

## ***Moral Majority redivivus: Assertive religious politics and the threat to religious freedom and citizenship in Malawi***

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### **Abstract**

John de Gruchy's 1995 work *Christianity and Democracy: Theology for a Just World Order* was published at a heady time, not only in society but in the ecumenical churches, who were prominent as "midwives of democracy." While the changes in Eastern Europe and South Africa were in the foreground, the book also covered emerging movements for democracy in sub-Saharan Africa outside South Africa. Sadly, De Gruchy's optimism was not borne out in the decades that followed. Partly, this was due to internal problems within the movements themselves; partly, it was a transformation in the identity of Christianity away from the role of an enabling midwife to that theocratic master. A new kind of Christian politics asserted itself, modelled on and enabled by conservative Christianity in the United States. Moreover, it asserted itself in rivalry to a new "other": fundamentalist Islam, which succeeded communism as America's global enemy. This article traces the emergence of this new assertive religious politics, criticizing both its theologically problematic "Christian nationalism" and its lack of concern for sustaining the human rights gains of the early 1990s.

### **Keywords**

*Religion; politics; theology; freedom; citizenship*

### **1. Introduction**

The early-to-mid 1990s was a time of great optimism in sub-Saharan Africa. Besides the dramatic end of apartheid in South Africa, there was

a new wave of democratization sweeping across the region. A “second liberation” of Africa was in the offing as the first generation of post-colonial governments, many of which had begun in hope but fell into single-party dictatorships of various kinds, began to fall. This “second liberation” was itself part of a “third wave of democratization” sweeping the world – a third wave that many observers saw beginning in Mozambique in 1974 but energized by the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989.<sup>1</sup> U.S. President George HW Bush coined the phrase, “a new world order” to speak both of the challenges and possibilities ahead. More ominous was yet another phrase, the “clash of civilizations,” to replace the clash of ideologies during the Cold War.<sup>2</sup> That clash would run through the heart of Africa. In spite of its optimism, Africa was set to become divided by the new as much as it had the old.

In the midst of this “third wave,” John de Gruchy’s *Christianity and Democracy* appeared.<sup>3</sup> With the subtitle, *Theology for a Just World Order*, its sweep was global. The cover showed an iconic picture of a smiling Nelson Mandela shaking hands with F.W. de Klerk, suggesting roots also in De Gruchy’s own South African context. But the book also featured a chapter on the recent movements in sub-Saharan Africa, especially the role of the ecumenical churches as “midwives of democracy.” While their histories were entangled with colonialism, these churches were often the best organized and highest profile members of civil society. They were also more liberal in their theology and politics, resisted ideas of exclusive Christian nationalism and were tied-in to transnational networks such as the global Anglican Communion and the World Council of Churches.

The year 1989 also saw the disbanding of the Moral Majority in the US. This organization which had mobilized American evangelicals against

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1 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991); Larry Jay Diamond, *Consolidating the Third Wave Democracies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Larry Jay Diamond and Marc F. Plattner, *Democratization in Africa* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

2 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

3 John W. de Gruchy, *Christianity and Democracy: A Theology for a Just World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

perceived liberal (and socialist) ideas seemed to run out of gas with a third Republican term at home and the Soviet threat disappearing overseas. The politics of polarization internationally seemed to be fading. At least so it seemed. This article will give something of an update to chapter six of *Christianity and Democracy* from a Malawian perspective. It will show that the style of church engagement characteristic of the Moral Majority resurfaced amidst the second wave of democratization in Africa, and empowered by a new, bipolar opposition between Christianity and Islam after September 11, 2001 has presented a challenge to De Gruchy's more optimistic picture. Indeed, Christian Rightists may pose as grave a threat to democracy in sub-Saharan Africa as the one mainline and ecumenical churches opposed a quarter-century ago.

## 2. Fundamentalism in sub-Saharan Africa

While religious radicalism is not a new development on the African continent, there is a new manifestation that is raising concern as a threat to human rights. A new, assertive religious politics bearing close resemblance to the American Moral Majority of the 1970s and 80s has found fertile ground in Africa. It is taking root among certain non-denominational groups, in turn infusing radical religious conservative views hitherto unknown in African politics.

