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Religious ideology, in its diverse forms and contradictory roles, was a salient feature of every stage of the Mozambican civil war from 1975-1992. First, the conflict had its roots, partly, in attempts by the state to suppress religion. Second, during the war different groups appropriated and adapted religion to explain, manage and survive the violent turmoil. Third and even more important, religious actors played a crucial role in the peace process and resolution of the conflict. This paper identifies and discusses the varied roles that religious ideology played in the civil war, and highlights the social conditions that made people give to their historical situation a religious interpretation. Based on an interdisciplinary approach, it concludes that religious ideology is a powerful political force that can only be challenged at great cost, and its implications for war and peace are, at best ambiguous, and at worst, catastrophic.

Key words: Conflict, God, ideology, peace, politics, rebel, religion, revivalism, resurgence, war.

INTRODUCTION

Since the birth of species, humankind has taken great consolation and joy in religious practice (Hubbard, 1981), which according to Huntington (1997) is ‘the central defining element’ of a civilization. Defying and re-defining this history, the ruling Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (Frelimo) and following other socialist countries attempted to secularize society and abolish religion, ‘the opium of the people’. Religion was condemned in a slogan such as: “Abaixaobscuntarismo! (Down with mystical and obscuring ideas!)

However, in trying to abolish religion by decree and achieve rapid development, Machel, the first president of Mozambique, threw his country on the path of war, self-destruction and underdevelopment. Indeed, Frelimo had set itself against a formidable force it was ill-prepared to confront, ‘a socio-cultural force in motivation, inclusiveness, participation... sustainability in the humanitarian field’ and the conduct of warfare (Pfanner, T, 2005:240). Specifically, attempts to curtail religious practices fuelled the conflict by giving legitimacy to the Mozambique National Resistance (MNR or Renamo) rebels’ claims to be fighting for religious freedoms.

Yet on the other hand, religion was a force for peace as religious conviction emboldened some groups to work for peace in their unique ways. For many of the war weary people, religion was a strategy for surviving the violent turmoil, while for a few strategically positioned; it was an avenue for accumulating wealth and power. In short, the war and religious ideology mutually fed on each other, with the war necessitating increased worship, and believers explaining the war in religious terms.

This paper, a broad brush based on a critical field opinion survey, builds on the existing literature, and adopts a multidisciplinary approach. Giving pride of place to the weak and voiceless by making their life histories central to the analysis, the paper shows that religious ideology is both a powerful and versatile political force that can be adopted and adapted by different people for...
contradictory causes. The extent to which religion can play a positive or negative role in society is contingent upon many factors, and cannot be ascertained a priori. The paper concludes that, the implications of increased religious revivalism for war and peace in Africa are, at best ambiguous, and at worst catastrophic.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE WAR

A creation of the Rhodesian Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO), and later adopted by South Africa at Zimbabwe’s independence in 1980, the Mozambique National Resistance (MNR, Renamo in Portuguese or Matsangaissa, the name of the first leader of the movement) waged one of the most brutal guerrilla wars on the continent. Starting barely two years after independence in 1975, the war had its roots in both the geopolitics of the Southern Africa sub-region and in the internal dynamics of the country. Ending in 1992, after protracted internationally mediated peace talks in Rome, the war claimed nearly one million lives, displaced one and half million internally, and led to economic destruction estimated at between US$15 million (Safer World, 1994) and US$20 million.

History of religion in Mozambique

Centuries before the arrival of Christianity in Mozambique, African traditional religions often constituted a very important force in society. Religious beliefs and authorities exercised a strong influence on the educational, medical, cultural, economic, social political spheres. Religious leaders and spirit mediums led ceremonies and performed the rituals surrounding the appointing of new chiefs, and were consulted on matters such as, drought and war.

As Ranger (1986) notes, during the 1886 Shona rebellion, the spirit mediums organized and leded armies into attacking the Portuguese. The spirit mediums exercised great influence on the chief, society and war in the Barwe community, before and during the uprising of 1917 (Ranger, 1986). Similarly, the Makombe revolt of the 1940s was ‘initiated by the traditional religious and secular authorities’ (Ranger, 1986).

Used by some in anti-conquest revolts, traditional religion had been used by others in cooperation with the colonial state. In an effort to enhance the image and legitimacy of colonial rule and their co-opted and newly appointed regulos (chiefs), the Portuguese went to great lengths in supporting and participating in African traditional rituals of succession, in what became known as the ‘Africanization of European institutions’ (Isaacman, 1972). Thus, by the time of independence, traditional religions were still a strong force sustaining the organization of economic and political power in the countryside.

Competing with traditional religion was Christianity, which had arrived in Mozambique in the sixteenth century. Before that Islam had been introduced by Arab traders, mainly in the northern provinces of Niassa and Nampula. Nationally, Catholics, Evangelicals and Moslems constitute about 23, 17 and 18%, respectively (Berkley Centre, 2013). Since in the central province of Manica, the case study area of this work, those who considered themselves Moslem were a very small minority, this paper does not dwell on Islam much.

During colonialism, Catholicism was the official religion of the state, and the state’s ideology was manifestly religious (Isaacman, 1972). The missionaries justified and sanctified the colonial state’s conquest and subjugation of the indigenes, and reciprocally, the state exercised jurisdiction over the religious institution, ensuring protection for the Church. The colonial state used Christianity to legitimize its rule, while on their part missionaries built schools to train a submissive technocratic stratum to run the state apparatus (Isaacman 1972). Not surprisingly, in the early days of independence the relationship between the state, traditional religion and the church was sensitive.

