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**WHERE ARE THE ANCESTORS? : THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS
ON THE IMPACT OF INTER-DENOMINATIONAL SUNDAY
SERVICES AT GREAT ZIMBABWE UNIVERSITY**

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ABSTRACT

Zimbabwe is a home to a plethora of religious traditions such as African Traditional Religions, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Bahai Faith and Rastafari Faith. In postcolonial Zimbabwe, the government promoted freedom of worship and a multi-faith approach. In general, the western missionary colonial historiography has enabled Christianity to remain a dominant religious tradition in all spheres of life. Notably, Christianity claims to have a large following of up to approximately 80% of the population in Zimbabwe. In principle, a long standing campaign from the Christian fraternity to declare Zimbabwe a Christian state in recent years was unsuccessful. Paradoxically, in practice, the state largely utilises Christianity at state functions in political, social, economic, legal and religious spectrums. This double-edged scenario greatly influences the religious experience at institutions of higher learning such as Great Zimbabwe University (GZU). This paper focuses on the impact of the Inter-denominational Sunday services at GZU, a cosmopolitan community whose niche is to be the centre of excellence in creative arts, culture and technology. Evidently, belonging to a non-Christian religion attracts stigma at GZU. It is further argued that it is a misconception to regard both students and staff of GZU as solely Christians, something that triggers the question: 'where are the ancestors?' By utilising interviews, questionnaires and participant observation to gather data, the study established that GZU's Inter-denominational sermons and procedures tend to pursue a colonial legacy that elevates Christianity but militates against multiculturalism that would propel its niche. It is our conviction that the University urgently needs to transform its strategy on spiritual and moral development of students and staff to sustain religious pluralism and social identity in Zimbabwe.

Key Words: Ancestors, Church, Education, Interdenominational, Religion, Zimbabwe

1.0 Introduction

Zimbabwe's open policy to the operation of different religions culminated in the existence of myriad religious traditions. Although there are a wide variety of religions in Zimbabwe such as Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Rastafari, the trio of Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religions (ATRs) seem to claim the largest number of followers. In fact, Christianity dominates the religious market both in numerical terms and other privileges that makes it appear as *the* religion. Despite the fact that Zimbabwe is not a Christian state, it is greatly utilised at different platforms including the social, political, legal, economic and religious spectrums. Thus, *de facto* Christianity is like a state religion, a status that it acquired since the colonial times. This privileged position of Christianity is evident in Institutions of Higher Learning (IHL) such as Great Zimbabwe University (GZU).

The paper focuses on the impact of the Inter-denominational (Inter-D) Sunday services at GZU. The study argues that the University has adopted a monolithic approach to issues of faith on campus to the detriment of adherents of other religious persuasions. Evidently, belonging to a non-Christian religion attracts stigma at GZU. It is further argued that it is a misconception to regard both students and staff of GZU as solely Christians. This study situates the enduring over-arching influence of Christianity at GZU through the Inter-D Sunday services at an institution whose niche is to be the centre of excellence in Creative Arts, Culture and Technology. The study seeks to evaluate the extent to which the dominance of Christianity is done at the expense of other religious traditions, particularly ATRs as niche bearer.

The paper further observes that even within Christianity itself, the Inter-D Sunday services tend to be in favour of the mainline religious group (which themselves are not homogenous given existence of broad divisions of the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant Churches in Zimbabwe) to the detriment of the other Christian categories with different doctrinal, liturgical, polity and sacramental elements. Therefore, these churches have different attributes in their history, organisation, beliefs and practices. This shows that Christianity itself is plural. Commenting on the situation in South Africa, Professor David Chidester rightly asseverates thus: "The existence of multiple Christianities is certainly obvious in South Africa" (Chidester 1987:10 cited in Lubbe 1990:209). It is nothing less than what Welbourn (1965:15) described as an 'ecclesiastical jigsaw', a reality that manifests in Zimbabwe in general and at GZU in particular. In this study two terms are necessary to define within the framework of the research. These are Denomination and Inter-denominational. Denomination

refers to a branch or group of churches with its own individual tradition. Interdenominational refers to people of all faith walks worshipping God and Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour without an affiliation to a religious group or name. Such services try to minister to all denominations through integration.

