"To Hell with Bishops": Rethinking the Nexus of State, Law and Religion in Times of Crisis in Zimbabwe

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Abstract: The article addresses the responses of the government of Zimbabwe and its proxies to a letter issued by Catholic bishops on 14 August 2020, entitled 'The march is not ended'. The response to the letter presents an ambivalent view of the nexus of the state, law and religion in Zimbabwe, which needs to be teased out and challenged in order to reinvent a democratic nation. This theoretical article taps into decoloniality theory to problematise state responses to the letter. The articles discuss responses by government actors, such as Monica Mutswanga and Nick Magwana, and regime enablers, such as Mutendi and Wutawunashe. The responses indicate the weaponization of religion and law to silence dissenting voices, and to enact a skewed nationalism. The article argues that, in the context of crisis, authoritarianism, and abuse of human rights, politicians and religious leaders should position their narratives to enact social justice, ontological density, peace and accountability, as a healing process to usher in sustainable development.

Keywords: Zimbabwe; decolonial theory; The march is not ended; Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops’ letter; regime enablers; rehumanisation; religion; law and politics

1. Introduction

Zimbabwe’s second republic, which emerged in 2017 with the removal of Robert Mugabe after 37 years at the helm of power, promised a new Zimbabwe, one characterised by accountability, a fight against corruption, and equal representation of all people. The internal conflicts in ZANU-PF can be credited for facilitating the replacement of Robert Mugabe with the incumbent president, Emmerson Mnangagwa; his reign is known as the second republic. Some people believe that the removal of Mugabe had been a coup, largely because it did not follow usual democratic processes of electing a leader, while others saw the rise of Mnangagwa, whether by coup or not, as a liberatory experience for the people of Zimbabwe. The second republic was envisaged as a new dawn, and Mnangagwa, in his inauguration speech, promised that he would be a listening president, and that those with a different opinions would be allowed to express themselves without fear, as a hallmark of a democratic society (Chronicle 2017). However, while President Mnangagwa’s promises delighted citizens who had yearned for the end of Mugabe’s rule, the reality on the ground has not lived up to expectations and, today, the situation may, perhaps, be even worse than in the Mugabe era. The second republic is characterised by a shrinking democratic space, abuse of the law and use of religion to enact a veiled autocracy or skewed nationalism that is measured by loyalty to the regime, and premised in the adoption of ZANU-PF ideology, and nothing else. Consequently, Zimbabwe is a country divided on political grounds, with some as friends of the regime (also referred as regime enablers, and these are people who aid the state in every aspect to ensure it remains in power through right or wrong means), and others as opponents (Mujinga 2018; Vorster 2017). In enacting this crisis, some religious leaders have been co-opted to dilute or confuse the religious constituency and to oppose dissenting voices. In this vein, I agree with Dreyer (2007), that “political consecration provides opportunities for religion to be exploited in power struggles over religion, class, race, and gender, and all the boundaries that are continually being revived by those in
power, or those seeking power”. The crisis is not only religious, but also legislative, as the law is being used against opponents of the state, despite logical reasons behind dissenting voices. Commenting on the Zimbabwean situation, the Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition (2019) notes that Zimbabwe’s government, courts and some religious leaders are authoring and presiding over the death of democracy. In fact, the ‘liberators’ have turned into ‘oppressors’ (Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition 2019). In addition, commenting on the situation prior second republic, Machakanja (2010) argues that Zimbabwe has been “trapped in a complex and protracted political crisis that has seen rising levels of human-rights violations, including kidnappings, disappearances, arbitrary detentions, torture, sexual violence and the forced recruitment of youth by armed groups, to name just a few” (p. 2). I focus on the giving the background.