Religion as a factor causing and fuelling the war

Officially, Frelimo’s position was that religion was a private matter. In reality, however, it was felt it tried, in a Stalinist fashion, to suppress religion as an ‘opium of the people’, complicity in colonial oppression. Religion and rapid scientific development were believed to be incompatible, and indeed, Frelimo’s socialist programme did not accommodate traditional or Christian religions.

Specifically, Frelimo opposed spiritual possession, exorcism by traditional healers and those practises which perpetuated the idea of the chief’s greatness. As Fry (1991) notes, ‘almost all that was ‘traditional’ was to be suppressed under such slogans asAbaixo o feudalismo, Abaixo o obscuratismo! (Down with feudalism, Down with obscurantist ideas). Christian worship was suppressed, church property confiscated and many Christian leaders persecuted and sent to detention camps, euphemistically dubbed re-education centres.

In a historically religious society, suppressing religion inevitably alienated many, and indeed had the opposite effect. Not only did it precipitate a remarkable resurgence in religious revivalism, but it also fuelled the war, as the disaffected joined the ranks of the rebels, which claimed to be fighting for religious freedoms. In short, in trying to control the Church and to suppress religion, Frelimo alienated many people, and unwittingly helped Renamo’s recruitment drive.

Renamo’s war for religious freedoms

Ingeniously building on a tradition in which revolts were
inspired and guided by religious agents, Renamo effectively used religion as a recruitment and mobilisation strategy. In a local equivalent of a ‘holy war’ or jihad, Renamo professed to be fighting a ‘war of the spirits’, and for religious freedoms. Its counter ideology, backed by force, was to give back power to the spirit mediums, traditional chiefs and elders.

Renamo also embraced and elevated Christianity by, for instance, using spiritual symbols, distributing bibles to its combatants, and encouraging them to attend sermons in the bush (Amnestized Renamo Rebels, 1992). As an integral element of its mobilization strategy Renamo left churches and mosques untouched amidst the wreckage of a town.

To the religious believers, whose world outlook had been dismissed by Frelimo as anachronistic, Renamo therefore became a bona fide liberator. Where Frelimo repressed peasant ideologies, Renamo articulated them and presented them as its cause. Naturally, this helped it win the hearts and minds of many, especially in the central regions of Manica Province and Beira. In Nampula province, Geffray (1991) found that the uncompromising approach to traditional religion and institutions was a major incentive for the local population to turn its back on the Frelimo state. In a similar vein, in central Manica Province, a story is told of a traditional chief who, when, he joined the rebels, all his subjects followed him.

Sin and war

There was a perceived ‘egg-and-hen’ relationship between sin and war. Some believed that sin, however defined, was the cause of the war. Others stressed instead that, war had led to increased sinning as social values and structures collapsed. The reality is, there was a dialectical relationship between war and sinning, with both mutually reinforcing the other.

In a purposefully charged but very short Good Friday sermon, a preacher at a Holy Spirit congregation preached that the violent and disturbing changes were evidence of God’s power and anger. Subtly attacking the political elite as sinners, he prayed for those unjustly arrested to be released: ‘Even those with a sin as dark as charcoal will be forgiven, only if they repent’. Continuing his tirade against the political elite and gloating over the collapse of its power base due to the war, he idiomatically quipped: ‘Nyayadzinotongwanedzimwenyaya’, which loosely translates to, ‘problems are resolved by other problems’; in every cloud there is a silver lining. By persecuting religious believers, Frelimo had sinned, and its sins had caused the war.

For the Maforga Missionaries (Interview, 1992) the war was the work of Satan and evil spirits: “Although God is behind everything, the thing behind the war is Satanic. There are spiritual things behind it... a lot of evil forces at work.” They added, there was no just element in the war, and “it was a pity that everyone is trying to kill them [Renamo].”

In a similar vein, an Igreja Evangélica Cristo Vive (Interview, 1992) preacher said that the leaders’ lack of ‘real love and respect’, especially for freedom fighters who had brought independence, caused the war. He asserted:

By turning their backs on freedom fighters who brought them to power, the leaders had ‘sinned’. Some of these freedom fighters have become Matsangaissa. They want to live well too.

In short, the war and religion mutually reinforced each other, with religion justifying and legitimating war, while war empowered religious leaders.

THE CIVIL WAR AND RELIGIOUS REVIVALISM

During the civil war, religious activism re-emerged with a vengeance that dazzled even the Mozambicans themselves: ‘There are too many new churches. Some of them are false prophets’. Such was the ubiquity of wartime religious practice in Mozambique, whose form, content and political articulation was shaped not only by the war, but also by the worldwide Pentecostal explosion. Driving the religious conversion experience was the search for spiritual healing and material welfare/human security, and the felt need for redemption. Fear of death, the unknown and of ‘miracles’ that were happening forced many to seek refuge in religion.

The phenomenon of religious revivalism was, however, not unique to Mozambique, but is occurring “on a grand scale... in Africa and...throughout the world” (cited in Roberts and Seddom, 1991). In the literature, the significance of this religious resurgence, has been interpreted in widely different ways (Isaacman, 1972; Ranger, 1986; Marshall, 1991; Gifford, 1991; Roesch, 1993; Balandier, 1965; Lantemari, 1985). For example, Isaacman (1972) and Ranger (1986) depict religion either as an instrument of colonial conquest or a form of protest against conquest.

