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Introduction

PENTECOSTAL POLITICS has historically been a politics from below. Theologically speaking, it is difficult to find a more egalitarian version of Christianity than Pentecostalism. The central promise that the Holy Spirit will be poured out on “all flesh” regardless of social position¹ gives this religion the potential to undercut established hierarchies. If the Spirit can fall on anyone at any time, then leadership in Pentecostal communities is equally accessible to women, youth, and the poor. This makes Pentecostal churches places where marginalized people lay claim to positions and resources that they are denied elsewhere (e.g., Parsitau 2011; Roberts 2016; Thornton 2020). Pentecostal politics is therefore a politics of recognition in a Christian religious key, a strategic engagement with power through the idioms of divine blessing and deliverance from evil. When these individual claims are added together, they constitute a program for social transformation, a kind of “Christian citizenship” (O’Neill 2010) aimed at the salvation of communities and nations (e.g., Marshall 2009; Wariboko 2014). But even these more programmatic efforts are grounded less in engagement with the state than in religious practices like in evangelism, prayer, and fasting.

Pentecostal politics in Zambia, however, is a different story. As the only African country to make a state-sponsored declaration that it is a “Christian nation,” Zambia has long served as a kind of “laboratory” for scholars interested in its particular brand of “Pentecostal nationalism” (Freston 2004, 154; Yong 2010, 10). Zambia was first declared a Christian nation by Pentecostal president Frederick Chiluba in 1991. Since then, “the declaration,” as it is often known, has structured the way Zambian Pentecostals understand their country’s divine vocation (Haynes 2015b; Kaunda 2018a). While a general sense that the declaration is key to God’s plan for Zambia is not new, during the presidency of Edgar Chagwa Lungu (2015–2021), a group of Lusaka

Pentecostals were given a unique opportunity to “actualize” the declaration, as they put it. For these Christian nationalist activists, the Lungu government represented, in the words of one bishop, a “divine season,” a God-ordained moment for them to promote their vision for Zambia.

As we will see in the pages that follow, “actualizing” the declaration meant building on its stated purpose to “submit the Government and the entire nation of Zambia to the Lordship of Jesus Christ” (see Cheyeka 2022, 24). Christian nationalist activists do not think that everyone in Zambia is a Christian by virtue of the declaration—this is no more possible, they would insist, than a person being a Christian simply because she had Christian parents. But they do believe that an entity called “Zambia,” identified with but not reducible to the postindependence nation-state, has been brought into a covenant with God. While this covenant is articulated most explicitly in the declaration, it is much older than its inclusion in the constitution, or even the constitution itself. Indeed, the covenant with God both predates and *constitutes* the nation; Zambia is Zambia only and always in relationship to Jesus. Zambian Christian nationalism therefore laminates national identity onto religious identity in a process that is at once remarkably expansive in its totalizing thrust and relentlessly exclusive in its boundary-making practices.

This book is an ethnographic exploration of Zambian Pentecostal efforts to realize this encompassing Christian nationalist vision. It is also a study in that vision’s ultimate failure. In part, this failure is down to opposition on the ground. Some of Zambia’s strongest institutions have stood in the way of the Christian nationalist agenda. These include the civil service, which acts as a bureaucratic wet blanket to the charismatic fire of Christian nationalism, as well as Catholic and mainline Protestant denominations, which have long opposed the declaration (Hinfelaar 2011). But the Christian nationalist project is also undermined by the fact that the religious regulatory mechanisms championed by the Zambian government under its aegis have disproportionately targeted Pentecostals—historically Christian nationalism’s biggest supporters. This “autoimmune” response, as I call it, indexes the movement’s fatal theological flaw. Simply put, efforts to define the nation in terms of Christianity, the boundaries of which are only known to God, collapses the distinction between God and people, effectively inviting certain people to stand in God’s place. It is now humans, rather than God, who decide who is in and who is out of the Christian nation—and by extension who is in and who is out of the Christian fold more generally. Hubris of this sort has a very specific name in Christian circles: heresy.

Heresy is a strange term for an anthropologist to use. An accusation of heresy presupposes an idea of orthodoxy and by extension an idea of God. There are some for whom heresy as a critical device will therefore be impossible to square with anthropology's traditional secularist assumptions, though there is an increasing sense that these assumptions are not as strong as they once were. The last twenty years have witnessed a growing number of invitations to a post- or nonsecular anthropology informed by theoretical traditions as diverse as posthumanism, phenomenology, the so-called "ontological turn," and Islamic "Godly ethnography" (e.g., Fountain 2013; Furani and Robbins 2021; Merz and Merz 2017; Moll 2023; Scott 2013; Willerslev and Suhr 2018). Also important to anthropological attempts to move beyond the secular have been interdisciplinary dialogues between anthropology and theology (e.g., Lemons 2018; Robbins 2020), though these have historically shied away from the kind of critical engagement that an appeal to heresy requires. "Broadly speaking," Elayne Oliphant writes, "when anthropologists of Christianity turn to various Christian theological terms and concepts, they do so in order to explore practices that merit empathy and understanding" (2021, 582). Against this trend, Oliphant suggests that theological tools should also be used to "buttress ethical critiques of Christian practices," a point she makes with an anecdotal appeal to the notion of heresy (582).

I return to a specific theological critique of Zambian Christian nationalism in the final pages of this book. I save the critique for the end to ensure that I've done my best to ground it ethnographically. Before getting into the ethnographic material, though, there's some conceptual groundwork that needs to be laid. I use the remainder of this introduction first to provide a framework for understanding African Christian nationalism. Next, I describe the history of Zambia's Christian nationalist project in detail. I then go on to discuss the fieldwork that informs my analysis, paying particular attention to the challenges of studying a movement that most anthropologists find "repugnant" (Harding 1991). I conclude by providing a brief outline of the book.