Zimbabwe Religious and Political Landscape

To contextualize the situation for readers, it is important to highlight briefly about Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe got an independence in 1980 from the British government and Robert Mugabe was the first leader of the perceived democratic state. As an act of democracy, religious freedom became one of the tenets of democracy with majority of people claiming to belong to the Christian faith. While majority people belong to Christian faith, Zimbabwe is tolerant to other faiths implying religious pluralism, which of course perceived as a field of tension (Vähäkangas and Lauterbach 2019). Within the Christian faith, there are various formations but broadly characterised as indigenous churches and those with foreign roots. The indigenous churches turn to be pro-government while some foreign one are perceived as regime change agenda. Thus, there is continuous contestation between indigenous churches and foreign rooted especially within the political space. The contestation shrinks the democratic space leading to the problems confronting Zimbabwe (Manyeruke and Hamauswa 2013, p. 284), which unfortunately has led to majority of people ‘poor, despondency and powerlessness’ (Pondani 2019). Cognisant of the foregoing, I agree with Ferrari (2012, p. 356) that “to prevent the danger of a clash and to ensure the equal treatment of all religions, it is essential to ground the public sphere on a principle that is universal and neutral, and therefore capable of being accepted by all people regardless of their religion: this principle is human reason”. While the suggestion is noble, the reality on the ground remains that human reasoning does not apply especially in the context of Zimbabwe.

In light of the foregoing, I show how religious groups (like in this case, the Catholic Church) that have an alternative ideology to that of the ruling party are treated with antagonism, and various strategies are used by the regime to silence dissenting voices. As a writer informed by decoloniality, I take the position that religious pluralism should exist in both theory and praxis, and divergent views should be allowed to make representation on the prevailing issues of the day, without prejudice. This is the position I take to interact and engage with the Catholic bishops’ letter. In this sense, decoloniality adds value in that the theory is against exclusion of narratives of the marginalised. In simple terms, decoloniality problematises the alpha and omega philosophy held by ZANU PF and its proxies that it is their view and nothing else matters in governing Zimbabwe.

Catholic bishops throughout the world communicate with governments of the day through letters, to voice their concern about poverty, undemocratic practices exhibited by states and related themes. It is in this context that Catholic bishops in Zimbabwe saw the need to write a letter to the Zimbabwean government to exercise their prophetic vocation to reconstruct a toxic political terrain. The letter is entitled ‘The march is not ended’. In Zimbabwe, several letters had been written before, so the letter was not out of the ordinary. The march is not ended speaks of several things, among which abuses of power and the state’s use of violence against its own citizens. The Catholic bishops, thus, see themselves as harbingers of a democratic society (Tarusarira 2016). However, as will be shown, speaking truth to power has repercussions, and the law can be used to silence dissenting voices.
In light of the foregoing, the paper examines the reaction of the government and regime-aligned religious leaders to the Catholic bishops’ letter. In this examination, I critique the responses from a decoloniality lens, with the intention to reinvent a religion, law and politics that address the lived realities of the Zimbabwean people. My engagement in this venture is informed by the observation of Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013a, p. 4), who argues that, “what Africans must be vigilant against is the trap of ending up normalizing and universalizing coloniality [oppression] as a natural state of the world. It must be unmasked, resisted and destroyed because it produced a world order that can only be sustained through a combination of violence, deceit, hypocrisy and lies”.

Thus, the paper supports the struggle for a better Zimbabwe; religion should be a contributing factor to democratization, instead of impeding progress and abandoning respect for humanity. The paper is arranged as follows. First, I will discuss decoloniality theory, then I unpack the bishops’ letter and report on the responses of the government and, lastly, I suggest rereading the letter to construct a democratic space in Zimbabwe that is underpinned by equal representation of people before the law, and in religion and politics.

