

**Zimbabwean theology and religious studies during
the crisis years (2000-2008):
a preliminary study**

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Abstract

One of the dominant accusations against theology and religious studies in Africa is that the discipline tends to be abstract. Critics charge that this discipline hardly addresses the lived realities of the people. Further, they assert that African theology and religious studies do not tackle the pressing issues of the continent; particularly the issue of (mis)governance. This article, a preliminary analysis, focuses on the contribution of theology and religious studies in Zimbabwe in addressing the Zimbabwean crisis. It outlines the major themes that scholars have addressed. It proceeds to highlight some pertinent issues that must be addressed in order to ensure that theology and religious studies become more attuned to the pressing issues of the day. As research and publication in Zimbabwean theology and religious studies have expanded significantly since 2000, we have sought to highlight trends related to specific themes. A more detailed analysis of the field requires several studies.

Introduction

Recent publications by Chitando (2010) and Amanze (2012) have been overly critical of the role of theology and religious studies in Africa. These publications have suggested that theology and religious studies do not address the existential issues of Africa and Africans. Further, they contend that these disciplines have tended to skirt the most demanding issues that must be addressed if the continent is to thrive. In particular, they call upon theology and religious studies in Africa to contribute towards mitigating the challenges relating to governance. In this article we seek to revisit the issue of the relevance of theology and religious studies in Africa by highlighting the extent to which Zimbabwean scholars (both in the country and in the diaspora) have sought to address the Zimbabwean crisis.

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While reviews of theology (Chitando 2002b & Shoko 2009) and religious studies (Chitando 2005c) in Zimbabwe have been undertaken, these tend to focus on earlier periods and do not cover the crisis years (2000-2008) that we will focus on in this article. Thus, overviews of theology and religious studies within the Zimbabwean crisis have not yet appeared. Unfortunately, this has led some scholars to assume that there have been no serious issues in Zimbabwe, at least as far as teaching (and publishing) in theology and religious studies is concerned (Clasquin 2005:16). Such an interpretation, we contend, does not do justice to the reality on the ground. In this article we highlight some of the major themes that have been addressed by Zimbabwean scholars in theology and religious studies as they have sought to address some aspects of the crisis. We include reflections by scholars who have operated from within Zimbabwe, as well as perspectives from Zimbabwean scholars of theology and religious studies in the diaspora. The connections between "home" and the diaspora remain quite strong, hence the inclusion of reflections by scholars outside the country. Furthermore, some scholars have straddled both spaces, thereby complicating the distinction between "home-based" and "foreign-based" scholars.

We are very conscious of the fact that we are commenting on processes that we have been actively involved in. This poses serious methodological challenges. For example, it must be conceded that aspects of autobiography tend to lack objectivity (Moyo et al. 2013). However, we have sought to be reflexive and, therefore, to grapple with our own biases. Furthermore, we refuse to endorse the view that only "outsiders" can be objective. We maintain that our own participation in Zimbabwean theology and religious studies has positioned us more strategically to appreciate the field than "outsiders." Nevertheless, we recognise that both "insiders" and "outsiders" must contribute to the writing of history. Consequently, our own narrative herein does not claim to be final: we have called it a "preliminary study" to draw attention to this very fact.

Zimbabwean theology and religious studies and contextual relevance: setting the scene

Zimbabwe was born after a protracted liberation struggle that captured the imagination of many people, particularly in the global South. For many, it represented the triumph of black people against racism and settler colonialism. Churches contributed significantly to the attainment of political independence in 1980. During the colonial period, some church leaders bravely challenged the State that sought to marginalise the black majority. With black nationalists now in power, there were high hopes that Church-State relations would deepen (Hallencreutz and Moyo 1988). However, some developments

in the post-colonial period created tension. While the first two decades of independence were relatively stable in terms of economic development (apart from the state-sponsored violence in the Matabeleland and Midlands provinces), serious challenges were experienced after 2000. It must be conceded, however, that the 1990s were characterised by economic upheavals that were caused by the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP). It was during this period that Canaan Banana (1996), one of Zimbabwe's leading theologians, proposed what he called "combat theology."

