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"Rewriting" the Bible or De-biblifying the Public Sphere? Proposals and propositions on the usage of the Bible by public figures in Zimbabwe

Introduction

Religion, theology and sacred texts remain highly uniting and divisive elements in human societies over millennia. As Zimbabwe tethers on the brink of collapse even with the Government of National Unity (GNU), we have all been asking ourselves hard questions because we all seem united in not wanting this beloved country to collapse. While most of us have been looking squarely at the doorsteps of all powerful institutions looking for answers, we have been convinced that the challenges we face are political and economic resulting in some social imbalances. We have hardly sought to understand the interface between the political, economic challenges and religious, theological frameworks and the role played by sacred texts in sustaining such religious and theological frameworks.

This study is born out of the Zimbabwean experience and has a special focus on the use of the sacred texts in the public sphere in Zimbabwe. As clearly illustrated in other papers, the Christian Bible has been extensively used in the public sphere by politicians, judges, industrialists and religious functionaries in such ways as to raise critical questions about the nature of development we aspire for as Zimbabweans. I am fully aware of the importance of all manner of economic and political reforms prescribed for our society, but unless we begin to engage with the fundamental beliefs that largely function in our lives at the subconscious level, we never achieve the goals we set for ourselves. This paper seeks to critically ask: what is the future of the Bible in Zimbabwe? Shall we reconsider the call made by Canaan S. Banana two decades ago? His call was to "re-write the Bible!" Alternatively, shall we seriously consider the way of Europe, a way created over centuries? This is the way that essentially "de-biblifies" the public sphere. It minimizes the direct or sometimes even perceived use of sacred texts in the public sphere by providing a number of checks and balances on how and where sacred texts can be used, a process largely understood by many as secularization. These appear to be two extremes on a continuum of resolving this conflict.

This article argues that, a critical deployment of sacred texts in the public sphere can be productively used to extract accountability and responsibility among all citizens.

Background to this study

As already intimated above, this study is informed by the situation obtaining Zimbabwe, and the desire to see a prospering Zimbabwe cannot be said to have been a passive element in the writing of this paper. However, there is a historical basis for raising the questions that we raise in this study. Canaan S. Banana, the first president of Zimbabwe from 1980 until 1987 is indeed a courageous man, not only was he the president of Zimbabwe, he was also a Methodist Church in Zimbabwe ordained minister, a theologian of note, Professor in the Department of Religious Studies, Classics and Philosophy at the University of Zimbabwe. These are offices that Banana held with distinction and it is unfortunate that his legacy was tarnished because he was convicted of "engaging in unnatural acts with men". While all these offices demands one to be courageous, the reason for calling Banana courageous lies in the fact that he made a daring call in 1991, when he called for the "rewriting of the Bible" as a way of finding long term solutions to the problems of political and economic domination which are sometimes packaged as divinely sanctioned ambitions. There is no doubt that Banana would ruffle a lot of feathers, especially when one reads Banana's explication of the holy, a word that we use to describe sacred texts such as the Christian Bible:

> To maintain something as holy – sacred and divine – is a label and a concept people have about something they treasure. It is also a way to maintain the status quo and to develop an unthinking populace which continues to be at the mercy of the elite. Present and future generations must not be held hostage by dogmas and dogmatists who were themselves captives of their own parochial world. Holiness must not be confused with legitimacy.[1] (Canaan S. Banana)

This call may be at home in Africa, because all the reasons that led Banana into making this call can be found in Africa. However, when it was made, Banana was responding to the heartrending situation of the Pales-

[1] Canaan S. Banana "The Case for a New Bible" in: *"Rewriting" the Bible: The Real Issues*, Ed. by I. Mukonyora, J. L. Cox and F. J. Verstraelen. Gweru: Mambo Press, 1993, 17-31, 18.

tinians and the Israelites, who despite their long history as neighbouring peoples, were escalating hostilities in the 1980s and 1990s, hostilities that continue to date. Banana was brave for making this call because he risked and received hatred from all major religions but especially Christianity in Zimbabwe. He was labeled all sorts of names and when he faced trial for "performing unnatural acts" with other men, it was taken as due punishment for his bold call years earlier. Indeed, Banana was a bold man. This article therefore engages Banana on the call to re-write the Bible, as one option of restructuring society focusing especially on the practicality of the call.

While this call by Banana received a lot of attention from a number of stakeholders, especially Christian leaders and ordinary Christians, other actions surrounding the Bible by prominent people have not received as much attention. Below, I will bring two statements of conviction from two prominent Zimbabweans, one a Member of Parliament and Banana again.

> I stand here representing God the Almighty. Women are not equal to men. This is a dangerous bill, and let it be known in Zimbabwe that the rights, privileges and status of men are gone.[2] (Timothy Mubhawu MP, MDC, addressing Parliament on the debate on the Domestic Violence Bill).

