

Review

The Politics of Christianity in Shaping the Political Dynamics of Zambia

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Abstract: Religion can often be very influential in the political system and political actors frequently take advantage of the leverage that it provides. In the Zambian case, Christianity in particular plays a crucial role in politics and policymaking, dating from the pre- to post-colonial era. Around 1880, Zambia, then Northern Rhodesia, became a British colony and, at the same time, Christianity was introduced within the context of the European culture. Later, 27 years after independence, Zambia was declared a Christian nation, and all Zambian political leaders have embraced Christianity as the nation's identity. Thus, Christianity plays a critical function in Zambia's political sphere. The main aim of this paper is to critically examine how Christianity seeks to direct the political agenda in Zambia's national politics. It demonstrates the interplay between church and state relations linked to how the state seeks to govern the nation in a Godly manner and the implications on public policymaking in Zambia. This paper explores a multifaceted analysis of the existing literature and the ideas around the politics of the state and religion. It argues that (i) Christianity in Zambia is often used as a political weapon to gain political mileage and (ii) Christianity as a religion has been traditionalised in Zambia. It serves as a "national moral campus", which compromises the nation's position as a so-called "democratic" state and suppresses individual freedoms. Thus, it corrupts the very nature of fundamental practices of the religion itself, as it has simply blossomed into more of a norm than a religion. Understanding these dynamics is very crucial, especially in the context of how religion is perceived, experienced and exercised in the political arena to circumvent limited policy options for broader problem solving.

Keywords: Christianity; religion; politics; Zambia



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1. Introduction

When Zambia was declared a Christian nation, it entered into a covenant with God Almighty. There is special grace upon the nation of Zambia and the leadership of this nation. God has promised us that He will guide us in the way this nation should be *governed*. I thank His Excellency the President of the Republic of Zambia, Mr Edgar Chagwa Lungu, for being sensitive to the voice of the Holy Spirit, who talked to him. Thereafter, the President decided to come up with a day when the people of Zambia, who belong to God, would gather to thank their maker and bring their supplications before him. So, the wisdom came from God, and it is all because we have a President who is attuned to the Spirit of God. ([National Assembly of Zambia 2020](#))

These words were spoken by Reverend Godfreda Sumaili, the Minister of the Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs (MNGR) at the time when the Patriot Front (PF) took office under Edgar Lungu's presidency in 2016. This was the first time such a ministry¹ had been established in government, followed by a national day of prayer, which was introduced as a public holiday to be commemorated on 16 October. Although the MNGR was abolished in 2021 under the United Party for National Development (UNDP) government, it plays a significant role in appreciating the politics of Christianity in Zambian public policymaking.

The arrival of Christianity in Zambia is closely linked to European colonisation, as Zambia was a British colony. Some scholars argue that the British rulers, together with the European missionaries, established imbalanced or unequal trade relations with the native government structures/local chiefs (Ranger 1993; Mamdani 1996) to maintain their own status and expand the British empire. Supposedly, Christianity appeared to be a more appealing form of worship compared to the forms of spirituality that the defiant natives practised and, consequently, European culture became domesticated in Zambia and elsewhere in Africa where the British established colonies.

Thus, Zambia as a nation is deeply rooted in Christianity, which very much forms a critical point of discussion in Zambian politics, government, policy, structures and institutions, including social life. Christianity as a religion has particularly influenced the behaviour of political actors in the post-independence era (1964). Political actors in Zambia not only seek a Christian populist narrative to gain political mileage but it also appears to be approved by citizens if they align with divine guidance from selected powerful clergy. Hence, such leaders are perceived as ideal rulers. This is expounded further in the chapter.

In light of the above, since the Victorian era of colonialism, the European agenda for Africa has been to dominate all cultures (including other former British colonies outside Africa), using Christianity as a tool for British cultural homogenisation (Zgambo 2022a). It should be understood that European religion plays an extensive role in contemporary politics since it forms part of law and regulatory instruments at both domestic and international levels.