From 2000, the country experienced massive socio-economic and political challenges. These include the fast-track land reform programme, political violence, poor governance, "Operation Murambatsvina/Restore Order," (Vambe 2008) women's marginalisation and others. The country battled against hyperinflation, negative publicity and a massive exodus of its citizens (Crush and Tevera 2010). Zimbabwean theologians and scholars of religion have sought to comment on these challenges and to provide insights on the way forward for the embattled country. With President Robert G. Mugabe's government fighting domestic and external opponents, they faced a real risk of being identified as "sell outs" (Machingura 2012a). In order to appreciate their social location, we will highlight the emergence of their discipline below.

Theology and religious studies in Zimbabwe: a snapshot

Zimbabwe has a long and proud history in theology and religious studies (McKenzie 1989) (Platvoet 1989). In line with the country's notable academic achievements on the continent, scholars in these disciplines have been quite productive. McKenzie (1989) argues that Zimbabwe could as well claim to have a distinguished tradition in the history of religions. Prior to the attainment of independence, the discipline attracted fewer black students due to the policy of racial discrimination. However, in the post-colonial period the economic stability that the country enjoyed up to the late 1990s facilitated the recruitment of scholars from other parts of the world. These scholars proceeded to become notable figures within their respective areas of specialisation. These include Adrian Hastings, Carl F. Hallencreutz, James L. Cox, Paul Gifford and others (Chitando 2002a:278-279). All these scholars operated from the Department of Religious Studies, Classics and Philosophy at the University of Zimbabwe, then the only department offering theology and religious studies in the country. As highlighted below, other departments have since been established at other universities in Zimbabwe.

Alongside these scholars with European and American backgrounds, black Zimbabwean scholars have made their mark in theology and religious

studies in the post-colonial period. In theology/church history/biblical studies, the country has produced some productive individuals, including (in no particular order) Canaan Banana, Paul H. Gundani, Gwinyai Muzorewa, John WZ. Kurewa, Ambrose Moyo, Edward P. Antonio, Isabel Mukonyora, Temba J. Mafico, Dora Mbuwayesango, Lilian Dube Chirairo and others. Tabona Shoko has contributed to the area of African traditional religions and healing, while Phillip T. Chikafu has published on the Old Testament and African culture. There is also an intermediate generation comprising scholars such as Maaraidzo E. Mutambara, Lovemore Togarasei, Francesca Chimhanda, Lovemore Ndllovu, Ezra Chitando, Nisbert Taringa, David Bishau, Richard S. Maposa and others. A separate narrative is required to do justice to their publications, as well as to review the output of scholars whose works came to the fore towards the end of the "decade of crisis" (see for example, Molly Manyonganise, Tapiwa P. Mapuranga, Sophia Chirongoma, Excellent Chireshe, Masiwa R. Gunda, Francis Machingura, Obvious Vengeyi, Kudzai Biri, Fortune Sibanda, Gaudencia Mutema, Zorodzai Dube, and Herbert Moyo).

Zimbabwean scholars trained in theology and religious studies increased their output markedly after the mid-2000s. A number of factors are responsible for this development. To begin with, the sheer increase in the number of students undertaking postgraduate training in theology and religious studies within the country ensured that some would proceed to take up careers within academia. It is these scholars who have begun publishing consistently within the field. Secondly, the expanding higher education sector in the country absorbed the emerging researchers. For example, alongside the more established Department of Religious Studies, Classics and Philosophy at the University of Zimbabwe, the Department of Theology and Religious Studies (Midlands State University) and the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies (Great Zimbabwe University) have contributed to the expansion of the field since the mid-2000s. These departments were at state-sponsored universities (complementing the Faculties of Theology at the church-related Africa University and Solusi University). Third, active involvement with regional/international ecumenical movements such as the Association for Theological Institutions in Southern Africa (ATISCA), the World Council of Churches (WCC), and collaboration with external universities (for example, Bayreuth and Bamberg universities in Germany) increased exposure. Fourth, the existential crisis that scholars had to grapple with resulted in research and reflection. These factors, among others, contributed to the increase of publications in the areas of theology and religious studies in Zimbabwe.

