

**Violence in early Christian writings:  
Lessons for Christians in independent Zimbabwe**

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*Abstract*

This work seeks to uncover the way in which the Church fathers have wrestled theologically with the ambivalent perspectives on violence. The early Christians, who took very seriously the injunction that they were not to take up the sword, refused to serve in the Roman armies for centuries. In essence, this work entails an historical enquiry as a basis for analysing the attitude of contemporary Christians to political violence in Zimbabwe. In the first two centuries, the problem of violence for Christians was treated as an appendage in the writings of the Church Fathers. Consequently, information about what Christians actually thought about the matter is derived from general comments on war and indirect references, which tell us little about the way in which the use of force can be reconciled in an individual's conscience with the Gospel. The article seeks to trace early Church perspectives on violence in order to find out whether the Christian attitude to politically motivated violence in Zimbabwe has its roots in church history.

**Introduction**

There are important relationships and similarities between the phenomenon of violence in early Christian writings and the phenomenon of violence in postcolonial Zimbabwe. Christian perspectives on violence lie at the intersection of one's understanding of the faith and one's practical experience in civil society. In all matters of controversy among Christians the Scriptures have been accepted as the highest court of appeal. It is clear that there are two sides to this issue of violence in the Bible. Some Christians are pacifists in outlook, while others emphasise the legitimacy of violence. Thus the two dominant positions on violence that conscientious Christians have embraced throughout Christian history are pacifism and just war theory. According to

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Boettner (1985:17), a pacifist is someone who believes that under no circumstances is war justified. The sixth commandment is often quoted by pacifists to prove that all war is wrong. Those who are committed to non-violence begin with the Sermon on the Mount in the gospel of Matthew (Matt 5:9). It is from this part of the teaching of Jesus that many have developed their commitment to non-violence. It should be noted that the same God who said “Thou shall not kill” (Ex 20:13), said in Exodus 21:12, “He that smiteth a man so that he dieth, shall surely be put to death.” Both verses summarise the Old Testament understanding of violence; there is the justification and rejection of violence. It is clear that the New Testament gives no direct teaching on the subject of violence, although there are snippets of teachings on violence in the New Testament.

This study sought to trace early Church perspectives on violence in order to find out whether the Christian attitude to politically motivated violence in Zimbabwe has its roots in church history. Although it is true that political violence belongs to all generations; in Zimbabwe the topic is currently more relevant than ever. Instances of political violence are rampant in Zimbabwe. The torture and killing of both opposition party and ruling party activists, and civil rights activists, and political beatings have become common events in independent Zimbabwe. This has brought about a sense of insecurity and uncertainty. This research, therefore, is being undertaken within the framework of the reality of political violence in the country.

### **Violence in Early Christian Writings**

The early Christians, who took very seriously the injunction that they were not to take up the sword, refused to serve in the Roman armies for centuries. In order to become a soldier in the Roman army, one had to offer a sacrifice, swearing an allegiance to Caesar – swearing ultimate allegiance to him as a god. J.L. Allen (1991:16) in his book *War: a primer for Christians* observed that there was “danger that in the Roman army, Christians might be asked to commit idolatry – to sacrifice to the emperor or at least to approve of doing so”. Of course, many Christians agreed that this was not possible for a devout believer. For this reason, believers were prohibited from joining the military. Early literature gives ample evidence of the position of the pacifists of the Christian Church. However, to say all Christians in the early centuries were pacifists is not correct. This is one of those polemical generalisations that will not hold up under even the most superficial scrutiny.

During the 300 years that followed the ministry of Jesus Christ, the members of the Christian churches or Messianic communities abstained from war and military service. Shubin (1999:21) notes that the earliest of these were the Messianic Jews of the apostolic era. They fled Judea to the east of the Jordan River to escape the invasion of the Roman army, the Jewish War

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and the devastation of the country, which occurred in the years 66–70 AD. During this period none of the Jewish revolutionaries took up arms to defend their country from invasion by the Roman army or in the defence of Jerusalem during the siege.