“Religion” is a contested term and raises more questions than answers in reference to state–religion politics. A large proportion of constitutions have been drafted against the backdrop of significant contestation over the questions of state–religion relations (Bali and Lerner 2017). It is believed that the terms “religion”, “God” or “religious freedom” appear (show a strong presence) in most constitutions or national laws in many parts of the world (Ibán 2016). In extending this view, Fox (2018) uses the concept of religious legitimacy to describe how religion is often used to legitimatise states/governments, policies, political structures and institutions. Religion further influences and legitimises the behaviour of political actors as well as political ideologies. Indeed, in this aspect, this view speaks well to the Zambian case. Zambia’s first president Kenneth Kaunda’s Humanism ideology was founded on Christian principles and Fredrick Chiluba of the Movement for Multi-Party Democracy (MMD) declared Zambia as a Christian nation in 1991 when he was elected into government, leading to Edgar Lungu’s formation of the religious affairs ministry and a national day of prayer.

Thus, with this background, I restrict my definition of religion to fit into the context of the discussion (religion–state relations) by adopting Fox’s definition.

Religion seeks to understand the origins and nature of reality using a set of answers that include the supernatural. Religion is also a social phenomenon and institution which influences the behaviour of human beings both as individuals and in groups. These influences on behaviour manifest through the influences of religious identity, religious institutions, religious legitimacy, religious beliefs and the codification of these beliefs into authoritative dogma, among other avenues of influence (Fox 2018).

With this definition in mind, the Christian religion is the main focus of discussion in this paper with reference to the Zambian case, which I also refer to as “Zambian Christianity”. I use the term “Religion” interchangeably with the term “Christianity”. In Zambia, Christianity found its new place in the constitution in 1996. Chiluba’s “The Hour has Come” era set the scene in declaring Zambia as a Christian nation in 1991 after he was elected into the presidential office.

Three major Christian bodies in Zambia seek to guide the governance of the nation. These are the Council of Churches in Zambia (CCZ)², the Zambia Conference of Catholic Bishops (ZCCB)³ and the Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia (EFZ)⁴. EFZ played a critical role in Zambia’s declaration as a Christian nation. These church bodies have continued to play a critical role in national politics.

In this paper, I focus on how religion in the context of Christianity has influenced political structures and policymaking. To be clear, the main argument in this paper is not to dispute the practice of Christianity itself but to demonstrate how religion limits avenues for problem solving in the Zambian context. This happens when public problems are problematised using a spiritual Christian lens and seek solutions that are narrowed to religious principles.

Firstly, I argue that Christianity as a religion has been traditionalised in Zambia. The continued use of Christianity as a tool to govern the nation compromises the nation's position as a so-called "democratic" state and corrupts the very nature of fundamental practices of the religion itself. Religion is meant to be a personal spiritual journey and not to be imposed by the state. At the same time, even though Zambia is declared a Christian nation, the constitution of Zambia makes provisions for freedom of religious affiliation. Because of this, citizens are free to practice whichever religion suits them (at an individual level) but, politically, the nation is driven by the ideologies of Christianity. This has implications for the future direction of Zambia's political structures and policymaking. Secondly, I, therefore, suggest ways of critically rethinking the role of the Christian declaration, Christianity as a political instrument and the implications for public policy in Zambia.

2. Religion and Politics: Conceptual and Theoretical Approach

It appears that most of the scholarly literature on religion and politics is often backed by theological approaches and concepts, often limited in terms of political science, as noted by Fox (2018), as such more of the scholarship on this subject tends to develop from the field of theology. In this paper, I use a different approach, exploring the application of a combination of related concepts of social construction, path dependency and bounded rationality as a basis for critically analysing the politics of Christianity in the political arena in Zambia, significantly emphasising the implications of the imposed Christian declaration.

Religion consists of dominant and path-dependent traditions that are inevitably hard to change or contest. In general, these religious traditions represent multifarious formations of authority, bureaucratic bodies/institutions and legalised spiritual instruments used to govern everything from social and political structures/systems, family and community, to individual sexual behaviour. The concept of path dependency helps to explain how structures create a path that can be traced through space, which endures, carries a history and is ultimately linked to contemporary events (Kay 2006; Pierson 1993). The "church itself in Africa lived on imperial and political favour" (Oosthuizen 1968, p. 6), although the emphasis is placed on a path-dependant colonial system of Christianity in most of Africa, including Zambia. Meanwhile, Zambia in the past three decades has seen the rise of the evangelical and Pentecostal "born again" Christian movements with international networks and mega-churches in some cases characterised by the prosperity gospel, ambitious prophetic declarations, Western-style theology and doctrines and miracle performances.