While religious conservatives have until recently eschewed politics in favour of sectarian, apocalyptic millenarianism, mainline churches<sup>4</sup> have a long history of engagement in the public sphere of southern African countries. Moreover, while religious conservatives historically displayed ambivalence (and even acquiescence) toward

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4 In what follows, this term will refer to those churches established by missionaries (and sometimes accompanying settlers), mostly from Europe, in the 18th and 19th centuries. While often working together with colonial powers, these churches were instrumental in establishing the educational and other institutions that shaped the first generation of African leaders after decolonization. While many came to insist on local autonomy and called for a moratorium on further missionary activity from Europe in the light of Africa's independence, they also maintained important ties to the denominational parents, as well as ecumenical relations with bodies such as The World Council of Churches. Hence while rooted in civil society, they also have been able to express suspicion of the Christian national ideas that shall be described below. See de Gruchy's account of this in *Christianity and Democracy*, 174–78.

the regimes of Africa's first liberation, the mainline churches were leading voices in the wave of democratization that swept Africa at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s.<sup>5</sup> Initially reluctant, evangelical and Pentecostal churches eventually joined the second liberation, but without the same history of engagement as the mainline churches.<sup>6</sup> Like the mainline churches, they were embedded in international networks. However, their networks tied them to a style of engagement distinctly American. Their apocalyptic millenarianism soon morphed into theocratic ambition, the politics of the messianic nation. In Zambia, for example, President Frederick Chiluba, an evangelical, amended the country's constitution to declare Zambia "a Christian nation."<sup>7</sup> Nevers Mumba, a non-denominational evangelical pastor who had previously stated that joining politics was demonic, nevertheless formed his own political party, the National Christian Coalition (later renamed the National Citizens Coalition). A self-described "prophet" who once claimed his vocation to be higher than that of President, he later joined the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) and became the country's vice president under Levi Mwanawasa.<sup>8</sup> In neighbouring Zimbabwe, where the Mugabe regime, after ten years in power and being heavily criticised by the mainline churches, found a way to weaken, muzzle and co-opt mainline church opposition. In this state of affairs, a similar movement emerged under a non-denominational, evangelical pastor, Evan Mawarire. Mawarire started the flag movement, #ThisFlag (#MrezaUwu/#iflaglei), and became the face of Zimbabwean resistance, at least in the diaspora.

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5 See Paul Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998). James Tengatenga, *Church, State, and Society in Malawi: An Analysis of Anglican Ecclesiology* (African Books Collective, 2006).

6 See Terence O. Ranger, ed. *Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Africa* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). Edmond J. Keller and Ruth Iyob, *Religious Ideas and Institutions: Transitions to Democracy in Africa* (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2012).

7 See Isabel Apawo Phiri, "President Frederick Chiluba and Zambia: Evangelicals and Democracy in a 'Christian Nation,'" in *Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Africa*, ed. Terence O. Ranger (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

8 Phiri, "Chiluba and Zambia," 110.

One of the things that has intensified this kind of assertive politics is the increased Islamic activity in the wake of 1989, and in particular the response on the part of the United States to the attacks of September 11, 2001. Rising tensions in West Africa due to the religious politics of exclusion and jihadist tendencies have mobilized opposing religious nationalisms. Islamist and Christian Rightest<sup>9</sup> groups speak in categorical, mutually exclusive and jihadist terms. Stories of Al Qaeda in North Africa, Boko Haram in Nigeria, Al Shabab in the Horn of Africa and East Africa (and with new incursions into Mozambique) and the debate among some southern African countries about whether to follow Zambia in declaring themselves Christian nations, have become a daily staple in public debate.

All this is far from what De Gruchy saw as the promise of church involvement in 1995. Rather than the church as a critical partner with the state for the promotion of human rights and social justice in a secular state, the church is seen as a prophetic shaper of a confessional Christian society, with politics as a means to that end. This is a kind of Constantinianism with an Erastian twist. The Constantinian part is the assumption that God raises up Christian leaders “for a time such as this,” to give Christian direction to the nation. Rather than building institutions that foster pluralism, support human rights, and limit governmental power, Christian action is defined as supporting a particular set of morals seen to be “God-pleasing,” and the putting into place of a regime committed to enforcing them. The Erastian part concerns their assertion that the church exists within the nation and serves its interests. Thus, the independence of the prophetic voice of the church is lost, and “the Kingdom of our God” becomes “the Kingdom of this world.”

