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(95) CHRISTIANITY IN ZAMBIA

Teddy Chalwe Sakupapa

Religion	Pop 2010	Pct 2010	Pop 2025	Pct 2025	Gr Pct
					1970 2025
Christians	11,997,000	86.2%	19,586,000	89.5%	3.3%
Independents	2,629,000	18.9%	3,650,000	16.7%	2.2%
African initiated	848,000	6.1%			
Orthodox	7,400	0.1%	8,000	0.0%	0.5%
Protestants	4,745,000	34.1%	7,500,000	34.3%	3.1%
United churches	1,144,000	8.2%			
Adventist	1,096,000	7.9%			
Pentecostal	865,000	6.2%			
Reformed, Presbyterian	641,000	4.6%			
Baptist	274,000	2.0%			
Anglicans	264,000	1.9%			
Holiness	168,000	1.2%			
Brethren	142,000	1.0%			
Evangelical churches	70,900	0.5%			
Roman Catholics	4,559,000	32.8%	7,651,000	34.9%	3.5%
<i>Pentecostals/Charismatics</i>	3,290,000	23.6%	5,330,000	24.3%	3.3%
<i>Evangelicals</i>	2,576,000	18.5%	4,220,000	19.3%	3.3%
adherents of traditional African religions	1,479,000	10.6%	1,600,000	7.3%	0.5%
Baha'is	243,000	1.7%	400,000	1.8%	3.4%
Muslims	141,000	1.0%	220,000	1.0%	3.0%
Hindus	17,900	0.1%	25,000	0.1%	2.2%
Chinese folk-religionists	8,500	0.1%	12,000	0.1%	2.4%
Buddhists	4,000	0.0%	6,000	0.0%	2.8%
Jews	1,700	0.0%	1,700	0.0%	0.0%
Sikhs	260	0.0%	400	0.0%	2.8%
people professing no religion	24,300	0.2%	41,000	0.2%	3.5%
Total population	13,917,000	100.0%	21,892,000	100.0%	3.1%

Source: Centre for the Study of World Christianity (CSGC), Boston, Gordon-Conwell TS

Introduction

This contribution offers a descriptive profile of Christianity in Zambia. It is specifically argued that, while there is a noticeable presence of other religions in Zambia, such as Islam and the Bahai faith, Christianity is

the dominant religious influence in the country. Be that as it may, I contend that Zambian Christianity may be best described as a mosaic of various Christian expressions. Structurally, I begin with a historical overview of the introduction of missionary Christianity in Zambia and the subsequent shift from mission to church. The second part discusses the changing face of Christianity in Zambia and highlights the challenges and opportunities presented by this development. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the public role of Christianity in Zambia.

A Brief History of Mainstream Christianity in Zambia

The southern African nation of Zambia (formerly Northern Rhodesia) has a population in excess of thirteen million people and is generally considered to be a *de facto* Christian nation.¹ Christianity is largely an outcome of the nineteenth-century missionary movement.² Comparatively, Zambia was the last field in south-central Africa to be reached by missionary societies from the north. Its landlocked position seems to have rendered it inaccessible to ‘missions’ for a long time. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, a number of missionary societies began to make inroads into the country. The Plymouth Brethren missionary Frederik Arnot is said to have been the first Christian missionary to settle within the borders of present-day Zambia, following his arrival at Lealui in 1882.³ In terms of missionary societies, it was the London Missionary Society (LMS) that made earlier attempts to establish missions in Zambia.⁴ Since 1877, the LMS had been struggling against all odds to establish a station in the southern end of the Lake Tanganyika area. Before this, the LMS missionary explorer David Livingstone had already visited the Bemba Chief Chitimukulu in 1867.

The LMS eventually set up mission stations among the Mambwe people at Nyamakolo and Fwambo, in 1884 and 1887 respectively.⁵ In what was then called Barotseland (now Western Province), Francois Coillard of the Paris Evangelical Mission established a mission at Lealui in 1887 following successful approval by the Lozi King, albeit during a period of political upheaval within the kingdom.⁶ The positive reception that Coillard enjoyed in Barotseland was due to a great extent to the catalytic presence of Sotho evangelists and teachers in his team. In correspondence with Coillard, the Primitive Methodist Missionary Society undertook a long and difficult journey to Barotseland but the King would not allow them to settle there. They finally managed to establish a mission at Nkala in Ila land in 1893.