*Church Fathers and war*

The section below discusses the position of some Church Fathers on violence. The Church Fathers or Apostolic Fathers is a reference to Christian authors whose writings have come down to us from the end of the first century and the beginning of the second. However, it should be noted that the pacifist or non-pacifist position taken by certain Christians does not mean that the Church was officially either pacifist or non-pacifist.

- Justin Martyr of Caesarea

Writing about AD 150, Justin Martyr of Caesarea, one of the earliest apologists, was anti-violence. Swift (1983:34) points out that Justin, who was martyred for his faith, wrote: “We refrain from making war on our enemies, and (we) cannot bear to see a man killed, even if killed justly.” He challenged Christians to pray for their enemies and to follow the injunction of Christ about turning the other cheek. He argued that Christians were living in the time which was prophesied by Isaiah, and this demanded a new ethic. Isaiah prophesied that in the consummated kingdom

... they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more (Isaiah 2:4).

Justin insisted that Christians should abstain from bloodshed. Justin’s time was largely associated with gladiatorial combat, murder and judicial processes. Justin was of the view that the Christians of his time felt that, with Jesus, the era of military service had ended and the new era of anti-violence had been inaugurated.

- Tertullian

Shubin (1999:24) maintains that Tertullian (c. 160–c. 220) was the first articulate spokesman for pacifism in the Christian church. He inclined toward pacifism as a character trait of the Christian especially during his Montanist period. Tertullian took a strong stand against violence and military service because he thought it was irreconcilable with the scriptures:

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There is no agreement between the divine and the human sacrament, the standard of Christ and the standard of the devil, the camp of light and the camp of darkness. One soul cannot be due to two masters – God and Caesar. Shall it be held lawful to make an occupation of the sword, when the Lord proclaims that he who uses the sword shall perish by the sword? And shall the son of peace take part in the battle when it does not become him to sue at law? And shall he apply the chain, and prison, and the torture, and the punishment, who is not the avenger even of his own wrongs? ... Touching this primary aspect of the question, as to the lawfulness even of a military life itself, I shall not add more (Shubin 1999:24).

Tertullian regarded military service and violence as immoral. For him, it was sinful for a soldier to hold the sword, a symbol of blood-letting, even in times of peace. Tertullian made the following statement in the early third century:

For even if soldiers came to John and received advice on how to act, and even if a centurion became a believer, the Lord, in subsequently disarming Peter, disarmed every soldier (Treatise on Idolatry 19, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 3:99–100).

Tertullian was referring to the incident where Peter attempted to defend Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus halted him, forbidding him to take up the sword against those attackers. He told Peter that he who lived by the sword would die by the sword (Matt 26:53). Tertullian and many Church Fathers saw this as a model for all Christians – so that none were given the right to pick up the sword. Tertullian considered Jesus' actions in the Garden of Gethsemane as a denial of violence. In admonishing Peter about putting away the sword, he disarmed all soldiers and, thus, cursed the wounds of the sword.

Peter was the first “pope” so, even if just war were legitimate, there is something out of place about a pope cutting off people's ears. Jesus' rebuke to Peter may be linked to the unsuitability of violence for clerical occupations. Although Tertullian later changed some of his early writings, he remained pacifist in outlook during his Catholic period.

It should be noted that in the first three centuries, both pacifist and non-pacifist positions existed side by side and neither was able to supplant the other. The reign of the Christian Roman emperor Constantine (306–337) represents a watershed in the development of Christian attitudes towards violence. It was a turning point in Christian thinking about the legitimacy of

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violence under certain conditions. Christians were now wrestling with the principles of violence in a new context and coming up with new answers.