### 3. *A Moral Majority redivivus*

The idea that God works by “raising up” Christians in places of power, and that Christian action should see this as a goal, is a sentiment strongly reminiscent of 1970s America and the group known as the Moral Majority. The Moral Majority was founded by Southern Baptist pastor, Jerry Falwell

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9 I am using this term over “fundamentalist,” “evangelical,” and “conservative” since the movement includes all of these and more besides.

in 1979. While fundamentalism had withdrawn from the public light for much of the twentieth century,<sup>10</sup> Falwell saw a need and an opportunity to advance conservative social and religious values. Ironically, this began during the tenure of America's first self-described "Born again" Christian President, Jimmy Carter. Also, a Southern Baptist, the liberal Carter was the clearly wrong kind of Christian for Falwell. Falwell saw the growing dominance of liberalism in social and political life as a threat to American hegemony. His crusade to recruit and mobilize conservative and evangelical Christians created an organization which "supported increased defence spending, a strong anti-communist foreign policy, and continued American support for Israel."<sup>11</sup> Reacting to the challenges of the 1960s generation to "traditional" moral values, the Moral Majority defined itself over against movements for civil, women's and gay rights, permissive sexual morality, the teaching of evolution, the banning of school prayer, and especially the legal right to abortion after 1973. Falwell's call to action was apocalyptic:

We are born into a war zone where the forces of God do battle with the forces of evil. Sometimes we get trapped, pinned down in the crossfire. And in the heart of that noisy, distracting battle, two voices call out for us to follow. Satan wants to lead us into death. God wants to lead us into life eternal.<sup>12</sup>

The vision of the Moral Majority was of a White, Christian America in which people of colour, Marxists, liberals and infidels (including Muslims) had no place. "Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" belonged only to them, the "one nation under God." The means to affecting that vision was the election of conservatives to the government and reached its goal with the election in 1980 (and re-election in 1984) of Ronald Reagan – ironically a man who rarely went to church, but who championed the "right" agenda.

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10 The classic study of this withdrawal is George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

11 "Moral Majority," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. February 12, 2018. [Online]. Available: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Moral-Majority>. [Accessed: June 24, 2019].

12 Quoted in "God and America: People and Ideas," [Online]. Available: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/godinamerica/people/jerry-falwell.html>. [Accessed: June 24, 2019].

However, Reagan “knew how to please evangelicals without giving them anything in return.”<sup>13</sup> Even though the Moral Majority disbanded at the end of the 1980s, it succeeded in bringing people into politics who had hitherto desisted in the face of the new world focusing on the world to come. With the attacks of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent “axis of evil” agenda, the polarization between “us” and “them” mirrors the apocalyptic distinction between the forces of good and all others, a distinction mirrored in conservative and mainline churches. In fact, while the Moral Majority is no more, right-wing Christianity continues to push its narrow agenda, now more aggressively in the African context.

The danger with all this is that it confuses the reign of God with human experiments, however Christian, however “prophetic” they may sound or claim to be. It flies in the face of the biblical prophetic tradition, which asserts its independence from political power.<sup>14</sup> The “prophetic imagination” distinguishes itself from “the royal consciousness,” as Walter Brueggemann calls it.<sup>15</sup> Brueggemann argues that authentic biblical faith is at its core a protest against social marginalization and political oppression, and an empowering of an alternative imagining of reality through language in the name of a God who cannot be domesticated. But this faith can be co-opted by those in power and perverted to serve their agenda. A reactionary politics can veil itself in piety. Such a “countering” of the “counterculture” is also found in the Bible. Kings (and Presidents) resist prophetic calls to justice by employing their own “court prophets” to lend theological legitimacy to their regime. Thus an “economics of affluence,” a “politics of oppression,” and a “religion of immanence” assert themselves against “economics of equality,” a “politics of justice,” and a “religion of God’s freedom.”<sup>16</sup> The name for the former is “Empire;” the name for the latter is “the Kingdom of God.” Just as there are court prophets appointed to do the empire’s bidding, so there is a counterfeit representation of the Kingdom of God – an exclusive kingdom obsessed with the boundary between

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13 Richard Cizik, in Julie Power, David Espar, et al, *God in America: How Religious Liberty Shaped America*. American Experience. DVD. New York: PBS Distribution, 2010.