This paper contends that, given impetus by the civil war, religious ideology was deployed in more ways than hitherto identified and documented in the literature. For many, religious conversion was a form of ‘survival strategy’, in both the material and spiritual senses. For the religious elite, it was a ‘holy avenue’ to the accumulation of wealth and power, while for the poor who so wished to please the preacher by donating the little they had, it was a royal road to financial ruin and spiritual satisfaction. Also, religious ideology simultaneously contributed to: fostering hatred and love; promoting violence and peace; providing humanitarian aid and thereby entrenching dependency. In a nutshell, war-related anxiety, disruption and grief, and the consequent need to re-interpret, explain and adjust to the harsh reality shaped the specific articulation of religious practice.
Religious demographics

While neo-traditionalist and Catholic membership was declining, that of Pentecostal churches was rising. At the risk of over-simplification, the aged seemed to numerically dominate neo-traditional religions, while youths preferred Pentecostal churches.

The majority of the membership of the locally based religious groups came from the poorest social strata. In contrast, membership of the Roman Catholic Church consisted mainly of the relatively well-off, those who could still afford to have wedding ceremonies and to buy fashionable clothes for Sunday services; the decline in Catholic membership, which corresponded to the rise in that of Protestantism and atheism, thus partly reflected rising poverty.

Most of the non-believers or agnostics were relatively educated and wealthy young men, some of whom had been to former East Germany. Conversely, the overwhelming majority of the believers were poor women – mostly single mothers - especially in religious groups involved in channelling and distributing food aid. In virtually all religious groups, women predominated numerically; the religious stress on marital fidelity, the sense of community and humanitarian aid were all major attractions. Thus class and gender divisions were not completely transcended as religious ideology attempted to unite the rich and poor in a spiritual warfare against evil.

Religious conversion as a survival strategy

A multitude of socio-economic, political, cultural, personal and psychological factors accounted for the increased activism of religious believers, as social critics, protestors, rebels, religious entrepreneurs and peace activists. Wartime economic crisis and the struggle for material survival form the backdrop of religious revivalism and the conversion experience. The need to survive, both spiritually and materially, the disintegrations and conflicts within a war-torn society was most significant.

In Manica Province, this religious activism took the form of neo-traditional worship, Catholicism and Pentecostal Protestantism all co-existing in competition and synergy with one another. Some religious groups adopted a more public profile, and engaged in activities that were more explicitly political. Consequently, some of these became the subject of controversy among politicians and scholars alike.

Neo-traditional religion: interpretation, justification and survival

A strong belief that the calamities of the time were punishment by the ancestors and God for abandoning and neglecting them led many people back to their traditional practices of ancestral worship and veneration. There were numerous cases in which people converted to traditional religion after encountering health, social and economic problems. Illness, drought and the unnecessary bloodletting were explained as an expression of wrath by the dead for not performing traditional rituals to appease and thank them (for life and protection).

The violation of the norms governing the relationship between the dead and the living led to the strange behaviour of nature – drought and floods. Such misdeeds of the living (agency) that lead to punishment by the ancestors can only be redressed by performing the appropriate traditional rituals and achieving reconciliation. Effectively, war-time political economy and the indirect consequences of war are explained in terms of human/spiritual agency, and are reduced to the familiar explanatory category of the relationship between the living and dead.

Naturally, these beliefs strengthened the power of the religious agents, the traditional chief, spirit mediums and traditional healers in particular. These alone, because of their strategic position in the politico-religious temporal/spiritual hierarchy, could offer an interpretation of, and solution to, the problems. As in the case of the Naparama and Mungoi spirit mediums, such religious authorities were able to exploit this strategic position to curtail Renamo violence.

Adapting to cope with the new social demands, neo-traditional religion became an effective survival strategy and a potent force in the matrix of politics in wartime Mozambique. It played a crucial healing function, both for illness and social trauma, and helped people develop and accept a new set of multi-faceted concepts about the nature of the world. In addition to state secularism, the greatest challenge to neo-traditionalism came from Christianity, its arch rival.

The Christian conversion experience as a survival strategy

‘Here people are thirsting for the word of God, and the spiritual uplifting it brings’, a local pastor aptly summed up the situation in war time Mozambique. Having lost everything, including faith in leadership, many discovered God, and indeed increasing numbers of people were converting to Christianity, especially to Pentecostal churches. There are many interrelated personal and socio-political reasons for this conversion. Interestingly, the very same reasons that forced some to ‘retreat’ to traditional religion led others to enthusiastically embrace Christianity. Some ‘born again Christians’ even claimed to possess divine understanding, to know something or be committed to something beyond the comprehension of
non-believers.

Religiously interpreting the war and the economic crisis, and justifying her religious conversion a young mother of four put it thus: ‘It is written in the Bible that towards the end of the world, all these miseries will happen. War, hunger and suffering are all signs of the coming doom’. The appearance of these signs and a sense of sinfulness combined to strengthen her resolve to become a dedicated Christian, and be saved.

**Healing, health and the Christian conversion experience**

The search for healing and exorcism from possession by an evil avenging spirit of a deceased person (ngozí) was cited on numerous occasions as the main reason for conversion to Christianity. Traumatised and dispossessed by the war, many found counselling, solace and spiritual and physical healing from the church. Even more important, membership to a religious group or congregation also offered a sense of belonging and community as well as practical assistance and food aid.

In one typical example, a young woman had to become Christian, and subsequently change from one church to another, in search of spiritual healing and exorcism from the avenging spirit of a person who was killed by her uncle. According to a tradition, the evil avenging spirit could only be exorcised when the woman’s family pays compensation to the relatives of the deceased in the form of a sacrificial animal, a goat, and a huge sum of money. Both had to be presented at a ritual ceremony organized to put to rest the aggrieved spirit of the deceased. But due to war induced poverty, the woman’s family could not afford to pay the compensation and perform the traditional rituals.