2.0 Research Methodology

The study corroborated three different research techniques to gather data. These are namely, in-depth interviews, questionnaires and participant observation. The population for the study were mainly students and staff (both academic and non-academic) at the main campus of GZU located at Masvingo Teachers' College and students and staff at the GZU campus located at Masvingo Polytechnic College. The triangulation of these methods enabled the researchers to interact with participants and phenomena under focus from different angles. The interview technique allowed the researchers to get first hand information from participants pertaining to their experiences on Inter-D Sunday services at GZU. The interview method also has the strength of allowing the researcher to cross-check responses with the interviewees where necessary (Haralambos and Holborn 2008). Questionnaires were also administered to participants. Initially, 100 questionnaires were distributed to respondents. However, out of the 100 (100%), 79 (79%) of the questionnaires were completed in full and returned to the researchers. This was regarded by the researchers as a good feedback that could be a basis for drawing conclusions on the study. The study also utilised participant observation taking advantage of the fact that they are employees (lecturers) of GZU. In a way, as 'insiders' to the institution many observations have been made on the issue of Inter-D Sunday services at GZU even well before a formal investigation had been launched through this study. The technique of observation has the advantage of providing the investigators an opportunity to tap relevant data in overt and covert ways (Haralambos and Holborn 2008). The importance of this method is aptly captured in the statement that 'all research is observational'. Fraenkel and Wallen (1996:446) say that observational research portrays what is observed or recorded in all of its richness. Thus, this technique can work smoothly with other instruments such as interviews and assists one to obtain a valid picture of social reality.

3.0 Religious Picture in Zimbabwe: A Melting-pot of Faiths

As has been noted above, Zimbabwe is a home to a plethora of religious traditions such as African Traditional Religions, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Bahai Faith and Rastafari Faith (Chitando 2010). Christianity claims up to 80% of Zimbabwe population. Statistics on the religious identity in Zimbabwe estimates that Christianity (including syncretic forms has about 9 million (75%) of the population; African Traditional Religions has about 2,4 million (20%); Islam has about 100 000 (1%); other religions have about 100 000 (1%) and Non-

Religious have about 300 000 (3%). However, these percentages are approximate due to emigration factors due to the Zimbabwe crisis (<http://www.relzim.org> Date Accessed: 21/10/2011). The estimated current population of Zimbabwe ranges from between 10 and 12 million.

Historically, there are three major traditions, namely, (a) The Roman Catholic Church; (b) The Reformed or Protestant Churches and Groups; and (c) The Orthodox Churches as tabulated in **Table 1** below that gives an overview of the Christian churches.

Table 1: The Christian Churches: An Overview (Source: Jenkins 1995: 46).

Attributes	Roman Catholic Church	The Reformed or Protestant Churches & Groups	The Orthodox Churches
What are they?	All Christians who accept the authority of the Pope	All Christian groups who base their beliefs and practices on the Reformation. e.g. Methodists, Lutherans, Congregationalists, Pentecostal Churches, Salvation Army, AICs.	A group of national or regional churches sometimes called the 'eastern' Orthodox which originally accepted the leadership of the Patriarch of Constantinople. There are 15 Orthodox churches e.g. Russian, Greek, Rumanian.
How are they organized?	The Pope is the Head followed by cardinals, archbishops and priests. There are also some orders of monks & nuns.	Each denomination has its own local, national (and sometimes international) organisation. Most belong to the World	Each Church is self-governing and independent and run by its own Patriarch. Under him there are bishops and priests. They have monks

		Council of Churches.	and nuns but they do not have separate 'orders'.
What things do they emphasize?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The authority of the Pope; • To be the one true Church; • The seven sacraments of which the Mass is the most central. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The importance of the Bible, not the traditions of any Church; • The authority of the Bible does not need the Church to interpret it. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They have the 'true' faith, beliefs and practices handed down by Jesus Christ to his Apostles.

The above picture is made more complex by the existence of various Christian denominations in Zimbabwe classified under the following umbrella bodies:

- The Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC) – for the Roman Catholic Church.
- The Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) – for the Protestant mainline churches that also belongs to the World Council of Churches.
- The Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ) – for Pentecostal churches and Assemblies.
- The Apostolic Christian Council of Zimbabwe (ACCZ) – for the Apostolic and Zionist churches (The Sunday Mail 2010:D6; Verstraelen 1998).

At Great Zimbabwe University there are also a number of denominations that co-exist with membership from and students and staff alike. The various denominations include Roman Catholic Church, Reformed Church in Zimbabwe, United Methodist Church, Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, United Church of Christ in Zimbabwe, Church of Christ, Salvation Army, Seventh Day Adventist, Apostolic Faith Mission, ZAOGA, United Family International, Rivers of Life, Christ Embassy, Zion Christian Church, Johane Marange Apostolic Church, Johane Masowe ye Chishanu and Johane Masowe ye Nyeredzi Nomwe, to

just mention a few. On this basis these are Christians of different shades. Their attendance of Sunday services at GZU ideally forms the Inter-denominational worshipping group that occupies the heart of this presentation.

