ‘man of God.’ While mainline churches

have done well in confronting the social evils in Zimbabwe, they sometimes do so at the expense of their religious and spiritual mission (Gifford 2009:50). This was the gap that was exploited by the new breed of evangelist, and it affected both traditional mainline churches, as well as established Pentecostal churches such as the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (ZAOGA), AFM and the Family of God (FOG).

The new evangelist gave the Bible a new lease of life by making it the alpha and omega of the new movement and promised distraught Zimbabweans a return to the good old days of biblical times. This promised return gave hope! Then the ‘man of God’ acted out the biblical claims: healing the sick, giving blessings of children to the barren, giving wealth to those who gave with reckless abandon to the cause of the ministry and many other claims that accompanied these leaders. These exploits inspired faith! In short, hearing inspired hope, but seeing led to believing! The Bible legitimized the Prophet. The Prophet legitimized the Bible. The Prophet lives in the Bible. The Bible and the Prophet are one! They are both the Word of God! From the foregoing, it is clear that biblical studies scholars have a role to play in studying the UFIC, yet even with these approaches it is impossible to exhaust a complex organism like UFIC. Other approaches are needed to complement the above suggested approaches from Biblical Studies.

History of Religions

Having examined the role of biblical studies in clarifying new religious movements such as the UFIC, this section proceeds to analyse the contribution of the history of religions to understanding the same phenomenon. Generally, scholarship does not agree on the nature, task and goal of the history of religions. This has been attributed to the fact that the terms ‘history’, and ‘religion’ do not each have a universal and all-encompassing definition. Bringing the terms together creates a potentially academically explosive situation. Referring to the history of religions, F. J. Streng (1985:220) says, “this method is an examination of religious people, their ideas, beliefs and practices within concrete historical epochs.” This refers to making an analysis on any given aspect of religion basing on its past or history. Streng (1985:220) says, “[I]t is to systematically organise and classify the material.” This notion had earlier been presented by R. J. Shafer (1969:3) who defines the historical

method as “a systematic process of investigation and interpretation aimed at securing the most accurate account possible of any event or series of events providing a coherent and meaningful discussion.” As such, this method helps the researcher in unveiling the origins and historical background to the UFIC. It answers such questions as relation to the date, purpose and pattern of its emergence. Using this method, one can be able to systematically organize the historical background of the UFIC, examining its religious people, their ideas, beliefs and practices within concrete historical epochs.

According to Ranger and Kimambo (1972), most historical studies in Africa have often focused on politics or administrative bureaucracies. This would suggest that in pre-colonial Africa, it was only the political institutions which had a history, or were worth studying historically, unlike other dimensions of society. This has been proved to be false, as every aspect of life seems dynamic and thus has a past. As a result, a historical perspective is very appropriate when studying the origins of a denomination or church that has managed to pull thousands of followers within a reasonably short period, at the same time being at the centre of controversy in religious circles in Zimbabwe. This is why Ranger and Kimambo (1972:2) say: “Yet from a historical view some work on African religion which has emerged from the context of African religious studies has been alarming.” Although Ranger and Kimambo were writing in relation to the study of African Traditional Religion, the same picture has largely applied to the study of African Christianity, although the situation is improving. The history of religions has a significant role to play in the study of the UFIC. The method does not reduce religion to sociology, psychology or any other discipline (Streng 1985: 220). It provides insights into the historical development of religion and would help to clarify historical questions relating to the UFIC.

While the historical method is very helpful in terms of gathering vital information from the past, it, however, may be compromised by challenges emanating from the loss of information, for example through the death of an elder in the community. This is so since oral tradition is the main means of transmission of information in contexts such as Zimbabwe. Some leaders within the AFM who were close to Mukandiwa, such as Evangelist Phaniel Dzungare Chiweshe, have since died. He died on 30 August 2011. This is a major loss as he would have contributed immensely towards the writing of the history of the UFIC as he was

one of Makandiwa's mentors. However, where such challenges occur, written records will become handy and the relevance of other methods becomes a necessity. Written records would relate to minutes of meetings where AFM leaders discussed Makandiwa's interdenominational ministry and newspaper reports on the activities of other members of the UFIC. This dimension is particularly important as there is a tendency to concentrate on the leading figure. Who were the other members who collaborated with Makandiwa in the interdenominational ministry? Did they leave/were they expelled from the AFM with him? Where are they? The phenomenology of religion complements the historical method by focusing on the point of view of the believer. We thus explain how the phenomenology of religion is relevant to the study of the UFIC below.