In a dramatization of the use of religious ideology as a survival strategy, she abandoned traditional religion and instead, and at the suggestion of a ‘saved and born again’ Christian, joined the African Zionist Church religious sect. The prophetic leaders of the sect claimed to have the ‘healing’ powers to dispel demons from their victims. Still failing to heal the woman switched on to yet another sect, the African Apostolic Faith, which she believed to be based on ‘true Christianity’ that could save her. In a nutshell, as with thousands others, the need to survive illness and wartime economic hardship, which are closely interrelated, drove this woman initially to neo-traditionalism and subsequently to two other Christian churches.

**EMPOWERMENT, NEW IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY**

The Chigubhu religious sect, a locally based religious movement which combines elements of African traditional dance with Christian religion, is a typical example of popular grassroots religious movements. Its exaltation of ‘wild brotherly and sisterly dance’ had earned it rebuke from mainstream established churches and the state. The sect was accused of promoting promiscuity and the breakdown of family life through the all-night uninhibited dance (to drums) and prayer sessions in which ‘brothers and sisters freely intermingled’.

For believers, however, dance and prayer was not only the most important expression of brotherly and sisterly love, it was the only way one could achieve genuine communion with Jesus Christ, and be saved. Membership in such a religious group not only fostered love and communion with God, but it also guaranteed caring and material support in times of need. As a single mother and member of the sect, pointed out:

*We help each other in times of need...When I was ill a few months ago, other members visited me, bringing with them firewood, water, maize meal powder and sometimes money. Had it not been for their help, my son would have starved to death.*

Another separated young woman, who had joined the sect following her separation from her husband who had married three other wives, similarly testified that becoming a Christian ‘helps in many ways’. Membership gave birth to a new identity, offered a sense of community, and empowered and fostered love among members, all of which helped her cope with the trauma of separation and wartime economic hardship.

Given the war weary state’s increasing inability to provide social welfare, the vital social function which the sect performed cannot be overstated. Participation in the sect’s activities also fostered a sense of belonging and community, and helped shape the process of re-defining individual and collective identity. Remarkably, one found a surprising degree of egalitarianism in the congregations. Calling each other ‘brother’ and ‘sister’, members appeared to have put aside, to some extent, the traditional respect for status, age and gendered inequality.

**THE MAFORGA MISSION AND THE MANY ROLES OF RELIGION**

The many roles of religion in wartime Mozambique is most amply demonstrated by the experience of the Marfora Mission. Established by a white couple in the mid-1980s on a farm about 15 kilometres east of Chimoio town, Maforga Mission was not only the most controversial religious group, but it also exhibits the many contradictory roles of religion. The mission’s tense relationship with the government puts into perspective the role of religion in providing humanitarian aid, promoting peace and/or war.

Assisted by short-term volunteers from the West, the
Mission’s core activities included provision of basic health care, training in knitting and sewing for disabled men and women, care for the elderly, the disabled and orphans, and provision of food and clothing. Often the Mission fed up to 400 and treated 1000 people a day.

The Mission was attacked left and right by both the government and non-governmental organizations for: operating illegally without registering with the government; engaging in activities that contradicted government policy with respect to concentration of people; using food aid as a bait for membership recruitment; alienating children from their culture; and most seriously, collaborating with Renamo. In its defence, the Mission rejected all these accusations as misinformed and misinforming.

Refuting the accusation of illegality, the Mission stressed that, for them as Christians, it was far more important to save lives than to waste time and resources negotiating through a Byzantine and corrupt bureaucracy for a permit when people are dying. The Mission denied contradicting government policy on concentration of people and using food as bait, a practice that is banned by the code of conduct of international NGOs, thus:

First, we did not invite the children… they simply came on their own. Second, giving aid is not our main objective. We started the programme of teaching women to knit and sew because they kept coming to us seeking help.

Many displaced people interviewed at the Mission had come voluntarily, and indeed thanked God for bringing these good Samaritans to their aid. Providing almost everything from thatching grass, to clothes, food and medicine, the Missionaries were seen as God-sent messiahs.

The most serious criticism levelled at the Mission related to its alleged links to Renamo and apartheid South Africa, and to thus supporting the insurgency. This allegation was substantiated by the Renamo ‘attack’, capture and subsequent release of the Missionaries in 1987. On their release in Malawi, after spending nearly three months in the bush with their captors, the Missionaries made a press statement which was interpreted as too political and sympathetic to Renamo by the Frelimo government and its allies. The statement was: ‘They [Renamo] had treated us to the best of their abilities. They never deliberately harassed nor tortured us’.

Denying any political objectives or connections with any political movement the Missionaries expressed their dilemma thus:

We don’t want to be politically involved. But it’s difficult to work with the government. You never know what they want and where you stand. The other problem is that, both the right and left wings want us to say things that support them and attack their foes.

From the mission’s perspective, the major problem in the country was corruption, directionless and lack of self-discipline: “Since no-one seems to have anything, no-one can be trusted with anything”

The Mission’s struggle against satanic forces, sinfulness and selfishness led it into a hostile relationship with the government, other churches and the supposed beneficiaries of its projects. Hinting at the conflict within the religious movements, the Missionaries attributed the sinfulness that had gripped the country to the activities of other churches, which they do not recognize as true Christians. Attacking the Jehovah’s Witness first the Missionaries said:

We don’t recognize the Jehovah’s Witness as a church. Their doctrine that only 144 000 people will go to heaven is blasphemous. As Christians we believe in the Trinity, that Jesus Christ died for our sins, and is our saviour.

