3 The Zimbabwean state and the case of Robert Mugabe in power

Through the lens of secularism

Joram Tarusarira

Introduction

Scholarship on the nexus between religion and politics in Zimbabwe has overlooked how secularism has shaped religio-political dynamics. Instead, the focus and point of departure has been religion. This chapter argues that this focus on religion has obscured the role of secularism, despite Zimbabwe being a secular state, and looks at how secularism has set the terms for the interaction between religion and politics. It is not my intention to articulate the entire historical trajectory of secularism. I am interested in secularism as a political ideology, or political secularism, which is enacted differently in different contexts, and my novel contribution is to foreground secularism's salient but dominant presence in Zimbabwe. This is an angle that no scholar has taken so far in discussing the interaction between religion and politics in Zimbabwe. By appreciating Mugabe's insistence on secularism, we are better placed to understand how he sought to direct the personality cult that ensued from his being and political ideology.

The use of religion within a secular environment is seen as a normal political practice, and this is evident even in the most democratic of states. This normalcy is now baked into scholarship and reflections on religion and politics in Zimbabwe. My intention is to expose that it should not be taken as given in Zimbabwe. There is a tendency, in Zimbabwe, to comply with what politicians say should be the role of religion in politics. This is a tactic by politicians to circumscribe the space within which religious leaders in particular can operate. Interrogating this naturalised and uninvestigated dominance of the secular in politics (secularism) is what makes this chapter offer a new angle of reading religion, politics and the personality cult. Secularism is here understood as a means of regulating the interaction between religion and politics in a secular state, without appeal to the divine. Secularism claims to be objective and neutral in its operations, hence presents itself as the best framework to govern modern nation-states that are characterised by various forms of diversity.

By virtue of this claim, politicians, who perceive themselves as the embodiment of the secular, arrogate themselves power to determine religio-political relations. With a focus on former President Robert Mugabe and his regime, this
chapter questions the interaction between religion and politics in Zimbabwe differently. Instead of asking what the role of religion has been, it interrogates that of the hitherto overlooked secularism. This shift intimates a reorientation in concepts and methods in the study of religion and politics. The chapter argues that more than religion, secularism has shaped the field of religion and politics in Zimbabwe, including contributing to the stay of Robert Mugabe in power for thirty-seven years. Instead of facilitating human security, peace and democracy, as it claims to do, secularism has contributed to the furtherance of regime security, violence, suppression and oppression in Zimbabwe.

**Religion in the study of religion and politics in Zimbabwe**

Scholarship on the interaction between religion and politics in Zimbabwe has been undertaken mostly by religious studies scholars (Hallencreutz and Moyo 1988; Gundani 2001; Chitando 2005; Gunda and Kügler 2012), who, rightly so, prioritise the religion factor. They have, thus, not illuminated their inquiries with theories and concepts such as secularism from other fields like sociology and political science. Consequently, the focus on religion has obscured the point that how religion is perceived in the public sphere is determined by terms set by politicians. The focus overlooks how secularism accords the political actors the privileges to prescribe how religion should feature in public affairs. The rules of the game or the terms of conversation are determined by the secularist framework (Mahmood 2017). Beginning and ending with religion generates two different but related problems. First, it overlooks the conditions that shape how the religious act with respect to public affairs. Thus, secularism and its compromise on democracy and human security is shielded from critique. Second, the sort of conclusions arrived at tend to categorise religion into good or bad, because it is in the constitution of secularism to operate on binaries. If religion contributes positively to civic and political matters, it is labelled good religion. If otherwise, it is bad religion.

This chapter argues that, more than religion, secularism shapes the conditions for religio-political dynamics in Zimbabwe. However, it is taken as given, presumably because the constitution lends it support and thus shields it from critique. Subsequently, politicians in the name of state and government, who are deemed to be the embodiment of secularism, become privileged to classify and determine which religious aspect or actor should participate in politics, when, where and how.

