


# God and budget: The place of religion in the readings of Ghana's annual budget statements by the Finance Minister (2017–2020)

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The budget presentation in Ghana's parliament is an annual ritual required by the 1992 Constitution. As stipulated in Article 179, the Budget Statement and Economic Policy should detail the revenues and expenditures of the government for the upcoming year. When the Akufo-Addo government of the New Patriotic Party assumed power in 2017, the Finance Minister became well known for using the Bible and religious themes in his presentations of budget statements. The study employed content analysis and thematic analysis of four budget statements to examine how religion has been used to present the national budget statements as divinely mediated. The study revealed how the Finance Minister sought to explain and gain support for the government's economic policies based on his convictions that the economic policies are under the guidance and direction of God.

**Contribution:** The study contributes to the larger conversation about the role of religion and faith in our societies today, especially in the public life of politicians. It also calls for the accountable use of religion in the public sphere.

**Keywords:** budget; parliament; politicians; God; religion; finance minister; Christians.

## Introduction

That Ghanaian society is saturated with religion is evidenced in the latest census, which indicates that over 97% are religious, with Christians in the majority with 71%, followed by Muslims with 20% (U.S. Department of State 2022). The presence of religion in political circles is not new and scholars have detailed the intricate relationship between religion and politics from the late colonial era through independence to the current dispensation of the Fourth Republic (Dovlo 2006; Ellis & Ter Harr 1998; Pobee 1987, 1991). Even though Ghanaians seem to be familiar with the association between religion and politics, the public interest and debate that greeted the Finance Minister's penchant for using biblical quotations during budget statement presentations pointed to a growing concern among some Ghanaians on the relevance of religion in public life (Wandusim & Boateng 2024). Since the inception of the Fourth Republic, Ghana has witnessed political stability and consolidated its democratic credentials (Owusu & Damoah 2023). Many factors contributed to this feat, and religion is an important one. Churches and ecumenical bodies have been active in the democratic process of the nation through important interventions such as being part of the peace council and through advocacy roles (Gyampo & Asare 2017; Yirenkyi 2000:325–328).

Nonetheless, Ghanaians are also growing concerned about the use of the Bible and religion, especially in the public sphere (Anomah 2018; Savage 2020; Wandusim & Boateng 2024). For instance, the former President, Akofo-Addo, indicated, 'I am a Christian who is in politics and unashamed on asserting my Christian faith as part of my political calling and I freely admit that my vision for my country, and Africa's transformation, is heavily influenced by the Bible' (Dapatem 2022). The relationship between political leadership and the Christian faith interests some Ghanaians who believe the association between the two should lead to qualitative results. For instance, in an empirical study on the presence of spirituality in Ghana's politics in the Fourth Republic, Aubyn and Aning (2016) conclude:

If the goal of politics is to promote good governance and improve the well-being of people and the purpose of spirituality is to encourage morality and human values, then there is a need to acknowledge and consolidate the important roles that religious functionaries play in politics in order to consolidate Ghana's democracy. (p. 146)

Religion in the public life of politicians can lead to some positive outcomes, such as strengthening Ghana's democratic processes. Existing studies on religion, the public sphere and politics have

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generally examined the presence of religion in national politics (Pobee 1987, 1991), the use of religion in electioneering campaigns (Dovlo 2006), religious bodies and their participation in national issues, and the interplay between religion, law and politics (Acheampong 2013; Asamoah-Gyadu 2014). The one work I have read that broaches the subject of religion in Ghana's parliament is the contribution by Wandusim and Boateng (2024) in the book *Going the Extra Mile. Reflections on Biblical Studies in Africa and the Contributions of Joachim Kügler*. They paid attention to the use of the scripture, particularly the Matthean text, by the Finance Minister in the 2018 budget statement. This study, however, focuses on the presence of religion across four budget statements in order to appreciate and critique the sustained use of religion in the budget readings in Ghana's parliament.