Turning to the Roman Catholic Church, the Missionaries attacked it for its liberal code of conduct and for elevating people and worshipping saints, such as the Virgin Mary, which they consider blasphemous.

The Mission had tried to establish links with other smaller churches by encouraging their members to participate in its activities. This seemed aimed at either gradually absorbing these churches or eventually converting their members into the Mission’s religion, all in an endeavour to outmanoeuvre its rivals. Earnestly wrestling with the challenges of physical and spiritual warfare, the Mission’s stance added to the confusion and animosity in the country.

Religious enterprising and after-life salvation

While some believers were making huge sacrifices and acting nobly in the name of religion, religious capitalist entrepreneurs were trying hard to barricade themselves from poverty and hunger. They were also probably inflicting it unto others by, for instance, underpaying their workers as well as by ‘stealing’ from the poor who donated the little they had to the church. There were many who profiteered from religious engagement, and the examples below are only illustrative.

The well pampered youthful Zimbabwean preachers of the Jesus Lives Gospel Reach Tent Ministries were perhaps among the most aggressive in religious enterprising.

Apparently insensitive to the material conditions and plight of those to whom they preached, they led a conspicuously luxurious life that sharply contrasted with that of their Mozambican counterparts. With lots of clothes and food, only leftovers of which they gave to the hungry souls who had assembled to hear them preach the word of God, they looked more capitalist than
Christian crusaders.

One of them, a youth in his early twenties, openly admitted that he had joined the crusaders because, like most of his colleagues, he had failed to get a job in Zimbabwe after completing his high school studies. Although the war was a present threat, he was not regretting having volunteered coming to Mozambique for, ‘there are so many opportunities of prospering in life while here. Everything, especially food and clothes, is cheap’. The economic opportunities of cheap second hand clothes (donated by European charities) for resale in Zimbabwe was the major attraction for such enterprising religious crusaders.

Like other such churches, preachers taught that a key aspect of prospering was giving to God first: ‘if we give and to the extent we give, God will re-imburse us’ (Gifford, 1991: 19).’ The leader of the group, an overweight man in his late thirties, even went further to praise the Mozambicans for their humility, meekness and openness to the word of God. Contrasting them to Zimbabweans, and drawing a biblical analogy he said:

The Zimbabweans, like the Pharisees in the Bible, are arrogant, self-praising and ‘full of I know’ (attitude), whereas the Mozambicans are, like the Galatians, humble, polite and open to new ideas. God blessed the Galatians and punished the Pharisees for their boastfulness.

Continuing with his religious discourse, he insisted bluntly that helping the Mozambicans materially was not their objective, for: ‘Man does not live on bread alone’. He added that, it is the spirit/soul that needs to be saved. Dismissing the counter-argument that ‘man cannot live without bread’, he retorted that for a Christian it was enough to simply pray for a starving man, rather than give him food.

This kind of gospel had obvious socio-political effects. It told the people of Mozambique, among the poorest in the world, that material prosperity will be provided by the ‘blessings of God’. It encouraged people to accept their earthly miseries, as ‘sinners who did not deserve justice’ and instead, seek mercy. It is this disarming emphasis on spiritual and after-life salvation that had been the main target for criticism of religious philosophy by concerned observers, and that forced some to atheism. One ill old woman, a non-believer, bitterly remarked when asked why she had not joined any religious group in order to get some help:

It’s all the same. At the clinic they want money. The traditional healers want money too. In the church, they also want money all the time. Where can I get the money from?

Many believers, however, would happily donate their last coins to the preacher. Strangely, religious philosophy derived its strength from the idea of earthly misery and after-life salvation.

Religion as a force for change and peace

Though not acknowledged in official history, many religious actors contributed immensely, in their unique ways, to conflict resolution and the peace process. Many neo-traditionalists believed that if the necessary rituals were performed the war would cease. Similarly, many Christians had faith that if people prayed the war and the other plagues would end. The Moforga Missionaries aptly captured this sentiment thus: “Whatever you say about the war, there is only one thing you can do. Pray and forgive one another”. Indeed, in the churches and congregations some people prayed for peace and forgiveness, while others prayed for the punishment of the sinners, the warmonger. Religious tolerance, which was introduced as part of the liberalization package of the 1980s, provided perfect conditions for religious actors to be involved in the peace process.

Neo-traditional religion and the peace process

Neo-traditionalists contributed in many ways to the peace process, reconciliation and post-war trauma treatment. For instance, some neo-traditional religious leaders explained the drought of the mid-1980s as punishment by the ancestors for the senseless blood-shed. Accordingly, they implored their followers to desist from violence. Further, they performed rituals to cleanse those who had been involved in violence and to appease the ancestors. In Gaza Province, for example, the bearer of the spirit medium of Mungoi successfully established a peace zone - to which thousands of peasants flocked - protected from Renamo atrocities. Similarly, Naparama, a spirit medium possessed healer who claimed to have risen from the dead, also established peace zones in the central region of Manica province. It was believed that if rebels fired a shot in those ‘sacred’ peace zones, they would be cursed by demons. Sharing the same religious beliefs with the masses, the rebels would not dare attack these ‘peace zones’.