**Secularism in the practice of religion and politics in Zimbabwe**

Commentators have argued that Mugabe abused religion for political expedi-ence by either pushing it to the private sphere, co-opting religious actors or not creating an equidistance between diverse religions. What is not interrogated
The case of Robert Mugabe in power

is why Mugabe was able do this without indictment. The default response has been that he had power. But what is further overlooked is the basis of this power over religion. The answer lies in the practice of secularism, which is the framework for political governance in Zimbabwe. Hence, I argue that it is illuminating to turn attention to secularism. It is disconcerting that despite the dominance of secularism, the focus in studying religio-political dynamics in Zimbabwe is the nature and function of religion. Yet secularism has the privilege to set the terms of religio-political interactions. This privilege has become naturalised to the extent that politicians have become impervious to it. They view the imposition of their ideas, ideologies and values as natural or normal. It is this privilege that made it possible for Mugabe to include and exclude religious actors from the political field when he deemed it fit. He was the embodiment of secularism and its privilege to determine what is right or wrong in religio-political conduct. Mugabe thus dictated the terms of secularism in Zimbabwe. This puts the meaning and implications of secularism into question.

The myth of secularism

This chapter exposes the myth of secularism in Zimbabwe by pointing out the characteristics and assumptions it brings onto the religio-political field. These include that it is disembodied (i.e. without socio-economic and political interests), thus neutral and objective. The chapter demonstrates and challenges this neutrality and objectivity from a historical trajectory, as well as using the contemporary case of Mugabe. To argue that secularism is a myth in Zimbabwe is not to intimate the direct extreme opposite, namely, that Zimbabwe should be run as a theocracy. Zimbabwe is a multi- and highly religious country and not a theocracy. The myth is here understood as a situation where secularism is unquestioned, such that it becomes difficult to think outside the paradigms that it establishes. Society gets structured to conform to the apparent truths of the myth, which becomes more unquestioned when society is made to conform to it. Mythologies tend to be groundless (Cavanaugh 2009). A prism of the myth of secularism in Zimbabwe is of multiple benefits in interrogating how Mugabe interacted with religion. First, it illuminates how he laid out the terms of the nature of church-state relations; second, it explains how he roped in religious actors to support his rule; and third, it exposes how he sacralised himself to further his stay in power. Despite its claim to be objective and neutral, secularism has been and remains associated with power and other interests; it is paradoxical and mythical. The claim is thus hard to sustain. However, it has remained understudied and unquestioned in Zimbabwe.

The concept of secularism

At first glance it might sound preposterous to discuss religion and politics in Zimbabwe through the prism of secularism, first, because secularism is a
framework that emerges out of the Western contexts, and second, because Zimbabwe is a highly religious society. Furthermore, numerous arguments have been put up against deploying Western concepts, such as secularism, which emerged out of specific socio-political realities, to non-Western contexts, as if they are transcultural and transhistorical (Cavanaugh 2009). Secularism is a historical product with specific epistemological, political and moral entailments (Mahmood 2017). In the thirteenth century “secular” referred to priests who lived in the world, as opposed to religious orders. In the sixteenth century, to secularise someone meant to convert someone from ecclesiastical to civil service or possessions. In the nineteenth century secularism was used to describe a movement towards providing a theory of public life and conduct without reference to a deity or a future life (Casanova 1994; Tamimi 2000: 14). Emanating from this evolvement is secularism’s presumption that it can distinguish clearly between matters that are transcendental and those that are temporal. Secularism defines itself as the starting point in relation to which the religious is constructed (Hurd 2004: 238). This means that it arrogates to itself the right to define religion and what it can do or not, including how it can participate in politics and public affairs.

There are many variations of secularism. Talal Asad identifies secularism as the modern state’s sovereign power to reorganise religious life. The state does this by stipulating what religion is or ought to be, assigning its proper content and legitimising particular forms of thought, morality and behaviour, while marginalising others (see Asad 2006). As part of the development of modernity, secularism gained political authority for governing national and global public affairs. The governing logic of secularism has become a permanent feature of the modern nation-state. The Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which is said to have settled the thirty years of religious wars, established the principle of state sovereignty (especially the right of each ruler to determine the religion of his territory) for all of Christendom. Secularism is said to have “resolved” the conflicts by being a buffer between them and disentangling the realm of politics from that of religion. It, thus, could keep the antagonistic religions at arm’s length so long as neither of them could muster a decisive victory over the other (Mancini and Rosenfeld 2014). Secularism was hence introduced to stabilise the conflict between warring Christianities and thereby provide security. Yet, as Mavelli argues, in the process of doing that, “religion” was defined as an object of fear, chaos, irrationality, violence and danger (Mavelli 2012). Consequently, state sovereignty (whatever the form of governance) and Christian practice became inextricably intertwined (Mavelli 2012). Indeed, some interpretations of Christian theology, such as the doctrine of the two kingdoms, were used to justify the separation of state from religious authority.