(African) Christian Nationalism

To understand contemporary Christian nationalist movements like Zambia's, we need to start with what might seem like an obvious point: Christian nationalism is a form of *nationalism*. Christian nationalism is not just Christian politics scaled up—not just a more comprehensive expression of the Religious Right, for example. Rather, Christian nationalism is nationalism in that its

defining characteristic is a specific way of imagining the nation. But Christian nationalism is also *Christian*. This means that its ways of imagining the nation are distinct from those found in secular nationalism or nationalism informed by non-Christian religious traditions, though similarities will exist in both cases. For Christian nationalists the nation is primarily a religious rather than a political category, and the nation therefore does religious and not just political work.

A key text through which Christian nationalists in Zambia understand the nation is Acts 17:26, part of a sermon given by Saint Paul, which reads: “From one man [God] made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.” Expounding on this Bible verse, the Zambian activist Emmanuel Katyoka explains that God’s establishment of the nations is proof that they serve a divine purpose; if God made the nations, he must have made them for a reason (see Msiska 2020, 17). This view is further supported by a Christian nationalist reading of the Abrahamic covenant recorded in Genesis 12. This text outlines Israel’s role in God’s plan for salvation as the nation that will bring the Messiah to the world. As we will see throughout this book, biblical Israel is for Christian nationalist activists “the true proto-nation” (Hastings 1997, 186), the model that they seek to follow. Since the purpose for which God made Israel was the salvation of the world, all nations are by extension also part of God’s saving mission. The task of Christian nationalist activists is therefore to determine the role their nation is to play in extending divine salvation to other nations.

Given this background, it should come as no surprise that I use the word “nation” extensively in this book. My usage generally follows that of my informants, for whom the term refers to a divinely established entity, the boundaries of which are fixed, having always existed in the eternal mind of God. Activists make a distinction between the nation and the “government,” a word they also used frequently. By “government” (*ubuteko* in Bemba, *boma* in common regional usage), activists are referring to an “apparatus of administration” (Hansen 2019, 1) that is a familiar part of Zambian life, especially in the capital city of Lusaka. While my informants spoke often of government, they rarely mentioned the “state,” a term that had almost no relevance for them. This way of speaking had the (likely unintentional) effect of obscuring the state behind the nation, allowing it to operate more or less without the threat of criticism from activists, who were focused instead on fulfilling Zambia’s divine vocation (Haynes 2023). While I do my best to follow my

informants' language in the pages that follow, I break with them from time to time when it comes to the state and employ this term to emphasize its distinct power and interests.

Having laid down the terms in which activists understand the nation, we can move on to delineating what I mean by "Christian nationalism." I should be clear here that, despite their regular appeals to the nation, this is not a term that Zambian activists use. Neither, though, is it a term to which they objected. When I suggested to some informants that I might call them "Christian nationalists" or "Christian nationalist activists," this was always greeted as a positive label. This makes sense in Zambia, where nationalists are heroes, the leaders of the independence struggle and founders of the country. While their counterparts in parts of the world where nationalism has different political connotations might balk at the Christian nationalist label, in Zambia and I suspect other parts of Africa this term was not considered offensive or inaccurate.

So, what is Christian nationalism? One of the most widely cited sociological studies of Christian nationalism in the United States defines it as "a cultural framework—a collection of myths, traditions, symbols, narratives, and value systems—that idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civic life" (Whitehead and Perry 2020, 10). Christianity here "supplies the myths, metaphors and symbols that are central to the discursive or iconic representation of the nation" (Brubaker 2011, 9). In these framings, Christian nationalism emerges as a political-religious assemblage that incorporates Christian texts, practices, and ideas, but also cultural frameworks, bureaucratic structures, and partisan ideologies that are not explicitly Christian. As such, Christian nationalism is, as Jon Bialecki writes, "not a pre-given structure but rather a *problem* that people find themselves inhabiting" (2017b, 44, emphasis mine). Ethnographically, it therefore makes sense to approach "Christian nationalism" the way that anthropologists have approached terms for other populist movements—that is, as a "*heuristic* device—rather than an all-encompassing definition" that allows for the capture of Christian nationalism as it exists on the ground, "with all its fugitive features and contradictory elements intact" (Holmes 2019, 66, emphasis in the original).

Douglas R. Holmes's treatment of what he calls "fascism at eye level" shows how contemporary far-right movements across Europe "colonize just about every expression of identity and attachment, every aspect of truth, beauty, virtue, and depravity" (2019, 83). In this way, he goes on, fascism demonstrates its capacity to "merge, fuse, and synthesize what would otherwise be considered incompatible elements" (83). Christian nationalism demonstrates a

similar ability to “colonize” and “synthesize” disparate cultural and theological elements. Key here, as we will see, is the biblical text, particularly the Old Testament, which for Christian nationalists presents the Israelites as the prototype of the nation. But Christian nationalists also make use of Christian religious practices like prayer, preaching, and singing, along with idealized images of African social life.

Insofar as Christian nationalism draws on elements of religious life to which all Christians have access, it represents “an underdetermined possibility” for Christians of all stripes (Bialecki 2017b, 45). This raises the question of what causes Christian nationalism to emerge in some communities rather than others. Drawing primarily on examples from the United States, Jon Bialecki has argued that Christian nationalism is catalyzed in part by a Nietzschean *ressentiment* that emerges as American evangelicals “imagine themselves at one and the same time as an entitled majority and a threatened minority” (2017b, 50). Bialecki describes this “double voicing” as a product of an America that, in the eyes of evangelicals, “is at once too Christian and not Christian enough” (50). While, on the one hand, the United States is understood to have been founded on Christian principles, and to have a population that has historically identified as Christian, since the mid-twentieth century, social and demographic changes have threatened to undermine this perceived historic and numerical influence. The resulting “nostalgic apocalypticism” responds to fears of a secular-liberal future with the hope of returning to an imagined, “largely fictive” Christian past (Riccardi-Swartz 2022, 14).