The social location (Dube 2003) of Zimbabwean scholars of theology and religious studies (both in the country and in the diaspora) implied that

they faced the crisis in a very direct way. They did not – in fact, they could not – stand apart from the massive socio-economic and political events underway in the country. As Desmond Tutu (1983:106) put it with reference to South Africa during apartheid, they hammered out their theologies “in the heat of battle”. Operating in an environment saturated with violence, intimidation and fear, they sought to expose the abuse/manipulation of religion and human rights by state functionaries. They did not remain indifferent and neutral (as the phenomenology of religion, for example, recommends), but contributed towards “making sense” of the crisis in diverse ways.

Whereas the struggle against apartheid in South Africa gave rise to a recognisable body of writings, especially in black theology, theological writings during the Zimbabwean crisis do not constitute such a body. They are scattered in a few books and many journal articles in many different parts of the world. Thus, in order to put the publications into their proper historical context, we will outline Church-State relations in independent Zimbabwe first. We will then examine discourses around the contentious land reform programme, followed by an analysis of responses to women’s issues. From 2000 and especially since 2002, Mugabe’s tenure as president has been disputed and his legacy (or lack thereof) divides opinion sharply. We contend that the formation of the Government of National Unity (GNU) in 2009, after the signing of the Global Political Agreement (GPA) in 2008, represents a new phase in the history of the country. An analysis of publications by scholars during and after this period merits a separate study.

Church-State relations in independent Zimbabwe: an overview

Church-State relations in independent Zimbabwe are characterised by polarisation on the part of the different strands of the Church in the form of individual church ministers, denominational church organisations and inter-denominational church organisations. Soon after independence in 1980, Church-State relations revolved around issues relating to the government’s option for socialism, the new economic plan, the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) and its effects on people and the state, constitutional reform, and reconciliation (Verstraelen 2002:54). Sibanda (2011:8) correctly points out that compared to South Africa, the Church in Zimbabwe has been polarised, with two opposing camps: one supporting Mugabe and his Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front, ZANU PF, and the other critical of his rule. This polarisation seems to stem from what Togarasei (2004: 76-77) refers to as “pro-ruling party” and “anti-ruling party” interpretations of Romans 13:1-7. The passage makes reference to the need for citizens to obey the governing authority. The “pro-ruling party”

position can be exemplified by the early Banana, while the “anti-ruling party” interpretation can be detected in Archbishop Pius Ncube.

Surrogate political theology: the case of the early Canaan Banana

At independence the government of Zimbabwe adopted Marxist-Leninist principles. This worried the churches since they wanted to know the kind of policy on religion that was going to accompany these Marxist-Leninist principles. From the Church’s readings, Marxist-Leninist ideologies and principles ran counter to Christian beliefs in theism. Mugabe tried to allay the fears of the church by explaining the importance of collectivism that is embedded in Marxist-Leninist principles and African culture, contrasting it with the individualism of the west. In this sense, Mugabe posed as an African scholar, locating himself firmly within the African theology of liberation.

This position was supported vigorously by the first president of Zimbabwe, Canaan Banana. However, taking up this position compromised Banana. Verstraelen (2002) notes that because of his constitutional role, Banana became an advocate for government policies. He could not be critical and prophetic as he was articulating State theology. He was co-opted to serve the ZANU PF government and he attempted to co-opt the Church in the same way by identifying socialism with Christianity (Verstraelen 2002:56-57). Banana, therefore, can be regarded as one who was a supporter of the regime in the early period. His writings were meant to bolster the government of the day. The writings were not significant because they looked like they were almost part of the system. One could thus say that Banana betrayed the prophetic function of the Church. The Church in the form of the Catholic bishops took a confrontational position against the government. In short, some church leaders had reservations regarding the government’s policy of socialism.

Banana made attempts to recover his prophetic voice when he fell out with Mugabe after Mugabe became executive president in 1987. He started to criticise the government. Mugabe withdrew the former presidential immunity from Banana and let Banana’s case of homosexuality surface. Banana was incarcerated (albeit in an open prison) and his prophetic voice was muted. Reviews of Banana’s role in Zimbabwean theology and religious studies (Chitando 2004) (Gunda 2012) have highlighted his contribution to the field. We believe that it is more productive to think of his post-colonial theological reflections in phases: the early Banana who worked from within the “belly of the beast” and the later Banana who sought to articulate a prophetic voice.