Secularism travelled beyond the Western contexts with the spread of Christianity, the expansion of European colonialism, global expansion of capitalism and the European system of states and modern science. This led to the understanding of secularisation as the differentiation of the secular spheres (state, economy, science), usually understood as “emancipation” from religious
The case of Robert Mugabe in power

Institutions and norms (Casanova 1994; Hurd 2004). Liberal concepts and institutions have come to define a global norm from which no modern society is exempt (Mahmood 2017). In Zimbabwe, religion is separated from politics and constitutes no point of reference for governmental processes. This situation justifies looking at the religio-political dynamics in Zimbabwe through the lens of secularism. But this does not suggest that religion is discarded. Secularism, as a principle of liberal state governance, has entailed not so much the abandonment of religion but its ongoing regulation through a variety of state and civic institutions (Mahmood 2008). Secularism pertains to the modern state’s sovereign power to reorganise substantive features of religious life, stipulating what religion is or ought to be, assigning its proper content, and disseminating concomitant subjectivities, ethical frameworks and quotidian practices (Mahmood 2017) in step with a culture-sensitive approach to the study of secularism (see Six 2018: 3; Buchardt et al 2015). No wonder religious actors in Zimbabwe have been subjected to criminalisation, under draconian legal statutes such as the Public Order and Security Act (2002), whenever they had challenged government. Government regards itself as having the mandate to define “good and acceptable” forms of religious expression.

Secularism has “ruled” that religion caters for its own adherents, in other words is sectarian, and thus cannot be a mode of governance for public affairs. What is required is a neutral, objective and disembodied framework, which it claims to be. Secularism associates its domain with public authority, common sense, rational thought, justice, tolerance and public interest (Hurd 2004: 239). These are the conditions which can facilitate people to understand each other. Religion is about personal God and belief about that God, a domain of the violent, irrational and the undemocratic (Hurd 2004: 239), and thus must submit to the secular discourse when it comes to issues of public concern. If religious reasoning is to be admitted into the public sphere it must translate its contributions to be understood by the secular, because propositions exclusively grounded on a faith not shared by all seem bound to remain inaccessible to some of those concerned (Rawls 2005).

While secularism separates religion and politics because of the historical association of religion with conflict and violence, in Zimbabwe, the separation is as a result of colonialism, which introduced and bequeathed the framework to Zimbabwe. Instead of being associated with conflict and violence, even though occasionally Christianity’s association and facilitation of colonialism is invoked to regulate religio-political dynamics, Mugabe often pushed religion to the domain of piety, peace, love, reconciliation, care, social, development and humanitarian work (Tarusarira 2016). Individuals who dissent from the framework of secularism were kept out of public affairs. They were criminalised, and secularism itself never gets subjected to interrogation. The claim of secularism to represent neutrality, justice and democracy is not put into question, despite the fact that secularism has been implicated in violent, non-democratic and unjust processes (Hurd 2004: 240; Mavelli 2012). Secularism is dynamic and driven by socio-economic and political interests.
Mugabe and secularism

Mugabe came into power in 1980, ending the colonisation of Zimbabwe. Unfortunately, this did not put an end to coloniality of power, which metamorphosed to nationalisation of power. This means that the technologies of subjectivation justified and embedded in secularism did not disappear with the birth of Zimbabwe. Instead they were officialised via the constitution, including the state being secular. As the head of state, in charge of upholding the constitution of the country, Mugabe configured and deployed secularism in a way that made religion subordinate to politics. In fact, it was to be in the service of politics. His secularism was one in which religion was separated from politics without discarding religion. Instead, he invoked it and at times claimed to be chosen by God to be the leader of Zimbabwe, and thus that he was fulfilling the will of God. Nicholas Wolsterstoff calls this “‘theistic account of political authority’ understood as regarding the authority of the state to do certain things as transmitted to it from someone or something [God] which already has that very same authority” (Hurd 2004: 236). Such a constellation was meant to instrumentalise religion for Mugabe’s political survival. It is not meant to suggest that religion is the ultimate appeal of governing public affairs. Here secularism’s dynamism is manipulated to the extent that it summons religion to the service of political power. Mugabe’s personality cult benefited from deploying secularism as a strategy of containment of religion.

