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# Mobilising Religious Assets for Social Transformation: A Theology of Decolonial Reconstruction Perspective on the Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs (MNGRA) in Zambia

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**Abstract:** The article argues for a theology of decolonial reconstruction to aid the Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs (MNGRA) in its search for a new political vision for Zambian society. The MNGRA was established in 2017 by President Edgar Chagwa Lungu to strengthen the Declaration of Zambia as a Christian nation. The second republican President Frederick JT Chiluba declared Zambia a Christian nation (hereafter, the Declaration) on 29 December 1991. In 1996, the Declaration was enshrined in the preamble of the National Constitution. Zambian Pentecostalism, perceived as chief architect and guardian of the Declaration, is also believed to have masterminded the introduction of the MNGRA. A female Pentecostal Pastor, Hon. Rev. Godfridah Sumaili, in fact heads the ministry. One of the key roles of the MNGRA is to stimulate faith-based organizations and religious communities' interest, support and participation in pursuit of social reconstruction and transformation of the nation. To this effect, MNGRA has deployed a methodology, which seeks to dialogue with these organizations and at the same time use a 'top-bottom' approach to promote religious morality in the process of social reconstruction and transformation. This article argues that, being a ministry with a strong conservative Christian orientation, MNGRA is in danger of falling prey to a Pentecostal demo-theocratic (democratic and theocratic) political paradigm which rejects certain human rights, religious pluralism, and knowledge constructions from other religions, which are perceived inferior. The article also analyses the viability of 'top-bottom' approach utilizing a theology of decolonial reconstruction. This approach embraces a pluralistic model of integral religious praxis at all levels of life.

**Keywords:** theology decolonial reconstruction; Zambian Pentecostalism; Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs (MNGRA); spiritual capital; religious pluralism

## 1. Introduction

The MNGRA was established in 2017 by President Edgar Chagwa Lungu to strengthen the Declaration of Zambia as a Christian nation. The Second Republican President Frederick JT Chiluba had declared Zambia a Christian nation (hereafter the Declaration<sup>1</sup>) on 29 December 1991. In 1996,

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<sup>1</sup> Among Zambians, the declaration is used as a shorthand description for the Christian nation.

the Declaration was embedded in the preamble of National Constitution. One of the key roles of MNGRA is to stimulate Faith Based Organisations' (FBOs) and religious communities' interest, support and participation in the pursuit of social reconstruction and transformation of the nation (Sumaili 2018). To this effect, MNGRA has deployed a methodology which seeks to dialogue with FBOs and religious communities through a "top-bottom" approach to promote religious morality in the process of social reconstruction and transformation.

Through content analysis, the article will demonstrate how a theology of decolonial reconstruction can help in reconceptualising MNGRA in the search to promote an authentic religiously grounded mission from the margins to influence democratization processes, social justice and human rights for all. The approach focuses on demonstrating how the rich national religious heritage is a source of spiritual capital capable of energizing altruistic behavior towards social transformation. Religion as national spiritual capital for social consciousness raising has potential to challenge the dominant political thought in the nation. The dominant or neo-colonial political system has a negative effect on people and perpetuates material legacies of colonialism through various socio-relational systems that Quijano (2000) classifies as a "power matrix." The "power matrix" characterises all dimensions of socio-relational life, such as gender, sexuality, authority, politics, economics, religion, subjectivity and labour. The challenge, as explained below, is that many Christian institutions with strong conservative orientation have embraced Eurocentric modernity with a reactive modernity. This worldview was inherited from the 19th-century colonial missionary enterprise, which was shaped by classical Eurocentric hierarchy of powers—patriarchal, heterosexual, authoritarian, religious hegemony and ethnocentrism. The continuous reactive posture as a strategy for liberation from Eurocentric modernity has meant for many Christian organisations, especially African Pentecostalism, retracting into a Pendamentalist (Pentecostal fundamentalism)<sup>2</sup> totalitarianism based on a political model with adopted elements from democratic and theocratic political philosophies.

African Pentecostalism has situated itself as one of the key religious competitors in contemporary Africa. Its demographic advantage has given it a massive public presence and helped articulate its resistance to the meta-religious narrative that forms traditional Christianity. Situated within post-modern reactions, Pentecostalism has questioned the legitimacy of traditional religious structures and authority and preferred individualistic approach to religion. This approach has helped to chart terrains for many pastors who now openly engage in politics in many African countries. In Zambia in particular, Pentecostalism, as chief architect and guardian of the Declaration, is believed to have also masterminded the introduction of the MNGRA, which is headed by a female Pentecostal Pastor, Hon. Rev. Godfridah Sumaili. The challenge is that the ministry is influenced by a particular brand of Pentecostalism with a strong fundamentalist orientation. Thus, MNGRA is conceptualised within a demo-theocratic (democratic and theocratic) political paradigm which functions with selective elements from the 19th-century colonial missionary enterprise and American Evangelical fundamentalism; these influences inform an interpretation of reality that rejects certain human rights, religious pluralism and knowledge constructions from other religions.