4.0 The Niche of GZU: A Multicultural Vision

Great Zimbabwe University has a multicultural vision that has to be fulfilled through its curriculum offered in various faculties and departments. The University's main vision is summed up thus: 'to be a centre of excellence in Creative Arts, Culture and Technology'. In its mission, the University seeks "to provide a learning environment for the search of new knowledge and experiences through creativity and cultural enrichment as a strategy for solving real life developmental and existential problems" (Great Zimbabwe University Brochure 2011). This is a fertile ground to develop a multi-faith environment for spiritual development of staff and students through the relevant faculties and departments. The University further seeks to play a leading role, not only in the restoration and preservation of African culture, but also in utilising such cultural heritage as a spring board for building a promising future in the local and global context. Through its curriculum, the University promotes African culture, reinforce the dignity and self-confidence and social identity that undergird national unity in Zimbabwe.

The birth of GZU cannot be detached from the historical relevance of the famous UNESCO World heritage site, Great Zimbabwe Monuments, after which the institution was named. Although currently, the University is operating at Masvingo Teachers' College, 7 kilometres east of Masvingo town, there are long term plans to relocate the institution's main Campus near the Great Zimbabwe Monuments, 30 kilometres from Masvingo City. In this manner, the birth of GZU heralds a new era in higher education. The University would bring a paradigm shift to the education system covering a wide range of disciplines that are adequately and vehemently anchored to African culture (Great Zimbabwe University Brochure 2011). This would help in instilling confidence of indigenes of Zimbabwe to apply and exploit their own creative genius in a highly competitive information society.

The University's niche is useful in developing a home grown spiritual and moral development hinged on acculturation and indigenisation which would promote self-identity, nationalism and national unity (Haar, Moyo and Nondo 1992). Thus, the academic, non-academic and administrative departments all work towards one goal to propel the University's multi-cultural vision. Of special importance for this study is the Division of

Student Affairs with diverse services such as catering, sports, Counselling, HIV and AIDS Life Skills, Accommodation and above all Chaplaincy that offers the Inter-D Sunday services. Issues of moral and spiritual development of the University community are catered by the Chaplaincy section which is manned by a Senior Ecumenical Chaplain who administers and coordinates the Inter-D Sunday services which are at the core of this research.

5.0 Inter-Denominational Sunday Services at GZU: Monolithic Spiritualism?

The research findings on the Inter-D Sunday services at GZU cannot be isolated from the existing influence of Christianity in Zimbabwe. Ever since the colonial period, Christianity has been dominant in all major areas of human existence including IHL in Zimbabwe. At GZU a monolithic spiritualism is being pursued through the complex fashion of Inter-D Sunday services which are essentially Theo-centric and Christo-centric in nature. Through participant observation and a documentary analysis of the Inter-D Sunday services programme issued to guide liturgical proceedings, the study established that Theo-centric and Christo-centric pastoral teachings are pursued perennially at GZU. The Inter-D programme normally stretches from 0745 hours to 0900 hours. The Inter-D Sunday services follow a particular theme in each session. For example, 'Sanctified Wisdom' was chosen to form the basis of the sermon presented on 21 August 2011 in NB2 at GZU main campus.

Attendance at the Inter-D Sunday services at GZU is not compulsory but both students, academic and non-academic staff are welcome. Invariably, it is normally those few students and staff that reside in University accommodation who normally attend the Inter-D Sunday services. Responses of student and staff participants to the administered questionnaire provided varied perspectives about the degree of popularity of the Inter-D services. A total of 34 (43%) agreed that the Inter-D Sunday services are popular and well attended. Twenty-five (32%) were neutral whilst 20 (25%) disagreed to the notion that the Inter-D Sunday services were popular and well attended. These findings from questionnaires on the popularity of Inter-D services show a slight divergence from the general feedback gathered from the interviews. This is because the majority who were interviewed on this aspect felt that the services are not well attended and not popular due to various logistical reasons such as failure by the University to provide transport and adequate accommodation.

The study also established through questionnaires that the contribution of the transport factor towards the attendance at the Inter-D Sunday services. A total of 16 (20%) noted that GZU provides transport to enable students to attend Inter-D Sunday services. Whilst 25 (32%) were neutral, 38 (48%) felt that GZU does not supply transport for the same cause. Through interviewees, some participants confirmed that interested students in University residence at Masvingo Polytechnic Campus are not able to attend the Inter-D services due to unavailability of transport. Thus, transport seems to significantly hinder the attendance at the Inter-D Sunday services at GZU.