14 For this trajectory in the Old Testament prophets and Jesus of Nazareth, see de Gruchy, *Christianity and Democracy*, ch. 2.

15 Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

16 Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 31.

insiders (true believers) and outsiders. In the end only the pure live in that kingdom; the outsiders are fodder for “hellfire and brimstone.” This is very different from the biblical picture of Christians as citizens of the City of God while on sojourn through the Earthly City where they live, work, and seek the common good together with non-Christians. The conflation of the two cities assumes the arrival of the new Jerusalem already, and thus the eschatological theocracy of the consummation.

#### 4. Prophetic theologies

If Africa is seeing the advent of Moral Majority-style theologies, it has also seen its share of more genuine and biblical prophetic theologies. *The Kairos Document* was written in part as a direct response to the particular version of Christian nationalism in South Africa, and the timidity of the churches in responding to it.<sup>17</sup> The apartheid regime asserted the Christian identity of South Africa not only against Marxism and liberalism, but against religious pluralism in general and Islam in particular.<sup>18</sup> It identified three theological responses to the crisis occasioned by the ensuing conflict. “State theology” was a theology of legitimization, Christian in name but having little to do with the God revealed in Jesus Christ. It was a theology that placed state security first, and subordinated church activity to it. The churches were commanded to be silent in public discourse since the state was “Christian” and represented the voice of God.<sup>19</sup> The second theological response was called “church theology.” While church theology opposed oppression in principle, it also held the appropriate place of the churches

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17 The 1983 Tricameral Constitution began with the words, “In humble submission to Almighty God ...” *The Kairos Document* referred to this as “the blasphemous use of God’s holy name in the preamble to the new apartheid constitution,” and identified this God of the state as “an idol. It is as mischievous, sinister and evil as any of the idols that the prophets of Israel had to contend with. Here we have a god who is historically on the side of the white settlers, who dispossesses black people of their land and who gives the major part of the land to his ‘chosen people.’” Kairos Theologians, *Challenge to the Church: The Kairos Document* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 23.

18 See “Faith Communities and Apartheid: The RICSA Report,” in James R Cochrane, John W. de Gruchy, and Stephen W Martin, eds. *Facing the Truth* (Cape Town; Athens OH: David Philip Publishers; Ohio University Press, 1999).

19 Kairos Theologians, *Challenge to the Church: The Kairos Document*, 17–24.

to be above the fray, a kind of “third way” which condemned the violence of each side.<sup>20</sup>

The third response was “prophetic theology.” This was the theology of the *Kairos Document* itself and claimed that neutrality was neither appropriate for the churches nor faithful to the prophetic tradition. Rather than condemning both sides in equal measure, it expressed prophetic solidarity with the poor and those seeking liberation, making the claim that God was on their side against the powerful.<sup>21</sup> “Recognizing a moment of judgment as well as opportunity,” De Gruchy writes, “the ‘Kairos theologians’ called for direct Christian participation in the struggle, including acts of civil disobedience in resistance to government tyranny.”<sup>22</sup> This precipitated a “kairos” in the churches themselves as they debated their response to the call, and especially as their internal black members pushed for more concrete and decisive engagement. As state repression increased and leaders were imprisoned, the ecumenical churches would take leadership of the movement, seeing it through to its climactic moment in the release of Nelson Mandela and the beginning of negotiations. While a victory, however, it also posed a challenge analogous to other situations on the continent: how to remain engaged in a time of transition and normalization of political activity.

The categories of state, church, and prophetic theology parallel in many ways what De Gruchy called the three historical Christian responses to movements of democratization: “reactionary, reformist, and radical,” respectively.<sup>23</sup> The position of Christian Rightists is best represented by state theology, reflecting in significant ways the position of the white Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa during the years of apartheid.<sup>24</sup> Though the idea of a “volkskerk” as an ethnically exclusive church representing

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20 Kairos Theologians, *Challenge to the Church: The Kairos Document*, 25–36.