2. Theoretical Framework: Decoloniality

This article is couched in decoloniality theory. Decoloniality is a concept comprising various perspectives and thinking by people who are not satisfied with an oppressive status quo that undermines democracy and humanization while, at the same time, sustaining oppression and perpetuating colonial legacy. Wanderley and Barros (2018) argue that decoloniality theory has its roots in Latin America, under leading scholars such as Walter Mignolo, Maldonado-Torres, Quijano and Dussel, “born out of a realization that ours is an asymmetrical world order that is sustained not only by colonial matrices of power but also by pedagogies and epistemologies of equilibrium that continue to produce alienated Africans” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013b, p. 11). Within the academic space, the decoloniality partly as offspring of critical theory “attempts to expose and questions hegemony, traditional power assumptions held about relationships, groups, communities, societies, and organizations to promote social change” (Given 2008, p. 140). To achieve this goal, the theory “rejects modernity [especially when it contributes to symmetry of power], which is located on the oppressed and exploited side of the colonial difference, in favor of a decolonial liberation struggle to achieve a world beyond Eurocentric modernity” (Grosfoguel 2011, n.p.). The relevance of this theory for grounding this article is premised on the understanding that decoloniality calls for unmasking and challenging any form of imposition, oppression and dehumanization, whether originating in Europe or from within Africa (Dube 2020a). Alternatively, applying this theory to religion, politics and law in Zimbabwe is an attempt to find an “alternative for (re)imagining and building a democratic, just and non-repressive” law (Mignolo 2009). The struggle of decoloniality scholars is “against the invisible vampirism of imperialism technologies and colonial matrices of power [coloniality] that continue to exist in the minds, lives, languages, dreams, imaginations, religion and epistemologies of modern subjects in Africa and the entire global South” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013b, p. 11). Informed by the foregoing, I agree with Mashau (2018) that decoloniality is a project that African religious groups should embrace and attend to as a matter of urgency especially when politics, religion and law are used as instrument to dehumanize those with alternative view to the politics of Zimbabwe such as the Catholic Bishops. The theory is relevant for this paper, since it enables me to question unjust practices in Zimbabwe, especially those aimed at poor and less disadvantaged members of society. Thus, decoloniality is relevant for investigating abuses by the law, religion and politics, since it challenges denials of the humanity of people (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013b, p. 13) based on political and religious grounds. In Zimbabwe, despite claims that it is a democratic country, the systems remain colonial, with people opposed to the ZANU-PF regime subjected to inhumane treatment. Those who claim to have liberated Zimbabwe, have assumed the role of oppressors of their own people,
as illustrated in politics and selective application of law. Thus, with this in mind, there is a need for Africans to depart from the one-sided view that coloniality comes from the Global North; instead, they should begin to interrogate their own practices that are framed in coloniality perpetrated by current regimes and their proxies. In short, African scholars using decoloniality are trapped into fighting the Eurocentric influence in Global South and forget that within the African society there are people and institute that have assume colonial mentality and as such they should be decolonised the same way it is done against Westernisation. Looking at the Zimbabwe contexts, politics, religion and law need to be decolonised since these institute continue to carry the colonial legacy of dehumanising people with a different opinion. In short, as used in the Zimbabwean context, the theory seeks to ignite the need to rehumanise the poor, and those dismembered by law and politics in Zimbabwe and decoloniality helps me tease out the need of the Catholic Bishop letter to be given space in the Zimbabwean religious and political affairs, as a way to reinvent democracy. The following section will unpack the Catholic bishops’ letter.

3. Unpacking the Bishops’ Letter

Catholic bishops all over the world communicate their opinions on the prevailing situation through letters. Thus, in the context of political and economic injustice, it was not expected that Catholic bishops in Zimbabwe would remain silent in the face of human-rights abuses. In fact, as argued by Jere and Magezi (2018), pastoral letters have been pivotal in disseminating important messages from church leadership to congregants, and to government as a whole, thereby reflecting the ideology of the Catholic Church in the political, societal and economic affairs of people. The Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops is a group of bishops representing 10 Zimbabwean provinces—each province has a bishop, who then forms part of the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops. This groups has many mandates, of which one is the prophetic duty to give voice to the cries from the parched throats of the poor, dying and miserable of society (Wiryadinata 2018). Informed by the foregoing, this section will briefly highlight the contents of the letter and its possible implications.

The first concern the bishops raise in relation to the Zimbabwean situation is that dissenting voices are being suppressed, especially those in opposition to ZANU-PF, and those aligned to the Movement of Democratic Change Alliance (MDC-A). In explaining this problem, the Catholic bishops write that “the suppression of people’s anger can only serve to deepen the crisis and take the nation into deeper crisis” (ZCBC 2020, online). They add that “the crackdown on dissent is unprecedented”. They ask, “Is this the Zimbabwe we want? To have a different opinion does not mean be an enemy” (ZCBC 2020). It is clear that the Catholic bishops are not happy with the persecution of opposition to ZANU-PF, since the government’s actions do not reflect the Zimbabwe envisaged by the second republic of President Emmerson Mnangagwa. Through this point, the bishops evoke the need for a non-violent society, which listens to different voices, and does not crack down on them, as multiple voices are a cornerstone of a democratic society.