In Zimbabwe, religion has always been described as a collaborator of the state (see Banana 1996). However, in this context, to collaborate meant to act in sync with the one setting the terms. That which sets the terms claims to be inclusive, neutral and objective, and this has been the promise and claim of secularism. During Mugabe’s reign, we thus see religious actors submitting and conceding to this frame of secularism, hence furthering the regime of Mugabe (Tarusarira 2016). Not only did other actors, especially members of his political party, invoke secularism in the service of Mugabe, he also participated in invoking secularism for his political expediency. Secularism is thus a framing reference. Framing essentially involves selection and salience. This means that to frame is to select some aspects of (a perceived) reality and make them more salient, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation (Entman 1993). In the process one sets the terms of reference. This is what Mugabe did with secularism. He set the framework for its definition and causal interpretation. It is important for the reader to note that Mugabe was not categorically stating that he was deploying secularism. Secularism is evident in his interaction with religion. A few paradoxical cases in point are in order. At first glance they appear to be serving the opposite of the argument I am making in this chapter. The first examples are meant to illustrate that the hand of secularism is so long that it reaches into religion and summons it to its service. This shows how secularism sets the terms of what religion can do or not do. At this point it is important to remember Mahmood’s point that secularism, as a principle of liberal state governance, has
entailed not so much the abandonment of religion but its ongoing regulation through a variety of state and civic institutions (Mahmood 2008). So what we see here is the ongoing regulation of religion. This is also a clear demonstration of the myth and paradox of secularism, because it contradicts itself, as Mahmood (2017) says. This found confirmation in Mugabe’s Zimbabwe.

Mugabe was likened to the biblical Moses who delivered people to the Promised Land. His leadership was said to be a fulfilment of a divine prophecy (Mushanawani 2013: 5). Indigenous religion was also appealed to. Chiefs were brought onto the political spectrum as custodians of culture and traditional religion, despite having been sidelined for siding with colonialists before independence. Maxwell (1999: 213) paralleled the recalling of chiefs back into the political structures to colonial Rhodesia of the 1930s, where chiefs were “stabilising influences, vicarious sources of political order for a ruling party increasingly insecure in its hold over the people.” Mugabe was said to be acting in accordance with the demands of the ancestors and obeying ancestral oracles (see Mukonyora 2011: 137). In his 89th birthday speech he (Mugabe) asserted that he had a divine task because God had commanded him to serve his nation. He further stated God had instructed him

Do not retrace when you are right. No backward movement when you are right. Your principles must be well defined. . . . Principles become sacred. . . . Some have dropped off. . . . The Lord has chosen that I remain. (Maodza 2013)

Mugabe was choosing which dimensions of religion to emphasise, in line with his commitment to the powerful cult of personality centred on himself.

African Independent Churches (AICs) legitimated Mugabe as the divine leader despite his governance shortfalls (see Maposa et al 2011: 258, Mukonyora 2011). On another level, Hastings (1979: 77) notes the totalitarian character of AICs and their industrialising nature through encouraging the production of baskets, furniture and tinware. From these, Machoko (2013: 4) argues that the AICs’ authoritarian nature equalled that of Mugabe, who centralised power in the same way the AICs leaders do. African churches such as Johane Masowe WeChishanu (Vapositori) became dependable support bases when ZANU PF’s urban support waned (Mukonyora 2011: 137). In one episode, Mugabe, a well-known Catholic, dressed in the Vapositori regalia as a way of identifying with them. The Vapositori featured at state functions and had special seats reserved for them. They lined up at the airport to receive Mugabe on his return from overseas trips.

Some leaders from mainline churches were also co-opted into the political system. Pro-Mugabe church organisations represented by church leaders from the Zimbabwe Council of Churches, Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe and Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops’ Conference emerged. The camp include Ezekiel Guti of ZAOGA, who upheld the notion of African liberation and preached in favour of sovereignty and independence; Bishop Trevor Manhanga1 former
The compromises shown by church leaders were noted by many church members. For example, Mrs. F in an interview said about church leadership:

> they prefer the quiet diplomacy which has not worked . . . it has failed the people. A lot of people I meet with from the grassroots level complain that they are hidden in their shells, they are hidden in their own world when people are suffering.

