Religio-political non-conformism, democratization and reconciliation in Zimbabwe

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The role of religion in the political sphere in Zimbabwe has been dominated by mainline Christian institutional churches and their apex bodies. Religious and political powers have often treated non-doctrinal religio-political organizations and individuals as an epiphenomenon or purposeless critics. This tendency, observable in colonial and post-colonial Zimbabwe, has obscured the role that such organizations and individuals operating structurally and culturally outside the jurisdiction and power of dominant religious and political systems have played in influencing the political realm. The study fills a research gap between historical narratives and modern admonitions for religious entities to play a constructive role in the socio-political sphere. It is an ethnographic study of religio-political organizations and the role they play in dealing with political conflict and violence in pursuit of democratization and reconciliation.

The organizations are understood as ‘religio-political non-conformists’ because they deviate from the dominant mainline churches and the political elites’ position with regard to religious participation in political matters. Deploying the concept of religious non-conformism, the study brings to the fore and distinguishes religio-political organizations from the general body of religious actors. While they are founded on the same religious tradition as the institutional churches, they possess a distinctive culture, organization and motivation hence cannot simply be studied under the general gamut of religious actors.

The study argues that through this concept, specific religious actors and the role they have played in the political sphere can be identified, thereby avoiding generalizations. It concludes that while mainstream religious actors possess the capacity to facilitate social transformation, for the most part they have not been effective in facilitating democratization and reconciliation. Instead religio-political non-conformist organizations and individuals, operating on the margins of religio-political power and willing to join forces with secular groups, possess greater potential to quickly respond to and challenge oppressive politics, transform grassroots relationships and promote ‘post-conflict’ reconciliation.

The study is grounded in previous work that emphasized the importance of religious actors in the public sphere in Africa and in Zimbabwe in particular (Chitando 2012, Daniel 2008, 2009; Gifford 1995, 1998; Hallencreutz and Moyo 1988, Kuperus 2011, Ranger, 2008). It concurs with the view that religious actors, especially Christian actors who are its focus, are important and significant in the political sphere, but develops an important caveat: religio-political non-conformists, are most effective when it comes to instigating social and political change. Religio-political non-conformists possess greater potential to be effective when it comes to challenging oppressive politics, transforming grassroots relationships, or promoting reconciliation. The study contains detailed accounts of three case studies of religio-political non-conformist groups – the Zimbabwe Christian Alliance (ZCA), Churches in Manicaland (CiM) (Manicaland is a Province in Eastern Zimbabwe) and Grace to Heal (GtH) – which provide examples of more effective activism than traditional mainline churches or denominational bodies. It focuses on their discourses and actions around democratization and reconciliation. The concept of reconciliation draws on Christian symbols and imagery, as well
as international discourses on truth recovery, and restorative and retributive justice. The study pays special attention to how religio-political non-conformists and their civil society allies conceptualize reconciliation. It looks to them as alternative sources for promoting democratization while acknowledging the power and structural constraints under which they operate.