Social construction has to do with how individuals depict meanings to issues in a way that is influenced by their environment, culture, history and, often, past experiences (Clarke and Cochrane 1998; Clarke 2001). Thus, the concept of social construction sets the scene for analysis and fits into the long-lasting unquestioned, unexamined impact of British colonial rule on the Zambian pre-colonial Christian setting.

Bounded rationality helps to explain the behaviour of political actors and the tactics they use to advance their political agendas (Birkland 2011; Weible and Sabatier 2018; Cairney 2011). This view is also supported by Fox's (2018, p. 209) theoretical framework on religion and politics stating that "politicians will seek to use religious identity, institutions, ideologies, and legitimacy, and rational calculations of religious and secular actors". This depicts the Zambia situation where religious rational calculations are made and the government and its functions are legitimatised by Christian values and principles. A typical example of this happened in 1996 when Zambia was constitutionally declared a Christian nation. This is discussed in detail later.

However, Fox (2018) sees religion as an important tool that exists independently with independent actors. But this is not the case in the Zambian situation, bearing in mind the dense involvement of religion, beginning with the constitution to the political structures and public service. Thus, contrary to Fox's theoretical framework, I argue that in the Zambian context, it appears that there is no separation of religion from state affairs. Christianity seems to co-exist with the governance and political system. This discussion is extended later in the paper. Additionally, contrary to Fox's framework, secular actors in the Zambian case are in the minority and are less likely to influence state–religion politics. For example, civil society and NGOs, including the traditional fraction, will often align with the Christian stance. Instead, coalitions of groups/denominations sharing the same beliefs (such as similar doctrines) are formed to create a unified narrative through storytelling (for example, using stories from the Bible and prayers) to support, or in some instances oppose, the ruling political party. A typical example of these religious coalitions in Zambia is illustrated through two streams: the evangelical–Pentecostal “born again” movements like EFZ and the ZCCB from the traditional Catholic community. Both streams play a role in national politics. They seek to put the nation and its government on the right path to Christianity.

Thus, this section provides the conceptual base for unpacking the politics of the state and religion in Zambia. The next part is a snapshot of some of the available literature and scholarly work on the subject, particularly looking at the Zambian context.

3. Scholarly Work and Literature on State–Religion Relations in Zambia

It is important to note that more of the literature on African Christianity/religion is often authored by non-African authors, mostly Europeans who have worked on the African continent, including some scholars of theology like Adrian Hastings, an Oxford scholar⁵, and John Taylor, who served as a missionary in Zambia and Uganda. Taylor himself, as a European, stated that the “impact and influence of Africans on other peoples deserves thorough documentation and analysis from the *perspective of the Africans themselves*” (Taylor 2001, p. 1).

However, it is also worth acknowledging that there is a significant growth in African-authored scholarly works on African Christianity (Ngalula 2017; Mugambi and Küschner-Pelkmann 2004; Kalusa 2011; Kageler 2009; Cheyeka et al. 2023), even though there is still more that needs to be conducted to encourage more African scholars in this area of research.

In particular, most of the Zambian literature on politics and religion has focused on Chiluba's politics, Zambia's declaration as a Christian nation, democracy and Christianity, the evangelical movement, Pentecostalism and the prosperity gospel (Ranger 2003; Phiri 2003; Muwina 2016; Kaoma 2014). Works such as (van Klinken 2013, 2017, 2018) have extensively analysed sexual orientation in relation to Pentecostal nationalism, and the politicisation of homosexuality, human rights, the anti-Christ and the end times (using biblical narratives). This work certainly provides a significant contribution to making visible the growing evangelical voice and political influence on the governance system. In particular, such groups seek to Pentecostalise Zambia as a nation using the Christian declaration, thereby undermining democratic principles and universal human rights. Chamamah Kaunda (2018, 2020) from a political science stream extensively deepens discussions of Zambian Pentecostal political theology in an article titled “‘The Altars are Holding the Nation in Captivity’: Zambian Pentecostalism, Nationality and African Religio-Political Heritage”. Kaunda (2018, p. 145) argues that “the Pentecostals in Zambia have reinterpreted the ancestors in the frame of the Holy Spirit”. Thus, the office of the president is spiritualised in that a presidential candidate is chosen in the spiritual realm and not elected by the citizens. Kaunda (2018) then ties the Zambian Pentecostal theology to a historically constructed conception of pre-colonial African traditional spiritual practices and culture. This work certainly contributes to understanding state–religion politics in Zambia, but is mainly limited to the Pentecostal fraction; yet, there is still more political involvement from other main Christian bodies like the ZCCB, which has existed since the colonial era.