21 Kairos Theologians, *Challenge to the Church: The Kairos Document*, 37–46.

22 de Gruchy, *Christianity and Democracy*, 208.

23 de Gruchy, *Christianity and Democracy*, 209.

24 Jerry Falwell visited South Africa in 1985, and on his return, denounced Desmond Tutu and urged conservatives to support the apartheid regime by opposing divestment and purchasing Krugerrands. Robert Pear, “Falwell denounces Tutu as a ‘phony.’” *New York Times*, Aug 21, 1985. [Online]. Available: <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/08/21/world/falwell-denounces-tutu-as-a-phony.html>. [Accessed: July 5, 2019].

the dominant power in government is specific to South Africa, the subordination of the church to the state and its advocacy of exclusivist Christian nationalism are obvious parallels, as are the restrictive moral agendas and the opposition of human rights and liberal discourse as anti-Christian.<sup>25</sup> By contrast, mainline churches have alternated between reformist and radical positions, sometimes (as in the case of South Africa) being pushed by voices within as much as circumstances without.

A more recent example of prophetic theology in sub-Saharan Africa is “The Accra Charter.” Whereas the *Kairos Document* addressed churches in situations of compromise in the Cold-War-polarized world of the late-twentieth century, the Charter addresses churches in situations of deep conflict as a result of the US-led war on terror. It states its orientation this way:

Representing many different Christian traditions, we came from nations such as Cote d’Ivoire, where a civil war threatens and where religious loyalties seem more united than political ones; from Nigeria, where religious extremists out of several traditions breach the peace, and the government struggles to maintain order; and from the newest nation now emerging, South Sudan, where hopes rise among diverse people of faith for a more just and reconciling public life.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, the Charter is born out of the situation where assertive sectarian exclusionist politics have a religious face. It is for this reason that the signatories

uphold freedom of religion not as an excuse to divide, split, and exploit, but as reason to summon the conscience in the name of the mutual duty of believer and citizen alike to exercise forbearance, charity and the regard for one another (1 Cor. 3:10; 7:21–24; 1

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25 It should be noted that the Dutch Reformed Church was never completely monolithic, and in the 1980s also began to move towards a Reformist point of view. This resulted in splinter churches supporting more explicit state theology. See Johann Kinghorn, “On the Theology of Church and Society in the DRC,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* (March 1990): 21–36.

26 “Accra Charter of Religious Freedom and Citizenship,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 35, no. 4 (2011), 6.

Pet. 3:8–9). In that way the spirit of benevolence can be stirred to move and elevate society in the work of civic righteousness. We are accountable to our creator and to our fellow human beings for nothing less than that. (Phil. 1:9–11).<sup>27</sup>

The Charter is thus a document that calls both for reconciliation amongst religious factions and a common commitment to pursuing a Common Good that can be shared across differences. This makes it a more constructive document than the *Kairos Document*, especially in its recognition that the pursuit of “civic righteousness” is a noble good. Indeed, Kairos theologians found themselves struggling to change course during South Africa’s transition, with some maintaining vigilance about the transition and others moving toward theologies of reconstruction.<sup>28</sup> “At the same time,” the Charter recognizes, “that governments and societies are provisional arrangements, for by faith we live in our countries while we look “forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (Heb. 11:9–10).” This means that the declaration of a nation “Christian” (or by extension “Muslim” or any other religious designation) confuses the kingdom of God with the kingdom of this world. Indeed, the Charter continues,

We are deeply convinced that faith gives its noblest expression in settings where all are free to follow their religious convictions and freely to serve the common good (Gal 5:13), where government secures the peace and good order taught by all the world’s great faiths, and where government affords its citizens the right to live freely and recognizes their power to hold it accountable.<sup>29</sup>

The Charter is in this way prophetic, though contextually different from the *Kairos Document*. It speaks of bridging gaps by advocating plural policies

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27 “Accra Charter of Religious Freedom and Citizenship,” 12.

