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Growing Nationalist Frustration

FRUSTRATION WITH A LACK of more overt endorsement for nationalist support from churches began to grow in the 1960s, despite the commitment of a few leading liberals to the cause. In 1962 the Anglican priest, Rev. L. Machiha, highlighted these concerns: “People are measuring Christianity with the standards of this world. They say Christianity has failed to make brotherhood of men. Going to church is considered by some as going to be told to close your eyes, ears and mouth.¹ The church hinders all aspirations of the masses of people who want freedom.”² With a predominantly white church leadership the churches began to be viewed as representing settler interests.³ Critics of the churches were quick to misrepresent it as a white institution that any self-respecting African needed to avoid.⁴ Kenneth Skelton, an Anglican minister, to a similar effect observed, “We who belong to a Church which proclaims its Catholicity, and yet is almost entirely officered and led by Europeans, have we any idea how difficult it is for Africans to be loyal to this Church—which in spite of all its protestations must inevitably seem to justify the title of a ‘white Church’?”⁵

1. An expression meaning puppet.
2. “Why Educated Africans are Leaving the Church in Rhodesia,” *The Link*, August 1962.
3. Mutasa, *Black Behind Bars*, 106.
4. Linden, *Catholic Church*, 69.
5. Skelton, “They shall . . . persecute you. Luke 21:12” (sermon), 19 April 1964, NAZ, GEN-P/SKE.

For the older guard of missionaries the rise of nationalism and its turning to radicalism had reawakened thoughts of the first Chimurenga⁶ when the church had been viewed as a settler institution and had been attacked, bringing its first martyrs both white and black.⁷

To Brand, the old guard were products of a generation raised with an ideology of African inferiority and white superiority, and they could not envisage a “Southern Rhodesia” ruled by Africans.⁸ Mutasa believed that the church leadership were also swayed by their need for socio-economic security and staying within their comfort zone despite the suffering of the majority of church members who were Africans,⁹ preferring to side with the white settler community rather than upset the system by offering political protest.¹⁰ Highlighting such problems with the Anglican Church, Mutasa wrote, “It is hypocritical to claim to be a Christian if the criminality of the Rhodesian way of life is overlooked. Black and white Christians should not kneel together before an altar receiving Holy Communion, pretending to be equal children of God, and come out of the church and immediately accept separate development as way of life.”¹¹ White Christians in Zimbabwe and the church leadership benefitted from the privileges and protection offered by the state to whites who found it difficult to comprehend the resentment of Africans towards the political system in which they were both comfortable and beneficiaries.¹²

Some church leaders in the late fifties and early sixties claimed that Africans were not yet ready to rule and that the Zimbabwean state was too sophisticated for Africans to rule. Bishop Donal Lamont who was later to be a leading voice of protest against the white settler government among the Roman Catholic clergy wrote in 1959 that Africans were “to recognise in realistic humility, that however high his thoughts may aspire to complete independence, he is as yet equipped neither academically, nor technically, nor economically to assume complete control over . . . a highly complex and industrialized country.”¹³ Nationalists believed that this attitude by

6. Shamuyarira, *Crisis in Rhodesia*, 227.

7. Linden, *Catholic Church*, 60.

8. Brand, “Missionaries and Nationalists,” 80.

9. Mutasa, *Black Behind Bars*, 106.

10. *Ibid.*, 122ff.

11. *Ibid.*, 122.

12. Brand, “Missionaries and Nationalists,” 73.

13. Quoted in Scholz, “Catholic Church,” 200.

the church leadership to Africans resonated of settler ideology,¹⁴ and that instead their capacity to rule the country was warranted. There were about 17 000 Africans regarded as qualified to vote even by the stringent demands of the settler government's 1962 electoral system;¹⁵ and some within this number were more educated than Members of Parliament of the settler governments.¹⁶ Many other Africans with college and university education were not qualified to vote.¹⁷