As stated earlier, there appears to be scarce literature from a political science perspective, especially that which takes into account the application of the concepts of path dependency, social construction and the others mentioned above. Most importantly, inter-linking the policy implications of imposing such a declaration constitutionally. It is this element that distinguishes my analysis of the role of Christianity in the political arena. Thus, this paper provides a unique contribution to debates about state–religion relations in Zambia.

In the next section, I briefly highlight the synchronised arrival of both Christianity and colonialism in Zambia.

4. Contextualising Colonialism and Christianity in Zambia

The first argument I present here is that Christianity, which in this case I refer to as the white man's/coloniser's religion, sought to replace the African pre-existing forms of worship in the pre-colonial era. As argued by Mbiti (2015), African spirituality has always been part of African culture—it is an African traditional practice. This view is supported by the literature on African religion⁶ (Carey 2003; Ranger 1986; Freston 2001; Speckman 2001; Hansen and Twaddle 1995; Mugambi and Küschner-Pelkmann 2004; Smith 1999; Chidester 1996; Oosthuizen 1968; Chitando and Adogame 2016; Taylor 2001; Mbiti 1978; Ngalula 2017; Hastings 1979).

Oladipo (2003) adds that colonialism suppressed worship through the use of African idioms, as Africans intended to Africanise European Christianity, and the colonisers sought to Europeanise Africans through language and religion, hence the coming of the missionaries to spread the gospel of Christ. While pointing out this view, I also note that the arrival of "Christianity" in North Africa "preceded the arrival of the European missionary mission to influence African religion/spirituality (Hansen and Twaddle 1995; Mugambi and Küschner-Pelkmann 2004; Oosthuizen 1968; Chidester 1996). Thus, before the missionaries claim to have brought the gospel of Christ to Africa, it was already in existence.

The missionaries and British colonial agents appeared to be in strong opposition to the African religion, which they sought to displace and replace with their culture through the manifestation of Christianity (preaching of the gospel and civilisation). Generally, African religion was dismissed (by the missionaries and colonial agents) as "fetishism, animism or totemism", thus the repeated reporting to the rest of the European community that there was "no religion" practised in southern Africa (Chidester 1996). Additionally, Hastings (1979) points out that most missionaries despised both the African culture as well as their capacity. It appears they were threatened by the African capacity. Hence, "they believed that the Christian religion must go with a European culture and a European leadership" (Hastings 1979).

In the Zambian case, Christianity and the inception of British rule arrived at almost the same time, around 1882. The London Missionary Society, the Primitive Methodists, the Paris Society and the Roman Catholics White Fathers are the missionaries that seemingly indirectly expanded the growth of the British Empire (Smith 1999; Carey 2003), leading to the colonisation of three countries (Zambia, Malawi and Zimbabwe), forming the Central African Federation (CAF). As Oosthuizen (1968, p. 6) adds, "Christian missionary was at times a pioneer of the white man's penetration". For example, David Livingstone, who worked as a European missionary in Zambia and other neighbouring southern African countries like Malawi, did not only express interest in Christianity but also commerce and politics and reinforced relations with the former colonisers through heritage diplomacy (Lusaka 2023).

It all began in Malawi (Nyasaland), which was formed as a "product of the missionary imagination" (Freston 2001) while the inception of Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) as a British protectorate was a byproduct of John Cecil Rhodes British South Africa (BSA) Company⁷. Around 1875, the Scottish set up two strong missions (the church of Scotland and the free church of Scotland in Nyasaland) before the arrival of the British, which also paved the way for British rule. This saw the establishment of a central African

British protectorate advocated for by the missions in fear of the Portuguese looming over the area (then Northern Rhodesia) (Ross 1995). The BSA finally handed over to British administrative rule, which colonised Zambia from 1888 to 1964.

Due to limited space, I will not deepen the discussions of the role and conflicts between the church and the state during the colonial era in Zambia, as Phiri (1999), in his article “Why African Churches Preach Politics: The Case of Zambia”, has extensively given an account of these events. But this is not where the story ends; in the next section I discuss what I have termed as “political Christianity”. This paper continues to discuss the implications of the Christian religion, which is often practised as political Christianity in present-day Zambia, a former British colony.