> There is no such animal as neutrality; neutrality at best means deafening silence and indifference, and at worst smiling at and admiring the status quo. I refuse to accept the notion that Jesus assumed the role of an honoured guest in the theatre of human slaughter and misery.[3] (Canaan S. Banana).

The mention of the African continent brings many memories and images flooding into our minds. For some, Africa is synonymous with strife, hunger, corruption and lately human rights abuses. For others, Africa is synonymous with rich resources, minerals, metals and fertile soils. Yet for others, Africa is synonymous with "rampant mass victimization", exploitation and plunders through slavery, colonialism, neocolonialism, capitalism, and lately despotism have reduced most Africans to victims. There may be even more images that are in your minds as well not covered here so far. For some like myself, Africa, particularly

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2 Masiiwa Ragies Gunda, "Reconsidering the relevance of the Prophet Amos in the quest for a just society in contemporary Zimbabwe" in: *BOTSA Electronic Forum*, available online: http://www.mhs.no/article_533.shtml accessed 28 June 2010.

3 Banana "Foreword" in: Michael Lapsley, *Neutrality or Co-option? Anglican Church and State from 1964 until the independence of Zimbabwe*, Gweru: Mambo Press, 1986, 7.

Southern Africa, brings the image of the Bible flooding in our minds, colonialism was inspired by a reading of the Bible, which inspired some Dutch sailors to identify South Africa as the Promised Land, given to them by God.[4] Colonialism was packaged as a blessing from God to the people of Africa and was early on understood as part of the trinity of Colonialism, Civilization and Christianity. The use of the Hamitic myth was one of the rationalizations of the mass victimization of indigenous Africans. The fight against colonialism was packaged as a new "Exodus from the oppression of Pharaoh" to the "Promised Land flowing milk and honey", yet "the Exodus to Freedom (has) turned out to be an exodus to bewilderment; honey and milk (have) turned out to be agony, killings and hatred."[5] In the post-colonial era, we have had several politicians proclaiming the greatness of God, even claiming to have been appointed by God to be leaders of their respective countries.[6] The Bible has been a feature of the public sphere in Africa for bad and for good, inspiring selfless deeds by some, while sustaining selfish deeds by others.

The question to be raised in this presentation is critical as we meet for this first ever conference on "Bible and Politics in Africa (and the West?)": is the biblification of the public sphere good for Africa? By which it is meant, is the widespread usage of the Bible in the public sphere good for Africa? Behind the biblification of the public sphere is the assumption that the Bible is clear and authoritative on all matters. But, is the Bible clear? Is it binding on non-Christians? To the question on the clarity of the Bible, the public declaration of Leonard Hodgson may be of greater use;

> As one who has been a professional teacher of theology for forty-three years, I now publicly declare my hope that no pupil of mine will ever be guilty of using the expression: 'The Bible says...' Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, when that expression is used, it means the speaker has found some passage which he/[she] quotes as authority for the position he/[she] is maintaining, regardless of the fact that those who disagree with him/[her] may find others which support their views. In the hundredth case its use may be more deserving of respect: it may be based on a study of the Bible as a whole, and

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4 Roy J. May (Jnr), "The Promised Land and Land Theft": excerpt from *Joshua and the Promised Land*, available online: http://gbgm-umc.org/umw/joshua/may7180.stm#T22 accessed 13/07/2010.

5 Valentin Dedji, *Reconstruction and Renewal in African Christian Theology*, Nairobi: Acton Publ., 2003, 102.

6 Gunda "Reconsidering the relevance of the Prophet Amos."

> the words may be intended to mean that what is being said is in accordance with... 'the Bible view of life'. Even so the phrase is misleading, and its use is to be discouraged.[7]

If these reservations apply to ordinary Christians who are influenced by their dogmas, what then could be the impact when such dogmas are allowed to influence the public sphere? Further, such dogmatic uses can easily be sponsored to influence public opinions, especially where texts are read to spiritualize causes of social challenges.[8] It is argued in this paper that one of the critical contributions of the biblification of the public sphere in Africa has been the creation "of the God-fearing ruler [public official] ...who fulfills the law of God, and that such a king [public official] inevitably pleases God..."[9] Notwithstanding this association, Jesse Mugambi correctly identifies the paradox that afflicts liberation movements and which can be extended to African states, some of which are still governed by former liberation movements, by noting that "when liberation has been achieved, there is always the temptation of former slaves to become oppressors themselves."[10] Janice Mclaughlin was informed by members of ZANU-PF, when it was still a liberation movement, that "by preaching against the use of force, [missionaries] softened the people so they could not defend their rights. Religion is nothing but a concept aimed at preserving the white rule."[11] In these cases the paradox noted by Mugambi is best illustrated because the liberators are now in the forefront of "monopolizing honey and milk with greed, leaving the majority in the shadows of poverty and death."[12] Clearly, therefore, the unaccountability of public officials is a long term challenge dating back to colonialism and has outlived colonialism.