Prophetic political theology: Pius Ncube

Pius Ncube was the Catholic archbishop of Bulawayo during the crisis period. He emerged as a highly courageous and critical voice in challenging Mugabe's government. He was bold enough to call on people to rise up against Mugabe's rule and he even declared his readiness to go in front of blazing guns. In his fierce criticism, Ncube blamed the president for the economic meltdown that plunged the majority of Zimbabweans into untold socio-economic hardships. He accused Mugabe of gross human rights violations and called for him to step down. Another confrontational position was around the issue of the Gukurahundi massacres in the early 1980s. Ncube demanded that Mugabe disclose the massacre of thousands of civilians in Matabeleland and the Midlands provinces by troops who crushed a purported armed insurgency against his rule soon after independence (Sibanda 2011:8). Ncube's complaint is captured well in the following utterance: "... this government does not have the Holy Spirit and they know what I think of them. I am not going to let them off the hook. These men are liars. They are murderers. They are only working to make themselves rich" (Sibanda 2011:8).

Mugabe responded by urging people to disregard church leaders who were calling for his forced ouster, accusing Ncube and other church leaders of peddling falsehoods about Zimbabwe's governance. Mugabe even questioned the moral authority of the clergy by accusing them of "sleeping around." The Church was branded a settler church with origins in the colonial era that backed Mugabe's opponents and western governments campaigning against Mugabe. By the end of the 1990s, Mugabe had begun courting African Initiated Churches (AICs) with whom he shared a strong indigenous outlook. Mugabe's intelligence network exposed Ncube's alleged womanising tendencies. Like Banana, Ncube was silenced when he had to resign from his position as archbishop. Once again, it had become clear that the prophetic mission in Zimbabwe (as elsewhere) was a costly one.

Church and land: mapping out convergences and contestations

The Church-State relations outlined above provide valuable insights into how Zimbabwean scholars in theology and religious studies responded to the land question. Mugabe's approach to the land issue brought Zimbabwe sharply into international focus. In 2000, following defeat during the referendum on the new constitution, war veterans (some far too young to have fought during the 1970s liberation struggle), ZANU PF militia, youth, military and intelligence officers and other actors moved to occupy farms that were formerly run by whiter farmers. It became known as the "Third Chimurenga" or the

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fast-track land reform programme. Mugabe's rhetoric on land was sharp, persuasive and consistent with black theology's emphasis on the empowerment of black people. Developing a peculiar theology of creation (where he argued that God settled different races in designated areas) and engaging in "presidential biblical hermeneutics," he charged that Christians had no choice but to accept the land reform programme that was under way. Addressing Catholic church leaders attending the Imbisa Plenary Assembly in Harare on 30 July 2001, Mugabe made it clear that if they were consistent, they had to endorse his actions. Mugabe (2001:34) proclaimed:

And for you specifically as church leaders, you face one fundamental question: what are Christians supposed to do, nay expected to do, when they live under an unjust system which claims to be Christian, to be Godly? What do we tell God's oppressed children; what do we tell 'a purchased people'; what do we tell the widow, the needy, the fatherless, the landless? What form does Christian witness take in such circumstances?

Together as one? Convergences between theologians and scholars of religion and Mugabe on the land question

Mugabe and ZANU PF framed the "Third Chimurenga" as a social justice issue which was consistent with, for example, Catholic social teachings. Indeed, a form-critical analysis of theological writings on the land issue in Zimbabwe shows that most scholars agreed with the principle of land redistribution, but proceeded to question the violence and cronyism that characterised the process. In fact, earlier writers such as Sebastian Bakare sounded quite nationalistic and totally in agreement with Mugabe's later pronouncements. Bakare maintained that Africans were entitled to land in Zimbabwe and that the Bible supported this. According to Bakare (1993), land was important to Zimbabwe as it was imbued with spiritual qualities. At this juncture, Bakare was quite "Mugabeian" in his approach to the theme of land in Zimbabwe.