5. From the “Christianity of the Coloniser” to the Zambian Political Christianity

The first argument here is that Christianity in Zambia cannot be further defined as a political tool used to gain political mileage (Zgambo 2022b), especially by public office bearers and political actors dating from the colonial era. Hence, I use the term political Christianity to refer to all forms of political tactics and manipulation manifesting from the use of religion to gain political favour and legitimise governance/rule of law.

I argue that the use of Christianity as a tool for political mileage did not just appear in Zambia when conveniently needed. It has a history: the missionaries appeared on the pretext of spreading the Christian religion, on which the British colonisers capitalised to create path-dependent dominant practices of British culture, manifesting as the two big Cs (Civilisation and Christianity). Thus, as a consequence of the many years of British colonial rule, Christianity in Zambia has now become traditionalised⁸. It is the British system that paved the way for using Christianity as a tool to manipulate the political system. In the words of Oosthuizen (1968, p. 6), “if Christianity can utilize politics in its service, why can't the peoples of Africa utilise Christianity for their political end?”. In other words, my interpretation of this statement is that African politicians were taught the art of the politics of religious manipulation to promote their political agendas. As argued by (Oosthuizen 1968), any political movement in Africa that sought to enlighten African masses to a new emancipation of their rights and freedom has used religious symbolism. This can be seen from the first African liberators⁹ (the likes of Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia and his Humanism, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania and others) who fought for political independence and sought nationalist ideologies as a new path against colonialism, but themselves still inherited religious identities (Chidester 1996; Oosthuizen 1968; Mugambi and Kuschner-Pelkmann 2004). Yet, these ideologies still encompassed the elements of ecclesiastical colonialism, which, until now, still very much exists in present-day Christian practices, with some few African modifications¹⁰ across both the mainstream and traditional churches.

6. The Traditionalisation of Christianity

In my second argument, I discuss the traditionalisation of Christianity in Zambia, which is reflected in everyday politics. Of course, Zambia's declaration as a Christian nation politicised and accelerated the state–religion relations to higher grounds, with some for and others against. However, as already stated, political Christianity was introduced by the British colonisers and inherited at independence under Kaunda's Humanism era. There appeared to be minimal but still meaningful church political involvement during Kaunda's era as, later, the nation was ruled under a one-party state. The one-party state also meant less political contestation and fewer church bodies were present or visible and some were just being formed in this era. Although the Catholic Church through ZCCB was significantly proactive in state politics (Kalusa and Phiri 2014). Kaunda continued to win his followers through the use of Bible phrases and the mention of God in his ideology of Humanism (Kaunda 1976). Kaunda is also said to have received support from the Apostolic Faith Church (Gifford 1998).

Following the end of Kaunda's reign, when the MMD was elected into power in 1991, Chiluba, like Kaunda, also referred to biblical scriptures in his speeches even before assuming the presidency. As president, apart from the declaration of Zambia as a Christian nation, Chiluba was often aired praying on national television. He gave a prayer following the declaration where he submitted himself and the nation to the "Lordship of Jesus Christ"¹¹. He also appointed his evangelical followers to government positions and had an evangelist advisor. It was such acts of strong expression of the Christian faith that gained him popularity as 'a president appointed by God', as the Pentecostals believed (Ranger and Apawo Phiri 2006; Kaunda 2018). Without getting into replicating what has already been written on Chiluba's reign, this particular president and the declaration have attracted a lot of attention in scholarly works (Gifford 1998; Freston 2001; Ranger 2008; Ranger 1986; Cheyeka et al. 2023) regarding state–religion relations in Zambia. While Christianity was at a very high momentum during this time of the MMD, the "christianess" of the God-chosen leader, Chiluba, the declaration and all the prayers for God to bless the nation did not seem to help the nation's economic state of affairs. Instead, the nation's economic status declined due to liberalisation and privatisation policies.

Later, the evangelicals began distancing themselves and Chiluba faced allegations of corruption and the plundering of national resources (van Donge 2009). Thus, agreeing with Freston (2001, p. 134) when he states that the Christian nation declaration was "purely symbolic, in tune with much charismatic political theology which talks of benefits accruing mystically from such acts." Thus, this forms the basis to argue that the Christian nation declaration served as an instrument for political mileage and a brief wave of Christian populism.