Phenomenology of Religion

Phenomenology of religion plays a key role in researches into new and contentious religious phenomena such as the UFIC. In Zimbabwe, the phenomenology of religion enjoys pride of place, especially in relation to the study of African Traditional/Indigenous Religions (Cox 2012: 25). However, there have been various attempts to define what this method is. One can argue that there are as many phenomenologies as there are phenomenologists. R. Jackson (1997:7) mentions this when he says, "Phenomenology of religion has been presented in different ways by different authors. Phenomenology of religion is a family of approaches rather than a tightly definable single approach."

This difficulty in finding an all-encompassing definition of what phenomenology of religion is has also been pointed out by C. J. Arthur (1992: 147) when he writes:

...anyone who wants to find out what phenomenology of religion is and how it is applied will find the search a frustrating one. To illustrate the cause of such a frustration would not be difficult, for rather than any embarrassing silence it is the sheer number of conflicting replies to the question 'what is phenomenology of religion?' which makes it so difficult to reach a satisfactory answer.

Generally, J. H. Lambert, a Swiss-German mathematician and philosopher, first coined the method of phenomenology in 1764. He used this term to refer to a study of that which shows itself. E. Husserl (1859-1938)

(Cox 1992:15) then propounded it as a philosophical discipline. Later on it was borrowed as an attempt to investigate the essence and meaning of religion. This means it seeks to explain and find the meaning of religious phenomena such as rituals, sacrifices and myths, among others. Phenomenology of religion was introduced as a reaction against reductionistic approaches such as anthropology, sociology and psychology. It uses two main principles derived from Husserl, namely, *epoche* and eidetic intuition. *Epoche* comes from a Greek term *epecho*, which means, “I hold back.” This requires the scholar or researcher to remove or suspend any preconceived ideas or previous judgment or knowledge one has on the specific subject of research. In this particular case, one has to bracket any preconceived ideas they have about the UFIC. This results in a research with limited bias. Eidetic intuition is also called eidetic “vision,” which is a search for or a seeing into the essentials of religious phenomena. This involves the description of the relationships and processes of phenomena found in religion. Such relationships and processes in the UFIC may include (but are not limited to) the concept of Makandiwa being known as ‘Papa’ by his multitude of followers, the concept of him having a spiritual father, his alleged prophecies and miracles. The overall aim is to establish the meaning of religion from the perspective of UFIC members.

The phenomenological method seeks to have a balanced and unbiased research. It avoids reducing religion as other approaches have done, for example, sociologists who have argued that religion is “the opium of the people,” or that it is “a creation of society,” and theologians have reduced religion to a mere “belief in God” (see Ferguson 1978:13-17). Some psychologists such as Sigmund Freud have argued that it is “an obsessive infantile neurosis” (Cox 1992). Such definitions have come as a result of preconceived and biased ideas with which researchers have studied religion. Thus, phenomenology of religion seeks to correct this and study religion as it presents itself, in its true picture. In the case of the UFIC, this entails concentrating on the point of view of the believers, rather than on the socio-economic factors. This is due to the conviction that religion is a discipline in its own right.

Phenomenology of religion calls for reflexivity. By using phenomenology of religion’ one can be developed into a ‘reflective practitioner’. M. Earley (2009:105) says,

Researchers are also practitioners engaged in (among other activities) the process of discovery and knowledge production, bringing to their research settings specific skills and knowledge about the topic of study and the research process...Reflective practices assure researchers play a role of more than just a technician and truly begin to understand research settings they investigate and how their own investigations affect the field in general.

As such, phenomenology of religion challenges every researcher to think about factors that promote or limit his or her effectiveness. Reflective researching gives room to the researcher to critically assess their surroundings, thus becoming more personal and understanding to what they are working on. As mentioned by Early (2009:110), “a reflective researcher connects more personally with their research, and they also understand how their research connects and applies to the larger field in which they work.”

Despite the strengths of phenomenology, it has its own limitations. According to R. Segal, phenomenologists do not prescribe how to perform epoche. He says unless they explain how it should be done, “it will remain a forlorn ideal.” Segal (1989:19) says:

Phenomenologists invariably neglect to explain how to practice it. To prescribe the suspension of bias is one thing, to achieve it is another. Until the actual means of ridding oneself of all biases gets explained, the epoche must remain only a forlorn ideal.

This means it will never be practical, but only idealistic. In addition, “the method is solipsistic” (Bettis 1969:26). It does not explain how one can grasp intuitively the essence of religious phenomena. Thus, Eric Sharpe mentions that it has been questioned whether there is a yardstick to measure “if one has grasped the essence religion or not” (Sharpe 1986:42). The question stands as, how does one know s/he has practiced epoche and eidetic intuition? These weaknesses have therefore caused Raimundo Pannikar (1999:76), in the context of religious dialogue, to conclude, “Epoche is psychologically impracticable, phenomenologically inappropriate, philosophically defective, theologically weak and religiously barren.” Because of such limitations, the phenomenology of religion cannot single handedly be used to research on the UFIC. Insights from the sociology of religion are required in order to clarify some dimensions relating to the movement. We focus on the sociology of religion below.