## Research methods and design

The data for the study were the published budget statements by the Ministry of Finance. These statements (2017–2020) were accessed from the Ministry's official webpage (<https://mofep.gov.gh/publications/budget-statements>). Each year's budget statement comes with ancillary documents such as the Budget Highlights and the Appropriation Act. However, it is the document titled, Budget Statement and Economic Policy, with the respective years that were used for this study. The statements from 2017 to 2020 were used for the study because 2017 marked the beginning of Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo's government, where he appointed the Finance Minister, Mr Ken Ofori-Atta, who popularised the use of religion, especially the Bible, in his speeches (Wandusim & Boateng 2024). The year 2020 served as a terminus point because it ended the first term of the government and contained the last budget statement for that term.

Four documents were downloaded from the Ministry's site, each titled, Budget Statement and Economic Policy, with the respective years prefixing each document. Two analytical techniques were used: content analysis and thematic analysis. As one of the widely employed methods in qualitative studies, content analysis helps in examining the occurrences of words, phrases and themes in a given context (Ngai et al. 2020). Although germane for qualitative analysis, content analysis can also be used to examine data quantitatively (Nche 2023; Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas 2013). The four budget statements contained the phenomenon of the Finance Minister's use of religious concepts to frame the national budget. Content analysis was necessary for the extraction and interpretation of the relevant religious terms within the statements. Each statement was read three times to identify the words and constructions that qualify as religious concepts. Because the budget statements contain relatively large textual information, not only were the concepts identified, but they were also categorised and grouped to aid in the identification of the frequency of the words, their relationships and the pattern of use (Grbrich 2013). The thematic technique was used to search for and identify common threads within and between the statements. Research assistants were recruited to help in this process.

Four research assistants, who are graduate students, were assembled and trained. Two meetings were held with them to explain the nature and goal of the study and their responsibility in helping process the data. The budget statements were printed and handed to them to read, at least two times. Receiving briefings on the conceptualisation of God and religion, they were to identify potential themes and forward them to me. After receiving their initial themes, I reviewed them by comparing, evaluating and synthesising the themes they generated using the objective of the study as a guide. I then generated overarching elements and higher-level sub-themes and identified the sections of the statements that were congruent with the themes.

## Defining God and religion

Religion is a contentious subject. Efforts to come up with an acceptable definition of the concept 'religion', which all scholars or even a majority of scholars will agree on, have been in vain (Woodhead 2011). Even a 'brief handy definition of religion' is difficult to arrive (Bellah 1964). Nonetheless, as Woodhead explains, the difficulty in defining religion as a concept can be offset by the necessity 'to have some critical awareness of what concept(s) of religion are in play, and to be able to justify their applicability in particular contexts of use' (Woodhead 2011:122). Within the five frameworks she proposes, the frame of religion as Culture best captures the concepts and ideas of how religion is perceived in this article. Belief is central to understanding religion as culture. As Woodhead (2011) puts it:

One of the most popular conceptions of religion today – if one takes as evidence not only academic work but the discourse of politicians, legal professionals, journalists and everyday talk – is of religion as belief. (p. 123)

This mainly manifests in the belief in the supernatural bodies, which in Christianity translates into God and spirits (Ratzinger 2004). It also manifests in belief in material objects associated with the supernatural, such as the scriptures, and in the case of the Christian faith, the Bible. In Africa (particularly Ghana), Christianity expressed in the belief of the supernatural is vibrant because of its ties to the African Indigenous Religion (Moscicke 2017). In the introduction to their book, *Worlds of Power: Religious Thought and Political Practice in Africa*, Ellis and Ter Haar (2004) argue that religion in Africa revolves around the belief in the supernatural world and its influence on the material well-being of Africans. They argue that this is the best way to understand the connection between religion and politics in Africa, since 'African politicians ... typically pay great regard to the spirit world as a source of power' (Ellis & Ter Haar 2004:3).