After the MMD two-term era came the PF party under Michel Sata, also known as King Cobra. Sata ruled from 2011–2014 and died while in office, leading to Edgar Lungu's presidency. King Cobra was a devout Catholic, from his perspective, even though his political Christian agenda was not as fully fledged as that of Chiluba and his Pentecostal followers. Similarly, Sata also referred to the biblical scriptures and stated that Zambia shall be governed under the 10 commandments from the Bible, emphasising the "thou shall not steal" commandment to fight against corruption. Thus, anyone stealing from the government would be prosecuted¹². Since Sata's presidency was short-lived, it may be difficult to assess to what extent his statement reflected his form of governance and relations with the church. However, Sishuwa (2017), a Zambia historian, provides a further detailed account of Sata's populist strategies to gain political mileage.

When Edgar Lungu (EL) took over the presidency after being elected in the 2015 presidential by-elections, there were two significant changes in the Zambian state–religion relations building up on Chiluba's Christian declaration. Unlike in the MMD era where there was only a religious declaration and the addition of the Christian declaration to the 1996 Zambian constitution, the PF went further to form a Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs (MNGRA)¹³, headed by a female Pentecostal clergy (reverend), and a National Day of Prayer, Fasting and Reconciliation on 18th October was declared as a public holiday. All Zambians were encouraged and expected to pray and fast for the nation on this day annually.

The MNGRA is a typical example of a "democratic-Christian national clash", as the Ministry often caused policy clashes by conflicting with government cross-cutting policies, particularly MNGRA supported by the EFZ, who strongly opposed the introduction of the Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) policy in the education curriculum, and was against the Ministry of Health's mandate to provide family planning services to all (including adolescents) (Zgambo 2022b). The reverend minister strongly expressed her views and spoke out to the nation (as if she was addressing congregants) on many issues to deal with morality (a strong condemnation of sexual immorality) and maintaining Christian values as a nation (Kaunda et al. 2020). This affected public policy, especially in that it created negative discursive effects as far as sexual reproductive health rights are concerned.

From this 'Christian nation' approach, limitations are imposed on what can be said and thought about sex or sexuality. Even though not every Zambian is a Christian, every citizen is meant to think the Christian way. With the re-enforcement of the Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs headed by a reverend, for example, sex before marriage, homosexuality and other sexual orientations are demonised and construed negatively. When such problematisations are spiritualised, there is a narrowed lens on how sex and sexuality are viewed in Zambia despite the reality that these demonised practices exist (Zgambo 2022b).

This ministry further sought to undermine some of the Zambian indigenous cultural ceremonies as going against the nation's Christian values, as cited in the statement below.

Laws in the constitution will now be based on Christian values, and all cultural beliefs will also be in line with the values. That is why for this year's Nc'wala ceremony, the paramount chief Mphezeni refused women from performing with bare breasts. The Christian values and principles are the anchor for our nation as we intend to base all things from government policies, family values, development agenda aligned in the seventh national development plan on all these values because we are a Christian nation (One Love Radio 2019).

It is clear that the ministry succeeded in influencing and swaying traditional leaders to abandon some old traditional customs that long existed before British colonialism. It is, therefore, possible to conclude that this ministry served as a modern colonial agent intended to dominate and suppress Zambian indigeneity through the traditionalisation of Christianity.

Christianity is a demonstration of a path-dependent system that continues to undermine both indigeneity and the concept of a democratic nation. It forms the basis to argue that democracy and Christianity particularly in the Zambian case have failed to cohabit. With this background, I disagree with terms such as "Christian democrats" or "evangelical African democrats", but agree with Ranger's (2003, p. 116) argument that the "evangelical demonisation of African traditional religion and its practitioners has profoundly undemocratic effects".

Therefore, I argue that there is either a fallacious representation of Christianity, which depicts continued colonial religious symbolism or, indeed, a misrepresentation of a democratic state, as Zambia cannot be considered both a democratic state and a Christian nation at the same time.