While such descriptions of American Christian nationalism have done a great deal to ground our understanding of this movement ethnographically, we should obviously expect that the Christian nationalist assemblage looks different outside the United States. One difference is in temporal orientation. Among Ghanaian Pentecostals, for instance, the notion that their nation belongs to the Christian God has prompted expectations that “a return to Jesus and vigilant prayer” would take their country “out of a backward state of traditional religion, poverty, and national insecurity, and towards a widespread adherence to Christianity and equal opportunities” (Daswani 2019, 328). The movement toward a promised Christian future, in other words, requires not a return to the past but rather a “complete break” from it (Meyer 1998). To give another brief example, while both American and African Christian nationalists are often also Christian Zionists, the theological reasons behind their support for Israel are very different. The current nation-state of Israel is a key element of evangelical eschatology, and for many American Christian Zionists supporting Israel is a means of ushering in and preparing for the end of the

world. In contrast, examples from Uganda and elsewhere on the continent demonstrate that for African Christians Zionism is focused less on the apocalypse and more on realizing the blessings of the prosperity gospel through the biblical promise that God will bless those who bless Israel (Gidron 2022).²

In pointing out these differences in temporal or theological framing, I do not mean to suggest that African Christian nationalism has not been shaped by American ideas or institutions. Many Zambian Christian nationalist activists have been influenced by North American pastors and theologians. Dr. Roland Msiska, who served as Secretary to the Cabinet under President Lungu until 2019, and who was easily the single most important player in Zambia's Christian nationalist project during my fieldwork, told me that his thought had been shaped by the work of the American evangelical theologian Francis Schaeffer. Dr. Catherine Mukuka, whose book on the declaration I discuss in chapter 2, takes many of her ideas from Rousas J. Rushdoony, the American founder of a movement called "Christian Reconstruction." Some activists, including Dr. Msiska, also had ties to prominent American charismatic Christians like Chuck Pierce and the late C. Peter Wagner, both of whom are linked to the New Apostolic Reformation, a movement linked to Christian nationalism in the United States (see Taylor 2024). However, in both these cases the American connections had been mediated by Bishop Emmanuel Kure of Nigeria. While it would be inaccurate to suggest that Zambia's Christian nationalist activists were operating outside of an international network of church leaders, then, it would also be wrong to overstate the extent of American influence on the movement. Just as the link between American and Zambian leaders was not direct but involved an additional connection in Africa, so the theological ideas that shaped the thinking of people like Dr. Msiska and Dr. Mukuka had been reworked in the light of African Pentecostal theology (Haynes 2021b).

The differences I have highlighted here are subtle and easily missed, particularly when globalized Christian media has given activists a common language with which to describe their cause. But they are crucial to helping us develop a more robust picture of "the Christian nationalist problem" (Bialecki 2017b, 46) as it is operationalized outside the United States. While a recent flood of academic and journalistic analyses has emphasized the growing influence of Christian nationalism, these discussions have overwhelmingly focused on the American case (e.g., Berry 2023; Goldberg 2007; Gorski and Perry 2022; Stewart 2020; Taylor 2024; Whitehead and Perry 2020). But as the Zambian, Ghanaian, and Ugandan examples make clear, Christian nationalism is not a uniquely American phenomenon;³ it is a way of mobilizing traditions and

texts that is available to all Christians but only taken up by some. Moving away from the US context allows us to ask what inspires people to turn to Christian nationalism in the first place. What theological, political, and cultural forces prompt Christians to emphasize the nationalist elements of scripture rather than, for example, those portions that describe a universal Kingdom of God? Responding to this question requires that we decenter the American case and instead focus on different expressions of Christian nationalism. There is no better place to carry out this work than Zambia, perhaps the most fully realized example of Christian nationalism outside of the West.

Africa's Only Self-Proclaimed Christian Nation

Zambia's declaration as a Christian nation followed on the heels of the country's transition from a one-party state to multiparty democracy in 1991. The peaceful transfer of power from Kenneth Kaunda's United National Independence Party (UNIP) to Frederick Chiluba's Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) made Zambia a model of democratic expansion on the continent. Chiluba was widely known as a Pentecostal, a "true spirit-filled believer" (Gifford 1998b, 365) who was "born again" while serving a brief jail sentence for trade union activities under UNIP. Less than two months after his election, Chiluba gave a surprise press conference—at least, it was a surprise to all but the select group of Pentecostal pastors who were present for the event. Standing between the pillars of the Zambian state house, Chiluba proclaimed:

Dear God, as a nation, we now come to your throne of Grace and we humble ourselves and admit our guilt. We repent from all our wicked ways of idolatry, witchcraft, the occult, immorality, injustice and corruption, and all other sins that have violated your righteous laws. We turn away from all this and renounce it all in Jesus' name. We ask for your forgiveness dear Father and cleansing through the blood of Jesus. Therefore, we thank you that you will heal our land. We pray that you will send healing, restoration, revival, blessings, and prosperity to Zambia, in the name of Jesus, Amen.

On behalf of the nation, [I] have now entered into a covenant with the living God, and, therefore, I want to make the following declaration. I declare today that I submit myself as President to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

I, likewise, submit the government and the entire nation of Zambia to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. I further declare that Zambia is a Christian Nation to be governed by the righteous principles of the Word of God. Righteousness and justice must prevail in all levels of authority, and then we shall see the righteousness of God exalting Zambia. (Quoted in Cheyeka 2022, 24)

Five years after Chiluba's press conference, the declaration was enshrined in the opening lines of the Zambian constitution:

WE, THE PEOPLE OF ZAMBIA:

ACKNOWLEDGE the supremacy of God Almighty;

DECLARE the Republic a Christian Nation while upholding a person's right to freedom of conscience, belief or religion.

From the beginning, Pentecostals have been the declaration's primary advocates.⁴ In part this was because supporting the declaration was a way of supporting Chiluba, a fellow believer whose government actively promoted Pentecostal expansion in Zambia. For example, the MMD government funneled resources directly into Pentecostal organizations. This was true both during Chiluba's time in office, when government moneys allocated to support "Christian affairs" essentially became a "slush fund" for Pentecostals (Gifford 1998a, 201), as well as under his hand-picked successor Levy Mwanawasa, who came to power in 2001. Under Mwanawasa, "Pentecostals were significantly more likely to obtain tax-free business licenses, local political appointments, public media access, and in some areas, urban land plots than their non-Pentecostal counterparts" (Sperber and Hern 2018, 843).