## Results

The findings of this study are as follows:

- **God bless Ghana: Re-echoing the national anthem:** The opening clause of Ghana's national anthem was a recurring theme in all the budget statements. The 2017 and 2018 statements were near direct quotations of the

national anthem: 'God bless our homeland, and make our nation great and strong' (Ofori-Atta 2017a, 2017b), while 2019 and 2020 were varied as below:

2019 (paragraph 1010): 'God Bless us all and our dear country, Ghana!' (Ofori-Atta 2018)

2020 (paragraph 1140): 'God Bless us all and God Bless our homeland, Ghana.' (Ofori-Atta 2019)

- **God the unseen Hand to Turn Ghana's Economic Fortunes:** The statements revealed the persistent idea that God is the unseen hand to help change Ghana's economic fortunes:

2017 (paragraph 895): 'We believe with the help of the Almighty God we can deliver on all the well thought out programmes and policies and build a business-friendly and prosperous economy.' (Ofori-Atta 2017a)

2018 (paragraph 875): 'We promised to pursue policies that will create jobs in the economy and we are delivering. This budget, by the grace of God, will deliver massively on jobs.' (Ofori-Atta 2017b)

2019 (paragraph 52): 'God has demonstrated countless times that He can use ordinary people, ordinary nations in ordinary times to do extraordinary things. Ghana has a history replete with 'extraordinary' achievements – nationally, regionally and internationally. These achievements were the result and culmination of right choices.' (Ofori-Atta 2018)

2019 (paragraph 1003): '... we have chosen to invest in people; we have chosen to boldly tackle the infrastructural needs of the people with a \$2 billion facility next year. We have chosen to make our rich oil resources more accessible to credible investors through competitive bidding and we aim to hit, God willing, a million barrels of crude oil production within a matter of a decade.' (Ofori-Atta 2018)

2020 (paragraph 4): 'Mr. Speaker, in substance, 2019 has been a very good year for Ghana. This is the year that one can confidently say that God's blessing of the hard work is beginning to manifest, putting us on a positive trajectory for a proper lift.' (Ofori-Atta 2019)

- **Use of Scriptures: An Affirmation of faith:** Occasionally, the Minister resorted to using scripture to support his claims and demonstrate his faith in the Bible:

2018 (paragraph 876): 'Mr. Speaker, in my debut appearance in this august House, my backbencher friends across the aisle traded Bible quotations with me. As I invoked the miracle of Jesus feeding the 5,000 with five loaves of bread and three fish.' (Mathew 13) [sic], they responded with Philipppines 4:19 'And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of His glory in Christ Jesus.' (Ofori-Atta 2017b)

2018 (paragraph 876): 'Mr. Speaker, with the little inherited from the Mahama Government, our performance these ten months are (sic) indeed nothing less than a miracle as evidenced by the blessings and achievements I have just enumerated. I can only add Mr. Speaker, that the combination of Philipppines 4:19 and Mathew 13, hard work and obedience have greatly benefited our dear country.' (Ofori-Atta 2017b)

2019 (paragraph 1008): 'I believe, that with faith as our shield and God-loving Ghanaians as partners, the promise of God in Genesis 12:2-3 will also be ours: "I will make you a great nation;

I will bless you and make your name [Ghana] great... And in you all the families of the (earth) [Ghana] shall be blessed.'" (Ofori-Atta 2018)

2019 (paragraph 1007): 'We also recognize that building national prosperity is not the exclusive domain of Government ... I thank all the productive communities of Ghana and all Ghanaians for the epic sacrifices and contributions you make every day. I particularly thank the community of faith whose intercession and prayers for this nation are unceasing. The Government recognizes and appreciates the role you play in fulfilling the biblical mandate in Matthew 25 to "feed the hungry, clothe the naked, take care of the sick and visit the prisoner." Government's partnership with you to lift the vulnerable and needy is stead-fast and immovable.' (Ofori-Atta 2018)

- **Ghana as God's beloved country:** God favours Ghana. This theme is expressed diversely as follows:

2019 (paragraph 1009): 'Mr. Speaker, in the Spirit of the season, I declare that by this budget, we bring Glad Tidings of Great Joy, of Hope, Relief and a Renewed strength. Indeed, Emmanuel God is with us!!!' (Ofori-Atta 2018)