- St Ambrose of Milan

Lietzmann (1951:70) avers that St Ambrose of Milan (339–397) insisted on the need to distinguish between just and unjust wars. He believed that in some circumstances war might be defended as the lesser of two evils. Accordingly, Ambrose justified war that was designed to punish wrongdoing or was defensive in nature. Therefore, for Ambrose not all wars were immoral. He also denied taking unfair advantage of the enemy as an ideal for Christians; an enemy in defeat had to be accorded mercy. In Ambrose's view, violent self-defence was unacceptable because it inevitably destroyed the virtue of love or piety, which united man to God. Accordingly, hurting an assailant in order to protect one's own life or property was tantamount to preferring a human good to a divine one and such a reversal of the proper hierarchy of values undercut any benefit that might accrue from preserving one's life.

Ambrose proposed that the same principles did not apply when a third party is involved. The responsibility for looking out for one's neighbour could require a person to use force on another's behalf even to the point of taking an aggressor's life. Ambrose wrote that the emperor was a soldier of God on duty, bound to serve the faith (Lietzmann 1951:70). In such circumstances, love and extreme violence were not mutually exclusive. This implied that love demanded the use of violence. As the thrust of Ambrose's philosophy this also played a crucial role in Augustine's thinking about the legitimacy of using violence.

Ambrose treated other aspects of the problem of violence in a cursory way. The fundamental problem Ambrose faced was how an individual could maintain within himself a spirit of love while in the very act of using force. Ambrose told us little about the precise way in which the use of force could be reconciled in an individual's conscience with the Gospel. This study will take up Ambrose's issue of violence as the lesser of two evils and ascertain whether the churches in Zimbabwe reflect this.

Ambrose categorically rejected the death penalty as a means of effecting religious conformity. What is more, he regarded violence against non-believers as a matter of no consequence. He conceded that it was legitimate for public authorities to have recourse to the use of force, but he insisted that there were definite limits to the right. Mercy was for Ambrose the better course because there was always hope for the wrongdoer's conversion.

- St Augustine's Classical Just War Theory

Augustine of Hippo (354–430) is regarded as the author of the “theory of the just war” (Swift 1983:24). Augustine’s attitude toward war was moulded by the defeat and sacking of Rome by the Goths in AD 409–410. He consequently endorsed the use of coercion to suppress religious dissent. For Augustine, military service was compatible with the Christian faith. His ideas on violence were largely based on humanity’s present condition in the created world. As a result, the wretched state of man led inevitably to bloodshed. Human beings’ tendency to follow their own self-interests and lower appetites threatened the very structure of human society. Consequently, God willed the civil order as a means of punishing wrongdoers and restraining evil. Augustine believed that obedience to a properly constituted authority was a general stipulation of human society. He further suggested that all men might be classified either as citizens of the city of God (i.e. Christians) or as citizens of the earthly city (lovers of self). Christians and lovers of self differed in the objects of their love, their goals and their ultimate destiny. The welfare of God’s city was inextricably bound up with that of the earthly city. Augustine thought that Christians should be grateful for the limited peace that was attainable in a sinful world.

Augustine’s fundamental belief was that the peacemaker who wielded the Word instead of the sword was following a higher call. This same theologian’s experience with the horrors of armed conflict convinced him that preventing war through persuasion and seeking peace through peaceful means rather than through war was more glorious than slaying men with the sword (Allen 1991:32). This statement is fundamental to an understanding of Augustine’s approach to the whole problem of violence. Violence and an internal spirit of love were not mutually exclusive. Among the principles governing justifiable violence was authority – killing was justified only when sanctioned by legitimate authority. In terms of this thinking, leaders had the right to take human life. But this was not all; equally important were the motivations which generated armed conflicts. Wars initiated to punish wrongdoing by another nation were justified. Augustine formulated seven points that had to be adhered to in order to wage a justifiable war. Allen (1991:32) states that in terms of just war theory there are seven criteria for whether a war is just:

1. **There must be a just cause.** In just war theory all aggression is condemned. Participation in war must be prompted by a just cause or a defensive cause.
2. **Just intention.** The war must have a right intention to secure a fair peace for all parties involved. One must have just motives for going to war.