These factors all contributed to the explosive growth of Pentecostalism across Zambia in the wake of the declaration. Pentecostalism first arrived in Zambia via missionaries from the Apostolic Church of Pentecost of Canada and the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, who came in 1954 and 1955, respectively (Burgess and van der Maas 2010). For decades, Pentecostals represented a tiny percentage of Zambia's Christian population. As recently as 2008, Austin Cheyeka wrote that the country's Pentecostals were "still relatively few" (147), though specific numbers were hard to find. It is still the case that the size of the Pentecostal population is difficult to gauge, but even rough estimates show significant growth. Data indicate that in 2020 just over 21 percent of Zambian Christians were Pentecostals (Zurlo 2025), and my own observations suggest

that represents a somewhat conservative estimate in urban areas, where many Zambians engage Pentecostal practices and events alongside ongoing membership in a non-Pentecostal congregation. If we include these sometime-Pentecostals in our estimates, then it is not an exaggeration to suggest that today, less than a century after the arrival of the first Pentecostal missionaries in the country, one-third of Zambia's population is Pentecostal.

While the declaration surely contributed to the growth of Pentecostalism, this is not the primary benefit that most Pentecostals believe they have derived from their country's status as a Christian nation. Zambian Pentecostals treat the declaration as a sort of "magic charm" that provides protection for the country (M'fundisi-Holloway 2018, 133). As far as they are concerned, the charm has been working. Conflicts in neighboring countries, which have brought thousands of refugees to Zambia's doorstep, have made Pentecostals acutely aware of their country's history of peace, which they attribute to the declaration (Haynes 2015b). Alongside what they see as divine protection from violence, Pentecostals also believe that the declaration serves as a guarantor of Zambia's future prosperity (Haynes 2012, 129–31). Zambian Pentecostalism has been heavily influenced by the prosperity gospel, a Christian movement that turns on the notion that it is God's will for all believers to be rich, healthy, and successful. In the context of the declaration, the nation is included in these expectations of divine prosperity, and the promise that one day "Zambia shall be saved!," as an early Pentecostal television program had it, means in part that one day Zambia shall no longer be poor. Because so many Zambians believe that the declaration keeps them safe and will one day bring prosperity, the idea of removing the declaration from the constitution is for them unthinkable. Take away the declaration, I was told by Pentecostals during my previous fieldwork in the Copperbelt province, and the result will be fighting or even "war" (*nkondo*). Chiluba actively promoted this view of the declaration, warning Zambians at one point that if they "[abandoned] the covenant" the nation would be "under a curse" (quoted in Cheyeka 2002, 179).

Seen from this angle, the political advantages created by the declaration are obvious. As the one who established the declaration, Chiluba positioned himself as the country's spiritual leader and religious intermediary (Haynes 2015b). By occupying what was effectively a priestly role, Chiluba created a situation in which God was seen to be on the side of the ruling party, which meant that opposition to the party amounted to opposition to God (Phiri 2003, 410). Academic analyses have made much of this observation, often interpreting the declaration as little more than a political strategy, a way of sidestepping and

silencing critique through appeals to God's plan (e.g., Cheyeka 2002; Gifford 1998b). Whether or not the declaration was intended as a political smoke-screen, it certainly served that function. After securing reelection in 1996, Chiluba attempted to change the Zambian constitution to allow him to run for an illegal third term in office. About this time, he also divorced his wife of thirty-three years. Both actions opened him to censure from his Pentecostal supporters. In a particularly prominent example, Zambia's first televangelist, Nevers Mumba, the host of *Zambia Shall Be Saved!*, broke ranks with Chiluba and formed his own political party (Haynes 2018b). But many Pentecostals stood by Chiluba, joining the campaign for a third term in hopes of keeping one of their own in office. This campaign was ultimately unsuccessful, and in the short term, at least, Chiluba's actions had destroyed his reputation, "both as a Christian and as a democrat" (Phiri 2003, 423). Six years after he left office, a civil court in the UK found Chiluba guilty of embezzling some \$50 million during his time in office, though a similar case tried in Zambia's criminal court system resulted in an acquittal.

Today, Pentecostals are mindful of Chiluba's shortcomings, though most would not go so far as to accuse Chiluba of "coopting Christianity" (Gifford 1998b, 370) for his own political ends. Christian nationalist activists do not doubt Chiluba's earnestness in issuing the declaration, and they regard him as instrumental—though not irreplicable—in God's plan for Zambia. This is clear in the way that the 1991 press conference, rather than the declaration's later inclusion in the constitution, has become a charter for activists. It is this earlier date that they cite as the point at which Zambia officially became a Christian nation. Segments of Chiluba's speech have been sampled into a pop song extolling Zambia's unique Christian status. A YouTube video of Chiluba's press conference has been viewed more than seventy-seven thousand times.⁵ That video was uploaded the day before President Lungu's election in January 2015, indexing the renewed importance the declaration would take on during the Lungu government.

After Chiluba left office, the declaration largely remained in the background in Zambian politics. It popped up from time to time, especially during periods of constitutional review, which carried the possibility that the declaration would be removed from the document (see Green 2013, 422–32). Activists reported having been especially concerned with the 2005 Mung'omba Constitutional Review Commission, which initially recommended the declaration's removal, though this recommendation was not followed through.⁶ But despite activists' ongoing engagement with the declaration, in the years after Chiluba left office, politicians did not pay it much attention (Sakupapa 2019).

The influential Zambian Pentecostal blogger known as Munshya wa Munshya has argued that during this same period public officials also ignored Pentecostals, whose image had been tarnished by the latter years of Chiluba's presidency (Munshya 2015).