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE PEACE PROCESS

The role of religious ideology in giving momentum to the peace process and post conflict development is most clearly illustrated by the Catholic Church, whose history is manifestly political, and whose relationship with the state has vacillated in a love-hate fashion. With the spread of the war, the Catholic Church gradually reclaimed its credibility, especially by involving itself, at various levels,
in bringing the belligerents together to end the war. In the early 1980s, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Beira Gonçalves had urged Samora Machel, then president of Mozambique, to negotiate with the Renamo rebels. In his misplaced faith in a military victory against the rebels Machel ignored the Bishop, who was seen as 'a mediator with sympathies for one of the parties', and instead signed the 1984 Nkomati Peace Accord with South Africa. The Nkomati Peace Accord obliged Mozambique and SA to desist from supporting each other's insurgent movements, the African National Congress (ANC) and Renamo respectively; the accord was flagrantly violated by both parties, and the war continued with greater intensity. In spite of being snubbed by Machel, religious actors continued to pray and campaign for peace, and eventually played a more prominent role in ending the conflict.

The Catholic Community of Sant’Egidio of Rome provide an intriguing instance of religion being used to settle a non-religious conflict. Initially, and in order to encourage Frelimo to relax its suppression of the Catholic Church, the Community sent three airplanes and two ships of essentials to Mozambique as gifts (Berkeley Center, 2013). Eventually, it not became mediator in the conflict, but also sponsored the tortuous peace process, which led to the Rome Cease-fire Agreement of 1992.

BROTHER ELIJAH AND HIS ANTI-WAR PEACE CRUSADE

A most glaring example of the role of religion as social critique and a force for change in war-time Mozambique is the one-man show of Brother Elijah’s Honour God Movement. Were it not for the large crowds of people that he drew during his peace and anti-war public sermons in Chimoio city centre, it would have been easy to dismiss him as a madman of no consequence.

A demobilized soldier and a holder of first class nursing certificate, Brother Elijah claimed that, after seeing a vision of God in 1989, he had been on a sojourn ‘to spread the gospel and to warn sinners that the day of judgement was imminent’. Since seeing the vision, he had devoted all his time to preaching, healing, and even attempting to reconcile the warring parties.

Some people tried to dismiss this strange preacher as a mad man or beggar but, to their surprise, not only did he refuse money offerings as debased, but he also had made new converts from the crowd. One of the new converts confessed that he had seen a vision of this encounter a few days earlier; he was asked to carry the cross. Some women pleaded with him to accept their genuine offerings of appreciation for his spiritually uplifting sermon, which he eventually did. It was difficult to disperse the crowd after the prayers and preaching, as people seemed to want more.

In an attempt to end the war, Brother Elijah claimed that he had invited both Chissano and Dhlakama, ‘the kings of war’, to come for peace negotiations on a mountain in Manica Province that God had designated for talks to end all wars in the world. Since they refused to attend the talks, ‘a hell of fire is coming soon to devour the whole world’. Relations of domination and control, oppressor and oppressed were seen in terms of spiritual warfare between forces of evil and good, Satan and God. Though non-believers may have more ‘rational’ explanations for the war and its consequences, many people believed Brother Elijah’s prophecies of doom, and followed him freely.

THE PASTORS FOR PEACE

The quest for peace and love led some to continuously move from one denomination to another in search of ‘true’ Christianity, genuine love and peace. Clearly illustrating this point is the case of a former pastor in the Assemblies of God (Africa). A demobilised soldier, he left the sect to become a pastor in Igreja Evangelica Cristo Vive, because he ‘wanted a church which encourages real love and not one that operates like an ‘empresa’ (enterprise), as the Assemblies of God did’. War had led to too much sinning in the country. Thus, he was prepared to end the war by any means. Was he the president, he would ‘agree to give up the Presidency’ in order to achieve peace, and similarly, was he the leader of the rebel movement he would ‘give up the struggle for power’.

Contrary to the popular religious view that drought is God’s punishment for sin and the bloodletting, he insisted it is God strategy for achieving peace. He wisely explained: ‘Drought is God’s solution to the war. If there are rains, the war will not end as there will be enough food to feed the belligerents and vegetation cover’. True, an army not only marches on its stomach, but also needs cover. Only through true love and prayer can the country achieve peace and develop, preached the preacher.

From these diverse religious interventions in the peace process, it is clear the relationship between religion, peace and war is a complex one. This complexity partly derives from the many roles that religious ideology plays when appropriated by different people in different contexts.

RETHINKING THE RELIGION, WAR AND POLITICS INTERFACE

In an apparent misreading of Marx, Frelimo attempted to abolish religion by decree. For Marx, the abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of ‘man who has not yet found himself or who has already lost himself’ is required for their real happiness. However, this cannot be achieved by decree or force. Instead, religion can only be
abolished through the abolition of the material objective conditions that need and sustain religious fantasies: ‘The demand to give up the illusions about its condition is the demand to give up a condition which needs illusions’ (McEwan, 1972, 122). In other words, religion will ‘wither away’ only when the socio-economic and political conditions that require it have been transcended. As Frelimo learnt that the hard way, abolishing religion by decree is an impossible task, if not suicidal.

Far from withering away, during the civil war religion ideology was getting stronger by the day as many converts were ‘born again’ and new churches built. Such a resurgence of religious revivalism, especially in conditions of extreme socio-economic deprivation and distress, lends credence to Marx’s claim that, God did not create man, but instead, man created God in his imagination. Having lost everything, including faith in the leadership, the war victims and dispossessed of Mozambique discovered God, as their fortress and refugee. They will probably continue to do so for the foreseeable future. However, the implications of increased religious revivalism for war, peace and development are far from clear.