The question is, how can a theology of decolonial reconstruction help the MNGRA redefine social transformation from the cosmologies and epistemologies of pluri-religious-based knowledge situated on the margins? In response to this pertinent question, the following questions can be raised: In what ways can the theology of decolonial reconstruction be employed to help reconceptualise the MNGRA for the common good? A decolonial reconstruction is way of engaging in the process of decolonising, liberating and redesigning the existing, but dysfunctional and colonial-shaped

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<sup>2</sup> Pendamentalism is a synthesis of selective Pentecostal philosophy and American Evangelical fundamentalism with its literalism and strict adherence to theological doctrines without sufficient regard for the humanity of others. This emerged as a reaction against modern theologies that promote the humanity of all people through contemporary instruments such as human rights, equality, justice and peaceful co-existence of all people regardless of religious (or no religious) background, race, gender, sexuality, and the like.

structures through intercultural and pluralistic dialogues, for an interchange of experiences and meanings rearticulated from diverse indigenous histories. It also seeks to transform such local histories themselves by rejecting elements that do not promote the fullness of life for all. It seeks to create knowledge for social reconstruction from the margins, in order to decolonise principles on which reigning political knowledge is grounded, as well as ideological discourses that inform national political vision (Mignolo 2011, p. 22).

Thus, decolonial reconstruction is not a matter of mere changing frames of thinking and approaches to social reconstruction. Rather a critical approach to decolonise the way social reality is constructed and articulated in the former colonised nations in order to promote a pluralistic articulation of shared meanings and political visions based on experiences of the margins. This is imperative in promoted a shared vision of social reconstruction more aligned with God's intention for humanity. How can the MNGRA take advantage of religious-based local histories to foster social reconstruction and political transformation? In responding to these key questions, this article argues that a theology of decolonial reconstruction has potential to help the MNGRA to take an inclusive and pluri-religious approach to engage religious knowledge and missional practices for social transformation in post-colonial Zambia. The article is predicated on the idea that a theology of reconstruction and decolonial imagination cannot be divergent systems of knowledge in the Zambian search for social transformation.

Before we proceed to analyse how a theology of decolonial reconstruction can assist in reconceptualising the MNGRA, it is important to put it within the broader context of the concept of the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

## 2. The Concept of Ministry of Religious Affairs

The concept of a Ministry of Religious Affairs (MRAs) is not new and not unique to Zambia. Many countries have had a similar government department responsible for religious matters. These departments have been called by various names, such as The Ministry of Worship of France, the Ministry for Ecclesiastical Affairs of Denmark, Israeli Ministry of Religious Service, State Administration for Religious Affairs of China or Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs in Greece, and most majority-Muslim nations have similar departments. These ministries have been established with the duty of managing and overseeing the religious operations of various religions in the nation. For instance, the Danish government maintains the position of Minister for Ecclesiastical affairs of Denmark, which has overseen church operations since 1916 (Sriram 2015). In some countries, especially those with a Muslim majority, the ministries also function to inhibit influence promoting sexualisation, secularisation, terrorism and radicalisation and to set perimeters for proselytization (El-Katiri 2013; Crouch 2013). However, in most cases such regulations are implicated in religious power dynamics, which appear to favour a dominant religion in the nation (Kjaersgaard 2017). The term dominance is used here in reference not to numerical majority, but rather to power relations in which one religious group sets itself on the top of the socio-political hierarchy. Such religious groups receive a disproportionate share of social privileges, exercise predominant political authority, covertly dominate the sociocultural systems, and seek to control the destiny of a particular nation or community (Marger 1991). One common feature of the MRAs is their strong assertion of practicing religious tolerance and promoting peaceful coexistence while, on a closer examination, seeking to reinforce the religious beliefs and values of the dominant religion. For example, although freedom of worship is stipulated in the Constitution of Denmark, until recently there was a lack of religious diversity. But now, Islam is becoming the largest minority religion (Nielsen 2012). As a result, the religious management largely targets and disadvantages those religious groups with limited or no access to political power (Sharfman 1993). While MRAs in post-Christian societies such as France and Denmark have less influence on public morality, those in majority-Muslim countries are used as tools to impose an Islamic moral order on society. They seek to reinforce rigorous religious values, especially in the fields of sexuality, blasphemy, and alcohol and drug consumption. The continuous Islamization of