(Tarusarira 2016: 116)

Chamburuka (2012: 207) commented that “the calibre of the bishops and the heads of churches that are put into office needs to be critically assessed . . . vibrant and robust leadership has diminished into seemingly selfish, worldliness, immoral and puppet oriented leadership.” He further asserts that in the face of tyranny, dictatorship and totalitarianism, peaceful demonstrations may be an option and the church may need to support revolutions to deliver the masses from alienation, oppression and exploitation (ibid: 208). A religious studies scholar stated:

> The church in Zimbabwe suffers from theological timidity and lack of intellectual creativity. To a very large extent the theology that guides
Zimbabwe is the theology of getting people to heaven. In other words, there is a general contention that the core business of the church is on the spiritual side of life and that getting hands dirty in the politics of the day is an aside, it is not the core mission of the church to transform communities. It is not the core business of the church to be advocates for human rights, justice and dignity, but that when the Gospel is preached, you hear people say, let us pray for the government of Zimbabwe, because it allows us to preach the Gospel but we may not say let us pray for the government of Zimbabwe, because it is sensitive to our political pronouncement and proclamation.

(Tarusarira 2016: 116)

Critics of religious actors often point out the aforementioned sacralisation of Mugabe and the co-option, complicity and timidity of mainline church leaders who went on to publicly identify themselves with the ruling party and became beneficiaries of the system (Bakare 2013: 29) as demonstrations of how religion is to blame. While this is undeniable, a nuanced approach is required here. It is important to interrogate, without exonerating the religious actors, what conditions, forces, systems and structures led the religious actors to act the way they did, and this is the core of the argument of this chapter, which argues that Mugabe’s secularism might provide some insights, as already alluded to.

In an interview, a scholar of religious studies summarised Mugabe’s secularism by referring to what Mugabe himself once said:

The politicians would say: You church people; you have no business with what we do with people here on earth, because your interest is in heaven. Robert Mugabe in particular has been very shrewd in terms of defining religion and politics, because he says the church is a key player, spiritually and socially, in terms of building schools, but the church has no business in politics, because that is their terrain. So when he talks of state–church partnership the spheres of influence and the lines of communication are very clear in his mind. The church is spiritual, politicians are earthly and practical. Then he says: ‘Please, church people, do what you know best while we do what we know best; let not these categories mix . . . I want to quote him: ‘This is a soccer match, and we politicians know how to play our football, and you people of the cloth, when you come to our terrain, because we also do crude tackles here, let nobody cry. That’s how we play, so our rules are different from yours, and let those who dare cross over to us be willing to suffer the consequence.’

(cited in Tarusarira 2016: 176)

The preceding quotation is a clear demonstration of the myth and paradox of secularism, because it contradicts itself, as Mahmood (2017) pointed out. On the one hand, the liberal state claims to maintain a separation between church and state by relegating religion to the private sphere. On the other hand, modern governmentality involves the state’s intervention and regulation of many
aspects of socio-religious life, dissolving the distinction between public and private and thereby contravening its first claim. On the one hand Mugabe emphasises the separation of the church and state. On the other, he interferes in regulating the operations of the religious, thus dissolving the distinction. It is also the threats he makes that made religious leaders stampede to sacralise him. It is not because they believe in him as a sacred entity, but the conditions were set for them regarding how to behave if they wanted to survive.

On the basis of the criticisms levelled against the religious leaders, people have not only lost trust in them but also accused them of legitimising the status quo, that is, the frustration of political transition towards democratisation and reconciliation. What the critics might be overlooking is that the religious leaders are “victims” of secularism, directly or indirectly. It is only a shift of the prism of secularism that will explain why the state can dominate the public sphere, ahead of religion, without indictment. Often the blame is on the religious leaders themselves, and yet due to the system in place, secularism is the cause. This understanding of secularism requires revisiting and redefinition because it continues to threaten human security and undermines democracy and justice.