**IMPLICATIONS OF RELIGIOUS REVIVALISM**

There are two main opposed views, negative and positive, on the relationship between religion, war, peace and development. The ‘negative’ perspective, most represented by Gifford (1991) and Roesch (1994) posits that, religion is ‘disempowering’ in many ways and cannot promote peace or development. The ‘positive’ perspective, articulated most eloquently by Marshall (1991), depicts religion as a force with great potential for individual and collective empowerment. The experience of Mozambique seems inconclusive, as there is evidence to support and refute both views.

**Religious ideology as disempowering**

Commenting on the ‘re-treat to neo- traditionalism’ in Manica Province in Mozambique, Roesch (1993: 9) asserts:

> ...people in Mozambique use religious discourses to explain their current problems, and situations and ...in doing so they mystify the economic and political forces that have shaped their current reality.

For him, neo-traditional religious practice is ‘mysticism’ and has counter revolutionary implications:

> While such mystification may serve reactionary political objectives, it does not do so necessarily. In the Mozambican case, however, such religious mystifications do often serve the reactionary objectives of ‘traditional’ political authorities who oppose democracy, defend hereditary authority and are concerned to re-instate their lost political powers and economic privileges.

With reference to the continuing spread of Christian fundamentalism in Africa, Gifford (1991) arrives at a similar conclusion. He argues that religion ‘leads its adherents to downplay the importance of development, to dismiss it as irrelevant, or even positively to turn their backs on it’. Religion does not act as a spur to Africa’s development and peace building.

When poverty, sickness, failing businesses, all of which inevitable in a war-torn society, are explained as punishment by the ancestors, avenging spirits, or God’s plan, there is no need to search for better explanations of the causes and solutions of these problems. With the problems accepted as just punishment, ancestral veneration or prayer, instead of social analysis, political activity or development became the remedy.

Often, it is the human factor, and not God’s plan, that turns drought, floods, or earthquake into disasters. The Jehovah’s Witnesses point out that, God is not responsible for natural disasters: ‘the concentration of humans’ in areas of ‘high mortality risk from disasters is of greater consequence than the severity of the disaster itself: ‘Earthquakes don’t kill people. Buildings kill people’ (Jehovah’s Witnesses, 2007, 5). Furthermore, the stress on after life salvation, saving the soul, ‘praying’ for, instead of feeding, a starving person, can be quite limiting and disempowering as people fatalistically accept their fate as God’s plan for them.

Although justified in criticising the dominant state ideology for having stifled the initiative of the poor, the Church’s rigid ideology, bureaucratic, hierarchical and gendered structure, also limits its capacity to ‘empower the poor’ and achieving lasting peace and development. Indeed, the recent threats by the MNR to resume the war are testimony to the limits of religious ideology’s peace building potential. Preaching to the oppressed to love their oppressor may be seen as a veiled attempt at legitimating the status quo, and hence further disempowering the weak.

In addition, as politics, religion and money intersected in interesting ways, the strange ‘adulterous marriage’ between the Bible and money became the norm in many churches. Often religion became the ‘holy’ avenue to wealth accumulation, and hence power. If money is the source of all evil, why do churches and Christians beg for it all the time?

Another related problem concerns the use of food aid to induce poor people to convert to their faith. Such linkage between humanitarian aid and religious proselytism, which is banned by the international code of conduct for faith-based NGOs, denies the poor choice, and often entrenches the dependency syndrome.

With even more far reaching ramifications for conflict,
monotheistic religions are often absolute, unconditional and authoritarian. Most Christian religions condemned the African traditional religion practice of ancestral veneration as paganism for, ‘the dead cannot harm the living’ and should therefore stay in their graves. In their defence neo-traditionalists posit that the calamities that have befallen society are punishment by the ancestors for abandoning tradition and uncritically embracing Christianity instead.

Within the Christian fraternity, there is competition and conflict, with each group claiming to be the true followers of Christ, with its version of worshipping as the only correct one. For example the Maforga Mission refused to recognise other religious groups and doctrines, and these in turn refused to recognise it either. Such conflict between religious groups undermined their capacity to contribute to the peace process.

In addition, by providing humanitarian aid, religious agents indirectly prolonged the war. The aid enabled both armies ‘to move on their stomachs’, as they had easy access to food aid. Apart from that, food aid entrenched dependency. Further, by bringing various groups of people together, religious ideology engendered and fostered relations of control and domination.

Religion as liberating


Religious conversion is experienced as a liberating and empowering personal re-birth, and...the new spiritual power possessed by the born again individual cannot be disassociated from the ‘practical’ power to transform his/her social and economic world.

Recourse to religion was an effective strategy for the dispossessed in negotiating for their survival amidst a vicious war. Churches provided shelter, food and clothes as well as spiritual solace. Some neo-traditional religions, for instance those represented by both Naparama and Mungoi, provided their followers with relative security. To this extent the resurgence of neo-traditionalist activism did not constitute a retreat from ‘popular politics’, as Roesch contended, but rather actually strengthened traditional healers, chiefs and people in a political struggle against both the modern state and Renamo violence.

Women and the poor numerically dominated membership of religious groups precisely because such groups offered them a forum to express their distress. They also offered an opportunity for mobilizing for peace, subverting masculine violence and for becoming visible. For such women, religion has thus been both an ‘expression of real distress’ and a form of protest against domination. Overall, the mere existence of active religious groups had the effect of strengthening embryonic elements of civil society.