society is presented as a covert religious duty of the MRAs in most Islamic nations (Peters 2005). There is still a need for more studies to understand how the MRAs align themselves with the dominant religious ideologies that have little or no regard for pluralism (including morality and religious pluralism), which is a natural consequence of democratic and moral maturation. It is clear that if MNGRA wishes to make a positive difference in Zambia, it has to transcend the narrow approaches many of the MRAs have taken. By embracing the project of theology of decolonial reconstruction, we argue, it could better promote social reconstruction and transformation and the unconditional common good of every Zambian citizen. It is within this framework that MNGRA is analysed in order to understand its function in national politics and how a theology of decolonial reconstruction could assist in reconceptualising the ministerial approach.

### 3. The Rise of MNGRA in Zambia

#### 3.1. Seeking to Operationalize Chiluba's Declaration

Christianity has played a dynamic role in shaping Zambian institutions and culture since its arrival in the mid-19th century. The nation was believed to have been established as a Christian nation by its first president, Kenneth Kaunda (Hinfelaar 2009, 2011). Christianity has remained constant throughout the political history of post-colonial Zambia. However, it was the late Second Republican President, Fredrick JT Chiluba, who formally integrated Christianity and politics through the public Declaration of Zambia as a Christian nation. Since the Declaration, Zambia has been characterised by religious controversy and confusion over the missional role and mandate of the church in national politics. Some scholars have consistently argued that the Declaration was politically empty, since it did not introduce new substantive laws to help overcome the challenges of neo-colonialism, such as political corruption, nepotism, dictatorship, economic and social injustice and human rights abuse, that afflict most neo-colonial African national-states (Freston 2001; Cheyeka 1998, 2008a, 2008b, 2016). However, these scholars have failed to see, as Gordon (2012; see also Van Klinken 2014) observes, that the public act of Declaration presented a distinctive form of political theology which has subjected the whole nation to the Pentecostal "Born Again" theology and resistance to the influence of Satan in the life of the nation through spiritual warfare. Thus, when in 1996 the Declaration was enshrined in an amendment to the constitution, it was merely to give it a level of legitimacy as it was already established as a national religious value. There is empirical evidence, however, which suggests that the Declaration has not translated into religious accountability giving obligation to public officials and government offices and affecting their political behavior toward the promotion of the common good. In other words, they are under the impression that the Declaration has not promoted the imperatives of sound policy design and implementation that can benefit the people on the margins (Freston 2001; Cheyeka 2008b). The lack of understanding as to the political function of the Declaration has meant that, over the years, politicians have leveraged its influence to create an elite system of control conformed to religious beliefs and practices about the ultimate source of power and authority to shape political leadership. The Declaration is framed in Pentecostal theology that perceive the ultimate problem and solution concern spiritual and/or moral forces and factors to be embedded in the mystical realm. This means that emphasis is to be always placed on spiritual remedies/ritual practices of protection or purification and adherence to moral strictures (Kaunda 2018). Consequently, there is less emphasis on pragmatic, material remedies aimed at, for example, promoting good government and economic development, and, has to some extent sought repress choices and behaviours that are deemed unrighteous or ungodly and are therefore seen as posing a danger to the spiritual welfare of the nation (Kaunda 2018).

President Edgar Chagwa Lungu succeeded Michael Sata after his death in the office on 28 October 2014, completing his remaining term until elections in August 2016. His ascension to the presidency was characterised by political faction and rivalry over who should lead the party into the presidential elections. Lungu was finally adopted as the candidate for the Patriotic Front (PF) and won an

election that was filled with “tribalism,” and his few months in the office experienced overwhelming economy challenges, with the currency plunging over 45 percent against the United States dollar. Lungu resolved to declare 18 October 2015 a public holiday for the National Day of Prayer and Fasting ([Lusakatimes.com 2015](#)). On this day, [Lungu \(2015\)](#) first re-affirmed Chiluba’s Declaration, adding his declaration of “Zambia set free from the dark forces of evil” and gazetted 18 October as the National Day of Prayer (NDP). He also started building the Tabernacle of the National House of Prayer (NHoP) to help realise Zambia as a Christian nation ([National House of Prayer 2016](#), p. 4). He appointed a Pentecostal bishop, Joshua Banda of the Northmead Assembly of God, as Chairperson for the Advisory Board for the construction of the NHoP. As a result, many Pentecostals become partisan. During the campaign, some Pentecostals promoted a defamatory discourse against the main opposition: The United Party for National Development (UPND) candidate, Hakainde Hichilema (hereafter HH, as he is generally known in Zambia), was often described as a Satanist. Some have argued that President Lungu’s association with Pentecostals contributed to securing his victory in the presidential race of 2016.