Nationalists did not just feel patronized by this attitude but they also believed the church leadership like the settler political establishment was a stumbling block to a fair or just African participation in Zimbabwe's political life.¹⁸ Shamuyarira observed, "Nine out of ten nationalist leaders have been educated at mission schools, and owe a great deal to missionaries; yet nearly all would say today that they mistrust the church as a whole."¹⁹

Muzorewa believed that although the scriptural hermeneutics of the churches were at times open to question, Christianity was definitely influential on African nationalism in Zimbabwe: "One day I sat with a young man who said, 'We should destroy the Bible and find some Africans who can write our own Bible.'²⁰ He thought that the Bible had been written by people like the Prime Minister of Rhodesia, Ian Smith. The fact that so many whites in Rhodesia claimed to be Christians (although few attended churches) and the vast majority, including some missionaries, supported white minority rule, made my witness to African students extremely difficult."²¹ Shamuyarira believed that the churches were tarnished by being white-led, like the government: "In African eyes the two institutions became in many respects indistinguishable. They have too many common features: racial discrimination, European domination and a despising of the African people."²²

14. *Ibid.*, 200.

15. Shamuyarira, *Crisis in Rhodesia*, 175.

16. *Ibid.*, 169.

17. Alderson, "In the Event of UDI," *Rhodesia Herald*, 29 October 1965.

18. Mutasa, *Black Behind Bars*, 123.

19. Shamuyarira, *Crisis in Rhodesia*, 141.

20. Banana, "The Case of a New Bible," 17ff., was proposed almost two decades from the time the incident recorded here occurred; perhaps the origins of this thesis should not be attributed to Banana

21. Muzorewa, *Rise and Walk*, 62.

22. Shamuyarira, *Crisis in Rhodesia*, 143.

The greatest struggle for the church was to learn to identify itself with the people and to find the required humility to be a true friend.²³ Sithole also observed that “missionaries, working in a colonial atmosphere, also adopted a colonial attitude towards the African and stood between the latter and his big dream of independence.”²⁴ Cecil Alderson recognized that this lack of understanding was fuelled by the fact that social relations between the majority of the church leadership and their African flock were usually at an artificial level.²⁵ So too did Garfield Todd, who argued that except for a few liberal missionaries who worked alongside the educated Africans, contact between whites in general and Africans was limited,²⁶ usually being during Sunday services and for a few hours. The Methodist Rea also believed that weekly congregational worship services could not suffice to build an interracial community in Zimbabwe.²⁷ At mission stations, where there was usually more contact between Africans and whites, missionaries were the bosses and Africans the servants,²⁸ with limited social interaction at an equal level between the two groups. Rea observed that on Sundays missionaries at most mission stations preferred to have their own services, which they attributed to the language barrier.²⁹ These limited relationships meant that most whites did not know what Africans really thought about the political crisis in Zimbabwe.³⁰ Bishop Alderson recognized this: “What Africans are thinking about it all [the political situation in Rhodesia] is nearly impossible for a white man really to know. Our priests get on with their jobs as best as they may.”³¹

Although a few missionaries like Alderson honestly admitted this, most other church leaders believed that they knew what Africans thought,³² and claimed that nationalists did not represent African opinion and that

23. Ibid. Cripps and White were noted for their advocacy for African rights within a missionary and European political culture that was apathetic to protecting African rights in early 1900s.

24. Sithole, *African Nationalism*, 57.

25. Alderson, “My Dear,” 1 January 1966, NAZ, GEN-P/ALD

26. Todd and Holderness, letter to Sir Douglas-Home, 15 May 1964.

27. Rea, “The Need for a United Church,” 87.

28. Brand, “Missionaries and Nationalists,” 72.

29. Rea, “The Need for a United Church,” 87.

30. Linden, *Catholic Church*, 55.

31. Alderson, “Letter to British friends,” NAZ, GEN-P/ALD.

32. Linden, *Catholic Church*, 56.

the general African populace was content.³³ Nationalists were only thought to represent the African elite, and not the interests of the majority.³⁴