The second aspect raised by the Catholic bishops is the extreme level of corruption present at all levels of society, including government. The Catholic bishops argue that “the corruption in the country has reached alarming levels . . . there hasn’t been equally a serious demonstration by government to rid the country of this scourge” (ZCBC 2020). When the second republic came into being, one of the promises by President Emmerson Mnangagwa to the people of Zimbabwe was an end to corruption, which had brought the country to its knees. However, this was easier said than done and, unfortunately, government officials, who were supposed to be the harbingers of the end of corruption, only became more corrupt. For instance, Obadiah Moyo was dismissed as the minister of Health after being involved in corruption deals that cost the government over 60 million USD (BBC News 2020a; News24 2020). However, since he is aligned to the regime, he is a free man and immune to the law, despite evidence of misuse of public funds meant for the health ministry. Corruption cases that involve government officials die a natural death in the courts, while those who expose corruption are subjected to humiliation and
imprisonment without trial, as illustrated by the cases of Hopewell Chinono and Job Sikala (Chikowere 2021; Mafata 2021). In summary, the law in Zimbabwe seems to favor corrupt individuals and persecutes those who expose corruption. This suggests a captured judiciary, which makes the rhetoric of fighting corruption a political gimmick that promotes the agenda of the rich and deny the rest of the population—even poor people—access to accountable government that values human life. A society cannot be considered truly human when it neglects poor and marginalized people, especially within the political, legislative and religious space. Furthermore, silencing voices in society only leads to greater frustration of the people, and exacerbates the situation (Mares 2020).

Cognisant of the foregoing, the Catholic bishops allude to the need for a united people, who are not divided along political lines. They argue that,

“we want our politics to build a united nation and not to divide us, turning the military who ought to continue the memory of the late heroes against the people who fed and clothed them ... Some of our vocal political leaders are busy re-creating the war situation of us and them”. (ZCBC 2020)

There is seemingly a notion that political leaders are striving to divide and rule. They are ensuring that the gap between ‘us and them’ is widening by the day; consequently, the rich and those who control (ZANU-PF) the means of production and law are advantaged, and any revolt by poor citizens is tantamount to war, which ordinary people will find difficult to win, since the army, the police and courts are on the side of the oppressors. In addition, the Catholic bishops note, “It feels the poor have no one to defend them. They do not seem to feature on the national agenda. Their cry for an improved health system goes unheeded”. In this regard the Catholic bishops ask, “In the face of growing numbers of COVID-19 infections where does the nation turn to?” In addition, the bishops report that “we notice with wounded hearts that government officials seem to have more personal protective equipment (PPE) than our nurses and doctors”. Unfortunately the plea for health and an effective “transport system that meets their transport blues are met with promises and more promises and no action” (ZCBC 2020, online).

Another point raised by the Catholic bishops is the government’s failure to take responsibility for the deteriorating economic and political environment—in fact, the government points the finger to stakeholders other than itself. The Catholic bishops note, “All we hear from them is the blame of our woes on foreigners, colonialism, white settlers and the so-called internal detractors. When are you going to take responsibility for your own affairs? When are we going to submit to the requirements for national accountability?” (ZCBC 2020, online). According to the Catholic bishops, taking responsibility is key for national development and, to date, the Zimbabwean government is far from recognizing itself as the enemy of the people and the international community. With this in mind, the solution to the Zimbabwean problem is far from being found, thus, the Bishops felt obligated to remind politicians of their accountability, as a way to redress the trajectories faced by the Zimbabwean people.

In this section, I summed up the thrust of the Catholic bishops’ letter. In the following section, I will report on responses to the letter by the government and its proxies.

4. Responses to the Letter by Government and Its Proxies

The points raised above by the Catholic bishops were not well received by the government of Zimbabwe and its proxies, though it resonated with the general population, who are facing daily struggles. While some scholars may argue that Catholic Church is a colonial project, it does not take away their ability to contribute to the reconstruction of the African space in terms of democracy and good governance. In this, the letter has positive contribution to the Zimbabwean political landscape even though it was seen as a direct attack on the regime, and as a mouthpiece of opposition political parties and regime change elements that work to undermine the sovereignty of Zimbabwe. Thus, according to politicians, the letter represents an example of a ‘third force’ (third force is a term used by ZANU-PF in reference to its enemies who, they claim, want to displace them), that seeks to
dismantle the democratically elected government (Dube 2020b). The first response I will discuss is that of the Ministry of Information and Publicity.