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3. **It is a last resort.** Other means of resolution such as diplomacy and economic pressure must have been reasonably exhausted before war is resorted to.
4. **Formal declaration.** The war must be initiated with a formal declaration by a properly constituted authority. Only governments can declare war, not individuals or militias or terrorist organisations.
5. **Limited objectives.** Securing peace is the purpose and objective of going to war. War must be engaged in such a way that when peace is attained, hostilities cease.
6. **Proportionate means.** Combatant forces of the opposition may not be subjected to greater harm than is necessary to secure victory and peace.
7. **Non-combatant immunity.** Military forces must respect individuals and groups not participating in the conflict and must abstain from attacking them. Justifiable wars are always directed at enemy forces. Therefore, no innocent civilians must be injured or killed and no civil property should be destroyed.

The main weakness in the criteria of Augustine and his just war theory is that both sides can claim the same justification. Perhaps the other major flaw of Augustine's criteria is that he gave Christians justification for waging war using the above criteria, rather than ceasing from war.

What is of value in the above analysis is that Augustine's pessimism about the fallen state of human beings and the violence which inevitably follows from it is matched by an overriding conviction about two things; that ultimately in God's providence everything works out for the good, and that God uses war both to punish the wicked and test the faithful.

### **Violence in postcolonial Zimbabwe**

Zimbabwe gained its independence from British rule in April 1980 with Robert Mugabe as prime minister at the head of a coalition government largely composed of two political parties – the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (Zanu PF) and the Zimbabwe African Peoples' Union Patriotic Front (PF ZAPU). Zimbabwe attained its independence after what is known traditionally as the second Chimurenga, which was characterised by fierce fighting and loss of life. Canaan S. Banana, the first president of independent Zimbabwe, pointed out that the issue of violence is one of the problems in the relationship between the Church and the State (Banana 1985:16). Banana, like St Augustine before him, believed that the best method for dealing with violence was the use of some form of violence.

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Christians in Zimbabwe grappled with a war culture in which violence, repression and brutality were destroying civility and endangering the very life of communities. Colson and Pearcey (1999:17) state in this regard:

To engage the world, however, requires that we (Christians) understand the great ideas that compete for people's minds and hearts. ... it is the great ideas that inform the mind, fire the imagination, move the heart, and shape a culture ... the real war is a cosmic struggle between worldviews – between the Christian worldview and the various secular ... worldviews arrayed against it.

A debilitating weakness among Christians in Zimbabwe is that they have been fighting political skirmishes on all sides without knowing what the war itself is about. Zimbabwe has witnessed a clash of worldviews.

Because of the handicap arising from their historical past, which was characterised by their siding with settlers, the churches were not psychologically and spiritually prepared for the birth of a new Zimbabwe as will be shown below.

#### *Religious bodies at work in Zimbabwe*

Various ecclesiastical bodies existed in the new country. The main bodies on the religious map were the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC), the Zimbabwe Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC) and the Heads of Denominations. The ZCC comprised a collection of mainline churches, independent churches and Pentecostal movements, while the ZCBC was made up of Roman Catholic bishops from dioceses in Zimbabwe and catered for specifically Roman Catholic interests. The Heads of Denominations consisted of leaders of both Protestant and Catholic churches. Both the ZCC and the ZCBC existed prior to 1980. The uneasy relations between religious bodies should be understood in the context of the second Chimurenga. Hallencreutz (1988:252–253) states that while the Rhodesian Catholic Bishops' Conference began to recognise the Patriotic Front in the 1970s and took an adversarial stance towards the Rhodesian regime with regard to atrocities perpetrated by its security forces, the Christian Council initially supported the pliable Bishop Abel Muzorewa's United African National Congress. In addition, the Christian Council backed the internal settlement negotiated between Ian Smith and Abel Muzorewa, which excluded the Patriotic Front. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that Muzorewa remained in the ZCC after independence.



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Churches feared that, in this new dispensation, they would be irrelevant in Zimbabwe. Indeed, many churches in the new Zimbabwe faced an identity crisis due to their association with the former colonial regime.