28 See the collected essays in N. Barney Pityana and Charles Villa Vicencio, *Being the Church in South Africa Today* (Johannesburg: South African Council of Churches, 1996). Charles Villa-Vicencio, one of the signatories of The Kairos Document, quoted Paul Tillich, who “insisted that while ‘a mighty weapon in warfare’ theologies of resistance are often ‘an inconvenient tool for use in the building trade.’” *A Theology of Reconstruction: Nation-Building and Human Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 21–22.

29 “Accra Charter of Religious Freedom and Citizenship,” 7.

that recognize human rights, while avoiding theological legitimization (actively or implicitly) of current regimes.

## 5. The case of Malawi

“There was never a time when the church was not involved in society and state in Malawi.”<sup>30</sup> It was church leaders who stepped into the vacuum during the country’s transition from 1992–1994.<sup>31</sup> The founding of the Public Affairs Committee (PAC) of the churches brought together Christians and Muslims, underground politicians, lawyers and business people. The evangelical, charismatic and Pentecostal leadership was reluctant at first, but later founded Charismatic, Pentecostal and Evangelical Leadership (CHAPEL) as their movement for engagement in the public sphere. Through it, they organized presidential prayer breakfasts and nights of prayer for Malawi. In order to counter the religious face of opposition, Dr Banda’s party tried to enlist pastors from newer churches into its own ranks, and these pastors remained active within the party. Nevertheless, CHAPEL continued to have a lesser profile than the PAC.

The question that faced the religious leaders, having been midwives to the new dispensation, was whether to continue their public role or “to leave politics to the politicians” and “get back to being the church.”<sup>32</sup> While the PAC decided that it was going to continue its public role as part of the emerging civil society, some prominent church leaders were courted by the new regime. Rev Ted Mwabila joined the civil service as Advisor for Religious Affairs (the equivalent of a permanent secretary in the civil service). The Rev. Mpande became a member of parliament. A number of others were appointed to chairs of boards of parastatal organizations. The Revs. Overton Mazunda, Silas Ncozana, Chande Mhone, and Emmanuel Chinkwita were appointed ambassadors to France, Germany, Zambia and

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30 Tengatenga, *Church, State, and Society*, 190.

31 See John MacCracken, *Politics and Christianity in Malawi, 1875-1940* (Zomba: Kachere Series, 2000); A. Ross, *Blantyre Mission and the Making of Modern Malawi* (Zomba: Kachere Series, 1996); K. Ross, *Here Comes Your King! Christ, Church and Nation in Malawi* (Zomba: Kachere, 1998); Matthew Schoffeleers. *In search of Truth and Justice: Confrontation between Church and State in Malawi 1960–1994* (Zomba: Kachere Series, 1999).

32 Tengatenga, *Church, State, and Society*, 191.

Mozambique respectively. There were Muslim leaders benefiting as well. They saw no contradiction in their roles even though it meant resigning from pastoral work. However, because all these were party political appointments, leaders were assimilated and thus lost their prophetic voice. There is an African expression: “A dog doesn’t bark with a bone in its mouth!” They had hoped to make a difference from the inside, but they were co-opted and compromised, if in the least muzzled.<sup>33</sup>

In the meantime, the promised economic transformation was not being fulfilled. Indeed, the new dispensations coming out of the second wave of democratization have not delivered for most countries. While multi-party democracies were put in place and free and fair elections promoted, economic transformation in their wake has been elusive. Poverty and stagnant development continue, and corruption is rife. Western supporters have bullied the new governments into toeing the human rights line. The religious leaders who joined governments have fallen into line with political realities; some of their successors in religious communities are being seduced into the corridors of power in the same way. As such, the religious voice has been muted some and at best plays a “peace-keeping and peace-brokering” role in the fractious politics of the new dispensation.

Economic failures have disproportionately impacted young people, and there is a zealous generation of youths yearning for a better life. Supported by a well-funded Islamic movement, Muslims continue to gain visibility and demand more space and rights. While Muslims make up about fifteen percent of Malawi’s population and have been present in the region for a long time, radicalizing elements are a growing phenomenon. A new narrative is emerging, inspired by the visit of Muammar Qaddafi in

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33 I have already spoken of parallels in Zambia under Frederick Chiluba. Another interesting comparison is with anti-apartheid church leaders in South Africa who joined the ANC government in 1994. With regard to Anglicans, however, Archbishop Desmond Tutu disciplined clergy who declared party allegiance. See Bob Clarke, *Anglicans Against Apartheid, 1936-1996* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2008), 537–38. Tracy Kuperus’ analysis of the South African Council of Churches, as she compares it with the Council of Churches in Ghana, is also telling in this regard. “Democratization, Religious Actors, and Political Influence: A Comparison of Christian Councils in Ghana and South Africa,” *Africa Today* 64, no. 3 (2018): 28–51.

