


Bindepinde [stout rope] theology and religio-political dialogue in Zimbabwe

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The article is motivated by a growing interest to solve local problems by infusing indigenous knowledge systems. It discusses the strained interface between religious and political actors using a local brand of theology, termed *bindepinde* [stout rope] theology. This theology is based on a local fable told to children, on how a Hare abused Hippopotamus and Elephant using a tethering rope. The folk story is taken as a metaphor in which Hare represents the sly politician abusing the rope to control Hippopotamus and Elephant, representing religious actors. Though Zimbabwe has a special place in this research, the research has shown that politicians act as third forces the world over. Religious entities often act as fodder for the progress of political demagogues, whose egos are legitimised by competing religious ideologies. Many religious bodies inadvertently enable politicians, thinking that they are fulfilling their own mandates. The article proposes negotiated versions of liberation theology and synodality as possible ways of overcoming inadvertent scaffolding of *bindepinde* theology. It concludes that while it may be difficult to tame the politician, it may be worthwhile to minimise the damage by making him focus more on the common good.

Contribution: This article contributes *bindepinde* brand of theology as an indigenous theory of knowledge in the area of religio-political dialogue. The *bindepinde* theology has proved applicable to various contexts globally, where it thrives on dualism. Its mitigation lies in Kairos theology.

Keywords: *bindepinde* theology; religio-political dialogue; Zimbabwe churches; ZANU PF, Kairos Theology.

Introduction

Scholars of religious studies and theology have noted the importance of religion and theology in the lives of millions globally. In contributing to the same discourse, this article discusses the tethering (restricting) effect of the *bindepinde* [stout rope] brand of theology (Chimhundu 2001), based on a local fable. The physical *bindepinde*, from which the theology is derived, is made up of splintered fibre, neatly woven to produce a sturdy rope (English-Shona Dictionary 2022). Whenever *bindepinde* is mentioned in Shona folklore or jurisprudence, its wielder is considered a sly character. In the fable in point, Elephant and Hippopotamus erred in their reading of the rope and its diminutive wielder, inadvertently falling victims to cunning Hare and his *bindepinde*. The *bindepinde* theology is used here as both a descriptive and an interpretive model for the restrictive interaction of the shrewd politician (Hare) and religious outfits (Elephant and Hippopotamus). By engaging the politician as a lesser significant actor, religious leaders hope to use him or her as their road to fame. This often fails because the politician exploits their love for doctrinal entrenchment, by tying them to those unwaveringly subscribing to different doctrinal views. The politician often becomes an obstacle to meaningful dialogue among people of different religious persuasions. He or she is commonly associated with the use of a metaphoric rope too long for participants to realise his or hers chicanery. Firstly, the article turns to the story that flouts the rule of normal tussle in close contact. Secondly, it contextualizes the story, suggesting the way forward, and finally concluding it.

The story behind the *bindepinde* theology

The story behind the *bindepinde* theology is a short one. It is known as the story of a Hare, an Elephant and a Hippopotamus. The story goes: Once upon a time Hare went into the jungle where he challenged an Elephant to a game of tag-of-war. The Elephant scoffed at the challenge but agreed to the contest on particular terms. Hare would tie elephant's leg with the *bindepinde* and move off in the direction of the river, where he would tie his own leg to the other end of the

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rope. Once that was done he would tug at the rope to signify the start of the contest. Hare then walked towards the river where he challenged a Hippopotamus to the same game. The overconfident Hippopotamus readily agreed to the terms. Hare would tie Hippopotamus' leg and move in the jungle direction. Once in the jungle, Hare would tie his own leg to the other end of the *bindepinde*, before tugging to signify the beginning of the game. Upon tugging at the rope, the two massive creatures pulled at each other for a full day. At sunset, Hare tugged again to signify the end of the game. He then moved to the Elephant, and then the Hippopotamus; untying them and declaring victory over them. Elephant and Hippopotamus were bruised, exhausted, and humiliated.