*Church's response to Gukurahundi*

The first organised acts of political violence in Zimbabwe were experienced in Matabeleland and the Midlands regions. Such acts were engineered by the government after the discovery of the so-called arms caches in Bulawayo. Subsequently, Mugabe unleashed *Gukurahundi* on his fellow citizens. *Gukurahundi* refers to the civil war in Matabeleland and the Midlands provinces in which up to 20 000 people lost their lives and during which government security forces hunted down and killed many civilians in the Western part of the country (Scholz 2004:19). The church subsequently had a role to play in the midst of the political violence in Matabeleland and the Midlands provinces as the section below will demonstrate.

Events during *Gukurahundi* forced the church to respond to the crisis. In the midst of political violence and instability in the Midlands and Matabeleland regions, the Catholic Church, through the CCJP, rediscovered its prophetic voice. The church became the voice of political victims. In fact, it was the then Archbishop of Bulawayo Henry Karlen who blew the whistle on the whole political saga. According to the publication of the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, *Breaking the silence: building true peace* (1997:53), on 16 March 1983 Catholic representatives consisting of CCJP chairman Mike Auret, Archbishop Karlen and Bishop Mutume met with Prime Minister Mugabe and presented him with comprehensive and irrefutable evidence of mass killings. On Easter Day 1983, the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference wrote a statement entitled *Reconciliation is still possible*, making it categorically clear that the ZCBC continued to condemn dissident atrocities and recognised the government's need to maintain law and order in Zimbabwe:

Violent reaction against dissident activity has, to our certain knowledge, brought about the maiming and death of hundreds of innocent people who are neither dissidents nor collaborators (Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace 1997:53).

In presenting the Prime Minister with this paper, the Catholic bishops spoke with the courage of their convictions. In the statement the bishops appealed to the government to find ways of reconciling with involved parties and adopting less harsh strategies in areas of disturbances. Mugabe denounced the bishops' pastoral letter of concern (Catholic Bishops' Conference 1983:17), calling them a "band of Jeremiahs" and "sanctimonious prelates".

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*The heads of Christian denominations meet the prime minister*

The encounter between the prime minister and the Heads of Christian Denominations on the 18 April 1984 resulted in the Heads of Denominations urging for the need to respect multiparty politics in the country. Political violence was a threat to multiparty democracy.

Some churches remained aloof in the midst of the harassment, intimidation, brutality, war and death and resulted in many churches losing relevance in the country. For example, the Pentecostal churches were largely absent from the political ministry of the church; emphasising spirituality at the expense of social relevance. The ZCC was conspicuous by its lack of prophetic function during the *Gukurahundi* era. The United Church of Christ in Zimbabwe, the Methodists, the Anglicans and the Lutherans, all members of the ZCC, were incapacitated by internal institutional problems. This was the time during which they were “breaking the umbilical cord” with their mother churches in the West, which left them struggling to sustain their prophetic function. Many mainline churches were busy restoring ecclesiastical hierarchies broken down during the second Chimurenga and were also reluctantly being weaned from their mother churches in the First World. In 1981 the American Board Mission was renamed the United Church of Christ in Zimbabwe. Commenting on the Methodist church’s response to political violence in the Matabeleland and Midlands provinces in the early 1980s, Dube (2006:107) writes:

The Methodist response would be best explained as ambivalent. There was no theological statement issued by the Methodist church in Zimbabwe categorically condemning government actions nor was there any pastoral letter sent to the ordinary Christians who were suffering, while others were either killed or maimed for life.

Dube addresses the problem of religion and violence in Zimbabwe using the Methodist Church as a case study.

Far more disturbing for Zimbabwe was the sabotaging of the railway system by Renamo in Mozambique. Renamo bandits attacked the railway lines to Beira and Maputo in an effort to force Zimbabwe to use the expensive South African routes for its imports and exports. Mozambique’s struggle for survival against the depredations of MNR, originally recruited by the Rhodesian Central Intelligence Organization to fight the Mozambique freedom fighters, and now trained and funded by South Africa, was a fight which was crucial to Zimbabwe’s own economic survival, depending as it did on routes through Mozambique to the sea (De Waal 1990:90). MNR bandits were responsible for serious human rights abuses, particularly in the north-

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eastern part of Zimbabwe and in Chipinge in the southeast, from 1988 onwards.