When nationalists questioned the impartiality of the “church,” their focus was upon the church leadership, which had remained silent when Africans suffered and continued to suffer various forms of abuse from the settler government.³⁵ Nationalists believed that the church should not only be a peace broker, but an advocate for those who suffered injustice.³⁶ Suspicions grew as they failed to condemn the settler government for its policies and abuse of Africans.³⁷ As early as 1960 a letter addressed to missionaries by the National Democratic Party (NDP) had expressed and highlighted these concerns: “We have noticed your acquiescence, for more than 70 years in a system which has reduced us to nothing more than hewers of wood and drawers of water. We have seen you supporting evil practices.”³⁸

Nationalists came to declare that instead of responding to their moral obligation to support their cause, the long-standing history of cooperation between the missionary-led church and the settler government had blinded the church leadership to this issue of social justice.³⁹

Signs of growing frustration by 1961 with this lack of support were becoming apparent. Doubt and questioning turned to severe criticism of the missionary-founded churches,⁴⁰ seen as the guardians of teachings on justice and equality, for not being prepared to speak out against injustice.⁴¹ Mutasa was convinced that the churches only encouraged passivity and compliance amongst its leaders: “The Church may allow white politicians to meddle in its religion but it forbids black political and religious leaders to take part in a religious act. Black people in the Anglican Church are only made suffragan bishops when they have no obvious political aspirations and agree to be stationed at centres which keep them out of sight.”⁴² Mutasa believed that a time for action had come: “One cannot see one’s friends

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid., 60.

35. Mutasa, *Black Behind Bars*, 122.

36. Ibid.

37. Banana, *Church and Struggle*, 83.

38. Quoted in Brand, “Missionaries and Nationalists,” 75.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid.

41. “Letter to the Editor,” *Bantu Mirror*, 15 July 1961.

42. Mutasa, *Black Behind Bars*, 123–24.

suffering under the political evils of the illegal regime and stand aside, claiming that one's duty as a Christian is not to help but to look on. That kind of attitude is both cowardly and unchristian."⁴³ The focus of criticism was directed at the white Christian leadership, rather than at the content of the bible as proclaimed by Joshua Nkomo, "The Christian philosophy is good, but the men preaching it are bad."⁴⁴ The complacency of church leaders to protest and the socio-economic gulf between church leaders and their people was strongly attacked by Mutasa, "Do some churches not lay treasure in Rhodesia where thieves steal black people's land, side by side with starving and unclothed people? And recently how many Christian chaplains have been sent to the illegal army and prisons? Have any been sent to pray for freedom fighters?"⁴⁵

During this period some educated Africans especially in the cities, felt the need to prove that they were not subservient to whites, and began to leave the churches.⁴⁶ Hostility was directed towards selected institutions within the church that were openly supporting the settler government such as the Anglican and the Dutch Reformed Church.⁴⁷ African Christians who were members of such institutions were warned about attending Sunday services and missionaries from such denominations were sent threatening letters.⁴⁸ If they were not sure where a particular missionary's allegiance lay they corresponded with him requiring him to clarify his political allegiance.⁴⁹ Furthermore, African Christians were scorned as puppets. They were viewed as puppets of the church leadership that had sold its soul to the government, which nationalists viewed as evil.⁵⁰

Others went further. In 1962 nationalist activists vented their anger at political repression by the settler government by burning and damaging 10 churches and 18 mission related properties.⁵¹ Persuasion and threats were employed to gain support from the churches.⁵² Although most Africans

43. Ibid.

44. Quoted in Shamuyarira, *Crisis in Rhodesia*, 141.

45. Mutasa, *Black Behind Bars*, 106.

46. Linden, *Catholic Church*, 69.

47. Bhebhe, "African Nationalists," 108.

48. Brand, "Missionaries and Nationalists," 75.

49. Ibid.

50. "Church in Rhodesia," *The Link*, August 1962.