2002, of an historically pre-British, Islamic Malawi.<sup>34</sup> While historically dubious, this exacerbated the contest over the country's religious identity. In response, some Christians argued for a formal declaration of Malawi as a Christian country. While Parliament did not make the requisite constitutional change, it did declare Malawi as "a God-fearing nation." Parliament continues to open with prayer, and national independence celebrations continue to include a predominantly Christian service of worship. Even with all this, Rightist Christians remain unsatisfied. Christian evangelicalism has become more actively engaged in civil society, building a new profile among young graduates of local universities. Some young activists have been formally trained at American Christian universities, while others have learned theologies through the televangelists on free satellite television. From such, young people hear fundamentalist evangelical preachers and leaders decry with confidence the moral bankruptcy of liberalism, substituting a God-fearing, right wing politics.

In what appeared to be an insignificant event at the time, Dr. Chris Daza, an articulate, foreign-educated entrepreneur and Pentecostal/Evangelical pastor, became Secretary General of the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) in 2008. He also served as a Cabinet Minister from 2013–2014. Not only did this bring an evangelical into high-profile politics, it also brought a "youthful" person (possibly untainted with the old image of the MCP) into the political realm. His was a new face, suggesting "a new dawn."<sup>35</sup> After leaving the party, Daza started the Democratic People's Congress (DePeCo). The quest for Christian transformation and changes in the political sphere has continued. Educated in Texas, James Nyondo ran as an independent presidential candidate in 2009 and 2014 with the financial support of American Christians.<sup>36</sup> He believed the only successful government in Malawi to be one based on Christian values. By the time of his death in 2015, he had formed his own political party, the National Salvation Front

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34 Qaddafi suggested that since Arab and Swahili slave traders had preceded the arrival of the British, Islam should be awarded its rightful place of dominance.

35 Pun intended: the MCP slogan "Kwacha" means dawn.

36 Kay Campbell, "Alabama friends mourn loss of Malawi leader James Nyondo." AL.com, Jul 21, 2015. [Online]. Available:

[https://www.al.com/living/2015/07/james\\_nyondo\\_death.html](https://www.al.com/living/2015/07/james_nyondo_death.html). [Accessed: June 25, 2019].

(NASA), whose Secretary General was another well-known Malawian evangelical, Lester Chikoya.

Roman Catholics and Muslims have joined in promoting the conservative moral agenda, as have some among the mainline churches. Recent marches against abortion and minority people's rights (which in Malawi is a catch all phrase for many rights inclusive of LGBTQ ones) display this unusual coalition. Successive governments have not met the needs of the people and the impatient youth. With what is generally perceived as a directionless, graft-ridden political system a need for a moral voice has arisen. With the mainline church leadership compromised and the heightened new profile of the religious right, a need for alternative leadership has arisen. The MCP, recognizing its waning influence, made Lazarus Chakwera, the head of the Assemblies of God Church, its president and flag-bearer. He had grown in stature over the years during periods of peace-brokering within and between the political parties and was a member of a group of seasoned religious and other high-profile mediators, the National Association for Peaceful Settlement of Conflict (NAFPESCO).

With the rising profile of Evangelical-Pentecostal churches it has become necessary to find a voice of reason with enough moral gravitas that would tap into the religious-political fervour in the country. Many well-educated young people belong to this movement, and they are convinced that the Christian faith needs to be brought to bear in the public sphere in a new way. It is time for the new form of Christianity to flex its muscles, “for the times, they are a-changing.”