*Political violence in the 1990s*

Violence was not limited to the first decade after independence. It persisted in the 1990s in Zimbabwe but tended to go underground. The authorities began a sustained campaign of harassment and detention of opposition political figures. Most opponents were charged under the Law and Order (Maintenance) Act and the Emergency Powers Act inherited from the colonial period. In 1999, with the formation of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), Political violence became a matter of critical public concern. The churches led the way in lambasting the state for retaining and using draconian Rhodesian laws in independent Zimbabwe:

Our political history is characterized by the use of state institutions as partisan tools to support the ruling party. Those who have opposed the ruling party have been marginalized and sometimes criminalized. In our history, there has not been space created to allow for healthy political debates and contestation. This has caused a lot of frustration and resentment (Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference, Pastoral Letter on National Healing and Reconciliation, *God can Heal the Wounds of the Afflicted.*)

The ruling party monopolised state institutions and used them for political control to the chagrin of its political opponents.

*Political violence at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century*

From 19 to 21 January 1999 many of the high density suburbs of Harare and Chitungwiza town turned "into virtual war-zones as soldiers deployed by the government to help police quell food riots shot and injured many unsuspecting civilians" (*Manica Post* 1989:3). In the year 2000, with the rejection of the proposed new constitution, political violence increased in the country. Youth militias, war veterans and Central Intelligence officers were on the prowl looking for opposition sympathisers. Politically motivated organised violence and torture, lynching, rape, arson and murder increased. Farm invasions began at the behest of the ruling party leadership. The arrival of the MDC on the Zimbabwe political scene in 1999 was closely associated with violence. In the general elections of June 2000 the first substantive opposition party in Zimbabwe, the MDC, captured 57 parliamentary seats in contrast to

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the 62 seats won by the ruling party. The opposition claimed to have achieved this feat within the context of state-sponsored political violence.

In the March 2005 general elections, the MDC garnered 41 seats but claimed that violence unleashed by the ruling party and the government's refusal to allow civil society to set the terms for civil politics compromised the government's legitimacy.

In the June 2008 presidential run-off the country witnessed a magnitude of violence comparable only to *Gukurahundi*. In order to cement his hold on power, the president used state security agents, party militias, and war veterans to intimidate the voters.

*The response of the church: the state plays off one group of churches against the other*

The state wanted to play off one group of churches against the other. In the words of Muchena (2005:267), for the state to achieve this it had to rely on a select group of church leaders who "see no evil, hear no evil and speak no evil". The state plan was to divide the church and benefit from the "divide and rule policy". Church leaders such as Nolbert Kunonga and Obadiah Musindo regularly appeared on state television, before the press and at functions as representing the voice of the church.

In February 2002, the Zimbabwe National Pastors' Conference hosted a conference in Gweru with the theme "Prophetic ministry in times of crisis". The conference documented the extent of political violence in the country and encouraged pastoral visits to politically troubled spots in the country. The Zimbabwe National Pastors' Conference consisted of members from various churches. Its goal was to promote peace, tolerance, human rights and good governance.

Mkaronda (2003:29) observed that when the violence was escalating to unprecedented levels in Zimbabwe, very few voices from the church voiced a position. Traditionally, Christians have looked up to their leaders and to such church bodies as the ZCC, EFZ, and ZCBC to speak out on behalf of Christians. The main demand was for peace and the development of the nation for a better Zimbabwe.