The *bindepinde* theology in the story

The *bindepinde* theology presented in the story deals with the trickery of harnessing two animals to generate Hare's fame. In the ruse, Hare selects two huge animals considering:

[T]hey live in completely different environments and possess similar strengths. Elephant naturally prefers the inner jungle and Hippopotamus spends most of his time in the water. This presents a perfect opportunity for a perfect match with Rabbit handing each end of the rope to each large animal at different times declaring that he can defeat either Elephant or Hippopotamus to this pull game. (Ncube 2012:i)

Because of the matching strengths of the two animals the game ends in a stalemate, which is a setback for both the animals. Elephant and Hippopotamus are prevented from discovering the trick by failing to get out of their defined territorial confines. The Elephant abhors the river terrain, while Hippopotamus finds the deeper woods an abomination. The dogmatic maintenance of territory allows the freelance Hare to dominate both territories. The non-dogmatists take advantage of the situation to establish hegemony over the blinkered dogmatists. As will become apparent, the political elite use the Hare tactics to tether one religious group to the other along conflicting doctrinal lines (ZCBC, ZFZ & ZCC 2006; ZCC, ZCBC & EFZ 2017). Unknowingly, the two groups are brought into a vicious tussle by the political elite occupying umpire status. The intransigent politician is left scot-free. Instead of confronting the politician traversing the territory between them and deciding the timing of the first and second tugs at the *bindepinde*, they choose to defeat him at his own game played by competitors out of sight of each other. Though the tussle in the story is physical, that of the politician and conflicting religious groups is ideological.

The *bindepinde* theology and the global village

In the Global North, Christianity and Judaism, Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, have been home to some of the most irreconcilable dogmatic differences. The dogmatic positions invited the third force to harness them with a contextual *bindepinde* resulting in bruising tussles. In the

Germany of the 1930s, the Nazi appeared as the third force in the Judeo-Christian dogmatic rift. The Christian anti-Semitic frugality and the Jewish obsession with usury became the tethering points. Christians labelled Jews as 'parasitic capitalists exploiting Christians' (Munson 2018:1). The Roman Catholic Church (RCC) particularly 'played a major role in leading Catholics throughout Europe to view Jews as an existential threat' (Kertzer 2014:329). The church hated modernity with which the Jews were identified. Though that dichotomy led the Jews to the gallows, it did not credit Christians ahead of Nazi nationalism. The church, therefore, suffered after giving credence to Nazi nationalism (Pawlikowski 1993:2). The Nazi publicly advanced Christians' labels of Jews as diabolic, carnal and Christ-killers. Initially, both Christians and Jews felt they could appeal to the conscience of the politician, leading to the acceptance and ascendancy of their economic ideologies. In reality, once the Nazi got the better of their positions, they tethered them and eventually discarded them both, bruised or butchered. Nazi identity politics delineated Christians as indigenes obsessed with intimidatory messages of hell, and Jews as foreign economic colonists.

In Northern Ireland, the politician did the same with Catholics and Protestants. There was 'a deep divide between Protestant Churches and the Roman Catholic Church ... in a deeply divided society' (Loughlin 1989:408). The Roman Catholics were seen as synonymous with Irish nationalism, while Protestants resonated well with the British Crown. For that reason, there was 'no coming together of the Roman Catholics and Protestant Churches in Northern Ireland' (Loughlin 1989:409). These entrenched allegiances helped politicians abuse them to their advantage, well-knowing that they would continue to defend particular positions. Nationalists aroused Roman Catholics to attack Protestants as imperialists, while the pro-empire politicians invoked Protestants to fight off the Roman Catholics as autocrats wanting to influence the world without being modified by it. This puritanical Catholic position was seen as stifling by the Protestants. The politicians who benefitted from these differences wished to have them perpetuated, so that their *bindepinde* might continue to reap them dividends by exploiting the rifts between the two blocs. Politicians 'manipulate religion to gain political power' (Echele 2023:2). Politicians are hungry for legitimation. The *bindepinde* theology works best in societies with clear dichotomies between 'us' and 'them' (Palaver 2019:22). The New Testament concept of loving the enemy has no place in this theology, where a group can only define itself by what it is not.

In Africa, the *bindepinde* was either used to leash Christians to Muslims or missionary to indigenous churches. In Malawi, the colonial administration allowed missionaries to convert learners on entry into their schools, which created a time bomb. Muslims resisted the call to attend such missionary schools though they offered education for employment, which made Muslims descend into poverty en masse. They harboured the grudge until the advent of Hastings Kamuzu

Banda, who decided to campaign on the divorce of education and religion, allowing Muslims and Christians to exhaust themselves over the issue. Banda won the populist vote to become Malawi's first independence statesman (ed. Bone 2000).