This time of relative silence regarding the declaration ended abruptly with the emergency presidential by-elections that followed the death of President Michael Sata in October 2014. Under Zambian law, the death of a sitting president requires new presidential elections to be held within ninety days, and Sata's death triggered a power struggle within his party, the Patriotic Front (PF). The eventual party candidate, Edgar Chagwa Lungu, was by all accounts an unlikely choice for the PF ticket. Opponents concentrated their attacks on his character, focusing on accusations of drunkenness and the circumstances surrounding the suspension of his law license (Cheyeka et al. 2022). In response, the PF launched a campaign "branded in Christian rhetoric . . . , depicting [Lungu] as a humble man of faith" (Sakupapa 2019, 114).

Lungu won the 2015 emergency election by a razor-thin margin. Once in office, he continued to foreground Christian concerns, breaking ground on a new National House of Prayer in Lusaka and establishing the National Day of Prayer as a public holiday. These moves helped secure the support of Pentecostals ahead of a second presidential election, held just nineteen months after Lungu first came to power, as he had initially been elected only to finish out the remainder of Sata's term. During the 2016 campaign, Lungu became the first Zambian politician in the multiparty era to be endorsed by "an explicitly partisan religious group" dubbed "Christians for Lungu" (Sperber and Hern 2018, 844). In the leadup to the 2016 election, Lungu also introduced what would become the third of his central Christian initiatives, a new government Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs. After his victory in another close election, Lungu kept his campaign promise to establish this ministry. His government continued to lean heavily on the declaration, promising in the 2017 National Development Plan, for instance, to draw on "Zambia's Christian heritage as a standard of governance" (quoted in Sakupapa 2019, 106). Government and church leaders alike also began to speak of "actualizing" the declaration (see Cheyeka 2022), translating Chiluba's commitment into "practical workable realistic interventions."⁷ It is in view of these initiatives that Christian nationalist activists considered the Lungu government to be a divine season. While, as we will see, opposition to the Christian nationalist agenda remained visible during this period, for the first time in years Pentecostal activists felt they had the wind at their backs as the government openly promoted

their programs. This book is a record of this heady period of Zambian political and religious history, an account of the divine season as it unfolded in policy, practice, and prayer.

The Fieldwork

The analysis that follows draws on nine months of fieldwork in the Zambian capital of Lusaka between 2017 and 2019, with brief periods of additional follow-up fieldwork in 2022 and 2023. I also draw on traditional and social media sources, archives, and the writings of Zambia's Christian nationalist activists. My initial plan to study Christian nationalism in Lusaka involved spending a lot of time in church. I cut my teeth as an ethnographer in congregations, and my intention in moving to Lusaka from Zambia's Copperbelt province was to follow the same program, focusing on churches where pastors or priests were especially politically active. I made regular visits to several such congregations, interviewed church leaders, and attended prayer meetings and occasional seminars. I also got to know some laypeople at one church through a friend from the Copperbelt who was an active member. Through these encounters I quickly realized that even though the leaders of these congregations were visibly engaged in politics—the Zambian press frequently featured pictures of them meeting with the president or members of cabinet, for instance—these activities did not impact significantly on the daily practice of their congregations. As far as I was able to tell, this was by design; while everyone in my friend's church knew of their leader's relationship with the president (and a few conversations suggested that not everyone was happy about it), social and ritual life went on week by week in much the manner it does in any Pentecostal church. The choir practiced, the youth group went on retreats, ushers showed people to their seats each Sunday, and sermons focused on topics ranging from parenting and the power of the Holy Spirit.

If on an institutional level the congregations headed by politically active pastors were not especially politically engaged, this does not mean that the individuals who attended these churches had no opinion about the Christian nationalist agenda. As I had found on the Copperbelt, most of the Lusaka Pentecostals I spoke to about the declaration had opinions on the subject, and most but not all of these were positive. But even those who were strong supporters of the declaration were not doing much to "actualize" it. This latter task was the province of those I call Christian nationalist "activists," many of whom were leaders of churches or of parachurch organizations. Others, including

several of the authors of key texts in Zambia's Christian nationalist movement, were lay professionals: doctors, high-ranking civil servants like Dr. Msiska, or consultants for multinational development organizations. Activists were well connected both in Zambia and abroad; they were highly educated, with many holding advanced degrees. Broadly speaking, then, while in my observation most of Zambia's Pentecostal laypeople subscribe to at least some Christian nationalist tenets, the work of Christian nationalist *activism* is largely undertaken by Pentecostal elites—or, better put, elite Pentecostals.

Once I had established that congregational fieldwork was not going to be central to this project, I focused on finding another field site. Initially, the National House of Prayer, with its various committees and evolving construction project, seemed a good place to start. I spent a great deal of time during my fieldwork in 2017 meeting with as many board members as possible, as well as the architect who had created the initial design. This focus meant a new way of working for me as an ethnographer, one that I had not anticipated. I had always considered myself an urban anthropologist, but fieldwork in Lusaka made me realize that this had only been true to a certain extent. While I had certainly been based in a city during my Copperbelt fieldwork, that project was very geographically circumscribed, largely focused on one neighborhood on the outskirts of Kitwe. During that fieldwork I had walked most places, occasionally taking a local bus, which was inevitably filled with familiar faces. In contrast, the sprawling reaches of Lusaka made driving a necessity. Alone in the car, often stuck in traffic, I pined for the long conversations I had walking to Pentecostal meetings in Kitwe. Now, everything seemed worked out over great distances and too often in hurried appointments arranged over WhatsApp. It took me a while to realize that the world I was inhabiting—long commutes, congested roads, rushed meetings, endless text messages—was the world my new informants inhabited as well.