Some people, furthermore, believe that the introduction of MNGRA was to show appreciation for the Pentecostal sector that supported President Lungu during the campaign ([ZambiaBlogTalkRadio 2017](#)). This is because the proposal to introduce MNGRA came in the midst of the petition in the Constitutional Court over the presidential election of 11 August 2016 ([Zambia Reports 2016](#)). President Lungu won the election with 50.3 percent of the vote, defeating HH who got 47.6 percent.<sup>3</sup> The election was regarded as rigged, and the main opposition, UPND, required a recount of the votes. President Lungu maintained that the introduction of MNGRA was imperative in order to reaffirm and strengthen the Declaration and operationalise the Christian nation’s values and practices. In a joint statement, the Zambia Conference of Catholic Bishops (ZCCB) and the Council of Churches in Zambia (CCZ) rejected the introduction, describing it as both “unwise and unnecessary” in view of the various economic and political challenges of the nation ([Vatican News 2016](#)). They further argued, “Zambians want their country to be a democracy rather than a theocracy,” according to [Vatican News \(2016\)](#). However, the introduction of MNGRA received indiscriminate support and affirmation from most Pentecostal ministers, who make up 90 percent of the membership of the Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia (EFZ) ([EFZ 2016](#); See also [Gifford 1998a, 1998b](#); [Burgess 2012](#)). Thus, President Lungu went ahead and appointed Hon. Rev. Sumaili, from Bread of Life Church International, as the head. It is important, therefore, to analyse MNGRA’s self-understanding and highlight its key mandates.

### 3.2. MNGRA Self-Understanding

MNGRA was ratified by Parliament in 2017. It draws its mandate from the preamble and Part II, Article 8 of the Constitution of Zambia Amendment Act No. 2 of 2016. It is also published in the Government Gazette No. 6526, Lusaka, Friday, 18 November 2016 [Vol. LII, No. 76]. The specific portfolio functions of MNGRA, according to the Government Gazette and the Constitution, are Christian affairs, interdenominational dialogue, national guidance, national values, principles and ethics, public religious celebrations, preservation of Christian and religious sites, and religious affairs. As could be seen in these functions, a distinction is made between Christianity and other religions. For example, Christian affairs and religious affairs are regarded as separate categories. Even in the national symposium which the MNGRA held in March 2018 under the theme “to equip the people of faith for today’s challenge,” it was made clear that one of the key purposes was to “appreciate the Bible as a promoter of peace and national unity” ([Sumaili 2018](#), slide 10). The other challenge is that these functions are not defined and explained. This potentially suggests that the meaning for each category would possibly be that which the MNGRA assigns. In addition, there is no MNGRA staff member

<sup>3</sup> Chiluba created a Ministry Of Religious Affairs, which later became a Religious Affairs Desk under State House, with a Pentecostal pastor as Deputy Minister. It became dysfunctional after Chiluba handed power to Levi Mwanawasa.

with an advanced theological background to engage more effectively in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. This also makes it difficult when it comes to interpretation and translation of the so-called national values and principles, which is often done through an Evangelical/Pentecostal framework.