In South Africa, millions of Africans migrated from the white people-controlled churches to form African Indigenous Churches (AICs), which transformed their socio-economic and political thinking (Bompani 2007). The black church which was largely English stood in opposition to the Afrikaans white church, which largely supported the National Party, the custodian of apartheid (Dube & Molise 2018:162). The black church advanced liberation or black theology in opposition to the conservative or white theology. Africans were fed up with the Western theologians' legitimization of apartheid (Lalloo 1998). The white supremacists used the established churches to churn out evolutionary theology, viewing Africans as still at the stage of 'hewers of wood and drawers of water'. Of course, the South African Catholic Bishops' Conference's tenor of pastoral letters began to firm gradually, with the 1957 letter calling apartheid 'something intrinsically evil' (Bate 1999:3). On the whole, established churches found all black churches theologically inadequate. As the two sets of churches exchanged a barrage of counter-criticism, the apartheid government was safe in Pretoria. There is no doubt, however, that many theologians from the mainline churches joined the opposition to apartheid in their individual capacities, becoming prominent members of the ecumenical groups fighting for justice. Major AICs in Zimbabwe were brought or formed by labourers returning from South Africa (Chitando 2004:121–125).

The authoring of the *bindepinde* theology in colonial Zimbabwe

The Zion Christian Churches (ZCC) entered Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) from South Africa at the turn of the 20th century. The ZCC of Mutendi had close links with Engenus of Mount Morriah in South Africa. The church had a strong indigenous flavour critical of the established church positions, especially the RCC. Subsequently, there arose numerous indigenous churches (both apostolic and Pentecostal) claiming local origins. Their incipient opposition to the churches that came from South Africa ahead of them (including RCC, Anglican and Methodist) created scenarios for tethering. That was until Methodism entered politics through the likes of Bishop Abel Muzorewa, Reverend Canaan Banana, and the RCC became vocal in support of African rights. The colonial government was more at home with the liberal stance of Muzorewa's United African Nation Union (UANU) than the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) under Reverend Ndavaningi Sithole, and later Mugabe (Hinfelaar 2001). Youths from either side exchanged fights in the black urban townships of Mbare and Highfields in Harare (Chitofiri 2015; Hinfelaar 2001). The colonial administration was happy to have them destabilised especially the Sithole camp (McLaughlin 1996). Zimbabwe African National

Union politics under Reverend Sithole was keen on rejecting any neutral position. Distinctive positioning of institution or person was meant to determine the *bindepinde* end, suitable for the entity or individual.

Any criticism of ZANU leadership was met with venom attributing the institution or individual to collaboration with the repressive colonial enterprise. Religious institutions or individuals not clearly on their side were matched with their secular political counterparts. The common good comprising social, economic and political liberation could not be defined severally, because the tethering *bindepinde* theology allowed no digression from ZANU's definitions (ed. Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2017; eds. Raftopoulos & Savage 2005). It was in that light that authorities leaned towards moderates/apologists. While the Catholic bishops boldly risked their lives writing terse pastoral letters critical of the Smith regime (Skelton 1985), the Evangelicals prayed for the annihilation of freedom fighters (alias terrorists) and the protection of the 'Christian Rhodesian government' and its security forces (Bhebe 1988). The position of the Catholics and that of the Evangelicals immediately assumed tethering and tugging positions. The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP) collated human rights atrocities against citizens and subject people (Auret 1992). For the Evangelicals, the whole process was a façade to blackmail an innocent government with made-up stories of atrocities and human casualties. The confusion gave the Smith regime undeserved positive standing in the community of nations. Despite the confusion inculcated by the *bindepinde* theology, critical minds still attest today that 'a number of publications bear testimony to the fact that the Catholics have always stood against the oppressed and violence' (National Association of Non-Governmental Organisations 2012:28). This assertion leaves them perpetually tugging at one end, with adversaries pouring vitriol from the other end.