While there was some comfort in the revelation that this new way of being and working in Zambia resonated with the experiences of those I studied, I knew that the emerging network of connections I was building across the city would not be enough. I needed a place where I could hang out, where there might be a serendipitous encounter. I left the field for maternity leave in September 2017 without finding an appropriate site. I returned the following year to find that the control of the National House of Prayer had been shifted from the advisory board to the Zambian government under the auspices of the Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs (MNGRA). As one of the Lungu government's flagship Christian initiatives, the ministry was in

some ways an obvious choice as a field site, but I nevertheless hesitated to pursue this option. In part, I was worried about getting caught in an endless bureaucratic maze. I also feared the risks of getting too close to the center of state power. My eventual fieldwork in MNGRA revealed that neither of these fears was unfounded. It did take a long time and a lot of paperwork to get access to the ministry. Throughout my time there I routinely bumped up against topics or events that my informants deemed “sensitive,” and that they themselves approached with great caution. Despite these hurdles, MNGRA proved to be the right place for daily participant-observation, and much of this book builds on insights developed either directly or indirectly through the four months I spent at the ministry in 2018 and 2019.

Beyond the logistic challenges of work in a large and sprawling city and the bureaucratic hurdles of studying in a government office, I also had to contend with the fact that Christian nationalism was an unpleasant thing to study. In this respect, I was not alone. While engagement with groups that anthropologists find “uncomfortable” if not “repugnant” is not new in anthropology (Faust and Pfeifer 2021; Harding 1991), the last decade has seen a renewed interest in people “whose politics confound us” (Lennon 2018, 440). There are several reasons why this is true of anthropology, in particular. In part, it reflects the expanding influence of authoritarian, illiberal, or far-right politics in Europe and North America. The election and reelection of Donald Trump in the United States, the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, and the increasing influence of far-right politicians across the rest of Europe has forced Euro-American anthropologists to reckon with ideologies that they might have historically only expected to encounter “out in the field.” The rise of these popular political movements has challenged anthropology’s own brand of populism, its “habitually aligning with the common sense of the common people,” as that common sense became “increasingly hard to swallow” (Mazzarella 2019, 46).

Such movements have also been difficult to square with a twenty-first-century emphasis on a “dark anthropology” focused on “suffering [subjects]” (Ortner 2016; Robbins 2013). As anthropologists have increasingly concerned themselves with documenting the injustices wrought by systems of inequality, giving voice to marginalized communities has become key to the discipline’s liberationist political agenda. Broadly speaking, this has meant that those whose positions could be presented as supporting this political project—either because they clarified the nature of oppression or because they were working against it—were more likely to take center stage in ethnographic

analysis. Those who could not be treated so sympathetically were, at least by some accounts, either denounced or dismissed (Dullo 2016). While attention to these disciplinary blind spots has been productive, it is important to add that there have been good reasons for anthropologists to avoid engagement with uncomfortable others. For one thing, there is an understandable concern that thorough exploration of morally or politically spurious views could be tantamount to an endorsement of them. Also at play here is a perceived reputational risk. Anthropologists studying uncomfortable others may fear accusations of “misplaced sympathies” (Barrett-Fox 2010, 16), epitomized in the question posed to Susan Harding during her research with American Protestant Fundamentalists: “Are you now or have you ever been a born-again Christian?” (1991, 375).

There is much about this brief survey that resonates with my experience as a scholar. My first major ethnographic project explored Pentecostals who had been strongly influenced by the prosperity gospel. In researching the impact of this religious movement, one that most people would view with suspicion, my priority was to emphasize its “situated integrity” (Mazzarella 2019, 49) in the form of its social productivity. For members of small independent Pentecostal churches, many of whom were women with few educational and economic opportunities, prosperity gospel practice provided access to spiritual patronage networks and a framework for realizing cultural values that had become increasingly inaccessible due to economic insecurity (Haynes 2017a). By approaching the prosperity gospel in these terms, my aim was to present it as my informants saw it—as something that compelled them, provided them with social connections, and at least in some cases improved their lives. Understood in these terms, I was able to argue, again in the vein of much scholarship on Pentecostalism, that this form of Christianity created a space within which poor and marginalized people could make political claims that they often could not make anywhere else. The prosperity gospel, with its core belief that God wanted people to “stay well at home,” as one Zimbabwean Pentecostal put it (see Maxwell 1998, 366), allowed my informants to demand proper housing and education for their children, as well as recognition and respect.

I carried the insights of this earlier research into my fieldwork with Christian nationalist activists in Lusaka. Indeed, this past experience became something of a calling card in a new research environment. While my Bemba language skills marked me as someone who had spent a significant amount of time in Zambia, it was stories of the time I’d spent in church that convinced many of my new informants that I understood something of where they were coming

from. “Ah,” said Mrs. Maluba,⁸ one of the MNGRA directors, when she learned about my earlier work, “Then you know.” This background with Pentecostals meant that I could sing along when worship choruses preceded meetings, and that I understood how activists employed certain terms or turns of phrase. The theological ideas that informed my new informants’ activism were also familiar. Like their Pentecostal brethren on the Copperbelt, Christian nationalist activists were laying claim to a God-ordained future, asserting a spiritually grounded right to position against what they understood to be demonic resistance. One implication of this observation that I don’t explore here is the possibility of a direct theological link between the prosperity gospel and Christian nationalism. But in the context of a discussion of uncomfortable others, the theological parallels between Copperbelt Pentecostal laypeople and Lusaka’s Christian nationalist activists raise another important question.

Upon reflection, I chose to approach the prosperity gospel the way that I did in part because of my Copperbelt informants’ social position. Their marginality may have made me more inclined to see Pentecostalism as a kind of resistance, especially to the socially corrosive effects of neoliberal economic reforms (Haynes 2020). Christian nationalist activists in Lusaka, in contrast, could not easily be treated as “suffering [subjects]” (Robbins 2013), and in this respect I may have been less willing to treat them sympathetically. Beyond any disciplinary bias toward perceived suffering on my part, however, I also struggled to charitably engage my new informants because I didn’t like them as much as I had liked the people I knew on the Copperbelt. This was not true of the staff at MNGRA, who were kind and helpful and who I liked very much. But activists were a different story. I was often put off by their attitudes, whether in meetings with other church leaders where I was an observer, or in one-on-one conversations in Lusaka cafés, where some of them were rude to waiters or other subordinates. Nevertheless, I remain grateful for the time they gave me, for the interest they showed in my research, and for their willingness to answer questions and connect me to others in their network. Were it not for this cooperation, the fieldwork on which this book is based would have been impossible. I’m not the only anthropologist to report such conflicting feelings, and I’ve taken both comfort and inspiration from others’ accounts of relationships with those they found difficult to like, despite owing them “a tremendous personal debt” (Bangstad 2017, n.p.; also see van Wyk 2013). Given these mixed emotions, Agnieszka Pasieka (2019, 3), drawing on her work with far-right activists in Europe, has suggested we think of our informants as “people holding ‘unlikable beliefs,’” rather than “‘people we

don't like.' I find this shift in orientation helpful, though it is worth reflecting on the demand that sitting with such "unlikable beliefs" makes on ethnographers.