The study also sought to detect the views of participants on the spiritual adequacy of the Inter-D Sunday services to the University community. From the questionnaire responses, 28 (35%) agreed that the services adequately provides the spiritual needs at GZU. On the contrary, 19 (24%) suggested that the Inter-D services were inadequate, whilst 32 (41%) were neutral. Along the same lines, the interviews and participant observation noted that the Inter-D Sunday services were spiritually defunct. One major concern that was raised was that the structure of the Inter-D Sunday services did not factor in the heterogeneous nature of those students and staff who identify themselves as Christians. For instance, there are diverse polity, doctrinal, liturgical, confessional dimensions from which students and staff hail from. In real terms, participants have varied religious backgrounds such as Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, AIC, Evangelical and Congregational. Furthermore, some participants revealed that without mass prayer that they practice in their usual churches they felt spiritually deprived. This was contrary to some respondents who felt that a feature like mass prayer is unwarranted and suspicious. It is also interesting to note that some of those from AICs and the Seventh Day Adventist felt out of place within the frame work of Inter-D Sunday services particularly because their *Sabatha* (Sabbath day) fell on a Saturday. In the light of the above findings, it can be argued that the Inter-D Sunday services need restructuring in order to effectively meet the spiritual needs of the University community. This position was strongly authenticated by the questionnaire responses in 48 (61%) agreed to the restructuring move in contradistinction to a paltry 8 (10%) who disagreed to restructuring whilst 23 (29%) expressed neutrality. Thus, the integration of people from different denominations under one service is largely flawed.

Another general observation established through the research is that GZU through the Inter-D Sunday services specifically cater for Christians at the expense of believers of other religions. The questionnaires showed that 37 (47%) agreed that the Inter-D Sunday services pursue a spiritual monolithic agenda to the detriment of other religious traditions. Whilst 16 (20%) disagreed to the above notion, 25 (32%) were neutral. These findings tally with what was established through interviews and observation. In this way, GZU must cultivate and promote religious pluralism within the University at all costs. This is substantiated by questionnaire responses in which an 64 (81%) overwhelmingly agreed that GZU needs to promote religious pluralism whilst only 4 (5%) thought that there was no need to cultivate and promote religious pluralism at the University. Only 11(14 %) expressed neutrality to the question. These results suggest that the University has to re-strategise its operations in order to develop a multicultural environment that would match the University's multicultural vision. Indeed, from the interviews and observation, some participants associated Inter-D Sunday services with Christianity that served as a handmaiden of colonialism. Majority of participants noted that even to this day, Christianity enjoys a privileged position at the expense of religions. This resonates with the existing literature whereby Christianity is highly utilised at state occasions such as Independence Day celebrations, Defence Forces Day celebrations, Heroes Day celebrations as well as proceedings at the burial of National heroes at the National shrine in Zimbabwe. At GZU, the annual Graduation ceremony officiated by the Head of State and Government is preceded by the University prayer which is repeated by the Senior Ecumenical Chaplain. This is an epitome of a monolithic spiritualism which stultifies the spiritual exposition of people of other religions which triggers the puzzling question: where are the 'ancestors' for the local indigenes in this maze? In fact, the Inter-D services are sanctioned by the GZU authorities as if no other religions exist on campus, yet there are African traditionalists, Rastas, Muslims, African Jews, Buddhists and Bahais, among others.

In the light of the above observations, the study also established that non-Christians at GZU are stigmatised and looked down upon as inferior to Christians. This brings on board the centre-periphery dichotomy on the religious landscape that depicted the West and Christianity as the centre whilst Africa was the periphery associated with what was inferior, illogical and backward (Sibanda 2011:1). Thus, Africans were exposed to the inferiority and superiority complex. From questionnaires, the study established that 19 (24%) agreed that non-Christians are stigmatised and looked down upon as inferior. On the other hand, 46 (58%) disagreed with this notion but 14 (18%) were neutral to the question. However, from