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7 Leonard Hodgson, *For Faith and Freedom volume 2*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957, 12.

8 Cf. Paul Gifford „The Bible as a Political Document in Africa" in: *Scriptural Politics: The Bible and the Koran as Political Models in the Middle East and Africa*, Ed. by Niels Kastfelt. London: Hurst and Company, 2003, pp16-28, 21.

9 Gifford, "The Bible as a Political Document in Africa," 23.

10 Mugambi, *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction*, Nairobi: Acton Publ., 2003, 25.

11 Janice McLaughlin, *On the Frontline: Catholic Missions in Zimbabwe's Liberation War*, Harare: Baobab Books, 1996, 54.

12 Dedji, *Reconstruction and Renewal*, 101-2.

Rewriting the Bible or de-biblifying? Some fundamental differences and a possible middle way

While I have been greatly impressed by Banana's courage to even think about "rewriting the Bible" let alone that he could publicly make such pronouncements, I, nonetheless, am aware of fundamental differences between his call then, and my call today. Banana's call is a reaction to the continued challenge of Middle East peace in which region "Christians, Jews and Muslims, who share history and who share an understanding of sacred of scriptures out of common origins, continue to fight one another in order to achieve domination politically, socially, economically and religiously."[13] The focus on the Middle East by Banana was at a time when no major challenges were confronting the people of Zimbabwe hence the search for illustration and inspiration from distant places, things have since changed. The call I make today is not inspired by the Middle East, rather it is inspired by Zimbabwe in particular and Africa in general. From the time Banana made his call, living standards in Zimbabwe have gone down[14] and from 2000 economic, social and political challenges have become part of everyday living for ordinary Zimbabweans. The multiplicity of conflicts in Africa has left many Africans in search of a "just society", a society that guarantees them dignity and protection as they search for happiness and prosperity, a society that creates opportunities for all citizens irrespective of their faith, race, gender and sexual orientation background. This is the background to my call. Further, I am aware that Banana envisages a situation where the world will "create a Bible that reflects the realities and possibilities of today's world [focusing on] a unifying element that will help our world to set aside our differences and learn to live together."[15] My own call does not share the optimism of Banana about the world we live in; neither do I share the vision of a world that is not inherently controlled by selfish interests.

Banana's call for the "rewriting" of the Bible is inspired by the vision of a supra-Bible, which is above all contemporary religions, in which the voices and experiences of all peoples of the world are condensed into a

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13 Banana "The Case for a New Bible", 28.

14 Moeletsi Mbeki, *Architects of Poverty: Why African Capitalism needs Changing*, Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2009, 101ff.

15 Banana "The Case for a New Bible", 29.

single universal collection of sacred writings for a universal religion.[16] While noble this vision maybe, I am coming from a background where I am inclined to argue that religions are by nature selfish and exclusive in their claims. Banana is aware of this element of religion because he correctly identifies one of the major challenges as the "ideology of chosenness", which he blames for many injustices in the world.[17] The ideology of chosenness plays a critical role in the self-understanding, survival and propagation of the three Abrahamic traditions, that is, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, yet interesting is that the others do not consider their peers as equally chosen and seek to convert the others.

Despite these fundamental differences, through the work of Banana an alternative proposal, largely operational in the European context, would be to call for the de-biblification of the public sphere in Africa because the vision of Banana is our vision today, he yearned for a legitimate system of governance that guarantees opportunities to all citizens, a system that increases "its capacity to pull people together as they search for happiness and fulfillment."[18] This is in contrast to the ideals of the "ideology of chosenness", so central in religions and through which non-believers are sometimes viewed as necessary victims or collateral damage in pursuit of private gain. This alternative call, is based on my opinion that "rewriting" the Bible as advocated for by Canaan Banana is a mammoth task that is likely going to be attacked by the different religious traditions that are part of the status quo, that Banana so much wishes to change. The exclusive claims of Judaism, Christianity and Islam are so fundamental to their existence that it is close to impossible to "rewrite" a universally valid Bible, not only because of clear cultural differences but also because each religious tradition has a set of non-negotiables.