7. The Current State–Church Relations in Zambia

The role of Christianity in Zambian politics remains crucial and continues to influence the behaviour of political actors, church bodies as well as citizens. State–church relations under the United Party for National Development (UNDP), also referred to as the "new dawn" government led by President Hakainde Hichilema (HH), have continued to strengthen with some changes. The UNDP was elected to government in 2021. HH maintained that Zambia would continue to be a Christian nation; meanwhile, he abolished the MNGRA but maintained the National Day of Prayer, fasting and reconciliation. This public holiday is marked by songs of worship and prayers in the form of scripted speeches and attended by various political actors (including the opposition parties), churches and church bodies, NGOs and members of the general public. The day's proceedings are often conducted and led by uniformed public service clergy (Chaplains)¹⁴ who joined the service after the Christian nation declaration. This also shows the extent to which Christianity is deep-rooted within Zambia's governance and political system.

As for the mother church bodies, EFZ, CCZ and ZCCB, they continue to add their political voice to the governance of the nation. There appears to be no synergy in how they present their spiritual guidance to the ruling party of the day. Each of them has their own style of political involvement guided by their doctrine. For example, the EFZ has over the most recent 5 years focused on the fight against CSE and anti-gay rights (Lusakatimes 2013; Phiri et al. 2022). In 2020, they called for the suspension of CSE through a statement

they submitted to the government¹⁵. In March 2023, there was a gay rights-funded parade protest that was not very welcomed by most political actors, and, most importantly, the main church bodies, both ZCCB and EFZ, spoke out against it, as stated in the comments below by EFZ.

The nation is left with a bitter aftertaste of the pro-gay march and people question further if the organisers are less informed about gay rights in Zambia, including the stance of the church and the position of the President on homosexuality. Bishop Mwenda [EFZ Executive Director] said that the act is disgusting, especially when Zambia is a Christian nation and its governance is anchored on the Word of God, which cannot be altered by man and the rule of law¹⁶.

On 18 November 2023, ZCCB released a long and extensive pastoral statement to the government where they expressed their concerns on various governance, social, economic and political issues, covering high levels of poverty, moral and social issues, use of social media, protection of the family, constituency development fund, manufacturing industry, political environment, among others¹⁷. However, it is unclear how often these church bodies engage in deliberate dialogue on an ongoing basis to discuss national issues because it appears as though statements are only released when there is a problem or an alleged crisis.

Notably, the role of the church in Zambian politics has evolved and there is a need to further explore these church–state relations and the contestation within the mother bodies. This might provide a far better understanding of the role of religion in public policymaking in Zambia and the implications of such impositions.

8. Conclusions

This paper has examined the volume and extent of how religion, in particular Christianity, presents expressions of democratic oppression as it intersects with and influences the governance system and political structure. Christianity is used as a political instrument, often to gain political mileage. Although, it is evident that Christianity in Zambia undoubtedly remains a relevant divine and spiritual institution, however deeply immersed in its colonial history. This has often been ignored or overlooked due to an over-extended period of colonial rule that formed the dominant construct of a British culture (now combined with an evangelical American culture) imposed on the nation's identity disguised as 'Christianity' and spreading the good news of salvation.

There are two critical arguments presented in this paper. Firstly, Christianity was used as an instrument to gain political mileage. Secondly, the traditionalisation of Christianity in politics and everyday life yields negative discursive effects undermining the idea of a democratic Zambia and suppressing indigeneity. Thus, I argue against the co-existence of notions of democracy and Christian values as I have demonstrated the two exist in perpetual antagonism.

In the MMD era, it was the declaration that opened the floodgates of a "Pentecostal movement state capture" and President Chiluba himself was the chief national prayer warrior. During the PF government, the agenda was driven by the Reverend Minister of the MNGRA, who further traditionalised and accelerated political Christianity by running the MNGRA like a congregation. This had implications for the natural exercise of democracy and further undermined Zambian indigenous cultural heritage. Thus, indeed, Christianity has been a key part of the Zambian culture and identity. However, it remains crucial to interrogate and question the role of Christianity in Zambian politics by questioning those who seek to use it to their benefit and not for its intended purpose.

I conclude with some key recommendations for reformulating the Christian agenda not only for Zambia but the entire African continent, which went through many years of colonialism. First, Christianity by all means should fit into the African reality through the development of an indigenous liturgy, and a theoretical framework applicable to the African setting. Secondly, there is a need for more African scholarly works on the subject, not only limited to theologians but also other disciplines like political science and sociology, among others. This will help the growth and the spread of the African perspective in this

field. Thirdly, there has to be more research on the separation of religion from national politics. How do religious bodies contribute to public policy with an open approach rather than a narrow Christian focus? Addressing these issues can help to make religion a more relevant element towards inclusive public policymaking.