4.1. Response by the Ministry of Information and Publicity

The letter of the Catholic bishops was seen as a direct attack on the government, thus, warranting a sharp response by the minister of Information and Publicity, Monica Mutswanga. In her response, she accuses the Catholic bishops of being misguided people who are being used by individuals to push a political agenda. One of the bishops was singled out as the force behind the letter, namely Archbishop Charles Ndlovu, the leader of the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops’ Conference. She describes Bishop Ndlovu as a “righteous Ndebele minority”, who is promoting a regime change agenda and “fanning the psychosis of tribal victimization” (Ndebele 2020). She levels this accusation even though the letter does not make reference to tribal issues. This response was not only an attack on Bishop Ndlovu, but on the Ndebele people, who have suffered under ZANU policies, some going back several decades. For instance, in Gugurahundi, more than 20,000 Ndebele were killed in the early 1980s. The response is a reminder of unresolved social challenges, and the minister indirectly reopened the wounds suffered by the Ndebele people. The minister’s response suggests that ethnic issues in Zimbabwe, when not addressed, tend to be bought back into the fold during struggle and disagreement.

According to the minister, the bishops’ letter was a script by “evil minded” people, who are fanning the flames of ethnic division; she made comparisons to the role of the church in the 1994 Rwandan genocide (BBC News 2020a). However, looking at the letter shows no suggestion that Catholics wanted to incite people to engage in violence, or which suggests a link to the Rwandan genocide. However, since the Rwandan genocide was based on ethnicity, the minister suggests that another genocide was possible if Catholic leaders write such things, especially under the leadership of minority Ndebele Bishop Ndlovu.

In my own assessment, nothing warranted the minister referring to the genocide, or to castigate Bishop Ndlovu alone, since the letter was a representation of the experiences of the people of Zimbabwe and represents the views of all the bishops who signed the letter. The response by the ministry indicates that there is background information on the relationship of the state and Bishop Ndlovu that people are not privy to, and which needs to be explored further.

Another figure in the ministry is the permanent secretary, Nick Magwana, who responded to the letter by noting that “it is most unfortunate when men of the cloth begin to use the pulpit to advance a nefarious agenda for detractors of our country” (Guardian 2020). In addition, the Ministry of Information saw the letter as an attempt “to manufacture crises” (BBC News 2020b). Such accusations by ministry officials are “psychologically damaging, religio-culturally disengaging and destructive to successful social, political and economic development and human progress’ (Kaunda 2015, pp. 78–79). The ministry’s response ignores the realities suffered by the people of Zimbabwe and shows that politicians are detached from the realities faced by the Zimbabwean people. Furthermore, the response indicates a lack of commitment by the Zimbabwean government to addressing the lived realities of the people and that speaking truth to power is dangerous, despite claims that freedom of speech exists. It is not only politicians who responded to the letter negatively—religious leaders aligned with the regime did too.

4.2. Religious Regime Enablers’ Responses to the Catholic Bishops’ Letter

The bishops’ letter also attracted the attention of Bishop Samuel Mutendi of the Zion Christian Church, and Apostle Andrew Wutawunashe, a Pentecostal church leader, both of whom are regarded as regime enablers (Dube 2020a). A regime enabler is an individual or group that helps politicians gain power and, then, helps them to maintain power (Magaisa 2019). The role of the religious enablers in relation to the Catholic Bishops letter was to discredit the alternative religious voice in the Zimbabwean political space. In this case, religion is used as a counter revolutionary strategy to silent emerging voices...
with different view to ZANU PF. In explain this further, I begin with Simon Mutendi. Mutendi, as a regime enabler, inherited church leadership from his father in 1976. Because his church is one of the biggest in Zimbabwe, it is a rich hunting ground for politicians to capture the religious constituency (Dube 2020b, pp. 4–5). Politicians have strategically positioned people like Mutendi for political mileage. Magaisa (2019) reports that “the perfect facade of normalcy of some religious leaders is designed to cover the sordid reality of the regime”. In response to the Catholic bishops, Mutendi, as regime enabler associated with the ruling elite, argues that the letter is irrelevant and dug up old graves. He notes that, instead of opening old wounds, like the Gukurahundi issue, churches should divert their energies towards preaching messages of hope to a nation burdened by drought and sanctions-induced economic hardships (New Zimbabwe 2020). He argued that church leaders should not speak out about past wrongdoings, but should focus on giving hope to their flock. There is no need to remind people of the past, because everyone has dark past (New Zimbabwe 2020). Thus, instead of engaging with the contents of the letter, Mutendi considered the Catholic bishops’ letter as “inappropriately prescriptive and grossly disrespectful” (Guardian 2020). The question is, why should a letter that champions the poor, and calls for accountability and ending political imprisonment and corruption, be regarded as inappropriate and disrespectful, especially by religious leaders? How can national healing occur unless past atrocities, such as Gugurahundi, are addressed and perpetrators subjected to accountability? It is clear from their response that religious leaders, like Mutendi, legitimise a regime through blindness to wrongdoing, as a way to remain politically relevant and ensure reciprocal benefits.