The de-biblification of the public sphere on the other hand recognizes this exclusivity of religions, and does not seek to create a supra-religion for all. Instead, de-biblification seeks to remove religion from the public sphere, which is already constitutionally legitimately secular. This call is also a recognition of the fact that while religion has played important roles in different societies, it nonetheless has also been a critical instru-

16 Cf. Banana "The Case for a New Bible", 29-30.

17 Cf. Banana "The Case for a New Bible", 21-3.

18 David Kaulem, 'Christian Responses to the Crisis in Zimbabwe', *Unpublished paper*, presented at Arrupe College, Harare, 23/10/2006.

ment in "blurring issues of accountability and legitimacy" within the public realm, a public realm that is presided over by people who think running the states is an entitlement and not a privilege.[19] It is observable that the Bible and religions in general have been central in this substitution of legitimacy and accountability by dictatorial tendencies, and this call is based on the assumption that de-biblifying the public sphere maybe one way towards establishing accountability and legitimacy in the public officials, by removing the association of the divine with public policy and duty.

Finally, de-biblifying the public sphere is also based on the misgivings that sometimes characterize different works from African scholars. First is the acknowledgement that the Bible is a feature of the public sphere in Africa, and was widely acknowledged as a valid feature of the public sphere especially during dominant years of Liberation and Black theologies. However, at the inception of Reconstruction theology, Mugambi called for the shift from liberation to reconstruction and challenged the validity of the Exodus-Eisodus motif as a paradigm for liberation and condemned it for being a model for colonial plunder.[20] In this regard, this influence of the Bible on the public sphere was unacceptable. The reservations of Mugambi were based on the understanding that this motif could and was being manipulated by the elites to sustain selfish interests at the expense of the "common good". As an alternative to the Exodus motif, Mugambi chose Ezra-Nehemiah as the valid motif. To this, I argued that the worst problem with Ezra-Nehemiah is that they can be models for unaccountability and can also be manipulated by the elites.[21] Central to these differences among different theological persuasions is the fact that "biblical texts are typically open to competing reasonable interpretations"[22] by which it is possible that there is no single correct interpretation of any given text. This fluidity of the text then

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19 Cf. Masiiwa Ragies Gunda "Reconsidering the relevance of the Prophet Amos in the quest for a just society in contemporary Zimbabwe" in: *BOTSA Electronic Forum,* available online: http://www.mhs.no/article_533.shtml accessed 28 June 2010.

20 Cf. Jesse N. K. Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology after the Cold war,* Nairobi: East African Educational Publ. Ltd, 1995, 40ff.

21 Cf. Gunda, "African Theology of Reconstruction: Painful Realities and Practical Options" in: *Exchange* 38/1, 2009, 84-102, 89.

22 Charles H. Cosgrove, "Introduction" in: *The Meanings We Choose: Hermeneutical Ethics, Indeterminacy and the Conflict of Interpretations,* Ed. by Charles H. Cosgrove. London: T & T Clark International, 2004, 1-22, 2.

allows for unconscious as well as deliberate twisting of some texts to sustain private interests.

The fundamental difference between the observations of Mugambi and myself is that while we both tried to find a new model for the influence of the Bible on the public sphere, Mugambi settled for Ezra-Nehemiah while I settled for Amos. This disagreement may be taken as a basis for de-biblifying the public sphere since it clearly shows that some of the models may eventually be manipulated by public office bearers as I pointed out in my critique of the Ezra-Nehemiah model. The threat posed by the biblification of the public sphere can better be appreciated from the words of John Calvin spoken in 1587:

> The power with which the preachers should be endowed will here be clearly described. Since they are called as administrators and propagators of the word of God, they have to dare everything and to coerce all the great and mighty of this world, to bow to God and to serve him alone. They have to give orders to all, from the lowliest to the most elevated. They have to introduce the statute of God, to destroy the kingdom of Satan, to spare the lambs and to exterminate the wolves. They have to exhort and to instruct the obedient, to accuse the reluctant and opposing. They can bind and absolve, cast lightning and thunder, but all this according to the word of God.[23]

The power abrogated to the preachers by Calvin in the above statement clearly shows how the power of God can become deadly when it has to be operationalized by mere mortals who take their enemies and friends to be God's enemies and friends respectively. The danger posed by this breed of preachers, was equally feared and inspired the historical critical study of the Bible in the seventeenth century Dutch Kingdom, where Spinoza argued against "the interpreters of the divine word."[24] This is what makes Banana's call self-defeating, in that however we rewrite the Bible, the interpreters or preachers of that rewritten text will mostly likely continue to manipulate the rewritten text to drive their own interests, especially if their word can become the policy of a society with power to give direction to the public sphere. Where the public sphere is constitutionally secular, it could be better and easier to de-biblify the public sphere than rewrite a universal Bible which would be selectively

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[23] John Calvin quoted in: Peter Bernholz „Ideology, Sects, State and Totalitarianism: A General Theory" in: *Totalitarismus und Politische Religionen: Konzepte des Diktaturvergleichs Band II*, Ed. by Hans Maier & Michael Schäfer. Paderborn: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 1997, pp271-298, 289.