Sociology of Religion

Sociology of Religion has to play its role in a research focusing on an emerging and popular movement such the UFIC. This method has the society as its basic unit of study. It is defined as a study of human relationships and interaction. From the early days of Emile Durkheim, it deals with religion and class, gender, economics, change and various aspects of society. This suggests that religion and society co-exist. One can therefore interact with the society at large to find out what they know about the UFIC. This includes what they believe, what they have heard and what they have seen. As part of the sociological method, one has to carry out interviews with members of the society. This includes employing methods of sampling selected interviewees. This is referred to as “purposeful sampling” (Patton 1990:106). One can use snowball or chain sampling to select their informants as explained in this section.

Snowball or Chain Sampling (Patton 1990:110) is a method of selecting interviews by looking for those who can give information on what one is looking for. This is regarded as looking for information-rich cases. One can look for particular informants who are regarded as sources of information on the UFIC. These may include the leadership, such as Makandiwa (the founding leader), his wife and co-founder, Ruth Makandiwa, or anyone one else in the leadership hierarchies. If they are not easily accessible, one can also get information from an “insider” of the UFIC.

In this case, the popularized debate on who an insider or an outsider is, is once again brought to the fore. The “insider/outsider” problem as popularised by Russell T. McCutcheon (1999) rages on. In essence, the “insider/outsider” problem relates to who is better placed to represent a religion: the practitioner or the researcher? It raises the question on who can reliably understand and represent a religion (Knott 2005:244). The contention is that the adherent has the lived experience of a religion, unlike the scholar. Consequently, he or she must be accorded priority when studying the religion. Other versions of the “insider/outsider” problem pit the adherent-scholar against the non-adherent-scholar. They maintain that the adherent-scholar has greater insights relating to his or her religion, unlike the scholar who is not an adherent of the particular religion. In the case of studying the UFIC, the question of the insider/outsider remains as to who is better placed to give the researcher some information about the church, the common member of society at

large who does not attend church at the UFIC or a member of the church. Even among the church members, who is better placed to give valuable information, close associates to Makandiwa, Makandiwa or any other ordinary member who attends church there?

These methods of sampling interviewees are a crucial aspect of the sociological inquiry. They will guide such a research on the UFIC. This is because it endeavours to be empirical and therefore, can be regarded as a scientific method, which is based on the observation of social practices. One can use pseudonyms for most of the respondents in this study, especially those who feel that they do not wish to disclose their identity. However, where consent is granted, the researcher can use real names.

However, sociology as a method has got its own limitations. One of these is that it emphasises society, thereby undermining the individual. This is argued by Morean (2000: 890), when suggesting that “religion is a creation of society.” It considers the perceptions of the society at the expense of the views of selected individuals; in this case perhaps the vision of Makandiwa in this church can be overridden by the assumptions of the society in general. As such, some sociologists are accused of ending up “explaining away” religion. In addition, one has to note that interviews carried out in sociology will have some limitations. This is because some interviews may not always be relied on as primary data and hence one can rely on them up to a certain extent. People may withhold valuable information that they may feel is too esoteric, sensitive or confidential. Some interviewees may become too reluctant to cooperate right from the onset. As a result of these weaknesses, sociology cannot do justice to a research of this nature alone. The psychology of religion is one other methodology that can be utilised to study the UFIC.

Psychology of Religion

One of the most prominent approaches to religion that society has unknowingly used to analyse emerging Pentecostal churches has been the psychological approach. As mentioned by Cox (2010:6), this involves an emphasis on the central criterion of religion as feelings or emotions within people which cause them to appeal to forces greater than themselves to satisfy those feelings. In this case, one may take the UFIC as a place which appeals to society emotionally. Where people are faced with challenges that are beyond human comprehension such as death and

incurable diseases and poverty, they appeal to forces that are greater than them. As such, one may take the UFIC as a religion that gives its believers “a feeling of absolute dependence” (Hall, Pilgrim and Cavanagh 1985:5). The trend here would be to examine the prevailing socio-economic context in Zimbabwe and regard the UFIC as providing emotional solace to its members.

However, just like the sociological approaches, psychological approaches to the study of religion have been accused of social scientific reductionism. According to Cox (2010:34), this refers to the “interpretation of religious behaviour using theories employed within one specific discipline.” Social scientists (who include sociologists and psychologists), have been accused of “tending to reduce religion to their own discipline because their ‘primary field...is not the religions themselves” (Platvoet, 1990:20). Consequently, it becomes very difficult to come up with a balanced study of the UFIC. Using such methods alone would not do justice to the church. It is on the basis of these weaknesses that the historical\phenomenological approaches and feminist theology of religion become viable. We examine the later approach in the next section.