The *bindepinde* theology in Independent Zimbabwe up to 2000

Once the Smith regime capitulated, Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) presented itself as the torch bearer of the revolution. The party promised a comprehensive reconciliation with everybody irrespective of one's part in the liberation war (eds. Raftopoulos & Savage 2005). This meant an invitation to pro-liberation RCC and the anti-liberation Evangelicals. The Catholics immediately became conspicuous in the public arena (Gundani 2008). The Evangelicals, however, were free to go about their own business (Bhebe 1988). Exploiting their social teachings, as well as their war legacy and public prominence, the ZCBC produced some critical pastoral letters and a blunt report on the Gukurahundi (operation clear chaff) atrocities in Matabeleland and the Midlands provinces that saw the demise of 20 000 supporters of the opposition ZAPU party at the hands of the state (CCJP & LRF 1997; ZCBC 1983, 1985). The atrocities seemed to authenticate the wartime Evangelical

rhetoric on the freedom fighters as 'savage terrorists'. The criticism of the independence government by the Catholics created their maiden cooperation with Evangelicals on national politics, leaving indigenous churches to inherit the wartime Evangelical position of colluding with the incumbent government. Thus, the failures of the government lost them their wartime friends (RRC), only to gain new ones including those formed solely to defend government's controversial land reforms, such as the Destiny for Africa Network. To this was added the splinter Anglican Church of Zimbabwe and the various AICs already in existence.

***Bindepinde* theology beyond 2000**

In the years following 2000, the ZANU-PF elite tethered together two splinter groups of the Anglican Church to exhaust themselves (Gunda 2010). The state took sides with the culprits, the Church of the Province of Zimbabwe (CPZ), but 'harassed the leadership and members of the Church of the Province of Central Africa (CPCA)' (U.S. Department of State: Diplomacy in Action 2012:1), critical of government approach to human flourishing. The ZANU-PF government took a decisive step to tether the two groups as a way of deflating attention from itself. In the Anglican Church, those fighting on the government side were personified by rebel bishop, Nolbert Kunonga, who demonised the CPCA which represented the authentic Anglican position by calling them homosexuals (Masiyambiri 2016). Meanwhile, homosexuality was proscribed by law in Zimbabwe, and complicity in the issue was a chargeable offence (Government of Zimbabwe 2013). The issue of homosexuals provided the relevant *bindepinde* tethering of the two sects, while the government played the Hare (Gunda 2010). Mugabe maximised the fight between the two factions by remaining seized with the discourse of homosexuality domestically and internationally. Kunonga used his homilies to praise Mugabe for his positions on homosexuality and land disposessions, which left Mugabe the winner in his tussle with churches critical of his rule. That was a great relief for Mugabe in the face of criticisms raised against his government by the CPCA Anglican Bishop of Harare, Sebastian Bakare:

In actual fact Zimbabwe today is a lawless state where the perpetrators of violence and even murder are never arrested or brought to book. The judicial system itself is manipulated and leaves a lot to be desired. The police are feared by the public because of their ruthlessness and brutality as we in the Anglican Diocese of Harare continue to experience. (Ashworth 2008:1)

Mugabe on his part managed, through patriotic history, to pitch war credentials as the panacea to the common good and the right to the ruling sceptre (Nare & Mataire 2022). The churches were split on whether war credentials should be read as meritocratic or not. Those finding meritocracy in that tended to be supportive of the government, saying leaders had already been anointed by God, while the other bloc found the narrative fallacious.

The apologists were worried about the British capitulation and not democracy. The ZANUPF had long digressed from the norms of the liberation struggle, and its war rhetoric 'wields little or no contribution to the political and socio-economic challenges the country continues to face' (Nare & Mataire 2022:292). The bloc that assisted during the war of liberation wanted ZANU-PF to put the war rhetoric behind and move on with democracy, social security and development, in line with progressive nations. In the years following 2000, for example, ZANU-PF was responsible for an elitist land reform that critically ignored the needs of the majority. This, despite the centrality of land to the liberation discourses on black empowerment (Nare & Mataire 2022). This lapse made the ZCBC (2002) infuse courage in the electorate to overcome ZANU-PF intimidation in the approaching 2002 presidential elections:

We call upon all of you once again to make the optimum use of your vote for the good of the country. Use your vote, it is your right and nobody can take it from you. Make your choice in the freedom of your conscience. Do not be afraid, it is a secret. (p. 3)

When the Catholic Church proved to be a thorn in the flesh of the central government, a ruse was invented to tether Catholics to moralists. Pius Ncube, the Archbishop of Bulawayo and a leading luminary in the ZCBC, was implicated in a sex scandal forcing him out of the episcopate and muzzling him (Magezi & Tagwirei 2022). The jinx was that 'while Ncube condemned Mugabe in Bulawayo, in Harare, priests served him weekly communion' (Itano 2003:2). This replication of the Anglican scenario of a split church disheartened Ncube, who bemoaned the situation: 'Mugabe has managed to divide us... Churches are no longer speaking with one voice' (Itano 2003:2). It was unfortunate that some sections of the church gave a blind eye to the glorification of violence as a credible method of settling scores, which is why they continued to treat Mugabe as a normal parishioner.