This theme of recognising the legitimacy of black Zimbabweans' right to land was also taken up by Verstraelen. According to him, "... the existing imbalance of blatant injustice in the distribution and availability of land becomes a *very urgent religious and ethical issue*" (Verstraelen 1998:111. Italics in original). Chitando (1998) reinforced this point, insisting that the land question in Zimbabwe had to contend with the indigenous understanding of the land as an inheritance from the ancestors. Similarly, Shoko (2006) argued that the land crisis was inspired by the indigenous worldview, especially the interpretation of the spirit world. Nisbert T. Taringa (2006),

however, sought to question the assumption that African traditional religions were ecologically sensitive and he challenged the romantic view of indigenous spirituality.

Bakare, Verstraelen, Chitando and Shoko were, therefore, in basic agreement with Mugabe's premise that inequitable land distribution in Zimbabwe was unsustainable. However, they did not venture to suggest practical steps towards the resolution of the land question. In addition, these scholars operated within the context of liberation theology and African nationalism: the very same template that Mugabe and the State were drawing from. Their reflections were, therefore, close to the State's arguments concerning the justification for black economic empowerment in Zimbabwe.

Theologians and scholars of religion were not the only ones who gravitated towards the nationalists' interpretation of the land question. Since landlessness had been one of the key grievances that gave rise to the liberation struggle, it was natural that there would be a general endorsement of the need for land redistribution in the country. Some church leaders were firmly behind the land reform exercise, both before and after 2000. Thus:

Church leaders like Bishop Nolbert Kunonga of the Anglican Church, Rev. Noah Pashapa of the Baptist Church and Rev. Andrew Wutawunashe of the Family of God Church were quite vocal in their support of Mugabe's land reform programme. Rev. Obadiah Msindo of the Destiny of Africa Network provided spiritual guidance to the ruling party and government, maintaining that Mugabe was God's chosen instrument for empowering blacks. He praised Mugabe's land reform programme, claiming that it was consistent with God's desire to restore the dignity of blacks. These church leaders utilised theological, historical and ethical arguments to justify the resettlement exercise (Chitando 2005b:185).

Whereas some theologians and scholars of religion had expressed the need for land reform by marshalling various arguments, there was an outcry when Mugabe initiated the fast-track land reform. It is instructive to note that the fast-track land reform exercise was carried out within the context of the 2000 parliamentary elections. These were characterised by violence. Furthermore, the fall-out from the land reform exercise included the worsening of the economic situation. At this juncture, scholarly responses to the land programme as implemented by Mugabe and his government became more contested. The dominant feeling was that the whole venture had been prompted by the need for political survival on Mugabe's part. Issues relating

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to distributive justice had been inserted to add appeal to political grandstanding by Mugabe.

Singing from different hymn sheets? Theologians and scholars of religion questioning the fast-track land reform programme

Paul Gundani (2002) noted the politicisation of the land issue, while calling upon the church to demonstrate theological creativity by giving up its own unproductive land (Gundani 2003). While accepting the principle of redistributing land to the landless black majority, Gundani suggests that “the problem had to do with the method of land redistribution, and the way political power was manipulated to exploit the poor ...” (Gundani 2008:232). Chitando (2005a) sought to expose the manipulation of theological concepts and indigenous spirituality in the land reform exercise. He also explored possible reasons why church land had not been expropriated by the ruling black elite (Chitando 2005b).

We contend that there is a notable shift in both the churches’ and scholars’ response to the land question in Zimbabwe after the controversial 2002 presidential election and subsequent evidence of the deployment of the land issue to enhance political mileage. Prior to this there was a general convergence in ideological and theological interpretations between Mugabe and the churches/scholars. However, after 2002, there are more divergences and contestations. As we have outlined above, scholars also became more cautious in their analyses of the land question. In particular, they questioned the politicisation of the land question by the nationalists. We note that Mugabe’s approach to the land question has been dominated by populism, gerrymandering and deep-seated internal contradictions. Although writing in a later phase, Machingura (2012b) has highlighted the extent to which Mugabe has used land and food as political weapons. Mousing revolutionary platitudes and evoking the blood of the freedom fighters, he has positioned himself as the defender of the landless. In addition, Mugabe has posed as the last standing advocate of black pride and economic liberation. This has seen him receiving wide acclaim as a consistent revolutionary in the global South. Feted as an African liberation icon, Mugabe has had African crowds in raptures with his fiery rhetoric on black pride and dignity, even as his domestic record is heavily compromised by inefficiency, rampant corruption in the public sector and lack of creativity in addressing the country’s multiple problems. An effective black theology must expose Mugabe’s inconsistencies and place emphasis on the black majority’s right to quality of life.