Although the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) had made preliminary contact with the people of Zambia as early as 1730, it formally established its first mission post in Zambia in 1891 near Mambwe-Mwela in the north of the country.⁷ This was largely a result of the missionary work of the White Fathers. In late 1899, the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa started missionary work at Magwero in eastern Zambia.⁸ In 1900, the Church of Scotland established a mission in northern Zambia. The Anglican Church established its first significant mission station at Msoro near Chipata in the east in 1911 and assigned the Malawian Leornad Kamungu to its charge.

¹ See 2010 census. Details available at www.zamstats.gov.zm/census/cen.html

² See Teddy Sakupapa, “Local Ecumenism in the Zambian Context,” In: *South African Perspectives on Notions and Forms of Ecumenicity*, edited by E. Conradie (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2013), 158.

³ Charles P. Groves, *The Planting of Christianity in Africa, Vol 3 1878-1914* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1965), 137.

⁴ Bwalya Chuba, *A History of Early Christian Missions and Church Unity in Zambia* (Ndola: Mission Press, 2005), 20.

⁵ See Peter Bolink, *Towards Church Union in Zambia: A Study of Missionary Cooperation and Church Union Efforts in Central Africa* (Franeker, Neth: T. Waver, 1967), 33-36.

⁶ See Philippe Burger et al (eds.), *The Spread of the Gospel in Barotseland: From Paris Mission to the United Church of Zambia* (Paris: Defap, 2010), 10.

⁷ See Hugo Hinfelaar, *History of the Catholic Church in Zambia* (Lusaka: Bookworld Publishers, 2004), 1.

⁸ Gerdien Verstraalen-Gilhuis, *From Dutch Mission Church to Reformed Church in Zambia: The Scope for African Leadership and Initiative in the History of Zambian Mission Church* (Netherlands: Franeker, 1982), 45.

The above-named mission societies and others soon proliferated in the country and gradually spawned a number of churches. These included the Roman Catholic Church, the United Church of Zambia (UCZ), the Reformed Church in Zambia (RCZ), the Anglican Church in Zambia, and the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP), among others.⁹ The Catholic Church is the largest single denomination, while the UCZ is the biggest Protestant church in the country. With reference to the UCZ, Gifford notes that this church 'is a remarkable ecumenical venture that is almost unique in Africa'.¹⁰ It was formed in 1965 as a union of the United Church of Central Africa in Rhodesia (UCCAR), the Church of Barotseland and the Methodist Church, thus bringing together Congregational, Presbyterian/Reformed and Methodist Christian traditions (Chuba 2005:143). Contrary to what one would expect in a former British colony, the Anglican Church is much smaller in Zambia. The RCZ is most widespread in the eastern part of the country but continues to make inroads in other areas. Other larger Protestant churches include the Seventh Day Adventists, the Salvation Army and the Baptist Convention of Zambia. Many of these churches have further developed their missionary heritage of schools and health institutions, although some such institutions have been surrendered to government control.

In retrospect, it may be argued that, while missionary Christianity contributed immensely to African society through the introduction of western medical systems and the establishment of schools, its hostile approach to African culture and religion has been a subject of much criticism by several commentators. One strong criticism in this regard is that missionary endeavours were difficult to disengage from colonial intent. Nevertheless, some argue to the contrary – that, in some cases, missionaries were prepared to fight the colonial administration 'if it seemed... that the rights of the African were being infringed or betrayed'.¹¹

The Emergence of Pentecostalism in Zambia

From the foregoing, it may be argued that the history of mission work in Zambia is integral to an adequate account of the history of Christianity in the country generally, and that of mainstream Christianity in particular. Mainline churches retained their dominance on the Zambian religious scene until the 1970s when other forms of Christianity began to appear. African Independent Churches (AICs) were among the first wave of an attempt to Africanise Christianity within the Zambian context. Some of these include Alice Lenshina's Lumpa Church, founded during the 1950s, and Emilio Mulolani's Catholic Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (also known as Ba Mutima). Lenshina had been a Christian at the Lubwa Mission of the Church of Scotland in north-eastern Zambia. Her prophetic and millenarian movement led the opposition to the newly independent regime of Kenneth Kaunda in 1964, resulting in a 'civil war' between her followers and Kaunda's party. Mulolani had been a Roman Catholic who had earlier been a student at Kipalapala major seminary. These and other AICs are no longer prominent in Zambia. Enculturation that has resulted in the appropriation of indigenous symbols in the liturgy is more evident within the Catholic Church. The healing sessions of Emmanuel Milingo (once Archbishop of Lusaka) were indicative of an