The power that established the state was violent, and that which maintained it was equally violent, with some clergy and laity seeing nothing evil in it (NANGO 2012). In fact, some churches and Christian personalities became the conscience, the servants, and the instruments of the state. By not taking sides with those violated by the state, they became complicit to the violence. Archbishop Paul Mwazha of the African Apostles, Trevor Manhanga and Obadiah Msindo of the Destiny of Africa Network saw Mugabe as a messiah for the indigenous people suffering at the hands of white supremacy. Manhanga maintained that Zimbabwe needed to avoid 'the Renamo syndrome, where losing politicians resort to violence' (Moyo 2014:1). Reference was being made for the opposition to accept stolen election outcomes to avoid the Renamo syndrome. Mugabe effectively used the apologists in his *bindepinde* theology 'to dismiss church leaders and civic leaders who criticise state violence ... as puppets of the West' (NANGO 2012:18). Andrew Wutawunashe, a proponent of African identity and renaissance, praised Mugabe for the chaotic fast track land reform, giving the programme a

biblical backing. Wutawunashe founded a pan-Africanist platform called the Faith for the Nation Campaign in 2000, to advance ZANU-PF agenda. He was partnered by Samuel Mutendi in partisan Zimbabwe Independent Indigenous Council of Churches (ZIICC) (Magezi & Tagwirei 2022). Johannes Ndanga of the Apostolic Christian Council of Zimbabwe (ACCZ), commonly known as Mapostori, equally supported the ruling party openly (Magezi & Tagwirei 2022), while the Christian Alliance Bishop Levee Kadenge and Sifiso Mpfu, and Bishop Anselm Magaya of the Zimbabwe National Pastors' Conference were accused of supporting the opposition. The latter took exception to the:

[A]ppointment of retired high-ranking officers from the uniformed forces to assume tutelage of leading institutions such as the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), Grain Marketing Board (GMB) and National Oil Company of Zimbabwe (NOCZIM). (Mhandara & Manyeruke 2013:105)

The complicity churches saw nothing wrong, though other churches and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) wondered whether these military personnel were more qualified than their civilian counterparts.

The *bindepinde* theology and the new dispensation

The ZCBC thought the 2018 elections could provide a positive solution, following the coup d'état of November 2017. The conference noted: 'The dramatic events of last November 2017 seemed to many Zimbabweans to promise a new chapter of that history and were greeted by most with immediate and spontaneous rejoicing' (ZCBC 2018:1). It was hoped that the new leadership terming itself the 'new dispensation' would change the narrative and shun abusing indigenous churches against established churches. It soon became apparent that adorning African Initiated Church regalia when visiting indigenous churches remained the norm. On the 16 April 2022:

President Emmerson Mnangagwa, his wife Auxilia and vice-president Constantino Chiwenga attended an Easter conference at the United Family International Church (UFIC) in Chitungwiza, a town 30 km from the capital, Harare. Emmanuel Makandiwa, who leads the church that has about 60 000 followers, used his sermon to praise Mnangagwa. (Matiashe 2022:2)

Makandiwa noted that the president did not need to campaign as his works spoke for themselves, though such works are hardly noticeable to the public eye. The tension between churches was sustained and taken to worse off heights against the hopes of those churches dreaming of a *Kairos* moment to turn over Zimbabwe's fortunes (ZCC et al. 2017). The Catholic Church maintained against the vanguard churches that prevalence of different opinions was not a threat to democracy (ZCBC 2017:1). Unfortunately, some religious leaders continued to frustrate efforts at reform by getting too close to the political leadership. They sanitised the bad done by government. The tethering divided body of Christ:

To date, Church and state relations are still like a marriage of convenience, as the government seems to be accommodative of those who support it and vindictive towards those who critique it. This situation has divided the body of Christ, as some pastors dine with the oppressive ruling elites, whilst others side with the oppressed, thus, creating a disturbing state of polarization. (Magezi & Tagwirei 2022:1)

Young religious leaders like Pangai Java and Ubert Madzanire came out in the open and were rewarded abundantly. Java was appointed vice president of the ZANU-PF partisan empowerment group, Affirmative Action Group (AAG). He sponsored social media comedians including Felistus Edwards (known as Mai Titi on social media) and Tarisai Munetsiwa (famously known as Madam Boss) to campaign openly for president Mnangagwa. Madzanire was appointed ambassador-at-large to Europe and the Americas (Magezi & Tagwirei 2022).