MNGRA defines its main objective as to promote national values and principles, thereby actualising the Declaration while safeguarding individual rights, freedom of conscience and religious orientation. MNGRA is mandated to systematically mainstream Christian values throughout Zambian society by seeking to reconstruct and transform seven pillars of culture, which are religion, government, business, education, family, media, and arts/entertainment (Sumaili 2018, slide 8). It also seeks to limit the influence of certain religious beliefs and practices from both within Christian denominations and other faith traditions that are perceived to be incompatible with Zambia's Christian national values. The national values and principles that MNGRA seeks to promote are categorised as morality and ethics; patriotism and national unity; democracy and constitutionalism; human dignity, equity, social justice, equality and non-discrimination; good governance and integrity and sustainable development (Sumaili 2018, slide 9). Yet, it is very difficult to understand the practical meaning of these specific Zambian national values. Whatever these national values might be, it is clear that there is considerable diversity in the way Zambian people view them and the role they have in individual and social life. For example, despite the affirmation of "equality and non-discrimination" as national values, sexual and gender minorities have no rights, and discrimination remains commonplace in the nation—discrimination which is reinforced by the MNGRA itself. Perhaps, this helps us to appreciate that interpretations of concepts such as human rights, justice and equality are not neutral but very much embedded in cultural and political contexts. The virtue of MNGRA's rejection of universalism of values is commendable and has an affinity with theology of decolonial reconstruction thinking, but to deny dialogue on multiple notions of national values is rejecting the fundamental moral foundation of decoloniality, which sees human dignity, equality and non-discrimination as critical for social reconstruction and transformation in a pluralistic society. Are there ways in which a theology of decolonial reconstruction could help MNGRA to construct the interpretation of national values in a manner that promotes pluri-local thinking (plural local thinking) through inter-cultural and religious dialogue? What is the role of the government in articulating national values as the nation searches for social reconstruction and transformation? Should the government impose moral values on the citizen or provide some guidelines through decolonial dialogue with various stakeholders, especially the people on the margins?

### 3.3. 'A Ministry from Heaven': The Custodianship of Pentecostalism

As already highlighted, the idea to create MNGRA is believed to have been engineered by some key Pentecostal leaders who surrounded President Lungu during the campaign in 2016. The Pentecostals have sought to transform Zambian political psychology by promoting Pentecostal moral sensibilities and political imaginations. Scholars believe that Zambian Pentecostals seek to orient and influence public discourses and define national identity (Van Klinken 2014). It has been argued that Pentecostals have taken on a form of militant theo-political activism underpinning the search to Pentecostalize the nation without regard for religious pluralism (Yong 2010, p. 10; Dowd 2015, p. 30). Most of these Pentecostals argue that it is not enough to engage politics through intercessory prayers and from the pulpits, and are seeking to influence politics through media, parliament, and security organs.<sup>4</sup> As already argued, this has resulted in more and more Pentecostals becoming uncritical partisans of ruling parties (Bompani 2016). In Zambia, most of these Pentecostal leaders try to be on good terms with every succeeding ruling party (Kaunda 2017b, p. 298). They see this as a strategy to

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<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere I have demonstrated how Zambian Pentecostal have articulated their theology of nationality in ways that seeks to transformation the nation into a spiritual institution which is easily manipulated by politicians for their benefits (see Kaunda 2018).

safeguard the Declaration, which they use as a tool to defend the nation from sexualising forces such as homosexuality and abortion, which remain high on the Pentecostal religio-political agenda. Thus, the introduction of MNGRA is described as “a ministry from Heaven.” They argue that President Lungu “heard God and announced the establishment of the ministry.” Therefore, MNGRA is believed to have been created by God in order to strengthen the nation (Mwenda and Goma 2017). Scholars have argued that African Pentecostals have been aspiring to create Pentecostal Nationalisms, which remain a priority of their political involvement (Maxwell 2006; Marshall 2009). In his study, Nimi Wariboko discovered that, while African Pentecostals utilise different theological paradigms in their political engagements, they all have one mandate: to transform national morality through the medium of politics (Wariboko 2012).<sup>5</sup> African Pentecostalism seeks to promote a form of nationalism entrenched with Pentecostal theo-political imaginations (Kalu 2008; Van Klinken 2014; Bompani 2016). Pentecostals have supported MNGRA, believing that because Zambia is a Christian nation, the ministry will help bring about moral transformation so that God can prosper the nation. As Rev. Mwanza (2016, p. 2), Executive Director of EFZ, writes, to justify the process, “if we prioritize God, the material needs of our country will be taken care of by God’s supernatural provision and blessings. First Things first.”