Women's struggles for abundant life: an overview

The crisis had a particularly negative effect on women. Zimbabwean women theologians and scholars of religion have sought to address the crisis, paying particular attention to its impact on women. While a longer narrative is required to do justice to this aspect, we will highlight some of the major issues that have been tackled. The underlying argument has been to draw attention to women's vulnerability to HIV, women carrying the burden of insensitive government programmes such as "Operation Murambatsvina/Restore Order" and women's susceptibility to globalisation and its negative effects. The latter theme is explored in considerable detail in Mwaura and Dube-Chirairo (2005). Contributors highlighted the extent to which Zimbabwean women have reeled under the weight of global economic injustices. Although Mugabe has articulated similar views, the women scholars have drawn attention to the complicity of local political actors.

Chauke (2003) and Mapuranga (2011) have highlighted the impact of patriarchal traditions on women's vulnerability to HIV and AIDS. In particular, they focus on marginalised areas, with Chauke concentrating on South East Zimbabwe and Mapuranga on Chipinge. Similarly, Chirongoma (2006) has demonstrated the negative effects of the health delivery system on women and children. She has also shown the impact of "Operation Murambatsvina" on women (Chirongoma 2009). These women theologians censure the government for not developing pro-poor policies, as well as failing to cushion women and children against the deteriorating economic situation. In particular, they bemoan the violence that women endure as a result of the political machinations of the ruling elite and the deeply entrenched patriarchal system.

Mukonyora (2007) focuses on the marginalisation of women in society and the Masowe Apostolic movement. For her, modernity and patriarchy have joined hands to force women in the Apostolic movement to the periphery of the city and society. It is clear that the socio-economic challenges have caused untold suffering to women on the margins. Zimbabwean women theologians have sought to confront the ruling elite, calling upon it to address women's vulnerability. Whereas the land reform programme is touted as having availed land to all indigenes, women theologians have challenged this assumption, highlighting the patriarchal forces at play. They also draw attention to the impact of political violence on women.

Theologies of resistance: a summary

We thus contend that theologies of resistance emerged during the crisis years in Zimbabwe. Whereas Mugabe had defined politics narrowly, insisting that

only the brave ones were to play the game, scholars of theology and religious studies disputed such an interpretation. Wermter (2003) rightly insisted that politics was for everyone by everyone! Antonio (2009) charges that Zimbabwe's leaders have failed to live up to their role as good shepherds and are now forcing their sheep to scatter. Antonio provides theological reflections on economic shortages in Zimbabwe. Both Wermter and Antonio challenge the ruling elite's assumptions regarding politics and economics. They contend that politicians have an obligation to allow maximum participation by citizens and to ensure that they enjoy abundant life. Violence, incompetence and corruption do not enable the people of God to thrive, they argue. According to Kaulemu (2008), Christian professionals in various sectors had the mandate to call the government to account.

Upholding the spirit of resistance, Dube (2006) charges that the Church in Zimbabwe has not been prophetic enough in challenging the elite and standing with the excluded. For Dube, the Church in Zimbabwe has been found wanting when faced with extreme violence by the State. Dube calls for a theology that promotes the health and well-being of all instead of the prevailing situation where only the ruling elite is assured of a decent quality of life. He contends that only a preferential option for the excluded will ensure the Church's relevance. On his part, Chindomu (2006) approached "Operation Murambatsvina/Restore Order" from the perspective of liberation theology and charged that the State had subjected citizens to inhuman treatment and that it needed to uphold the dignity of the poorest of the poor.