Taking the political battle into the church backyard

In the same Hare tactics, President Mnangagwa formed Pastors for ED (the initials for his first and middle names, Emmerson and Dambudzo) to campaign for him under the façade of Pastors for Economic Development (Chinowaita 2022). He personalised clerics to further irk the bloc of pastors critical of the move. The pastors for ED were led by the councillor for Ward 30, Zibagwe Rural District Council, evangelist Idirashe Dongo (Kachiko 2022:1). Zibagwe was the president's home district and Dongo wanted all pastors across denominations, to join the grouping, but personalising pastors deeply divided the churches. The disunity allowed the political elite to ride on the crest of such confusion. The pastors promised to dish out projects for the youths. Pastor Dongo equated President Mnangagwa to a king inviting his subjects for a walk in the park, and denied any violence or injustice during elections. Some members saw the pro-ED pastors as Satanists leading many astray (Chinowaita 2022), but Dongo was upbeat maintaining that they met ZANU-PF provincial leadership 'to get a deeper understanding of what is expected out of us as an affiliate, while we also tell them our plans towards mobilising voters for the ruling party' (Mkondani 2023:1). Godwills Masimirembwa, the provincial chairman for ZANU-PF Harare province, acknowledged working with some pastors in a bid that everyone should vote for ED in the harmonised elections.

Pastor Aaron Rusukira noted that it was biblical to pray for politicians and to support them. Praying for ED's 2030 middle income vision was therefore not different (Pastors for ED Midlands Chapter 2022). The pastors quoted Romans 13:1–6 on the harmonious living between the church and the ruler, maintaining that it followed that every pastor should declare their allegiance. As a result, some pastors 'were being added into Pastors 4ED WhatsApp platforms without their consent' (Kachiko 2022:1). If one existed they were followed up in inbox were and intimidated and asked to tell all congregants to vote for ED in the 2023 harmonised elections.

The grouping was recognised as a party association and not structure. Among the associates were war veterans including Bishop Wellington Mupisa, who vowed to find more converts for ED for a harmonious state–church relation.

The approach of making pastors an association of the ruling party was heavily disparaged by Tom Deuschle of Celebration Church Ministries, as sanitising oppression, and abomination in the Christian churches. He chided the pastors for joining ZANU-PF under the guise of pastors for economic development. To him that was manipulation of church leadership by the state, which he equated to a ‘literal flood, of non-Christian activity’ seducing the church (AllAfrica 2023:1). The pastors were a sanitising flood of oppression on the suffering masses, instead of being mouth-pieces of the voiceless. He noted that political leaders may be supported only when they are in the right. He also condemned the attendance of the Herbert Chitepo School of Ideology by pastors, which Dongo praised for inculcating patriotism in the church. What happened there was seen as an abuse of the hero status of Herbert Chitepo, the first chairman of ZANU-PF.

The Kairos theology as solution to *bindepinde* theology

The Karos document produced by the ecumenical group in South Africa had a particular praxis driving its focus. It stressed ‘a particular moment of truth’ that had dawned (Bate 1999:159). The central idea was to present prophetic theology as the answer to the problems besetting the poor in apartheid South Africa. Such prophetic theology was characterised by speaking the truth to power even with threats to personal safety. The aim was to help those at the periphery of society fight state theology nourishing apartheid, which looked down upon the black majority as unworthy of privilege and respect. Church theology was complicit in advancing state theology in that the church stood by, paying a blind eye to atrocious injustices of apartheid. The pietistic church that separated religious praxis from political and social engagement had no use in liberating people (Kairos Theologians [Group] 1986). This argument by South African theologians has a bearing on the current argument discussing the *bindepinde* theology, a local version of state theology.