Ethnography, perhaps more than any other research method, requires that we engage the worldviews and ideas of those we study, seeking to understand and inhabit them as fully as possible, even to the point where they might become our own (e.g., Harding 1987). I found it very hard to do this with Christian nationalism. In part this was because of the Islamophobic, homophobic, and racist comments that sometimes popped up during fieldwork, though I should add that these were relatively rare. More pervasive was the unflinching quest for power, the firmly held belief that the nation ought to be remade in the Pentecostal image. Writing about her work with the Westboro Baptist Church, Rebecca Barrett-Fox highlights the "emotional challenge" of "understanding the symbolic world of the one who is clearly the offender" (2010, 16). While Zambian Christian nationalist activists are not, like members of Westboro Baptist, publicly celebrating the deaths of innocent people, there is much in their perspective and project that I found affronting. Fieldwork in Christian nationalist space was draining, as I sat day after day in rooms where people plotted political projects with which I fundamentally disagreed on both political and religious grounds. As a left-leaning academic, I found their conservative political project off-putting. As a Christian, I was horrified that this project was being undertaken in the name of a religion with which I identified. I don't often write about my faith in connection with my scholarship, but fieldwork with Christian nationalist activists has tested the limits of my ability to bracket personal views that were shaped as much by my Christianity as by my anthropological training or my political inclinations.

In the light of these personal responses, I have had to ask myself what I owe the activists with whom I disagreed and who I often struggled to like. The first answer to this question is perhaps the most obvious, at least from an anthropological point of view. I owe them, like any informants, the same detailed, good-faith description that is owed anyone who does us the service of letting us study their lives. There are obvious disciplinary benefits to such detailed description. A commitment to exploring, for instance, the "varied moral claims" (Pasieka 2019, 5) made by right-wing political groups, or the "ethical polytonality" of Pentecostal practice (Coleman 2015, 296, emphasis removed), ensures that we avoid reproducing the lopsided emphasis on sympathetic practices that has been an unhelpful by-product of dark anthropology (Dullo 2016). At the same time, we should view this detailed ethnographic work as

part of a larger political project, a commitment to understanding that resists stereotypes and easy explanations. “Nuance,” write Rosana Pinheiro-Machado and Lucia Scalco (2021, 334) of Bolsonaro-era Brazil, “is an ethical and public responsibility of anthropologists in times of democratic collapse.” This is because nuance leads to better critique. As Susan Harding argued in her landmark discussion of “repugnant cultural others,” nuanced description contributes to “more effective political strategies to oppose directly the specific positions and policies” advocated by such informants (1991, 393). In other words, only after we have done the work of understanding what underlies the “positions and policies” of movements like Christian nationalism can we critique—and ultimately oppose—them effectively.

The task of critiquing Christian nationalism is one that I have in earlier attempts described in terms of “judgement” (e.g., Lemons et al. 2022, 530–34). My use of this term followed from interdisciplinary dialogues between anthropology and theology that have emphasized the comparative ease with which theologians render moral judgments, something anthropologists have argued is less easily done in our discipline (e.g., McKearney 2021; Robbins 2006, 2020). While not wanting to discount the contributions of this dialogue, from which I have drawn inspiration, I have chosen here to leave behind the language of judgment in favor of that of critique. Here I am following Judith Butler’s (2001; also see Asad et al. 2013, 101–8) reading of Foucault, which draws a distinction between judgment and critique. In Butler’s framing, judgment closes off engagement, “[separating] the critic from the social world at hand” (2001, n.p.). Critique, in contrast, is a process that is always engaged because it is always emergent, always situated in a dynamic field of power. The work of the critic is therefore both “to isolate and identify the peculiar nexus of power and knowledge that gives rise to the field of intelligible things,” as well as “to track the way in which that field meets its breaking point, the moments of its discontinuities, the sites where it fails to constitute the intelligibility for which it stands” (2001, n.p.). It is this twofold task that I have in mind when I refer to a critique of Christian nationalism “on its own terms.”

With the declaration, Zambia’s Pentecostals have sought to subject the nation to the rule of Jesus. In tracing out the roots of their political project and the form it took at its most recent zenith, I am attempting a critique that charts a course beyond liberal political visions, including both secular and Christian expressions of liberalism. The result is something more provisional, more willfully circumspect. This critique is prophetic in that it hinges on a radical rejection of human certainty, inspired in part by Saint Paul’s observation that

human perception is always partial, “only a reflection as in a mirror”⁹ (cf. Howell 2017). It’s toward this prophetic vision that I’ve oriented my analysis of Christian nationalist activism, the broad outline of which I sketch in the following section.

Outline of the Book

Like most ethnographies, this book starts with some history. Chapter 1 helps develop a portrait of Zambian Christian nationalism by contrasting it with the country’s long-standing history of nationalist Christianity. As in other African countries, Christianity played a key part in Zambia’s nationalist movement. Church and state leaders, including the country’s first president, Kenneth Kaunda, drew on Christian ideas and practices in their nation-building efforts. These efforts helped create an image of Zambia as a “nation of Christians.” While the nation of Christians differs significantly from the Christian nation that emerged with the declaration in 1991, the two are nevertheless connected. Zambia’s long engagement with nationalist Christianity has created social, political, and bureaucratic precedents that have allowed Christian nationalism to flourish. At the same time, this long history has often marginalized Pentecostals, leaving them out of public representations of “the church.” This background, and in particular the marginalization of Zambia’s Pentecostals, are key to understanding what happened during the divine season.