[24] Preus Samuel, Spinoza and the irrelevancy of Biblical Authority, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001.

acceptable to all believers. Talking of de-biblification of the public sphere draws the objection of limiting Christianity or in some cases the accusations of trying to declare Christianity illegal or bluntly, a declaration of war on Christianity. Further, there are some who object to de-biblification because they interpret it as a return to the eras of being persecuted for being Christian. I am fully aware that this fate awaits anybody who makes such a call within the Zimbabwean context.

In the context of Zimbabwe, therefore, the two options can only spell doom for whoever makes the call. Rewriting, as already seen in the case of Banana brought him too many enemies than friends.[25] The same fate awaits the call to de-biblify the public sphere. Any attempt at changing the position of the Bible in Zimbabwe is taken as a direct challenge on God because the Bible is the Word of God.[26] The Bible's availability on the public sphere is seen as the workings of God and it is this belief that has allowed some to manipulate the Bible. With many Zimbabwean Christians being largely conservative and evangelical in the manner in which they view the Bible, the two options discussed above will not be tenable hence the suggestion for a middle way, a "critical biblification of the public sphere" that I propose here. By critical biblification we mean that gradually a critical appropriation of the Bible should become a part of public discourse in Zimbabwe. We should bid farewell to the days when people (public officials and religious leaders) would get away with careless appropriations of the Bible.

The manner in which the Bible is invoked as in the case of Mubhawu cited above should no longer be allowed to escape public censure and correction if we are to build a society that is just. The tools of critical biblical engagement must be distilled in a language that allows more people to engage with the text of the Bible critically. This is possible if we follow the lead set by Gerald West and others, where scholars and untrained readers of the Bible become reading partners.[27] This way, not only are scholars exposed to the reading techniques of ordinary readers, they also equip the ordinary readers with their own reading techniques and thereby fostering a critical appropriation of the Bible in more people than if scholars only waited for University students. This critical appro-

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25 Mukonyora et al (eds), *"Rewriting" the Bible: the Real Issues*, x.

26 Gunda, *The Bible and Homosexuality in Zimbabwe*, (BiAS 3), 2010.

27 West, *The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999.

priation of the Bible can become a partner of de-biblification in some instances without raising the ire of Zimbabwean Christians as shall be demonstrated in the section below.

The Public Sphere: A delimitation exercise

While we have considered above the possibilities of what we can do with the Bible, we still have not asked a prerequisite question; what is the meaning of public sphere in this article? I will therefore begin by undertaking a delimitation exercise, setting boundaries and clarifying the usage of the phrase "public sphere" in this article and to contrast it with the "private sphere". It is never easy to carry out a delimitation exercise without raising eyebrows but any attempt will be made here to do this in a fairly sustainable manner. Public sphere is conceived of here in terms of place and event. First, by public sphere, therefore, we mean places that are of necessity to all citizens and residents of a particular country. Second, we also mean events that are of necessity and of significance to all citizens and residents of a given country. Clearly from this broad delimitation, Church buildings and religious gatherings are not understood as constituting the public sphere because they lack in the key marker of the concept, that is, they are not of necessity to all citizens and residents of a country, because of the freedom of worship provision in our constitution.

Clearly therefore, this paper agrees with Wole Soyinka's "ideal state" which allows individuals to follow their personal beliefs while acknowledging that religion primarily belongs to the private sphere, something that is widely guaranteed by the constitutions of the African nation-states.[28] While political campaigns and gatherings appear to fall outside of this conception of public sphere because ideally they are only freely attended, there are reasons which make them part of the public sphere. First, political rallies are intended to gather enough support from all citizens in order to get the mandate to govern, the subjects to be governed will include all citizens including those voting against the winning party. Second, since political rallies are supposed to be events where would-be governors articulate how they intend to govern; their pro-

[28] Wole Soyinka cited in: Holger Bernt Hansen "The Bible, The Qur'an and the African Polity: Towards a Secular State?" in: *Scriptural Politics: The Bible and the Koran as Political Models in the Middle East and Africa*, Ed. by Niels Kastfelt, 2003, pp42-54, 42.

nouncements are necessarily of interest to all citizens hence they should be considered as falling under the public sphere.

The public sphere in terms of places is informed by the fact that there are places where all citizens expect to be assisted, especially through the government or other service providers. In these places, service is for all citizens irrespective of their religious confession if they have one or even if they are agnostic or atheistic. The only qualification for such service is being a citizen or resident of that country. Government offices, hospitals and clinics, including privately run surgeries for as long as they offer to treat all patients irrespective of their religious faith or lack of it, banks, insurance companies, universities, colleges and schools (unless they clearly discriminate against other faiths in their recruitment of both students and staff), sporting facilities, public transport etc. It is clear from this understanding that it is possible for private citizens to create public spheres, hence the idea of private property does not necessarily apply in all circumstances.