⁹ For a history of some of these churches see Bolink, *Towards Church*; Burger et al (eds.), *The Spread*; Brian Garvey, *Bembaland Church: Religious and Social Change in South Central Africa, 1891-1964* (Leiden, 1994); Bwalya Chuba, *Mbeleshi in a History of the London Missionary Society* (Gaborone, Pula Press, 2000); Hinfelaar, *History*; Verstraelen-Gilhuis, *From Dutch Mission*.

¹⁰ Paul Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 183.

¹¹ Stephen Neil, *Colonialism and Christian Missions* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1966), 309. Cf. Henry Meebelo, *Reaction to Colonialism: A Prelude to the Politics of Independence in Northern Zambia 1893-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1971), 27.

attempt to take seriously African religious experience. Milingo's approach was considered unconventional and it led to his transfer out of Zambia to a new assignment in Rome.¹²

Another significant development in Zambian Christianity was the emergence of Pentecostalism during the early 1970s, largely due to the influence of classic European and North American Pentecostalism (such as the Pentecostal Assemblies of God and the Church of God), as well as Pentecostal missions and independent ministries. The latter included the German evangelist, Reinhard Bonnke, American evangelists like Jimmy Swaggart and Kenneth Copeland and others in Africa. Various Christian student fellowships contributed to the spread of Pentecostalism, serving as a platform where young students encountered this expression of the Christian faith. Youth ministries in schools and tertiary institutions, under the auspices of Scripture Union, the Zambia Fellowship of Evangelical Students, Campus Crusade, Navigators and others, left a Pentecostal influence that is residual within Zambian Christianity.

Alongside this was the charismatic ferment which affected many churches in Zambia as an outgrowth of the global charismatic movement.¹³ The initial impact of these Pentecostal expressions was in the form of charismatic worship which soon led to factions in congregations between Pentecostal-inclined (mostly youth) members and so-called 'traditionalists'. The ensuing strife eventually culminated in breakaways in mainline churches. Significant examples include the UCZ and the RCZ who experienced major breakaways, which resulted in the formation of Bible Gospel Church in Africa (BIGOGA) and Grace Ministries in 1993 and 2001 respectively. The 1990s particularly witnessed the proliferation of new Pentecostal churches, particularly those with no links with classic Pentecostalism.

In its many forms and expressions, Pentecostalism has fast become the representative face of Christianity in Zambia.¹⁴ It has indeed become a prominent feature of Zambia's religious landscape. However, one must be cautious not to downplay the vitality and growth within mainline churches too. Cheyeka and others are thus correct when they argue against the tendency to generalise interpretations of the significance of Pentecostalism in Zambia.¹⁵

From the perspective of mainline churches, there is a noticeable shift from questioning charismatic worship (which dominated the late 1990s) to the recent dynamic that has led to the unabashed 'Pentecostalisation of Christianity' in Zambia. The notion of this 'Pentecostalisation of Christianity' has been described by Ghanaian theologian Asamoah-Gyadu as an attempt by mainline churches in Africa to accommodate some Pentecostal elements.¹⁶ This seems to be the case in the local Zambian context where several mainline churches are appropriating elements of Pentecostalism in their liturgies and practice of ministry.

The rapid growth of the Pentecostal phenomenon in Zambia may be attributed to a number of factors. The Pentecostal message with its emphasis on the power of God to miraculously and mystically transform all life situations – including the healing of diseases, ensuring prosperity and solving believer's daily problems – has indeed been attractive to many. Such a message is compelling and seductive for people whose decreasing quality of life and multiple life struggles are a daily experience. Even more significant is

¹² See Hugo Hinfelaar, *Bemba-speaking Women of Zambia in a Century of Religious Change (1892-1992)* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), 171-175.