It may be too early to reach such a conclusion, but one cannot help acknowledging that the links this movement has to the American Bible Belt do not augur well for the future. Adding to the concern is the new assertiveness among Muslims. What would happen should Muslims respond to Christian assertiveness by attempting to form their own political party? If they were pushed out of the public sphere and away from the share of the pie that is Malawi might they embrace radical Islam? As is common knowledge, Al Shabaab has been flexing its muscle as far south as neighbouring Mozambique. The words of Accra Charter again speak to this kind of escalation of religious extremism:

We reject the use of coercion and repression in matters of religion, political affiliation and personal choice. ... As citizens and believers, we acknowledge that religion as the duty we owe to our Creator as well as the manner of discharging that duty demands the repudiation of force or violence, and the recognition that all citizens are entitled to the free exercise of religion guided by the dictates of conscience (Jn 4:24). Government may not impose or forbid, favor or impede, the establishment of religion. ... We declare and proclaim religious freedom as the charter of citizenship and solidarity in a rapidly changing world of overlapping rights and responsibilities.<sup>37</sup>

Zambian scholar Kapya Kaoma has written about the global conservative and rightist alliances in the political and moral landscape in Africa. His claim is that what African Rightists are claiming as their voice is really not *their* voice.<sup>38</sup> It represents the infiltration of the fundamentalist American Religious Right into African society, with a colonial, homogenizing agenda. Because of seeming affinities, many Africans are oblivious to this agenda. While the rightist agenda has lost some of its influence in the American context since in 1989, it has reproduced itself within the contemporary contest for the soul of Africa. African governments feel constrained and bullied by Western powers over human rights, and they find allies in the fundamentalist right. That which these organizations cannot do in the USA or Europe they are free not only to do but to propagate in Africa.<sup>39</sup> They are granted access to masses of Africans through their crusades and programmes, and to African governments through their opposition to human rights, which they do not get at home.

A postcolonial analysis of all this would suggest that despite the Moral Majority's demise in the US it is redivivus in Africa. This points to one

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37 *Accra Charter*, 11–12,14 “Accra Charter of Religious Freedom and Citizenship,” 11–12, 14.

38 K. Kaoma, *Christianity, Globalization, and Protective Homophobia: Democratic Contestation of Sexuality in sub-Saharan Africa* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

39 The documentary, *God Loves Uganda*, in which Kaoma appears, illustrates this very well with Pastor Lou Engle and Scott Lively’s participation in the “Kill the Gays Bill” in Uganda. *God Loves Uganda*, Directed and Produced by Roger Ross Williams. DVD. New York, First Run Features, 2013.

possible path Malawi may tread with its new, assertive religious politics. Should this Rightist agenda succeed, a time is foreseeable when citizenship may be a matter of religious coercion, and rights only exercised when they fit such a narrow agenda. The second wave of democratization in sub-Saharan Africa which began with such promise will be completely undone. People who do not conform will become strangers in their own country, deprived perhaps even of the right to vote – the very essence of democratic participation.

## 6. Conclusion

While occasioned by optimism about democratic transformation in the 1990s, there is also a realist current running through *Christianity and Democracy*.<sup>40</sup> No penultimate democracy can be the *ultimate* Kingdom of God, and so democratization must always remain a *vision* both guiding and judging political and economic life. At the same time, the failures of the second wave in sub-Saharan Africa remind us that elections and opposition parties represent *systems* that may or may not carry forward the democratic vision of a just society. Democracy is always vulnerable to co-option into other agendas, whether on the left or the right. While churches can play important roles as “midwives” of democratic transformation, talk of a “Christian nation” is deeply problematic theologically as well as democratically, as apartheid South Africa showed. It was the ecumenical churches, with their long and sometimes ambiguous history of public engagement, that played a key role South Africa’s dramatic transition, even as it was the ecumenical churches that were key to the opening up of democracy in Malawi not long after. For it is the church, insofar as it is faithful to the gospel from which its mandate is derived, which reminds every regime that it cannot be the Kingdom. And it is also the church that is called to represent the voices of those marginalized by the anti-democratic projects of such regimes – even when those projects are done in Jesus’ name.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps such a fresh realization on the part of churches in sub-Saharan Africa might begin to open another wave of democratization.

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40 de Gruchy, *Christianity and Democracy*, 245–46.

41 de Gruchy, *Christianity and Democracy*, 267f.