2020 (paragraph 4): 'Mr. Speaker, in substance, 2019 has been a very good year for Ghana. This is the year that one can confidently say that God's blessing of the hard work is beginning to manifest, putting us on a positive trajectory for a proper lift.' (Ofori-Atta 2019)

2020 (paragraph 10): 'Mr Speaker exactly 2 years, 8 months and 12 days later, I stand before you to declare that indeed God has been gracious. His favour has shone on our nation and it is because, in my humble view, we, their new leaders, choose to serve His people rightly and sincerely.' (Ofori-Atta 2019)

- **Ghanaians as Partners in faith and development:** There is a role reserved for Ghanaians as religious faithful, who also contribute to national development:

2019 (paragraph 1007): 'We also recognize that building national prosperity is not the exclusive domain of Government. ... I thank all the productive communities of Ghana and all Ghanaians for the epic sacrifices and contributions you make every day. I particularly thank the community of faith whose intercession and prayers for this nation are unceasing. The Government recognizes and appreciates the role you play in fulfilling the biblical mandate in Matthew 25 to "feed the hungry, clothe the naked, take care of the sick and visit the prisoner." Government's partnership with you to lift the vulnerable and needy is stead-fast and immovable.' (Ofori-Atta 2018)

2020 (1138): 'As we can all testify, the last three years have been remarkable and we are grateful to God and the good citizens of Ghana for what we have achieved. Going forward, we will consolidate the gains made and pursue our transformation agenda, so help us God.' (Ofori-Atta 2019)

2020 (1139): 'This, Mr Speaker, as we push on, in the knowledge that Ghanaians will know that we mean well, we do well and that, by the Grace of the Almighty, we shall all proclaim with one loud voice in melodic unison that: 'ONE GOOD TERM WILL DESERVE ANOTHER.' 'ONE GOOD TERM WILL DESERVE ANOTHER.' (Ofori-Atta 2019)

## Discussion

The study examined how religion finds presence in economic planning instruments such as the national budget statements. From the content analysis, the word 'God' appeared 21 times in the four budget statements under review. In the 2017 budget, it appeared twice, and thrice in the 2018 budget. In both 2019 and 2020, the word appeared eight times each. Upon further scrutiny of the data, we found that in 2017, the two appearances were in the conclusion section of the budget statement. The same is true for the 2018 statement for all three appearances. However, in the 2019 statement, the word appears once in the introduction, once in the body and six times in the conclusion section. Finally, the 2020 budget had three uses in the introduction, one in the body and four in the conclusion.

A significant observation is the progression in the use of the term. The minimal use in the first two statements may be attributed to the fact that the Minister was new in his office and was unsure of making his personal beliefs prominent in the budget statements. However, as he warmed up into his role and gained confidence, he dared to be outspoken about his personal beliefs. Also possible is the idea that the Minister was uncertain of how Ghanaians might respond to his explicit appeal to faith and God in the early days of his job. Again, we observe how in the first two statements, the Minister reserved his use of God and religious themes for the end of his presentations, but the next two statements reveal a more dispersed use. As indicated above, this not only shows the strong conviction of the Minister in his faith but also his confidence in how he portrayed his faith.

Findings from the thematic analysis show how the Finance Minister used religion to project the national budget as divinely mediated. In Ghana (and many African societies), the presence of religion in national secular events is not uncommon. Abbink (2014) argues that there is an 'unrelenting growth in the public presence of religion in Africa'. Although a secular state, Ghana has a compliance gap in how secularism is practised (Michael, Lin & Berlinerblau 2024). Ghana's national anthem opens with the clause, 'God bless our homeland Ghana'. God and Religious themes are common in many national anthems, even among highly secular states (Silaghi-Dumitrescu 2020). National anthems as symbols embody the collective fate of a people in a country (Zikmund 1969). The anthems contain a nation's unique view of its polity, self-image and political aspirations (Zikmund 1969). National anthems play similar roles as religious symbols in eliciting values of commitment and allegiance. Politicians leverage the blending of religious and national themes and symbols to achieve a set of political ideals, such as support for a policy (Serrano 2023). The Finance Minister's continuous use of the phrase 'God bless our homeland ...' in the budget statements similarly sought to awaken the national and religious sentiments of Ghanaians.