¹³ For a history of charismatic Christianity in Zambia see Austin Cheyeka, "Towards a History of the Charismatic Churches in Post-Colonial Zambia," in *One Zambia, Many Histories: Towards a History of Post-Colonial Zambia*, eds. Jan-Bart Gewald, Marja Hinfelaar and Giacomo Macola (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2008), 144-163.

¹⁴ David Gordon, *Invisible Agents: Spirits in a Central African History* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2012), 187.

¹⁵ Austin Cheyeka, Marja Hinfelaar & Bernhard Udelhoven. "The Changing Face of Zambia's Christianity and its Implications for the Public Sphere: A Case Study of Bauleni Township, Lusaka," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 40, no. 5 (2014): 1031-1045.

¹⁶ Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics: Current Developments within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 30.

the ability of Pentecostalism in Zambia to appropriate both the indigenous and contemporary Zambian/African cultures' anthropocentric focus. Pentecostalism has thrived on the fertile ground of Zambian traditional cosmologies by appropriating notions of salvation within the framework of their inherently religious and anthropocentric cosmology. Further, salvation is holistically conceived. Akin to Mbiti's description of salvation in African Traditional Religion, salvation in Zambian traditional cosmologies 'has to do with physical and immediate dangers that threaten individual or community survival, good health, and general prosperity or safety'.¹⁷ Accordingly, material blessings (children, good health, shelter, etc) are deemed a stamp of divine approval.

Ecumenism in the Zambian Context

Zambia has three so-called church mother bodies, namely, the Council of Churches in Zambia (CCZ), the Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia (EFZ) and the Zambia Episcopal Conference (ZEC). The CCZ is composed of ecumenically inclined Protestant churches. The EFZ is made up of evangelical churches including a variety of Pentecostal/Charismatic churches, while ZEC is the administrative body of the Roman Catholic Church. These three bodies especially collaborate on issues that require the common witness of churches.¹⁸ Within the field of theological education, most mainline churches (e.g. Roman Catholics, UCZ, RCZ, Anglicans and Baptists) run sizeable seminaries and university colleges. Nevertheless, these largely remain a denominational enterprise as there is very little collaboration in theological education among these institutions. Established Pentecostal churches such as the Pentecostal Assemblies of God also offer training programmes for pastors in their denominational Bible colleges. The need to develop theological education synergies among theological institutions in Zambia remains crucial.

In view of the fragmented theological education scenario portrayed above, Theological Education by Extension in Zambia (TEEZ) – an ecumenical venture established for the purpose of preparing all God's people for works of Christian service through non-residential theological training – holds much promise in bringing theological education closer to churches, particularly churches of Protestant mission origin. The Mindolo Ecumenical Foundation (MEF), established in 1959, is yet another significant ecumenical venture in Zambia. It was originally founded with the aim of serving the Christian church and the community. It was established as a centre of study and worship and for consultation on the unity and renewal of the church and its responsibility in society.¹⁹ MEF also served as the headquarters of the All Africa Conference of Churches in the early 1960s.

The Public Role of the Church

As the most dominant religious influence in the country, Christianity has been a significant factor in national social and political matters before and after the independence struggle against British colonialism. Already, in 1924, the Northern Rhodesia missionary conference campaigned against the tax system which was imposed on Africans by the British colonial authorities. It later also allied itself with local opposition to the Federation.²⁰ This notwithstanding, some of the local people involved in the nationalist struggle

¹⁷ John Mbiti, "Some Reflections on African Experience of Salvation Today", in *Living Faiths and Ultimate Goals: A Continuing Dialogue*, ed. S.J. Samartha (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1974), 108-119.

¹⁸ Joe Komakoma (ed.), *The Social Teachings of the Catholic Bishops and Other Christian Leaders in Zambia: Major Pastoral Letters and Statements, 1953-2001* (Ndola: Mission Press, 2003).

¹⁹ Denis M' Passou, *Mindolo: A Story of the Ecumenical Movement in Africa* (Lusaka: Multimedia Publications, 1983), 26-28.