Emerging in a tense context, theologies of resistance in Zimbabwe have sought to question the ruling elite's theologies of entitlement. As noted by Chitando (2005a), in Mugabe's ideology, his party delivered freedom and independence to the black majority. In addition, they availed land to the landless and promoted indigenisation and economic empowerment to the marginalised. Therefore, they had a divine right to rule. Those who opposed his rule were running dogs of imperialism, since all true sons and daughters of the soil appreciated his party's revolutionary credentials. Theologies of resistance in Zimbabwe emerged to question this narrative and highlighted the manipulation of religion by politicians. Although some church leaders such as Nolbert Kunonga endorsed Mugabe's rhetoric (Gunda 2008) and there was contestation regarding the prophetic ministry of the Church (Vengeyi 2010), we argue that as the socio-economic and political environment in Zimbabwe worsened around 2006/2008, Zimbabwean theologians and scholars of religion became more vocal in challenging the status-quo. Gunda (2006) called upon biblical studies scholars and the Church to adopt a prophetic stance in the face of the deepening crisis.

Challenging the liberators: a critical analysis

Theologians and scholars of religion have been quite courageous and creative in challenging the abuse of power in Zimbabwe. As the foregoing sections have illustrated, they have not withdrawn into their protective shells but they have sought to be contextually relevant. For theologians and scholars of religion operating within state-sponsored institutions, there have been no guarantees of personal safety. However, to be fair to Mugabe's regime, academic freedom has not been stifled and robust debate has been allowed. It is only when critics proceed to organise the masses that the regime has not been tolerant as the cases of violence against political activists indicate.

Despite paying attention to the context and facilitating the emergence of new voices, there are a number of factors that must be addressed in order to enhance the social relevance of Zimbabwean scholars of theology and religious studies. First, the discourse tends to be scholarly and elitist, even when addressing lived realities such as the land question. There is a disconnect between the people of God in the townships, villages and mountain tops and the university professors of theology and religious studies. Could it be that the powers-that-be feel far less threatened by hard-hitting articles or books in political theology than by angry, educated but unemployed youth? Second (and leading from the foregoing), publications by the scholars do not appear to reach the generality of church-based activists. While books and articles promoting the prophetic role of the church have been published, most of these books do not get distributed to citizens where they can initiate dialogue and instigate social transformation.

Third, there is limited interaction among the various contributors. We find little evidence of collaboration among scholars who have responded to aspects of the Zimbabwean crisis. In particular, male scholars appear unwilling to embrace reflections by women scholars. This prevents one from attaining a holistic picture of the contribution of theologians and scholars of religion to the resolution of the Zimbabwean crisis. Fourth, the earlier convergence between nationalists and theologians over the land issue made it difficult for the latter to voice their criticism when the government embarked on the fast-track land reform programme. Although they may not have consciously sought to promote Mugabe's rhetoric on land, theologians and scholars of religion came very close to serving the interests of the ruling elite. However, it must be conceded that there have been times when the interests of the ruling elite and academics converged.

Fifth, there are no synergies between theologians and scholars of religion in Zimbabwe and those in the diaspora. Following the massive Zimbabwe exodus, many theologians are now operating from diverse contexts, including Southern Africa, North America and Europe. However,

there is no platform for the two groups of scholars to interact and exchange ideas. There is a need for scholars in Zimbabwe and in the diaspora to collaborate in efforts to address pertinent issues. Scholars of theology and religious studies can tackle pressing existential issues relating to governance, human rights, HIV, the status of women, children' welfare and others.

Conclusion

In this article we have described some of the key areas that confirm that theologians and scholars of religion have addressed the Zimbabwean crisis in a very direct way. Alongside some Church leaders and ecumenical bodies, they drew attention to the deficit in democracy, violence and the deterioration of the citizens' quality of life. Whereas they had called for urgency in addressing the land question, they broke ranks with Mugabe when the fast-track land reform programme gained momentum after 2000. Zimbabwean women theologians were particularly scathing in their analysis of women's vulnerability in the wake of gross injustice and incompetence. Overall, we have highlighted the challenges that scholars of theology and religious studies in Zimbabwe faced when the freedom fighters began to fight against freedom.

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