God is the unseen hand responsible for turning Ghana's economic fortunes. This idea is captured in varied and

powerful ways in the budget statements. Primarily, God is presented as the all-powerful, transcendental being superior to humans. In paragraph 895 of the 2017 statement, the Minister opens with the words: 'We believe with the help of the Almighty God ...' This religious language is inclusive and draws Ghanaians into his world. The phrase, 'Almighty God', shows the hierarchical relationship between the believer and the deity. Thus, by drawing Ghanaians into his world, he communicates that God is the only one who can ensure that the good plans detailed in the budget can be achieved. He, the Minister, and all Ghanaians are subservient to this great and powerful deity. As humans, they can achieve their goals only when 'Almighty God' comes to their aid. Thus, the word 'help' perfectly defines the message of the Minister; the success of the budget depends on God's help. Norenzayan (2013) argues that early societies created the idea of 'big gods' equipped with policing abilities to reward and punish humans according to their acts. Thus, 'big gods' help promote pro-social acts in larger societies, and 'while these gods can help cultivate pro-social norms, they can also be used by the state to serve its own ends' (Broadsheet 2021). The Finance Minister plays this latter function by positioning God as an important agent in the success of the budget.

God's supernatural intervention in Ghana's economy is presented through religious themes such as the 'grace of God', 'God willing' and 'God's blessing'. These phrases appeal to the religious community in Ghana. For instance, the phrase 'by the grace of God' is popular among Ghanaians who believe that every achievement, big or small, depends on God's grace. In a study by Korang-Okrah (2015), she demonstrates how this phrase is popular among Ghanaian widows despite their difficulties. She explains that the phrase 'God's grace' provides meaning and purpose for the widows and, by extension, many Ghanaians. Similarly, the phrase 'God's blessing' is used to gain credibility among Ghanaians. The Minister juxtaposes this phrase (God's blessing) with the work ethic of hard work (see 2020 paragraph 4). Through this move, he frames his discourse as a collaborative effort between God and humans (the government). This is clear from the comment, 'We have won some painful but necessary battles for God and country'. The expression, 'God and country', is a popular hendiadys that individuals use to demonstrate their highest commitment to their faith and country. The binary yet complementary use of the sacred and the profane is a clever way in which the Minister continuously merges the two realms to claim credibility.

One of the distinctive characteristics of the Finance Minister was his frequent use of biblical quotations and allusions in his public engagements. This is what Wandusim and Boateng (2024) call the 'Ofori-Atta phenomenon'. For instance, one of the notorious biblical allusions by the Minister was his reference to the Joshua Caleb story in 2022, when the country was torn between going to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to request a bailout or implementing what the government called the home-grown solutions. The government and the Finance Minister initially opted for the

home-grown solution, hence the allusion to the Joshua Caleb story. In this respect, Anny Osubatey (2022) explains that:

Mr Ofori-Atta likened the country's situation to the heroic deeds of Joshua, Caleb and ten others, who went to spy on the PROMISED LAND, and only two came back still believing they could execute the mission. (p.1)

In the budget statements, several biblical references are referenced: Matthew 13 and 25, Philippians 4:19, and Genesis 12:2-3. These references not only solidify the Minister's image as a devout Christian but also his commitment to upholding Christian values in his official duties. But critics of the Minister pointed out that the penchant for the use of the Bible deflects responsibility away from him. In a nation where the majority are Christians, the Minister may be cleverly leveraging his faith for political expediency. Some studies point to the global phenomenon of politicians' use of religion in public life. Schiess (2023), for instance, demonstrates how this practice has been part of the political history of the United States. Religious identity (specifically the Christian identity) is effective in courting the allegiance of Ghanaian Christians.