Chapter 2 explores the theological underpinnings of Zambian Christian nationalist activism, introducing the movement’s key political-theological category: the Christian nation. An analysis of books authored by activists shows how the Christian nation emerges through an analogical reading of the Old Testament that links Zambia to biblical Israel through a divine covenant. The connection to biblical Israel continues in the Christian nationalist portrayal of different contemporary actors, including the president, whose role is described in terms of kingship. This approach to the presidency indexes a broader emphasis on leadership in Christian nationalism, one that returns our attention to the figure of Kaunda. Pentecostal critiques of Kaunda’s government further demonstrate how the covenant shapes Christian nationalist political theology. This chapter concludes with the vision of the Christian nation, an expansive, encompassing political force that forcibly incorporates all Zambians into a Pentecostal frame and excludes those who cannot be made to fit there.

Turning our attention from theology to historiography, chapter 3 examines memorials erected during the Lungu government to David Livingstone and former presidents Frederick Chiluba and Michael Sata. Drawing on interviews with architects, civil servants, and tour guides, as well as an analysis of the monuments themselves, I show that these public works projects literally constructed a vision of the Christian nation shaped by the inexorability and irresistibility of God's plan. Livingstone's legacy is especially important here, as during the Lungu government the famed Scottish missionary was held up as the original author of the declaration, a kind of stranger-king who for activists served as a divine emissary of the Christian nation. Monuments to Livingstone and past Zambian presidents extended the totalizing force of Christian nationalism into the past and the future. This was further accomplished through the monuments' symbolic frameworks, which limited the interpretive approaches to those that reinforced Christian nationalist history.

Chapter 4 focuses on one of the Lungu government's flagship projects, the National House of Prayer. This massive edifice, described as an "altar" for the nation, was meant to bring Zambians together as a symbol of the Christian nation, a worshipping body politic represented by those who would fill the ten-thousand-seat auditorium. The House of Prayer went through several sets of plans before construction began in 2021. An analysis of these plans and their reception demonstrates how the Christian nationalist vision of worship forcefully incorporates people in space, just as Christian nationalist historiography forcefully incorporates them in time. This process draws many Christians who do not support the declaration into its influence, while simultaneously pushing them outside the field of its full realization. By asking Zambian Christians of different denominational backgrounds to engage with the National House of Prayer in this way, activists also opened themselves up to criticism of the Christian nationalist project. The House of Prayer is therefore the first site at which we see resistance to the Christian nation, coming in this case from within Zambia's Christian communities.

Opposition to the Christian nation was also evident at Zambia's Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs (MNGRA), the subject of chapter 5. MNGRA shared with other government agencies a divide between the interests of the civil servants that populated the ministry's staff and the politicians that were its public face. But at MNGRA this divide was amplified by Christian denominational differences, with ministry staff overwhelmingly hailing from mainline churches, in contrast to the Pentecostal Minister. This divide translated to a conflict in the ministry across the familiar divide

between bureaucracy and charisma. A comparison of the bureaucratic and charismatic political models at work at MNGRA shows that despite activists' best efforts to work around bureaucracy, the latter usually won out at MNGRA. The triumph of bureaucracy over charisma in the ministry demonstrates the power of resistance to Christian nationalism, as it ultimately rendered the government arm of Zambia's Christian nationalist project unworkable.

Christian nationalist activists maintain the covenant established in the declaration through two annual ritual events: the National Day of Prayer and the Commemoration of the Declaration of Zambia as a Christian Nation. As chapter 6 demonstrates, organizers of these events aimed to produce a visible image of the Christian nation in the form of a worshipping body politic, united in prayer across party lines and Christian denominations. But criticism of these events from leaders of mainline churches and the political opposition made realizing this vision impossible. Faced with reduced participation in the wake of critique, those in charge were forced to look for ritual workarounds to symbolically create the image of the Christian nation that they could not produce outright. These symbolic efforts demonstrate that for all Pentecostalism's rapid growth in Zambia, its public influence is still limited, and that awareness of this limited influence shaped what happened during the divine season.

Where the previous three chapters highlighted sites of external resistance to Christian nationalism, chapter 7 demonstrates the movement's internal contradictions. It does so by exploring activists' efforts to purify the Christian nation through policy interventions. Focusing on the movement's primary others—Muslims, LGBTQ+ Zambians, and “fake” Christian pastors—I show how the “autoimmune” response to this last group reveals the fundamental impossibility of the Christian nationalist project. The declaration has defined the boundaries of the nation in exclusively Christian terms. This move has necessitated a constant process of purification that expels those who fall outside the Christian nation, for instance those who belong to another religion. But the example of fake pastors demonstrates that this process of purification is carried out among Christians as well, threatening to exclude many of them from membership in the Christian nation. This includes some of the Pentecostals who have historically been the declaration's strongest supporters. The Christian nationalist project therefore ultimately undermines itself, as its exclusivist edge cuts off members of activists' own religious tradition. This autoimmune response also illustrates the theological error at the core of Christian nationalist thought, the hubris with which Christian nationalist activists claim knowledge of God's will, expressed in and through the nation.

Having laid out ethnographically the failures of the divine season, the book's conclusion offers a critical engagement with Zambian Christian nationalism, grounded in theology and especially in the work of the Catholic theologian Emmanuel Katongole. Katongole is critical of Christian attempts to seize political power, as in Christian nationalism, but he also demonstrates the shortcomings of Christian attempts to critique the state that continue to assume its legitimacy. In contrast to these models, Katongole invites us to consider a different political approach, drawing inspiration from prophetic communities. These communities are prophetic in that they announce the Kingdom of God by announcing a different way of being together, refusing to fix their boundaries to the nation or the church, and embracing instead the mysterious possibilities of God's work in the world. In Zambia, at least, such prophetic action returns us to the small-scale Pentecostal communities with which our discussion began. It is in such communities that I find not only a critique of but also an antidote to Christian nationalism.

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