Beyond spiritualisation of politics, there are three basic threats that have forced Zambian Pentecostals to seek to institutionalise their political engagement in Zambia through MNGRA. The first is a moral threat to the sexual purity of the nation. Pentecostals perceive MNGRA as a critical space for protecting the Declaration from disintegrating into the abyss of secularisation. Homosexuality is often perceived as un-African and un-Christian because it is framed within the discourse of secularisation and human rights. The MNGRA has made it clear, according to Rev. Sumaili (2018), that “discussions on pervasive sexuality such as homosexuality, lesbianism, transgender are not welcome because such practices are illegal and an abomination in a Christian nation.” However, national sexual purity is not only about resisting homosexuality; it is defined based on the Christian traditional notion of family, which allows for expression of only heteronormative romantic love as God’s ideal and excludes all other sexual expressions as forms of rebellion against God. For instance, recently, MNGRA warned Zambians to stop using sex dolls: “It is totally unacceptable for anybody to start using the sex dolls because Zambia being a Christian nation does not embrace such” (Zambian Eye 2018). Based on the Christian injunction, a South African musician, who often dances without underwear, was deported from the country on the grounds that her performance was “contrary to public interest and [would] undermine our national values” (Entertainment Reporter 2018). The MNGRA “is informed by an ideology of Pentecostal nationalism with a millennialist undertone” (Van Klinken 2016). As Adriaan Van Klinken (2016, p. 493; 2014, p. 268) further argues, in Zambian Pentecostal thinking, “the sexual purity of the nation has eschatological significance and is believed to be under the threat of cosmic forces of evil” disguised as human rights. But there is more to this, as Pentecostals believe that material prosperity is the natural consequence of moral purity. In other words, material prosperity is understood as the token of divine approval and adversity as the sign of God’s displeasure with the nation. Hence, defence of national moral purity is believed to be both a litmus test for patriotism and a divine obligation. The Ministry is perceived as a religious instrument to promote national moral discourse in the public imagination so that the nation can experience blessings through material prosperity.

The second threat is religious: Islam. The Pentecostals have sought to fight Islam through MNGRA’s political power. Many Pentecostals are uncomfortable with the drastic growth of Islam in Zambia, especially in the east of the country. The Declaration itself was partly intended to offer some form of resistance to the proliferation of Islam (Cheyeka 1998, 2008b). On the one hand, some Pentecostals appear to tolerate and verbally affirm religious freedom, yet, on the other hand, they nevertheless nurse a deep islamophobic attitude (Marshall 1995). Bishop Bernard Nwaka (2007, p. 105)

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<sup>5</sup> Nimi Wariboko identifies about five basic theological paradigms that frame African Pentecostal engagement in politics, which are covenant, spiritualist, leadership, nationalist and developmental.

for instance, advises: “One thing you do not want to ever happen in your nation is that it becomes a nation bound by the religion of the bondwoman’s son—Islam and the sharia law.” Muslims, according to Nwaka (2007, p. 106), “desire to put in leadership people who will push their agenda in the continent but we have a decree to stand in prayer and declare that their plans shall not stand, nor shall they come to pass.” This is the main reason Nwaka (2007, p. 107) believes Zambia should have “a forum where [Christian lawyers] can use their professional skills to advise and guide the church leaders in making proper, well advised decisions, and also pray with understanding.” Bishop Joshua Banda (2016) agrees and cautions, “[w]hat is now deemed as freedom of religious worship in Zambia has become a matter of concern, given the rise of radical Islam in Africa.” Banda (2016, pp. ix–x) is alarmed that “The religion of Islam is strongly taking root in Zambia, with recent ‘road shows’ of Muslims celebrating the birth of Mohammed, in time for the season of Christmas.” The minister of MNGRA in a radio interview (ZambiaBlogTalkRadio 2017) was asked if there was room for other religions as well. She responded, “we intend to work very closely with these other religions [ . . . ] we need to know what they are doing in Zambia. We need to know their strategies.” This statement appears to suggest that MNGRA is a tool being used by Pentecostals to study other religions in order to come up with a strategy to limit their proselytization in the country.

The third threat Zambian Pentecostals seek to address is an image threat posed by neo-prophetic (new Pentecostal) movements. Zambian Pentecostals have been forced to seek institutionalisation of their political engagement in order to utilise political power to redeem their image in the context of numerous scandals emerging from neo-prophetic movements. Many mainstream Pentecostal clergy exhibit tendencies of hostility toward the approach that neo-prophetic movements have taken. The scandals and unorthodox approaches of these movements make them *ifyana fyabene* (children of unruly and untraceable lineage), as they are called by some mainstream Pentecostals. They are increasingly perceived as black sheep, nuisance members who have brought shame and disgrace to the Pentecostal family. In her “Ministerial Statement on the Mushrooming of False Churches and Prophets, and Measures Being Put in Place,” Rev. Sumaili outlines the grievances against neo-prophetic movements. She underlined the concern that these movements are abusing the favourable environment of a Christian nation and engaging in strange practices, which put some of the Zambian people at risk. These strange practices include the use of water, which has become a ritual, raping women and children, and using witchcraft. They are obsessed with material wealth, perform fake miracles, issue false and misleading prophecies, and endanger members by, for example, stopping HIV/AIDS patients from taking their medication (Sumaili 2017).<sup>6</sup> The proposed solution was to create the MNGRA to help “clean up” the churches through “registration” “and making sure that false prophets are flushed out,” as Rev Sumaili puts it (ZambiaBlogTalkRadio 2017). Already, the Ministry refused entry into the country to the Malawian, South-Africa-based prophet Shepherd Bushiri (known as Major 1), describing him as a “false prophet”. Rev Sumaili (ZambiaBlogTalkRadio 2017) underlined that she would not “allow false prophets, magicians” in ‘our’ nation, adding, “we are not going to accept confusion in our country. We want to preach the true gospel.” A Nigerian prophet, Andrew Ejimadu (known as Seer 1) was deported for putting expiry dates on holy water, and a Zimbabwean prophet, Uebert Angel, was refused entry into the country (Zambian Observer 2016).<sup>7</sup> Rev Sumaili (2017) seeks to promote accountability and integrity among pastors and their congregations, and require every church to affiliate with church mother bodies. Pentecostals see this as a viable approach with potential to