Abbinck (2014) argues that the idea of a secular state in Africa is dynamic and multilayered. This is true because of the varied ways religion and politics intermingle in many African societies. For instance, politicians consciously and unconsciously merge the two worlds through their rhetoric. The Finance Minister, in the budget statements, employed explicit and implicit religious cues to convey the idea that God favours Ghana. The nation is the beloved of God; it has been chosen by God. The 2019 statement, for instance, employed one of the popular Christian symbols, 'Emmanuel, God is with us'. In paragraph 1008 of the same statement, the Minister referenced Genesis 12:2-3, where he quotes. 'I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name [*Ghana*] great ... And in you all the families of the (earth) [*Ghana*] shall be blessed'. The text is critical in the formation of the Israelites as a nation. Abram, later Abraham, who will become the father of the Israelites, is the addressee and the recipient of the promise. Many theological themes emerge from this encounter between God and Abraham, including the theology of grace, election and God's promises; however, I believe that the theme of election was foremost in the Minister's mind.

The theology of Israel's election states that God made the divine choice to select the Israelites as God's chosen people. It is God's decision, God's choice, and not Israel's doing to have had such a privileged position with God (Sohn 1991:1-4). The Minister appears to play on this idea when he refers to Gen. 12:2-3. God has chosen Ghana just as God chose Israel. Ghanaians, therefore, stand in the line of promise and will inherit God's blessing, just as Israel saw the promises fulfilled when they conquered the land and established the nation of Israel. This manoeuvring by the Minister is possible because there are indeed sentiments among many Ghanaian Christians that Ghana is God's chosen nation in Africa (Ghana News Agency 2005). Because of the prevalence of this belief, politicians capitalise on it to garner support for their policies and political action.

The Finance Minister cleverly reserved a role for Ghanaians as partners in the faith and development of the nation. In the 2019 budget (paragraph 1007), for instance, he indicated:

I particularly thank the community of faith whose intercession and prayers for this nation are unceasing. The Government recognizes and appreciates the role you play in fulfilling the biblical mandate in Matthew 25 to 'feed the hungry, clothe the naked, take care of the sick and visit the prisoner'. Government's partnership with you to lift the vulnerable and needy is steadfast and immovable.

Here, he shows appreciation to Ghanaians not only for their role in the development of the nation but also for their faith practices. He particularly singles out the 'community of faith' for their religious contribution through prayers. By this move, the Minister validates national praying sessions organised by several religious bodies, especially Christian groups. Although the phrase, 'community of faith', may be intentional to include all religious bodies, the comment that follows, because of its specific Christian allusion, suggests that the Minister is referring to the Christian community. The Minister portrays the Church and state cooperating in the biblical mandate by helping the vulnerable in society. By this rhetoric, the Minister presents the government as partners with the Church and with God.

## Implications

### Towards a Critical Engagement of Religion in Ghana

Ghana, like many African nations, is notoriously religious (Mbiti 1969). As noted by Asamoah-Gyadu (2014), 'religion and life are inseparable entities and this has remained so both in traditional systems of governance and within modern political life' (p. 165). Although Ghana is a constitutional state and also considered a secular state, the separation of religion and state has been questioned by many. Ede and Kalu (2024), for instance, note that African societies have continued to allow religion to thrive despite the increasing presence of science and technology. In a study by Michael et al. (2024), Ghana and Nigeria both obtained 8/13, which is a relatively high score for African countries whose constitutions refer to them as secular. However, they observe that the reality on the ground suggests that the two states do not abide by the principles of separation between religion and state. Takyi (2017) affirms this when he concludes in his study that 'separation of church and state exists in many parts of Africa only in the area of rhetoric'. Michael et al., therefore, conclude that although the constitution advocates for a secular state, what is happening, as in the case of Ghana, is noncompliance. One reason given is the impact of colonialism on the constitution-writing process. Colonialism created elite groups that used the constitution and secularism as a hegemonic tool. Again, there was a lack of a genuine understanding of the demands of secularism among the fledgling African nations. They argue further that Africans seem to be indifferent about how and where one displays his or her religious beliefs. Drawing from Smith's analysis, they write, 'Africans appear unaccustomed to the private-public distinction, so much so that they seem unaware of the demands their secular constitution make of them' (Michael et al. 2024:29).