In May 2002, Sebastian Bakare, the bishop of the Anglican diocese of Manicaland, admonished Zimbabweans to reject political violence and called for unity and peace among the people of Zimbabwe (Mkaronda 2003:29). In the same year, Archbishop Pius Ncube conducted a service for peace and justice in Bulawayo (Tsvangirai 2011:395). Together with the faithful at St Mary's Catholic Cathedral, Ncube embarked on a peace campaign march on 6 June 2002.

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In an editorial titled “Zimbabwe Council of Churches: Are you ready for Judgement Day?” *The Standard* (2002:4) bemoaned the church’s silence in the midst of political violence:

There has been so much comment in the past two-and-half years about the role the churches and church leaders are playing, or should be playing in the political life of Zimbabwe. There is a very important reason why the church, in partnership with the media, should be involved in this process. The church should be concerned about the whole issue of the struggle for peace, justice and reconciliation in Zimbabwe. This is a task that the church cannot in any way be absolved of, or hand over the responsibility to others. Indeed that should be the central mission of the church anywhere in the world.

In July 2003, Bishop Patrick Mutume of the Catholic Church, Bishop Trevor Manhanga, the President of the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe, and Bishop Sebastian Bakare, the President of the ZCC, held their first ever meetings with President Robert Mugabe and Morgan Tsvangirai. The bishops challenged the two leaders to relax their belligerent positions and make peace.

Muchena (2005:265), in his article “The church and reconciliation”, stated that in September 2004, in preparation for elections the following year, the South African Council of Churches in conjunction with the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA), the Centre for Policy Studies and the Institute of Justice and Reconciliation in South Africa worked in partnership with churches in Zimbabwe to organise a conference in Pretoria. The theme of the conference was “Minimum standards for elections in Zimbabwe”. They discussed the importance of creating an enabling environment and political will before, during and after elections. The conference encouraged church leaders to be fearless and courageous in dealing with complex political situations. The churches, in turn, called for the levelling of the playing field in accordance with the SADC Guidelines on Elections adopted by the Heads of SADC countries in Mauritius in August 2004. The guidelines aimed at enhancing the transparency and credibility of elections and democratic governance, as well as ensuring the acceptance of election results by all contesting parties.

From 8–12 November 2004 the Association of Evangelical Alliances in Africa convened a conference in Bulawayo. According to Muchena (2005:266), the conference was attended by 38 delegates from 12 SADC states. The conference was designed to support and energise the efforts of local church leadership to reconcile communities torn apart by political

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violence; it explored the political situation in the country and called for political accountability, free and fair elections and peaceful coexistence.

While many church leaders embraced the prophetic ministry, others supported state repression. Vengeyi (2010:173) argues that some church leaders acquiesced to politicians:

While the orgy of violence engulfed the nation from the year 2000 until February 2009, church leaders, such as Bishop N. Kunonga of the Harare diocese of the Anglican Church, O. Musindo of New Generation Church and Elizabeth Chinouriri of the Family of God among others, have never criticised the perpetrators. Like the government they condemned the victims as they celebrated and prophesied blessings on the perpetrators.

The church was divided in its position on political violence and this enabled Zanu PF hegemony to reign without critical challenge.

#### **The church's pragmatic position on political violence: lessons from early Christian writings**

What stands out clearly in this study is that political violence is a painful phenomenon in the history of the church in postcolonial Zimbabwe. The theme that runs through this study is the rejection of violence both as a means of preserving the status quo and as a means of bringing about change in society. Violence is not a Christian virtue; it is the result of wrong relations in the country and it often creates a cycle of retaliatory acts that exacerbate those relations. Consequently, the church normatively rejected violent solutions to the Zimbabwean crisis, with pacifism being viewed as the Christian ideal.

The fatal malady of the church is its tendency to neglect the guiding theological foundations it is based on. As shown in sections 2.1.3 and 2.1.4 above, St Ambrose and St Augustine provided for more than passive resistance to the most tyrannical political authorities; both approved active political resistance on the part of lower political authorities against higher authorities. It is worthwhile to point out here that perhaps Zimbabweans have not been pushed towards violence as the last resort to remove an authoritarian system. People have not completely lost hope in the possibility of bringing about change through non-violent means.