Another influential religious leader who responded to the bishops’ letter is Apostle Andrew Wutawunashe, who represents the Zimbabwe Indigenous Inter-denominational Council of Churches (ZIICC). Wutawunashe states that, as a religious movement, it categorically dissociates itself from calls by certain religious leaders to march against the government and to reignite conflicts and wounds for the sake of healing (Pindula News 2020). It is not surprising that Wutawunashe would want to distance himself from this letter and the political issues it refers to, as he has been involved in various political issues in Zimbabwe in the past, and sided with the regime. He is a known political activist who champions the regime agenda, has officiated at ZANU-PF functions and has castigated those with a different political agenda. His view on the letter is centred around the notion that the religious regime should please the political masters. In accordance with Magaisa (2019), we ask, “how do respected men of the cloth become drawn irresistibly to normalise what is not normal”? In fact, they [religious leaders] start from the periphery, wearing the label of “technocrats”, but they soon find themselves deep in the cesspool, wearing scarfs and chanting ridiculous slogans (Magaisa 2019). Therefore, Wutawunashe finds it impossible to speak up against the regime, especially when he benefits from the regime. In this regard, I agree with Matthews (2019) that democracy itself is undermined when the needs of the majority of its population are ignored, and preference given to that of the political and economic elite, which implies a skewed nationalism favoring a few who are aligned to the regime. In short, the responses of regime enabling religious leaders, which negate issues of justice, and disregard poor people, religious pluralism and democracy, dilute the prophetic role of the church in critical affairs related to nation building.

My own analysis indicates the responses by the government and its proxies can be summed up as ‘to hell with the bishops’. The responses indicate that the “majority of Africans remain mentally colonised” (Kaunda 2015, p. 77). In light of the foregoing, “unfortunately, a section of religion is being used to legitimise, sustain and even promote political tyranny and oppression” (Zimunya and Gwara 2013, p. 188). The responses illustrate that religion tends to be relegated to the exclusive realm of ideology or belief, especially if religion does not advance the political ideology of the day—doing so obscures its overwhelming impact on social institutions (Johnson 2015, p. 109).

The responses of government and religious leaders to the bishops’ letter calls us to rethink the foundations of our knowledge on and the role of religion in society and politics.
(Tarusarira 2020). It is clear that the political space in Zimbabwe is not prepared to hear alternative voices that promote democracy through fair representation, which manifest in allowing multiple voices to engage in matters that affect humanity. The response undermines the narratives by African people that fight against coloniality, since the regime perpetuates a colonial mentality that continues subdue fellow Africans. While the responses of the government are negative, it does not mean that people should be quiet. This paper is informed by decoloniality and is part of the struggle to reclaim the religious voice in the political space, since the regime sometimes, when it suits them, assumes there is no separation between church and state, but when plural voices make unfavorable demands, it insists on the separation of state and church. So, the relationship of the state and the church is fluid, and is influenced by what the regime’s opinion on the message of the church. But what stands out with the Zimbabwean context is that the adherents of the indigenous church are given preferential treatment over the followers of all other religious faiths, which are perceived as foreign to the nation (Ferrari 1997, p. 83). Thus, in the following section, I will suggest ways to reinvent a decolonial political order, devoid of hate of political enemies, or those with a different voice.