With this background, we can appreciate why religion is ever-present in national and secular events, such as the reading of the annual budget statements. The question that we need to ask, then, is, with this context of the increasing presence of religion in public life, how can the presence of religion in Ghana's politics and public life be maximised for the good of all Ghanaians? I pose this question because I agree with the conclusion of Michael et al. (2024) when they write:

Ultimately, the most crucial query about political secularism is whether they serve citizens. Effective secular states must secure ... religious peace, while permitting maximal freedom ... A complex, balancing act that is, though this is precisely the metric by which we should ultimately judge the desirability of a secular Africa. (p. 29)

I stand with Gunda (2012:31) when he calls for a 'critical biblicisation of the public sphere' in Zimbabwe. Ghana and Zimbabwe, as well as many sub-Saharan African countries, have similar pervasive intrusion of Bible and religion in public life (eds. Gunda & Kügler 2012). Gunda and Kügler (eds. 2012) observe as follows:

The challenges facing Africa and the continued meteoric growth of Christianity in Africa, coupled with the entrenchment of the Bible as the primary African book in most sub-Saharan countries, mean that Africa provides an important background to broach the subject of the Bible and politics. (p. 8)

Gunda (2012) argues that the Bible (religion) uncritically permeates Zimbabwe's public sphere. What is more worrying is that the widespread use of the Bible occurs alongside deepening socio-economic crises. For Gunda, this development is not good for Zimbabwe and other African countries. He questioned some proposals that have been put forward to address this problem. For instance, the proposal to *de-biblify* the public sphere, which is akin to the principle of secularisation, may be the right way to go; however, there will be stiff opposition from ordinary readers of the Bible. Thus, Gunda (2012) writes:

Talking of de-biblicisation of the public sphere draws the objection of limiting Christianity or in some cases the accusations of trying to declare Christianity illegal or bluntly, a declaration of war on Christianity. Further, there are some who object to de-biblicisation because they interpret it as a return to the eras of being persecuted for being Christian. I am fully aware that this fate awaits anybody who makes such a call within the Zimbabwean context. (p. 31)

With the pervasive nature of religion in the lives of Africans, scholars need to propose innovative measures that respect the people's beliefs and, at the same time, challenge the abuses that may arise from public use of personal faith. Gunda thus proposes what he calls 'critical *biblicisation*'. Critical *biblicisation* of the public sphere means:

[T]hat gradually a critical appropriation of the Bible should become a part of public discourse in Zimbabwe. We should bid farewell to the days when people ... would get away with careless appropriations of the Bible. (Gunda 2012:31)

This means that trained readers of the Bible need to be more engaged and active in the society:

[B]y monitoring how religion and in our case, Bible is used and abused in the public sphere and clearly making our observations public in order to equip ordinary readers to resist being hoodwinked. (Gunda 2012:37)

But how can this be achieved? Gunda proposes a critical role for biblical scholars as well as a collaborative effort between trained readers of the Bible and untrained readers. Gerald West (1993a) also calls for similar collaborations between the two categories of readers to inspire social transformation. Trained readers have the expertise and knowledge to understand the dynamic nature of biblical interpretation (West 1993b). One becomes a trained reader through formal training institutions of higher learning, such as the seminaries, Departments of Divinity and Religious Studies Departments. Untrained readers or ordinary readers read the Bible pre-critically (West 1993a). This is not to say their readings are wrong or unacceptable (Lopez 2021). But as West (1993b) argues, they lack the right knowledge and skills to offer a deep and systematic explanation of the Bible, especially concerning the historical, sociological and linguistic structures that lie within the texts.

In the particular case of politicians who express their faith publicly, trained readers or scholars can interrogate their interpretations and unravel the ideologies and motivations behind the meanings they assign to the Bible and their faith. An example is the work of Wandusim and Boateng (2024), who reveal that the Finance Minister's use of the Matthean text takes advantage of the religiosity of Ghanaians, as it presents 'the minister as a God-fearing public figure to be admired by all. Consequently, it has negative implications for public accountability in the management of the Ghanaian economy' (p. 121). Such critical interrogation of the use of the Bible publicly can help to create a national consciousness of the proper way to integrate personal faith and politics.