Christians should resist the temptation to resort to violence. Pragmatically, the Church accepts that it exists amid the reality of violence in the country and, accordingly, has a mission to restore peace through non-violent means.

Duncan (1987:271) asserts that:

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None of the arguments about 'just war' or 'just revolution' or the 'justified use of violence', however persuasive and rational, can shake a deeply-held belief that the sacrificial death of Jesus is the way we are commanded to go. We are commanded to love even unto death.

This injunction is true of the Church. For the Church, Christian pacifism does not mean inactivity; it means committed and sacrificial action to create a just and righteous society. It means a Christian way to build society. The church subscribes to the use of concerted action to change situations by means that do not involve physical abuse.

The complexity of the Zimbabwean situation defies the neatly worked out moral principles of classical Christian tradition. The findings in this research refute Augustine's just war theory. The assumption is that violent struggles were waged by one state against another. In Zimbabwe there is internal violence within a state and, worse still, Christians attacking each other in the name of partisan politics. Political affiliations are overriding Christian sentiments. The classical tradition does not envisage an unjust aggressive political party emerging from the boundaries of a single state authorising violence as a strategy to get or retain power. Zimbabweans are acting violently against fellow Zimbabweans.

**Divisions and ambivalent positions**

The present political violence has highlighted the divisions in the church. Werbter (2003:71) asserts:

A deplorable lack of unity between Christian churches is exploited by the government and its media: the latter never seem to have a problem finding some pastor presented as 'speaking for the church', who will support government positions and denounce truly Christian voices as being 'spiritually misguided'.

Divisions within the church based on differences of political affiliation and/or sympathies have hindered the church from providing a more coherent and unified voice of leadership to the nation. According to Mkaronda (2003:6), the co-option of church members by the government should be seen as a means of stifling the church's prophetic voice.

Anglican bishop, Nolbert Kunonga, supported government actions that are controversial and oppressive in society such as the land redistribution programme. He is on record as organising a prayer day for the ruling party and declaring that the state president is a 'saint'. Therefore, Kunonga has

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failed to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, who identified with the poor and, consequently, Kunonga is suffocating the prophetic voice of the church. Church leaders who are sympathetic to the government have been rewarded with posts and invitations to officiate at ceremonies like those for Independence Day and Heroes Day (*Herald*, 12 August 2005).

As a matter of principle, the church must have an 'open door' policy towards everyone and maintain dialogue with all important forces and movements in society. The early Christians refused to prostrate themselves before emperors and this deprived the state of its divinity. Indeed, they chose to die rather than worship the emperor.

The church in Zimbabwe holds incomplete and ambivalent positions. On the one hand, it condemns violence as a result of sin and regards it as evil. On the other hand, it says violence is an option on the table for Christians in the face of government intransigence. The presence of violence is understood as an act of self-defence against a system and a people that practises oppression and exploitation. It is hoped that through violence justice will eventually be established. Many churches connived with the ZANU PF and failed to bring any measure of meaningful pressure to bear on the government. Pastor Obadiah Musindo's constructive engagement policy highlighted in this study is a classic example of connivance.

### **Conclusion**

This article has demonstrated that in the history of Christian tradition there has always been an ambiguous relationship between religion and violence. The study traced early Church perspectives on violence in order to find out whether the church's attitude to politically motivated violence in Zimbabwe has its roots in church history. The early Christians, like in the Bible itself, presented a variety of conflicting perspectives on violence. We have noted that both the Old and the New Testaments are characterised by ambivalent perspectives towards violence. Soon after Independence in Zimbabwe, churches focused intensively on preaching peace and making moral statements and vilifying the violence without consciously and critically attempting to locate inner forces and currents in the creation and deployment of political violence. While violence is predominantly a moral issue because of the far-reaching consequences of violent activities, Christians should not only make moral utterances, but should also develop a system to counter government violence. Traits of early church teachings on violence are found in the churches' interaction with the state in Zimbabwe.



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