5. Rereading the Letter: Evoking a Democratic Nexus of State, Law and Religion in Zimbabwe

The Catholic bishops’ letter emerged at a critical time in Zimbabwe, when the religious voice failed to provide an alternative to social and economic pathologies. The letter concurs with the observation by Bottoms et al. (1995, p. 109) that, “in the long run, society [scholars, religious leaders] should find ways to protect people [against] religion-related abuse, and help religion evolve in the direction of the better treatment of people”. In the same vein, the letter can be seen as part of liberation theology associated with communist thinking, which is opposed to state theology (McKinnis 2010, p. 8) The letter serves as a reminder to the political elite and regime enablers of the obligations of leaders to facilitate democracy and treat fellow citizens as human beings.

In this section, I suggest rereading the letter in light of decoloniality and the need for rehumanisation of marginalised and politically enslaved people (Fanon 1988), since the theory advocates for fair representation of different voice as a way to reinvent a better society for all. Decoloniality is used here to problematise the throwing away the message with the messenger, without engaging in the critical issues raised by the letter. By so doing, religious leaders and politicians create singular narrative to the complex trajectories faced by Zimbabwean people. Thus, informed with decoloniality that allow multi-dimensional perspectives, I suggest the rereading the Bishop letter as an alternative to re-imagine democracy and accountability in Zimbabwe. I raise four issues pertinent to development, especially in the nexus of religion, politics and the law. By so doing the paper contributes to the field of religion as will be shown below.

5.1. Need to End Corruption

The letter speaks of corruption—a critical element for political-economic development of any society to address poverty—which is rife, but ignored by the regime and its proxies. When the second republic emerged in 2017, people had high hopes that the new regime would fight corruption at all levels of government. In an attempt to keep its promises, a new anti-corruption commission was set up by the new government and a few people were arrested, such as former minister of Local Government, Ignatius Chombo, and former minister of Tourism, Prisca Mupfumira. These arrests were welcomed; however, it became clear early on that while these two officials had been corrupt during their tenure, the real reason for their arrest was that they belonged to a ZANU-PF splinter group, commonly known as G40. In the new republic, imprisonment is not a consequence of corruption, as is claimed, but is used to settle political scores (Machakaire 2020). To this end, corrupt people continue being rewarded by the system, and the law seems to be incapacitated to evoke justice, which suggests that the judiciary has been captured and serves to punish political foes. Against this background, the bishops’ letter sought to sensitise the government
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that corruption does not benefit anyone—not even corrupt officials themselves. This (that corruption benefits no one) claim was exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, during which money meant for PPE was stolen, leaving health workers without the PPE needed to execute their jobs, leading to shortages of medication in hospitals and an increase in the mortality rate. If money had been used where needed, these challenges could have been mitigated. Thus, according to decoloniality thinking, there is a need to continuously expose and challenge corruption in all spheres of life, as one of the ways to reinvent a better Zimbabwe. To ordinary Zimbabweans, a letter by the bishops, emphasising that corruption had to end, should have been welcomed by all hands; instead, it was refuted and classified as a letter that manufactured crises. Such an approach is “an impediment to economic advancement, irrelevant for modern societies and something that would fade away in time” (Lunn 2009, p. 939). In conclusion, if Zimbabwean politicians and government’s proxies are sincere about ending corruption, the letter by the bishops could have stimulated engagement and introspection, and should have ensured that corrupt officials are subjected to fair and just prosecution, rather than being used to silence political foes and whistleblowers. Taking note of the need to corruption especially coming from the church perspective is very important since it ignites the commitment of religious communities in mitigating social ills. By so doing religion contributes to sustainable development and an accountable society.

5.2. Ending the Persecution of Political Foes

The second republic has become notorious for its persecution of political foes, and creating a hostile society that does not tolerate alternative views. It is against this background that the Catholic bishops’ letter was met with resentment. Various political activists and whistleblowers, such as Fadzayi Mahere, Job Sikhala, Joana Mamombe and Hopewell Chinono, have suffered imprisonment, while corrupt political officials walk free. Being complicit in corruption in Zimbabwe seems to be more acceptable than speaking against and reporting corruption. Rereading the letter by the Catholic bishops, I note an indication that democracy cannot emerge when dissenting voices are persecuted by legal organs, such as the police, army and judiciary, especially not when they expose corruption that milks the country’s resources. In fact, the Catholic bishops see their role as a “commitment to upholding the transcendent dignity of the human person and affirming that the legitimacy of any political authority lies in its accountability to the common good, understood as a moral order grounded in this human dignity” (Carozza and Philpott 2012, p. 25). In light of the foregoing, the church has a significant role in initiating a conversation that can change the status quo. I argue that the “church should always be seen as an agent of transformation that seeks to confront, interrogate and engage prophetically powers that be, including issues of racism, forgiveness and reconciliation” (Mashau 2018, p. 6). Therefore, the foregoing refutes the observation of Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013b, p. 11) that churches are sites for the reproduction of coloniality. Suggesting this way, the letter contributes to the field of religion through promoting a non-violent society that appreciates diversity and different views for nation building.