In addition to the aforesaid, I will also include the various ecumenical bodies in Ghana, such as the Christian Council of Ghana, Ghana Pentecostal and Charismatic Council and the Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference (GCBC), to actively respond to public displays of faith and biblical interpretations that are deceptive and abusive in nature. These bodies can help in promoting critical appropriation of the Bible by calling out and condemning blatant and hidden abuse of the Bible in public spaces. For instance, the GCBC, according to Saa-Dade (2015), has been very active in issues of governance and environment. Atidepe-Agbesi (2021) indicates that this body enjoys a lot of respect in Ghana, even among non-Catholics. Its intervention in governance issues has been through the methods 'denunciation and appeal to individual and collective conscience' (Saa-Dade 2015:97). These approaches can be used to address the uncritical manner in which religion and the Bible are used within the public sphere.

As Gunda (2012) observes, it is impossible to prevent people from expressing their faith and religious beliefs in public spaces. This is more so when many African cultures do not

frown upon such incidents and may even encourage them. However, whenever a politician brings his personal religious beliefs into the public space, those beliefs cease to be private and personal. They have to be assessed and benchmarked against principles such as truthfulness, fairness, inclusivity and accountability.

I will demonstrate how critical *biblicisation* can be achieved by applying the aforementioned criteria to assess one of the many instances in which the Finance Minister appealed to the Bible and religion. In the 2019 budget, the Minister referenced the book of Genesis in paragraph 1008. He alluded to the promise of God to Abram when the latter was instructed to take a step of faith by leaving behind the familiar (his family) to go after the unknown (what God was promising him). By this allusion, the Minister seems to say that Ghanaians have placed their faith in the government to send them into the promised land of prosperity. The crux of the message thus is: the government will deliver on its promises of making Ghanaians prosperous and comfortable. By linking this mundane message to the story of Abram, however, the Minister disguises this plain message, which can be critiqued by Ghanaians, with a biblical message that many Ghanaians will refrain from critiquing. In an Afrobarometer report on the state of Ghana's economy in the year 2019, Ghanaians were disappointed by the performance of the government. The report says, 'Few citizens are content with the country's economic situation and their personal living conditions, and a majority say the country is headed in the wrong direction' (Sanny & Baaye 2019). Because of the strong belief in the Bible by many African Christians, there is a potential for its abuse when personal interpretations are bundled over into public discourse in a way that many will find it difficult to distinguish between the two spheres. This is even more worrying when there are real possibilities for misinterpretations and even disguised abuses of the Bible. As Wandusin and Boateng (2024) conclude on politicians and their use of the Bible:

Ultimately, it must, therefore, be argued that the recourse to the Bible in politics in Ghana and other parts of Africa is not an expression of a belief in the divine power thereof, but a leveraging on an existing religiosity for political ends; ends that actually benefit the political elites more than the masses. (pp. 140–141)

## Conclusion

It is no secret that religion continues to have a special place in the modern political life of many African societies. In Ghana, religion is present in public spaces, including the arms of government, parliament, the President and his appointees, and the judiciary. Christianity may be a tacit religion of Ghana, but Ghana is not a Christian or religious state; thus, the Bible is scripture for Christians. It encourages Christians to be faithful in their relationship with God and the world. It has no role in public policy except admonishing Christians to live according to what God deems right. Politicians need to understand this and be careful in using religion in public policy and engagements. The annual budget presentations are major

public policy events that have no place for personal faith. Debates and discussions on the budget presentations should be carried out based on public policy reasoning. Ghanaians need to understand that religion has no role in this process. However, when politicians choose to bring their faith into public policy discussions, such attempts should be critically assessed to show the true intention behind their use of God and religion.

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### CRedit authorship contribution

Kojo Okyere: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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### Data availability

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### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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