**Mugabe, secularism and human security**

The concept of human security rose to prominence through the UN Commission on Human Security final report “Human Security Now” (2003) out of a realisation that the nature of security has changed over time. Two sets of dynamics are noted as the rationale behind the development of the concept of human security. First, security threats have become complex and new ones have been added to the traditional ones. These threats include chronic and persistent poverty, ethnic violence, human trafficking, climate change, health pandemics, international terrorism and sudden economic and financial downturns. A comprehensive approach that utilises the wide range of new opportunities to tackle such threats in an integrated manner is required, beyond the conventional mechanisms alone.


> the vital core of all human lives in ways that enhance human freedoms and human fulfilment. Human security means protecting fundamental freedoms – freedoms that are the essence of life. It means protecting people from critical (severe) and pervasive (widespread) threats and situations. It means using processes that build on people’s strengths and aspirations. It means creating political, social, environmental, economic, military and cultural systems that together give people the building blocks of survival, livelihood and dignity.

(United Nations CHS 2003: 4)
Against this definition, the net effect of Mugabe’s secularism was a threat to human security. Firstly, religious actors interested in pursuing broader objectives of human security were vilified and pushed to the periphery. Cases in point include the former Catholic Archbishop of Bulawayo, Pius Ncube, who was outspoken against the ZANU PF regime and Mugabe’s bad governance and undermining of human rights. State machinery, including the media, was unleashed on him, leading to a story on sexual misconduct, which resulted in Ncube’s resignation as a bishop. Another case in point is of Pastor Evan Mawarire of the #ThisFlag movement. He produced videos in which he criticised the government’s bad governance and failure to respect human rights. He was arrested, arraigned before the courts and charged with wanting to cause instability in the country and unseat a democratically elected government. He skipped the country to the United States, before returning back home. Upon his return he was arrested again. All charges against Mawarire were eventually dropped. Ncube and Mawarire advocated for respect of human rights, and end to poverty, functioning hospitals, jobs, freedoms; in short, human security. Their own security was threatened, not only because of physical threats but also because they lacked all other elements of human security. The human security of the generality of Zimbabweans was also threatened. This was because the prophetic and critical voices were silenced; human insecurity continued unchallenged. Instead, Zimbabwe was characterised by overt violence, bad governance, lack of jobs, international isolation, collapse of the health system, collapse of schools, compromised higher education, collapse of the economy and lack of freedoms, among many other ills. This is because Mugabe had sacralised himself and encapsulated and captured religious actors to do the same, using secularism as the technology of silencing and subjectivation. Instead of confronting secularism, commentators have focused on religion and put up with the question of good religion or bad religion. In this chapter I challenge and shift the focus from religion to secularism and its effects.

Conclusion

This chapter thus argues that a different way of interrogating the relationship between religion and politics in Zimbabwe is required. To date, scholarship has taken off from religion in interrogating the nexus between religion and politics. Yet, as demonstrated in this chapter, Zimbabwe is a secular state, and secularism determines the framework within which religion should operate. Secularism has not been taken as the point of departure in this discourse. This is the contribution this chapter makes to the debate on religio-political dynamics. Using the case of Zimbabwe in general and Mugabe in particular, the chapter has argued that the claim and promise of secularism to be objective, neutral and universal is a myth which cannot be sustained. Instead of advancing social cohesion and advancing human security, secularism has led to suppression and oppression of minorities. It is shrouded with performative contradiction insofar
as it justifies its own violence against those that do not subscribe to its “peace.” That is why in the name of secularism Mugabe could threaten, arrest and imprison religious actors with dissenting voices. In a demonstration of secularism’s paradox, other religious leaders were forced to support and sing praises for Mugabe, feeding his personality cult. They became victims of Mugabe’s subjectivation, a slow and subtle way of indoctrinating them, to the extent that they were convinced that it was appropriate for Mugabe to act the way he did. Scholarship thus has to examine the religio-political dynamics in Zimbabwe differently in order to be able to find out the conditions underlying the interaction between religion and politics. Secularism is here proposed as the different approach, which will re-enable scholars to appreciate Mugabe’s success in using religion to stay in power.

Note

1 Bishop Manhanga began as a critical voice. He was a member of CiM, but jumped ship during the process of the “Zimbabwe we want” vision document, which was a joint project of the ZCBC, ZCC and EFZ. He represented the EFZ because he was the president of the EFZ.

References


The case of Robert Mugabe in power