Privately owned public spheres would include such institutions as schools, hospitals, banks etc, which may be owned by an individual but serving all citizens and residents. The faith of the owner cannot therefore be imposed on clients. These are places where citizens, Christians, Muslims, Bahais, Hindus, Traditionalists, Agnostics and Atheists all expect to be served. The services are also clearly marked out to be for all those who meet certain requirements but none of which being "religious faith" whereas if faith is specified, then such institutions would naturally become part of the private sphere. This is clearly the case in some schools where applicants and parents/guardians are clearly informed of the religious basis of the institution and where acceptance of a place is taken as acceptance that one would abide by the faith demands. In those places where service is offered to all, without the faith requirement, a policy of de-biblification would appear much more reasonable and indeed foster the idea of tolerance in a pluralistic society like ours.

The public sphere in terms of events is informed by the fact that there are events that bring together people of the same country as part of a shared history and identity. In Africa, after years of colonialism, independence celebration is such an event that clearly is meant to go beyond one's religious faith. Sporting celebrations are also supposed to be broader than religious convictions; religious education in public schools must also be broader than "Bible Knowledge or Divinity". Other public

events are national speeches by the head of state and/or government, national budget presentations by the minister of finance, monetary statement presentation by central bank governor. This would also apply to the official opening of parliament, and public meetings between elected officials and their constituents, where such elections were held and were open to people of other faiths or Agnostics and Atheists. Such events are considered significant by all citizens; it is in these circumstances also that the call for de-biblification can become important. There is no attempt to undermine the role of Christianity or the Bible in the private lives of Christians.

However, in the case where public officials are issuing public statements and are interested in extracting legitimacy from the Bible, it would be critical for an analysis of such usage of the Bible to censure and rebuke misuse and abuse of the Bible for political or economic mileage by such prominent individuals and corporate institutions.[29] The use of the Bible by prominent Zimbabweans was covered in my earlier publication citing, Dr. Herbert Murerwa, then Minister of Finance, Renson Gasela, then an opposition MP[30] among those people who directly cited biblical texts to make an argument. Where such things happen, a response must come from the critical appropriation of the Bible, to show the dishonest and selfish interests that lie behind such uses of the Bible. The case of Mubhawu cited above is yet another example of cases where an immediate response and rebuke is called for before some destructive ideas are canonized in the society. Similarly, it is on record that in 2008 after losing the first round of elections, Robert Mugabe came up with some reason why he would not vacate office, even if he lost elections by suggesting he was put in the office by God. While he did not cite the Bible directly, a response to such reckless and careless statements by public officials should have been strongly worded, showing the mischief in the statement. The public sphere, in my thinking calls for a combination of de-biblification and critical biblification.

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[29] Econent Wireless makes use of John 14: 14 on its recharge cards as a marketing gimmick. The text "If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it", clearly has nothing to do with the business of Econent unless Econent now claims some divine status!

[30] Gunda, Reconsidering the Relevance of Amos, see also Gunda and Mtetwa "The Bible as a Political Resource in Zimbabwe" in Chitando (ed), *Religion in Politics, Politics in Religion in Zimbabwe's Crisis Decade* (forthcoming).

A Biblified Public Sphere: Can the Bible be Offensive?

Of critical importance here is the assumption that if the Bible (understood in this paper as a private document, Christian Scripture) interferes with the public sphere, what stops the public sphere from interfering with the Bible? Clearly, one of the questions that hardly feature in African discussions on the Bible is the possibility of the Bible being offensive or detrimental to social well-being, this despite the association of the Bible with colonial plunder and racial segregation. As we meet here to discuss the Bible in/and politics in Africa, is it not a better forum to begin thinking critically about the role of the Bible in our communities. It is one thing to argue on the good intentions of most biblical texts and the concepts of justice, fairness and the respect for human dignity, but it is completely different when one considers the manner in which the Bible features in our public spheres. In being suspicious to public usages of the Bible, we are inspired by the critical observations of Norman Gottwald, when he notes that issues about sacred books were never simply about religion but essentially about who had controlling power in the society.[31] It would appear, however, that scholars of the Bible in Africa have largely ignored this fundamental dimension of the Bible and have therefore focused largely on how the underprivileged people continue to derive inspiration from the Bible to the benefit of an inefficient and corrupt public institution.