²⁰ John Weller & Jane Linden, *Mainstream Christianity to 1980 in Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1984), 191-200.

questioned certain missionary attitudes despite having been beneficiaries of missionary education. Kenneth Kaunda, a son of an African minister and who later became Zambia's first President, is an example of this critical stand. Kaunda noted thus:

In my days at Lubwa [mission], I had begun to question certain things in the life of the mission which seemed incompatible with the teaching of Christ in the Bible. I could not see why the European missionaries should have special seats in church and why the Rev. Paul Mushindo [an African] went about on foot or on a cycle while the missionaries rode around in cars.²¹

At the same time, there were missionaries such as the Methodist minister Colin Morris who earned the confidence of many Zambian Christians and the close friendship of Zambia's future President Kenneth Kaunda as a result of his 'political outspokenness'²² in support of the liberation struggle.

By the early 1960s, many missions had become churches. The role of churches in a decolonised Zambia which had been honed during the struggle for independence became quite evident in the subsequent years of nation-building. The churches would not only respond but also contribute to shaping social, economic and political developments in the ensuing transitions. For instance, churches opposed the United National Independence Party (UNIP) government's attempt to introduce 'Scientific Socialism' into the Zambian educational system via the nationwide educational reform between 1976 and 1982. The churches were concerned about the exclusion of religious education from the proposed curriculum, and the proposal to convert church buildings into classrooms in an attempt to overcome the dearth of school space.²³

In 1991, Zambia changed from being a one-party state into being a multi-party democracy. Churches made a significant contribution by way of civic education during that historic transition. They conscientized citizens through church-owned media and joint statements that underscored the importance of civil society and democracy.²⁴ The Kaunda government was persuaded to return to multi-party politics and to hold elections in 1991. Churches were further involved in monitoring the elections which ousted Kenneth Kaunda's UNIP and ushered in a newly-formed party, the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD), under the presidency of Frederik Chiluba.

On 29th December 1991, barely two months after taking over the presidency, Chiluba declared Zambia a Christian nation.²⁵ Later in 1996, the declaration was included in the preamble of the Zambian Constitution. In a joint statement, the CCZ, EFZ and ZEC only cautiously welcomed the declaration of Zambia as a Christian nation, while lamenting the lack of consultation in the process. They further raised concern that the declaration should not compromise freedom of conscience and worship.²⁶ There were therefore divergent views regarding both the declaration and the enshrining of the same in the constitution. This notion of a Christian nation has in recent times attracted scholarly work on Christianity in Zambia and its role in Zambian politics.²⁷ Engaging with some of these studies, Cheyeka and others argue that, in practice, the declaration is first and foremost a moral discourse, at least from the perspective of Pentecostals and evangelicals in Zambia.²⁸

²¹ Kenneth Kaunda, *Zambia Shall Be Free* (New York, 1963), 146.

²² John V. Taylor & Dorothea Lehmann, *Christians of the Copperbelt: The Growth of the Church in Northern Rhodesia* (London: SCM Press, 1961), 157-158.

²³ Komakoma, 'The Social Teachings,' 107-133.

²⁴ Komakoma, 'The Social Teachings,' 140-196.

²⁵ Austin Cheyeka, *The Politics and Christianity of Chilubaism 1991-2011* (Ndola: Mission Press, 2010), 26-30.

²⁶ Komakoma, 'The Social Teachings,' 264.

²⁷ Gifford, *African Christianity*; Isabel Phiri, "President Frederick Chiluba and Zambia: Evangelicals and Democracy in a 'Christian Nation'", in *Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Africa*, ed. T.O. Ranger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). See also Gifford, *African Christianity*, 197-206.

²⁸ Cheyeka *et al.* "The Changing Face..." 1034.

Conclusion

In this contribution, I have described the growth of Christianity in Zambia from missionary times to the contemporary period which has seen the emergence of many forms of Christian expressions. Such growth shows, as Walls argues, that ‘Modern African Christianity is not only the result of movements among Africans, but it has been principally sustained by Africans and is to a surprising extent the result of African initiatives’.²⁹ I have further demonstrated that Christianity in Zambia holds an important place in society and that the churches – particularly the mainline churches – have engaged government on critical social issues. Although the contribution of Pentecostal churches to social issues is rather clumsy, it is not completely absent. Ecumenical co-operation between churches notwithstanding, there is a need for further collaboration beyond the question of social ethics.

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²⁹ Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 89. Cf. Cephas Omenyo, “Agenda for a Discussion of African Initiatives in Christianity: The West African/Ghanaian Case,” *Missiology: An International Review* 39, no. 3 (2011): 373-390.

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