51. Bhebhe, "The Nationalist Struggle," 108.

52. "Letter to the Editor," *Bantu Mirror*, 22 July 1961.

were sympathetic to the cause of nationalism, those who were reluctant openly to join the nationalist camp began to face intimidation, a foretaste of the way nationalist parties were later to treat their opponents. Bhebhe observed that by 1961, because of “NDP inspired outbreaks of violence, civil disobedience, strikes and intimidation of collaborators of the white regime . . . it was becoming apparent that the NDP could cause so much chaos as to prevent the implementation of the new constitution. Moreover, the chiefs were so frightened for their own personal safety, that they were urging the Government to ban the NDP.”⁵³ Although nationalists during this period tried to differentiate attacks on missionaries, Christians and Christian institutions from attacks on the Christian religion, persuasion and threats failed to solicit widespread support for nationalists from white church leaders.⁵⁴ Indeed, the policy, borne of frustration, put an end to immediate prospects of gaining support from most of the church leadership and missionary community, and served to widen the gap between them and this influential section of the community.⁵⁵ Missionaries felt their work was being severely undermined and were personally under attack from a hostile philosophy.⁵⁶

On the other hand, they had been reluctant to embrace nationalism because many in the Zimbabwean Christian leadership had come to believe that nationalism was simply Communism in disguise and they believed they were protecting the church from the evil of an atheist philosophy, which would prevail if nationalists seized power.⁵⁷ The Roman Catholic Bishops of South Africa claimed that the Roman Catholic Church was “the strongest bulwark against anarchy, indifferentism and communism. It is a pity that her most vital influence is being denied.”⁵⁸

To Linden, “Many a bush missionary saw himself as an outpost of the non-communist world struggling against unseen enemies, a silent soldier in the Cold War.”⁵⁹ This was a further reason why most in the white settler

53. Bhebhe, “*The Nationalist Struggle*,” 101.

54. *Ibid.*

55. Linden, *Catholic Church and Struggle*, 63.

56. Brand, “*Missionaries and Nationalists*,” 74.

57. Linden, *Catholic Church and Struggle*, 48–49.

58. “The Role of the Church and the Rhodesia Society,” *Rhodesia Herald*, 8 January 1959.

59. Linden, *Catholic Church and Struggle*, 49.

constituent of the churches concluded that Christianity and nationalism were incompatible.⁶⁰

As a result of a combination of these factors only a few individuals with the Christian leadership remained convinced in the early 1960s that it was the duty of the church to speak on behalf of the oppressed alongside nationalists. These few individuals from the political liberal camp were to become one of the greatest contributions the Zimbabwean church would offer to the nation at its political crossroads. However, there were other factors that hindered the churches from significant political engagement.

The Problem of “Neutrality”

In order to retain some semblance of unity and avoid further polarizing the church many church leaders thought it prudent to take a position that became popularly referred to as that of “neutrality.”⁶¹ A member of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) which officially subscribed to the position of neutrality commented, “Church [DRC] policy was that you do not get involved in politics whether on the side of the government or the boys⁶². It was not an issue that you supported the white government or not. You simply had not to get involved, you had to be neutral. But on the ground, people in their individual capacities as Christians were actively supporting whoever they wanted.”⁶³

To some, a doctrine of political neutrality, of non-partisanship in a political conflict, could be seen as truly prophetic.⁶⁴ Gwemende observed that there was a strong tradition of this position within the history of the DRC in Zimbabwe, which predated even the 1948 apartheid government in South Africa. The missionary founder⁶⁵ of the DRC during the Chimurenga wars in the 1890s was able to continue staying at Morgenster mission by saying “I am not taking sides,” until he was forcibly removed by the settler soldiers who warned him “*munovurawa kuno*.”⁶⁶ He refused to

60. Ibid.

61. Maxwell, “Christianity and the War,” 63.

62. Guerrillas.

63. Kudakwashe Gwemende, Personal Interview, Scripture Union, Harare, January 11, 2007.

64. Maxwell, “Christianity and the War,” 62ff.

65. A. A. Louw founded the mission in 1891.

66. Shona for: you will get killed here, a number of whites, missionaries included, and Africans that assisted them were killed during the first Chimurenga.

sell chief Mugabe⁶⁷ guns and to allow soldiers to come to the villagers. Gwemende observed, “He was able to stay with blacks, negotiate with whites and sometimes negotiate with whites on behalf of blacks. In the years to come this position served missionaries well, they hardly condemned political injustice saying they were neutral. Neutrality served them well because they could continue operating indifferent to the situation around them and that is why they couldn’t condemn apartheid.”⁶⁸