This is certainly important, but at the same time, is the uncritical biblification of the public sphere not also based on exploiting this confessional use of the Bible by smuggling the divine in areas and events that are supposed to be judged in terms of their efficiency and not religiosity? Should the Bible be let to influence the necessary "wider social responsibility" to the extent where it appears that "only Christians matter"?[32] Having spent two hours in a government office waiting to be served by an official discussing personal issues on a public phone, all I could do is read biblical quotation after biblical quotation, what is the purpose of these biblical quotations? How would I have felt if I were a Muslim, Baha'i, or traditionalist? Is the Bible not being offensive under these circumstances? With the Bible having a life of its own, it would appear that where once legitimation depended on the Church, now the Bible is

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[31] Norman Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985, 111.

[32] Paul Gifford „The Bible as a Political Document in Africa", 20.

performing the "supportive and legitimizing function"[33] for an inefficient and outright incompetent public institution or officials inasmuch as it was used to legitimize the massive land dispossessions that occurred during the colonial era.[34] Or, imagine at the much awaited national budget presentation by the minister of finance, who is presiding over a melting economy which melting is a result of a combination of high level corruption, condoned mismanagement of resources for the benefit of the elite, and a round of international sanctions presumably targeted but whose effects may not be as targeted, the minister of finance invokes the Bible, the minister reads from the book of Jeremiah.[35] Two critical questions come to mind: why should the minister read from the Bible in a country which legally recognizes that it is religiously plural? Secondly, why does this minister find it easy to invoke the Bible and not acknowledge that we are in a man-made fix? What is the function of the Bible under these circumstances? Can the Bible be regarded as being offensive in this particular case? Could it be that the Bible is being invoked to serve political interests? In yet another case, take the national independence day and the place is the national sports stadium, where buses paid for by the taxpayers, some of whom being non-Christians, have been picking up people in different locations irrespective of their political affiliation, religious faith etc, to this national rendezvous, then when all are sat down, then everyone including those at home following the proceedings on national television and radio also funded by taxpayers, are asked to follow through the Bible readings and sermons from a Christian minister. In a public place on a national event bringing together all citizens, is the Bible not an offensive instrument? Is independence a Christian event or a national event? Why should one collection of sacred texts be considered mandatory in a country that constitutionally guarantees freedom of worship? Should we then expect that if a Muslim Zimbabwean is elected President, then the Koran will become the national sacred text? Is the faith of the President or public office bearer supposed to be a national faith?

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33 Hansen „The Bible, the Qur'an and the African Polity", 51.

34 Cf. Chengetai J. M, Zvobgo, *A History of Christian Missions in Zimbabwe 1890-1939*, Gweru: Mambo Press, 1996, 8.

35 Gunda, Reconsidering the Relevance of Amos.

De-biblification of the Public Sphere: The Role of Biblical Scholars

The position being taken in this presentation, which it is envisaged should become one of the central issues for biblical studies in Africa, is that it is high time biblical scholars began highlighting cases where the Bible appears to become an instrument for curtailing full social participation by all citizens in issues of national development. This call is made with two critical assumptions in mind; first that I am only a biblical scholar hence my contribution to this quest should be influenced by this professional commitment. Second, is the fact that teachers and students of the Old Testament are never content with the world of the Bible only, but in essence seek to transform the world they abide in.[36] Valentin Dedji correctly observes that "the myth of a resurgent or resilient people created by Mugambi [and other reconstruction theologians] would remain an ideal dream, a pure slogan unless we start talking frank and honest language to ourselves."[37] Part of this frankness involves admitting that the Bible has been used in the public sphere to hoodwink believers and non-believers alike. This curtailment is subtle in that the "ordinary readers"[38] of West do not have a say in how the Bible is used outside their own reading circles and frequently these ordinary readers derive their inspiration from the "literal text of the Bible", the same text which is manipulated in the public sphere. These ordinary readers believe what they believe to be the meaning of the Bible and take it to be true. These characteristics of ordinary readers pave the way for the abuse of the Bible in the public sphere. The Bible has become an instrument of hoodwinking people from the actual intentions of the elites and in this case, the continued oppression of the poor by the elites has essentially become part of the wrath of the Bible.

What the elites (be they political, religious or economic) need primarily is loyalty from the majority of the people who also happen to be poor. Workers are cowed through daily morning prayers in which the very

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[36] Cf. John W. Rogerson, „The potential of the Negative: Approaching the Old Testament through the work of Adorno" in M. Daniel Carroll R. (ed), *Rethinking Contexts, Rereading Texts: Contributions from the Social Sciences to Biblical Interpretation*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000, 24-47, 47.

[37] Dedji, *Reconstruction and Renewal*, 80.