5.3. Thinking Anew about Poor People

Providing care and protection for poor people is at the heart of the Christian message. Consequently, the Catholic bishops refer to the need for politicians to take care of poor citizens, in particular, providing for their health and meeting their transportation needs, especially at the dire time of COVID-19. One wonders why politicians reacted with anger when the Catholic bishops sided with poor citizens. It means they are rich, and that the cries of poor people disturb their comfort and privacy. In fact, over the years, churches have played a key role in speaking out against abuses of human rights, social injustice and poverty. Advocacy on behalf of poor, marginalised and oppressed people has been and remains a major contribution by churches to civil society (Gibbs and Ajulu 1999, p. 3). Thus, the bishops’ emphasis on the need to take care of poor people is not out of the ordinary, but
a moral obligation for politicians and religious leaders. Thus, any government or religious group that does not have poor people at the centre of its narrative is irrelevant and creates an angry society that will be hard to govern. In short, a rereading of the letter suggests that we should rethink how religious and political discourses in Zimbabwe relate to poor people. Thus, a letter become a reminder of the basic tenets of religion which taking care of the poor, oppressed and disadvantaged members of society and seemingly the Catholic church maintains the ideology of the poor as the center of religion and politicians are not exempted from this divine mandate.

5.4. Resolving Past Trajectories

Rereading the Catholic bishops’ letter provides an indication that Zimbabwe is a nation with unresolved issues in its past—the Gugurahundi massacre, as an example. The bishops note that, unless issues such as Gugurahundi are resolved from the victims’ perspective, it will continue to manifest and impede Zimbabwe’s development. However, mention of the Gugurahundi massacre is met with resistance and defensiveness by the perpetrators. Despite evidence that 20,000 Ndebele people were killed, the courts have not yet prosecuted a single alleged perpetrator. Cognisant of the foregoing, the letter is a reminder that Zimbabwe’s success is dependent on resolving past trajectories, as an act that could heal the nation of pain and anger. Thus, through decoloniality, past trajectories need to be exposed and addressed, to ignite a process of reconciliation that is necessary for development, and to manage conflict and implement viable solutions to address the social, political and economic ambivalence experienced by Zimbabwean people. In rereading the letter, there is an indication that politicians and society should “not shy away from engaging about [the past experiences] and discern from those voices from the margins as to how we should move forward in terms of racial reconciliation in this country” (Mashau 2018, p. 6). In short, resolving past trajectories through a decoloniality approach entails the rehumanisation of the dehumanised, and provokes the courage to care and to love (Mpofu 2017).

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, despite negative reactions by government and church leaders to the Catholic bishops’ letter, I am of the view that the letter is relevant, and positions the church within the terrain of advocating for human rights issues, the rule of law, basic human rights, accountability, and transparency (Kumalo 2009). The negative reactions to the letter do not negate the need to tease, expose and challenge the undemocratic space that pushes poor people further to the periphery of development. A nation cannot achieve its full potential if dissenting voices are thwarted by means of the law, politics and religion. In fact, the process breeds anger in the oppressed, and spirals to unending crises in all facets of life. With this view, I sum up the paper by arguing that politicians and government proxies should reread the Catholic bishops’ letter from the angle of poor people, and reconstruct the polluted political terrain that has contributed to economic turmoil. All voices that seek to ensure democracy should be accorded space in Zimbabwean politics, and the law should provide a level playing field for all, regardless of political and religious affiliation. In this way, the nation of Zimbabwe can be reinvented, underpinned by respect for human rights and accountability. Failure to do this will mean Zimbabwean politicians and their proxies have become colonisers of their own people.

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