In the 1960s and 1970s neither supporters of the two sides of Zimbabwe’s political divide believed that the position of neutrality was a genuine one. David Maxwell has argued that the inability by nationalist guerrillas to believe anyone, even the Elim Pentecostal Mission, could be truly neutral led to the murder of nine Elim missionaries and their four children.⁶⁹ Those that supported the African nationalist cause believed that the church leadership’s general silence on political matters was neither neutral nor amoral. Robert Mugabe in the late 1970s commented to Sister Janice McLaughlin, “The missionary should not view himself as the man in the middle or he will be mistaken to be on the side of the oppressor.”⁷⁰

To many others neutrality meant a failure to make a difficult moral choice as to which side to support, and to need-fully speak out in a prophetic way against injustice, oppression, or physical abuse.⁷¹ It implied that the churches had no right or need to comment on wider social or political matters. In general, it discouraged Christians from getting involved in issues of a political nature.⁷² It raises questions over whether it was possible to have no view at all about the rights and wrongs of the Zimbabwean conflict. It would only be sustainable if the issue had no moral implications, or if both sides were equally right or equally wrong. African nationalists argued that the doctrine of neutrality in the 1960s played into the hands of the settler government as the oppressing group, leaving it not challenged or confronted by a united church as it implemented its sociopolitical policies no matter how unjust.⁷³ The Methodist bishop Ralph Dodge in a let-

67. Chief Mugabe, not related to Robert Mugabe, had contacted Louw seeking guns to arm his people for protection and hunting.

68. Kudakwashe Gwemende.

69. Maxwell, “Christianity and the War,” 63.

70. Quoted in McLaughlin, *On the Frontline*, 33.

71. McLaughlin, *On the Frontline*, 33.

72. “Called to Serve,” *The Link*, August 1962.

73. Shamuyarira, *Crisis in Rhodesia*, 143ff.

ter to Joshua Nkomo and Kenneth Kaunda who later became the Zambia President commented, "It should be clearly understood that the practise of non-violence often may not accomplish the desired purpose in this world of ours. It may mean that a ruthless enemy will take advantage of the spirit of love on the part of those who practise non-violence and cause harm to befall them."⁷⁴

When the settler government was contemplating UDI, Dodge warned that such a move would be tantamount to rebellion against Britain. He threatened that he would advise members of his denomination not to take orders from such a government.⁷⁵ On the other hand, missionaries who thought that they were in the middle ground were perceived to be in acquiescence with the political authorities. By 1966 some Catholic Bishops were moving from their 1960 position of outright rejection of nationalism, and coming to recognize the complexity of the situation, a position similar to that reached by a few Anglican priests: "It comes as no surprise to us that many [Africans] are saying, 'So this is Christian Civilisation! This is what Christianity is' the preservation of privilege for the few and well-to-do, and the neglect of many who have nothing. It seems as if we have been deceived by the exponents of Christianity, the missionaries. These have come here only to prepare the way for the racist state where we shall remain permanently the hewers of wood and drawers of water."⁷⁶

What the churches needed in this divided community was to be impartial not neutral, and not to be seen as simply wanting to perpetuate settler interests.⁷⁷ According to Canaan Banana, they needed to wrestle with the moral dilemmas in the Zimbabwean conflict, and having judged impartially who was in the right and who was in the wrong to make a stand on behalf of what was or who was right.⁷⁸

A Remnant of Liberal Protestors

The words and actions of some white Christian leaders who sought to publicly voice the grievances of Africans challenges the view that the

74. Dodge, "Top Secret," 10 June 1963.

75. Shamuyarira, *Crisis in Rhodesia*, 142.

76. Ibid.

77. Hugh, "Luke 23:34; Father, Forgive them" (sermon), 27 February 1966, NAZ, GEN-P/SKE.

78. Banana, *Church and Struggle*, 318.

churches were an outright barrier to nationalism.⁷⁹ These white Christians were largely missionaries from a liberal political background. Any form of political protest was viewed with great suspicion and hostility, yet some resolutely believed that the churches in Zimbabwe were to be agents of reconciliation, and that they should actively work for the transformation of social structures.⁸⁰

To some of them, the church's reconciliatory role was viewed as limited to dialogue and peace initiatives.⁸¹ Any attempt to force the government to change its policy by any means other than non-confrontational words and prayer was regarded as unbiblical.