[38] See Gerald West, *The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999.

people who are underpaying them take part and preach how God enjoys seeing people working without complaining. Politicians are known for citing from the Bible and some have even vowed not to ever attend a rally without the Bible. In negotiating this complex situation, we are grateful to observations by scholars in the field of political theory, who in attempting to explain the emergency and survival of totalitarian institutions contend that there is need for an organization with a leader or leadership, who will have the monopoly of interpreting the content of their ideology. Further, it is also argued that in the case of states, the secular power of the state has to be conquered leading to the amalgamation of spiritual and secular leadership in the same leader or leadership. A crisis afflicting the said state is crucial in facilitating this takeover of the power of the secular state eventually leading to a mature ideocracy.[39]

The use and abuse of the Bible in the public sphere should be a cause for concern among biblical scholars particularly because in the quest for reaching the ideocracy, religions and religious texts can be appropriated as bases upon which the ideology is founded hence texts such as the Bible can be central "not only for establishing but also for stabilizing a totalitarian regime."[40] The ordinary readers of the Bible are impressed by this God-fearing, Bible-carrying elite but the intentions of these elites remain hidden to the ordinary readers. In the so-called letter of Leopold II, the ordinary readers are being convinced of their predestined fate of servitude, while the elites through mismanagement and outright cheating accumulate wealth for themselves. Are we really destined to be poor? Is the Bible being useful to the ordinary readers if it does not inspire them to take action to right the wrongs committed against them for so long by colonial structures which have since outlived colonialism and have become critical tools for black elites? There has been no respite for the vulnerable in Africa!

What should be the role of biblical scholars in this de-biblification and critical biblification exercise? Clearly, biblical studies in Africa have been dominated by theologians and the major focus has been to entrench theological positions and interests. For African theologians like John

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[39] Peter Bernholz „Ideology, Sects, State and Totalitarianism: A General Theory" in: *Totalitarismus und Politische Religionen: Konzepte des Diktaturvergleichs Band II*, Ed. by Hans Maier & Michael Schäfer. Paderborn: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 1997, 271-298, 273.

[40] Bernholz „Ideology, Sects, State and Totalitarianism", 273.

Mbiti, the Bible is at home in Africa hence Christianity should also be at home in Africa. I am questioning the validity of this assertion, widespread among African theologians, the only question is: which Bible is at home in Africa? Further, which Christianity should be at home in Africa? Is it the Elitist Bible and the Elitist Christianity read in order to pacify the oppressed or a Bible and a Christianity that inspires the poor to act on their man-made predicament? These two parallel Bibles and Christianities have been highlighted where the interest has been to draw lines between western Bible/Christianity and African Bible/Christianity. It would appear to me that the colonial system in which this parallel Bible/Christianity developed outlived the colonial era and persists in contemporary African states. The attempt to paint this duality as only affecting the colonial era is therefore not plausible. It is humbly submitted here that biblical scholars in Africa must of necessity begin to defend the Bible by exposing its excesses and the manner in which it has been used to curtail the aspirations of the poor. It appears to me to be a great disservice to the poor in Africa to continue on the path of denying the existence of abuses of the Bible. The first such work should focus on highlighting the major abuses of the Bible in the public sphere, whenever they occur.

Conclusion

A de-biblified public sphere removes the often abused combination between public service and the divine service, which in the public sphere is an attempt at removing accountability from public officials. This is not as many would want to assume an attempt at minimizing the essence of the Bible; rather it would appear to me one move towards protecting the integrity of the Bible. Should the Bible be associated with the incompetence that sometimes accompanies public offices? What has the Bible got to do with a mandate to provide service to taxpayers? Clearly, the African public sphere is heavily biblified and this biblification has only helped the elites to remove accountability by hiding behind a religiosity that is questionable because of the existence of clear determinative private interests in their actions. The Bible therefore is an instrument towards their goals and as ordinary readers continue to base their actions on some literal texts, they are helping sustaining their own oppression. The challenge for biblical scholars is whether we shall continue to speak no evil, see no evil and do nothing.

On the other hand, as I noted above, the Bible remains a critical and central text in the life of the majority of Zimbabweans who are Christians and who genuinely believe that the Bible is Scripture, the Word of God. Calling for an indiscriminate de-biblification can only bring suspicion and entrench the tensions that already exist between academics and ordinary believers. Realizing this complexity, I am convinced that we need more than simply a de-biblification exercise; we need a critical biblification exercise. This would mean becoming more engaged and involved in the issues that affect our society by monitoring how religion and in our case, Bible is used and abused in the public sphere and clearly making our observations public in order to equip ordinary readers to resist being hoodwinked. This critical biblification should also see academics and ordinary readers constituting themselves into "Bible reading partners" which is mutually beneficial.

If we refuse to answer to this call of duty, let me invite you to join me in taking our seats and be honoured guests in the theatre of human slaughter![41] This is a call to action in our chosen professional field!

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[41] Cf. Banana „Foreword" in: Lapsley M, Neutrality or Cooption? *Anglican Church and State from 1964 until the independence of Zimbabwe*, Gweru: Mambo Press, 1986, 7.

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