<sup>6</sup> Rev Sumaili’s analysis is affirmed by the findings of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities (CRC 2017) on the “commercialization of religion and abuse of people’s belief systems”. The 50-page report outlines 12 abuses see, “CRL Rights Commission’s Preliminary Report of the Hearings on Commercialisation of Religion and Abuse of People’s Belief Systems”.

<sup>7</sup> “Angel’s refusal of entry into Zambia is mainly due to Godfridah Sumaili’s active role as a pastor in Bread of Life Church.” “It is all about jealousy and corruption, as we suspect that she is being unduly influenced by her man of God to further their selfish church interests” (Zambian Observer 2016). This argument does not reflect the reality on the ground, which is based on general grievances against these movements.



redeem their image from neo-prophetic scandals. The question remains, how can MNGRA resist being a political tool at the service of Pentecostalism and politicians and make a constructive contribution to social transformation? In other words, how can the theology of decolonial reconstruction help MNGRA redefine social transformation from the perspective of cosmologies and epistemologies of pluri-religious-based knowledge situated on the margins?

#### 4. Theology of Decolonial Reconstruction—Toward a Framework for MNGRA

This section only begins a conversation on the theology of decolonial reconstruction as a possible framework that might help in reconceptualising MNGRA as a tool for social reconstruction and transformation. The effectiveness of the theology of decolonial reconstruction is its embeddedness in pluri-verse (multiple universals—knowledge making) and pluri-local (multiple local contexts) perspectives, which reflect pluralistic responses to human values and interpretations of reality. This approach emerges out of respect for communication and dialogue across multiple places, religions, ideas, cultures and cosmovisions (Dunford 2017). The early advocates for a theology of reconstruction<sup>8</sup> in Africa, such as Mugambi (2003, 1995) and Villa-Vicencio (1992), did not adequately position the paradigm within decolonial thinking.<sup>9</sup> They did not explicitly recognise the need for theology of reconstruction to engage invisible socio-political power structures that perpetuate colonial relations of exploitation and domination that continue to define African reality long after the end of colonialism (Maldonado-Torres 2006; Grosfoguel 2007; Mignolo 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013; Kaunda 2015). A theology of decolonial reconstruction affords more than a strategic response to material legacies of colonialism and its neo-colonial successor, and more than an ability to engage in interreligious dialogue: It seeks to reposition religions as national spiritual capital, as critical assets in reimaging social reconstruction and transformation. A theology of decolonial reconstruction perspective does not claim universality, neutrality, and singular religious knowledge as the only immutable truth (Grosfoguel 2009, 2015). Rather, it seeks to articulate an inclusive and shared knowledge that takes into account interreligious co-creation of diverse systems of meanings and interpretation of reality based on the experiences emerging from and in the margins of society. Applied to MNGRA, a theology of decolonial reconstruction would require radical rethinking of its political praxis in light of the divine mission to promote the fullness of life for all in the nation. This radical rethinking is imperative in the search to establish a new social order informed and shaped by God's intention for humanity. Theology of decolonial reconstruction understands God's mission as a form of knowledge that emerges within and is directed toward the marginalised communities who are the true victims of colonial and neo-colonial domination. It demands reconceptualising how MNGRA can work in productive ways in partnership with diverse religious and non-religious imaginations to decolonise socio-political, economic, and cultural practices at work in the nation for the sake of the common good. Theology of decolonial reconstruction seeks to engage the people from the margins in an attempt to build a relational society. It is a religious political praxis, which resists separating religiosity from political commitment to total liberation, social reconstruction and transformation (Sindima 2008, p. 47). It seeks to understand and discern where God's redemptive activities in the nation are taking place. This might not necessarily be in the church or other religious spaces, but could be anywhere within the context of the margins. This makes the theology of decolonial reconstruction critical of Western-centrism and local religious fundamentalisms (including religious hegemony), patriarchy (including sexism and heterosexism), colonialism, neo-colonialism and ethno-nationalisms (Grosfoguel 2006).