African Feminist Theology of Religion

All the methods discussed above have been accused of focusing only on men, overshadowing the significance of women in religious circles. Methodology in religious studies has for a long time now not taken women’s religious experiences seriously. Chitando (2012:72) argues that “the study of religion in Africa has generally been gender blind.” It has often presented the religious experiences of men as normative. This phenomenon justifies the argument that “the study of religion in Africa has therefore been (and continues to be) a male-dominated discipline” (Chitando and Chirongoma 2008). By utilising perspectives from feminism and African feminist theology of religion, a researcher can be able to give priority to UFIC women’s religious experiences too. This seeks to correct the history of religions that has focused on men’s experiences. We agree with D. Kinsley (2002:3) who says:

Despite its claim to include all religious phenomena within its scope, the history of religions, like all other humanistic disciplines, in fact had a quite limited focus. What it claimed to be the religions or religious expressions of humankind were often (indeed, usually) the religions and

religious expressions of males. Prior to the advent of women's studies, the history of religions was primarily the study of men's religion.

This is reiterated by Chitando (2012:73) who suggests that

“whereas previously the departments of religious studies had given the impression that religion meant the same to men and women, women scholars have sought to highlight the significance of religion to women (as opposed to what it means to men).”

In this section further we explain how the use of feminist theology can help to recover the experiences of women in the UFIC.

According to Musimbi R. A Kanyoro and Mercy A. Oduyoye women's issues have always been silenced in religion and culture. However, feminist theologians have since woken up to the idea that something has got to be said about the presence of women in religion. They argue that,

African women theologians have come to realise that as long as men and foreign researchers remain the authorities on culture, rituals and religion, African women will continue to be spoken of as if they were dead...Until women's views are listened to and their participation allowed and ensured, the truth will remain hidden, and the call to live the values of the reign of God will be unheeded (Kanyoro and Oduyoye 2006: 1).

Chitando (2012:73) thus argues that “African women scholars have challenged the dominant approaches to the discipline by paying attention to the status of women in the various religions of Africa.” An interesting method within African feminism that can be used as an interpretive tool to the UFIC is “cultural hermeneutics” (Kanyoro 2002:9). This is “...an analysis and interpretation of how culture conditions people's understanding of reality at a particular time and location” (Kanyoro 2002:9). With this method, one is able to analyse and interpret beliefs in this particular church and their impact on the status of women. Kanyoro says that cultural hermeneutics “is the choice of combining an affirmation of culture and a critique of it that will have the potential to sustain the modern Africa” (Kanyoro 2002: 26). One can be able to study the status and contribution of women within the UFIC. This gives room for answers to questions such as: what has Ruth Makandiwa (wife to Emmanuel Makandiwa and co-founder of the ministry) done for the church, for the needy, for other women and for herself within the ministry? How does the church support women's ministries? How do indigenous cultural constructions of womanhood affect the UFIC reading of the Bible and its statements regarding the status of women?

Such a method, unlike all other methods in the study of religions, appreciates the presence of women in the church unlike most methodologies which present “men in the pulpit and women in the pew” (Hendriks et al 2012). Despite the gap that this method intends to fill, the method does have its own weakness. It has been noted that most male scholars of religion have not been willing to embrace the tools of gender to analyse their work. They have “condescendingly dismissed gendered approaches to the study of religion in Africa” (Chitando 2012:74), despite rich dimension it has brought in bringing women’s experiences to the fore. The challenge facing the African feminist cultural hermeneutics approach is that it has been associated with women in an almost exclusive way and most male researchers would struggle to embrace it. In addition, women do not constitute one composite group: there are differences relating to race, ethnicity, class and age. These differences are handled better by sociological approaches that we summarised above. Furthermore, isolating women’s specific religious experiences would prevent the researcher from achieving the complete picture of a church such as the UFIC.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, we feel justified to conclude that no one method can do justice to the study of the UFIC. Each approach seeks to correct the limitations of the other, hence, the interplay of the various methods we have given above. We, therefore, agree with R. Pummer (1975:175) when he says, “No one method or discipline can lead to an exhaustive and all encompassing understanding of [humanity’s] religious aspects.” Ninian Smart (1996) shares the same sentiments when he makes it clear that the study of religion requires a poly- methodic approach because religion is multi-dimensional. A diversity of approaches will have to be employed in order to do justice to such a complex phenomenon as UFIC. Each one of these approaches plays a major role in clarifying specific aspects of the UFIC. They serve to complement each other. This serves to overcome methodological imperialism or methodological absolutism whereby one method seeks to dominate the rest in the study of religion. Such an open-minded approach allows the researcher to “secure a means to see into the meaning of religious experiences by ac-

knowledging the existence of an open universe with multi-dimensional ways of apprehending its reality” (Cox 1992:170).

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