In short, religious practice and analysis is a contested terrain, which is characterised by subjective spiritual experiences and explanations that are vying for hegemony. None of the opposed views on the religion, war and politics interface are wholly wrong or correct. Instead they offer only a partial truth of a more complicated reality. The reality is, while religion became the central ideological apparatus for the ‘elaboration of a conceptual challenge to the power monopolies’ (Marshall, 1991), it also entrenched the power of religious authorities.

Why is religious ideology so appealing?

Contingent upon the exigencies of surviving a war situation, religious belief offered consoling, if comfortable and simple, answers to complicated and often incomprehensible problems. In the absence of a scientific theory to guide them, the masses adopted religion as a ‘general theory’ for social engagement. As Marx (cited in McLellan, D, 1972, 123) pointed out:

Religion is the general theory of [a perverted] world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritualistic point d’honneur, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn completion, its universal ground for consolation and justification

As ‘the general theory of a perverted world’, religious ideology offered different groups the necessary means and religious/moral basis for identity formation, either opposing domination and the war or justifying the war.

Although some of the problems that led to religious conversion may be an indirect result of the war, people dealt with them according to their beliefs, for “faith” and “belief” do not necessarily surrender to logic: they cannot even be declared illogical” (Hubbard, 1981). In particular, African traditional religion is founded on an episteme that does not quite conform to western forms of rationality. As with religion in general, its appeal lies in the way it successfully reduces the inexplicable and the unfamiliar to the familiar, thereby stabilising the relationships between the living and the dead, the individual and society, and that which is man-made and nature. Thus to dismiss these religious practices as mere ‘mystification’ reflects the limits of western rationalism as well the power imbalance between the interpreter and the represented.

In a context in which the struggle for power at every level had become a ‘zero sum’ game, and in which other bases of resistance in civil society were absent or oppressed, religious conversion became a pragmatic act
of individual and collective reconstruction. It helped people deal with tensions that arose from violent social change by providing the means for negotiating the personal, social and political conditions they experienced, and through which they were even empowered.

As protest, religious ideology offered a critique and alternative to the status quo ante. This was supremely manifested in the Renamo mobilization and anti-state insurgency and in some religious groups which ignored or even challenged the state. Mystifying and justifying the war, religion became ‘opium of the people’ that blurred the social forces shaping their situation, and hence stood in the way of radical solutions. Providing a rationale and explanation for their social situation, religious ideology acted as a ‘general theory of a perverted world’, and by its stress on forgiveness and restraint, it helped build peace and reconciliation between erstwhile foes.

Such complexity of religious practice and discourse partly derives from the disparities in the knowledge (and power) bases of believers, the wide range of social meanings carried by religious movements and their multiple, if not contradictory, significances in different historical contexts.

Summary

In Mozambique, religious intolerance was a very non-survival activity, a short road to trouble, which led to the slaughter and suffering of many people. Using religion as a basis for recruitment, Renamo insurgency crippled the anti-religious Frelimo state. In turn this opened up political space for religious ideology to flourish, and for worshippers to insert themselves in the political arena. With the war and urbanisation as key driving forces, religion became an important factor in fuelling and legitimating the war, proved vital to the provision of humanitarian aid, and the peace process. Believers contrasted the hopelessness, sinfulness and destructiveness of the war and the security, hope and empowerment belief offered in the social construction project.

Western-based churches, which were competing for influence with a variety of locally based religious movements, added to the momentum of wartime religious revivalism. The result was a complex situation in which religion, war, economics fed on each other in a fashion that mocks any attempts at distinguishing between cause and effect, for the effect was simultaneously the cause.

The diversity of religious beliefs and the tensions between these have further complicated the role, nature and stature of religion in society. Such complexity and multidimensionality of religious discourses and practices defy simple binary analytical categories of whether religion is good or bad, negative or positive.

To sum up, in spite of Frelimo’s efforts to curtail religious practice, there was, in fact a remarkable resurgence in religious revivalism during the civil war, with all its bad and good manifestations. In a perplexing fashion, some used religion to, interpret and explain the war, and their predicament. Others used it to justify their actions, and yet others still to obtain material benefit, such as food and profit. While the rebel movement used religious ideology to justify their insurgency, many others prayed and acted to end the war. Depending on context and individual history, religion performed multiple and contradictory functions. It functioned as an expression of ‘distress’, a ‘form of protest’, a survival strategy, an ‘opium of the people’ and a force for peace. Thus the increasing numbers of religious groups reveal large differences in what people want out of life, which is in turn a function of their personal and social histories.

Conclusion

An omnipresent force in all the stages of the Mozambican conflict, religious ideology shaped the dynamics and consequences of the conflict, and left a distinct and lasting imprint on contemporary Mozambique. Condemned by the ruling leftist political elite as ‘opium of the masses’, used by the rebels as a mobilization strategy, embraced by the masses as a survival strategy, and motivated others to work for peace, religious ideology simultaneously contained a potentiality of radical protest and conservatism, and of violence and peace. In a perplexing fashion, different social groups appropriated, adopted and adapted religious ideology to suit their respective situations and needs. Uprooted from their established social frameworks, many found anchorage and refugee in religion, a force that has not only survived modernity but an important factor in defining it.

Ever since the early religious wars recorded in the Bible, religious ideology remains such a powerful force in the world; in the name of religion, holy wars have been fought with shameless but pious cruelty. Then as now, religion consolidated peace and sanctioned the legitimacy of the state, just as it often engineer its subversion by justifying war. In conclusion, religion is an important political force to reckon with, and the extent to which it can play a positive or negative role in society is contingent upon many factors, and therefore cannot be ascertained a priori.

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