Those that viewed the church's role in Zimbabwe as that of promoting reconciliation argued for the need of continuous dialogue by the church on behalf of the African people. The Anglican bishop Cecil Alderson proclaimed, "[W]e must be true with our dealings, with all of our fellow-citizens . . . 'where there is discord let me sow peace.'"⁸² Confrontation with political authorities was not viewed by this group as an option that Christians could pursue. Their belief that the prophetic task of the church was solely for reconciliation made them stand aloof or castigate the few that believed that Christians could be political activists.⁸³

These tensions were highlighted in the Southern Rhodesia Christian Conferences.⁸⁴ The Christian conference had been formed in 1903⁸⁵ and was primarily a conference for missionaries held once in every two years.⁸⁶ On 22 August 1962 some members of the Southern Rhodesia Christian Conference suggested the forming of a separate council that would, among some of its duties, give a Christian voice on various sociopolitical issues.⁸⁷ This suggestion was given as a solution to tensions that had arisen as result of some of its members calling for the need of the conference to

79. Mutambirwa, "Impact of Christianity," 69.

80. Muzorewa, *Rise and Walk*, 56.

81. *Ibid.*

82. *Ibid.*

83. *Ibid.*

84. The Christian Conference was an event where missionaries in Zimbabwe gathered and generally discussed and prayed for various matters concerning mission work in that country.

85. Falk, *Growth of the Church*, 196.

86. Muzorewa, *Rise and Walk*, 58.

87. Watyoka, *25 Years*, 2.

address political matters as part of its mandate.⁸⁸ This threatened the unity of the Conference, as some believed that it was “dragging the church into politics,”⁸⁹ suggesting a theological dualism that compartmentalized issues into spiritual and temporal. The majority of the leaders and members of the largest denominations, Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism, still saw that political matters belonged to the government and religious matters to the church. Muzorewa observed, “It was (in 1963) disturbing to hear the conservative reaction of many church leaders . . . that a true Christian should not be involved in politics, nor be active in the national struggle.”⁹⁰

The disputes in the Christian Conference deepened, amidst initiatives from the Bulawayo and Salisbury African ministers’ fraternal according to Muzorewa who, “longed for an inter-church body that could speak . . . on national issues as they arose,”⁹¹ and had urged for a formation of a council that could deal with such matters. The eventual result was the formation of the Southern Rhodesia Christian Council and its formal launch on 29 July 1964. Article (i) of its first constitution read, “The Council shall participate in forming an enlightened public opinion on all issues affecting the people in the territory. It shall serve as the representative body which can, after study and investigation, express the mind of the Christian community on issues. The actions and pronouncements of the Council shall not commit any of the denominations or other agencies represented on it to any policy or line of action, or financial responsibility without the consent of their executive authorities.”⁹² The Christian council was therefore open to “actions,” as well as pronouncements. The few liberals who had been willing to speak out against the resistance of the government to reconciliatory actions by the church were members of this body.⁹³ Not all members agreed with this position, believing that nonviolent action was the only appropriate prophetic stance for the church, and that there was no strong theological justification for use of violence as a means for social transformation. Those who called for action argued that non-violence had failed to dissuade the settler governments, especially after Smith’s take over, from increased political repression against Africans.⁹⁴

88. Ibid.

89. Ibid.

90. Muzorewa, *Rise up and Walk*, 59.

91. Ibid., 58–59.

92. Christian Council of Southern Rhodesia, “Constitution,” NAZ, GEN-P/WOR.

93. Muzorewa, *Rise and Walk*, 58ff.

94. Watyoka, *25 Years*, 11.