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Notes

- ¹ The first president, Kenneth Kaunda, had introduced a Ministry of National Guidance, but his focus was to promote Humanism and, when the Chiluba government was elected into power in 1991, he appointed a Deputy Minister of Religious Affairs.
- ² The CCZ was formed during the colonial era as the Christian Council of Northern Rhodesia in 1945 and only became known as the Christian Council of Zambia after political independence in 1964. CCZ has a more diverse interdenominational membership and operates more like an NGO. It engages in several societal development programmes including gender and health, social and economic justice and youth and children's programmes <https://ccz.org.zm/index.php/home/programmes/> (accessed on 16 April 2022).
- ³ ZCCB, formed in the post-colonial era immediately after independence in 1965, is a college of Catholic bishops in Zambia. Their mission is "the service of unity in diversity, inspired by the Word of God, are committed to the proclamation of faith, meaningful celebration of liturgy and authentic witnessing through our structures for the salvation of all" <https://catholiczambia58.com/about/>, accessed on 15 March 2022.
- ⁴ EFZ was also formed after independence in 1964, mainly comprising protestant Christians, and their strategic focus areas are Mission and church planting, integral mission and church mobilization, peacebuilding initiatives, advocacy and influence of policy, HIV/AIDS and health, disaster risk reduction, technical vocational and entrepreneurship training (TVET), gender and good governance, poverty reduction interventions, advocacy related to the Millennium Development Goals and extractive industries <https://www.linkedin.com/company/evangelical-fellowship-of-zambia/about/>, accessed on 13 May 2022.
- ⁵ Adrian Hastings worked in Zambia, Tanzania and Uganda for many years.
- ⁶ By African religion, I refer to all forms of spiritual worship originating from Africans and practised by Africans themselves. John Mbiti's book, *Introduction to African Religion*, provides more detail about African religion and spirituality.
- ⁷ It is believed that the Paris Society and White Fathers helped to establish the BSA company (Henkel 1989).
- ⁸ By traditionalised, I mean that it has become a norm, a way of Zambian daily life covering every aspect of social life, politics and governance, as well as some indigenous traditional customs that are Christianised. This is presented in the second argument and discussed in detail.
- ⁹ For example, Kenneth Kaunda, a son of clergy serving as a missionary in the Church of Scotland, had a strong affiliation with the Catholic Church, Malawi's Kamuzu Banda was a staunch Presbyterian and Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe identified as Catholic.
- ¹⁰ Changes include localised liturgy hymns in the local language, some churches conducting services in the local language and the use of local instruments of worship, just to mention a few; however, there is still much that has to be achieved in terms of localising the theology curriculum and funding issues need further attention.
- ¹¹ A clip of his speech can be accessed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RhFX5kywvCs>, accessed on 10 May 2022. He also offered an emotional prayer during the funeral of the Zambia national football team that died in a plane crash in Gabon in 1993. In his prayer, Chiluba broke down in tears and rededicated Zambia as a Christian nation. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QhCoAqB8J60>, accessed on 10 June 2022.
- ¹² <https://www.lusakatimes.com/2011/09/25/president-sata-church-peaceful-polls-promises-base-rule-10-commandments/>, accessed on 2 November 2022.
- ¹³ The Ministry's mandate was to promote national values conforming to the declaration of Zambia as a Christian nation for social transformation and sustainable development (MNGRA 2015).
- ¹⁴ This is emphasised by both (Banda 2003; Munshya 2021) in their work on church-state relations in Zambia. Munshya (2021) also emphasises that it is only the Christian clergy (no other religion) that can take up chaplainship in these uniformed forces.
- ¹⁵ <https://www.lusakatimes.com/2020/09/28/efz-calls-for-the-suspension-of-sexuality-education-until-consensus-is-reached/>, accessed on 15 March 2022.
- ¹⁶ <https://zambianbusinesstimes.com/efz-questions-police-role-in-lgbtqi-funded-parade/> (accessed on 16 April 2022)

- ¹⁷ <http://www.gcatholic.org/update.htm> and <https://zambianobserver.com/catholic-bishops-statement-on-the-state-of-the-nation/>, accessed on 12 November 2022.

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