Bishop Kenneth Skelton (1985) of the Anglican Communion in Rhodesia and Reverend Canaan Banana (1996) of the Methodist Church (and first president of independent Zimbabwe) contend that the RCC was more prepared to speak truth to power than any other denomination from Rhodesia to Zimbabwe. Muchena (2005) notes that the RCC continued treading where others feared, right into the 1990s. In that regard, only the RCC resisted the state attempt to muzzle it, with the result that ‘except for the role of the ZCBC and its work in Matabeleland, and the CCJP’s advocacy role following the Matabeleland massacres, the Church’s attention was focused on non-political issues’

(Muchena 2005:260). The RCC took audacious courage to publish a book on the Matabeleland and Midlands massacres that saw the decimation of 20 000 lives at the hands of the state (CCJP & LRF 1997). The forced resignation of the Archbishop of Bulawayo, Pius Ncube, after the ZCBC published the pastoral letter, *God Hears the Cries of the Oppressed* (ZCBC 2007), in which he was accused by government of masterminding, did not deter the RCC. They went on to publish one of their best critiques of government *bindepinde* theology – *The March is not Ended* (ZCBC 2020). That letter unlocked a tirade of negative responses from government, which led both national and international secular and church bodies to publish solidarity messages in support of the beleaguered ZCBC (ZCC 2020).

The RCC has its own shortcomings as we have seen in Nazi Germany, but overall it has done its work in good faith on behalf of the poor and the oppressed. We saw the SACBC firming in support of the victims of apartheid from 1957. Post-modern history of Malawi refers to the RCC pastoral letter of 08 March 1992 as the watershed to multiparty democracy in that country (Ross 1996). It is clear, however, that the *bindepinde* theology can only be defeated in unison with other churches. What we have seen so far is that the RCC has generally been on one side of the *bindepinde* tussling with those complicity with the state in its oppressive agenda. Ecumenical cooperation through the Heads of Christian Denominations steadily gathered momentum to fight the *bindepinde* theology from 2000. One outcome of that interdenominational cooperation was the authoring of a blueprint for democratisation and development, *The Zimbabwe We Want* (ZCBC et al. 2006). From then on, the Heads of Christian Denominations have worked closely together in engaging government. After the coup d’état in 2017, they jointly authored a *Kairos* document advising the incoming dispensation to renew the nation by working for all and shunning political polarization (ZCC et al. 2017).

The value of policies has to be judged by the way they affect the lives of the underprivileged. ‘In order to overcome our socio-political and economic challenges there is need for a meaningful inclusive dialogue in the country’ (ZCBC 2022:3). No single political entity can overcome national problems, and therefore the nation should journey holistically. The criticism for the pastors for ED lies in the fact that a muzzled or incorporated church exposes the vulnerability of society, with no capacity to speak to power. The pastors for ED need to seek their prophetic mandate, and on finding it, journey with the rest in the gradual liberation of the people of God. It is imperative to note that ‘dialogue between Christians of different confessions, united by one baptism, has a special place in the synodal journey’ (ZCBC 2022:4). Synchronising the journey defeats the *bindepinde* theology which thrives on dualism and contradiction.

Conclusion

This article sets out to explore *bindepinde* theology as an indigenous perception of religio-political interaction.

The local brand of theology is based on a fable of Hare, Hippopotamus and Elephant, normally meant for children, though having metaphoric meaning to adults. *Bindepinde* theology was applied to various contexts, and found to be applicable both in the Global North and Global South. The tripartite character in the fable was found to be applicable to the politician (Hare) and two competing religious persuasions (Hippopotamus and Elephant). A solution was sought in ecumenism, where the competing religious dogmatic positions were to find each other, to form a combined prophetic resistance to political manipulation. The cohesion in resistance was found in the regional brand of *Kairos* prophetic theology ecumenically applied in South Africa as practical theology. In the Zimbabwean scenario where the RCC has been known to tussle in a seemingly lone battle on the far left, with the rest either lukewarm or on the extreme right, it was equally noted that the *Kairos* brand of theology developed in South Africa was the best solution to the *bindepinde* theology. The RCC, whose position has been clear regionally and internationally, has increasingly worked through the Heads of Christian Denominations since 2000. It has increasingly become noticeable that progress is in unitary prophetic theology, both religious and political establishments dialoguing in truth.

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Author's contributions

E.D. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

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Data availability

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