<sup>8</sup> This theology has been critiqued by various theologians for its narrow approach to reconstruction which sought to abandon liberation and inculturation; its inadequate engagement with gender, sexuality, ecology and so on (see for example, Farisani 2002; Gathogo 2007).

<sup>9</sup> In this article, we are not dealing with the conversional theology of reconstruction that was proposed by the Kenyan theologian, Jess Mugambi and South African White theologian Charles Villa-Vicencio.

It is an inclusive paradigm based on pluri-religio-relationality, which seeks the “fullness of life for all.” Significant to theology of decolonial reconstruction is its embeddedness in the “bottom up” knowing and acting. This is based on the understanding that all knowledge creation is geopolitically situated. This also means that the knowledge from the center cannot adequately bring transformation on the margins. This does not mean that all knowledge emerging from the margins is shaped by the thinking of the margins, for a thinker can be physically located on the margins whilst their thinking is shaped and located at the center, and vice versa. This is why the theology of decolonial reconstruction seeks to do critical reflection with the people on the margins and reinstate their questions to help them re-describe their realities (Kaunda 2017a). It also gives epistemological privilege to diverse rhythms of their knowledge constructions based on their struggles and hopes. In other words, it promotes subversive knowing, being, and acting as radical ways to realize divinely redeemed and sanctified sociopolitical and economic structures in the nation. It perceives religion as not just a force for good but also a force for destruction, which should be directed toward dynamic social transformation through engaging religious institutions to position themselves as national loci for evolving plural-relationality.

The theology of decolonial reconstruction seeks to reconstruct religious imaginations to allow for openness, hospital thinking and transformations within religious institutions themselves. Religious ideological transformation can be seen as imperative for any religious institution to become a safe space for radical inclusion and promotion of unconditional citizenship in which all individuals and groups have a sense of belonging, full participation, and know they are recognized and legitimated as full human beings with dignity and value for social transformation. It is through engagement with the knowledge emerging from the margins that this transformational process arrives at privileged knowledge for engaging socio-political, cultural, economic, and indeed all human institutions.

This paradigm sees the entire reality of human existence as a stage where divine redemptive activities take place, which become the impetus for human proactive engagement in the process of transforming sinful structures that perpetuate poverty, gender inequality, social injustice, oppression, authoritarianism, religious hegemony, tribalism and colonial mentalities. The theology of decolonial reconstruction therefore requires a paradigm shift so as to recognize the dignity, value and importance of each person, not only as an ethical norm and moral imperative, but also as a legal principle, a societal goal, and ultimately, as internalized practice. In other words, the paradigm affirms that no human being should be discriminated against as a result of class, race, religion (or lack thereof), ethnicity, sexuality or gender. This is an affirmation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals’ (UN 2015) ethical imperative: “No one must be left behind, and no human right ignored.” To this end, framing MNGRA with the theology of decolonial reconstruction as its orientation can play a critical role in promoting religious political engagement that has potential for sustainable social transformation.

## 5. Conclusions

The article argues for a theology of decolonial reconstruction as imperative to help the MNGRA in the search for an alternative political narrative for Zambian society. It critiques the “top-bottom” approach utilising a theology of decolonial reconstruction and calling the MNGRA to embrace a pluralistic model of integral religious praxis at all levels of life. The guiding questions could be restated here: Are there ways in which the theology of decolonial reconstruction could help the MNGRA in redefining social reconstruction and transformation from the cosmologies and epistemologies of pluri-religious-based knowledge situated on the margins? How can MNGRA leverage religious-based assets to foster social reconstruction and political transformation? Based on this question, the article demonstrates that the theology of decolonial reconstruction has potential to make a distinctive and valuable contribution to assist MNGRA in reconceptualising its ministerial approach. This framework rejects a narrow understanding of national values as having potential to legitimize the colonial matrix of power, and proposes interreligious and intercultural dialogue across diverse worldviews in the process of creating knowledge for social reconstruction and transformation. In so doing, it refuses to specify, in advance, how national values are to be defined and lived. In other words, it embraces an

inclusive approach to constructing values based on their contribution to social reconstruction and the transformation of the nation.

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