the interviews and observation, the study established a contrary picture. The majority of participants affirmed that belonging to a religion other than Christianity attracted scorn and derision. A number of misleading terminologies that used to be employed in the colonial missionary historiography that looked at everything non-Christian as 'primitive', 'heathen' and 'superstition' (Ray 1976; Sibanda 2011:14), have also featured among students and staff with a Christian 'holier than thou' perspective. It was further established that the majority of followers of non-Christian religions at the time of filling in enrolment forms to join the University provide false details on the aspect of their biographical data concerning religious affiliation in fear of being stigmatised as 'devilish' and 'pagan'. This makes the 58% as a 'halo effect' that complies with the 'standard' religion – Christianity. In fact, Mndende (1999) rightly observes that most people who claim to be Christians are mere 'Sunday Christians' because during the rest of the week they often fall back to their indigenous practices. Thus, in a way, GZU's vision to be the centre of Creative Arts, Culture and Technology is not fully complemented through the Inter-D Sunday services. From the questionnaires it was established that 40 (51%) agreed that the University's niche is not fully complemented through the Inter-D Sunday services. On the contrary, only 14 (18%) disagreed to this notion whilst 26 (33%) remained neutral. In this vein therefore, the Inter-D Sunday services needs to be 'decolonised' so that it adequately meets the spiritual and moral needs of the University populace for it to go in tandem with the GZU niche. Similarly, interviews confirmed the need to inculturate, indigenise, acculturate and adapt conservative Christian teachings so that they suit the local context. The Inter-D Sunday services should express a theology that mirrors African experience, a theology 'cooked in and African pot' (Fiedler, Gundani and Mijoga 1998; Maposa 2011) which is palatable to the indigenes.

6.0 Where are the Ancestors? : Some Theological Reflections

Religion in IHL is not immune to existential challenges. This is particularly true of the experiences of the Inter-D Sunday services at GZU which is a multi-faith cultural environment. Firstly, the study established that there is no adequate spiritual enrichment within the framework of the current GZU Inter-D Sunday services. There is a heterogeneous picture within the Christian camp. The different polity, doctrinal, confessional and liturgical dimensions complicates the entire 'ecclesiastical jigsaw' when understood in the framework of Inter-D Sunday services at GZU. For instance, it is a stark reality that one would never worship with a Seventh Adventist Day member in the Inter-D Sunday services because they strictly adhere to their doctrinal teaching stresses Saturday as the Sabbath and a day of

worship as opposed to Sunday (Makahamadze and Sibanda 2008:295). This is a point of theological reflection that calls for the unbundling of the integrated approach pursued through the Inter-D Sunday services. Put differently, the University may have to allocate different slots for each denomination that exists at GZU such that each church grouping is assigned separate times and venue. This arrangement is typical of other IHL in Zimbabwe such as the University of Zimbabwe.

Secondly, another level of spiritual fulfilment among members of the University community is hinged on making the Inter-D Sunday services relevant to the existential needs of all people. On a theological note, there is need to openly practice ‘mission by translation’ in which African culture enriches and is instrumental in communicating the word of God (Sanneh 1989: 90). The modes of translating the gospel can be executed through different avenues such as the use of music, dance, instruments, message and language of sermon delivery. The Roman Catholic Church provides a typical example of a denomination that has tried to acculturate and indigenise Christianity since the Vatican II Council. Such a contextualised stance is aptly summarised in the words of J. Lenherr cited in Makahamadze and Sibanda (2008:308) with reference to music thus: the “hymns are often far from being perfect (*and*) should give an incentive to African Christians not to accept these hymns as a legacy so sacred that it never should be change, but to improve on them and to express their faith in ever new ways as the spirit guides”. This suggests that Christianity should be dynamic and contextually relevant to the spiritual needs of the Africans. However, in the case of the GZU Inter-D Sunday services are held consistently in English language such that hymns and sermons are done in this foreign language. For instance, in one of the sessions that the researchers attended during participant observation hymns that were sung in English include: ‘What a friend we have in Jesus’ and ‘Rock of Ages cleft for me’. Furthermore, there was no use of *ngoma* (drums), *hosho* (rattles), *mbira* (thumb piano) or *hwamanda* (trumpets) in context of GZU Inter-D Sunday services. It is these same instruments that would promote the niche of the University. The use of such instruments at GZU would imply a real translation of Christianity that immerses itself in the pool of indigenous African heritage. The Theological orientation must be decolonised for it to send a relevant message within the University community. There should be a reciprocal interface between African culture (connected to the ancestral roots) and the Christian message that is to be translated in the local context failure of which one is justified to ask together with Bourdillon (1997) thus: ‘Where are the ancestors’ in such a labyrinth?

7.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The University end to maintain a colonial legacy that elevates Christianity but militates against multiculturalism that would propel its niche. The study noted that Inter-D Sunday services at GZU are not very popular and not well attended because of some logistical reasons such as non availability of transport. Another challenge is the existence of people of different doctrinal orientation who are made to worship under the same service. Therefore, the University largely fails to meet the real spiritual needs of the University community. It is fallacious to imagine that people in the postcolonial era would continue to suffer stigmatisation if they were non-Christians in an IHL. In the light of the above, the study recommends that the Inter-D Sunday services at GZU needs restructuring that would allow different denominations to operate independently to enhance spiritual and moral development of students and staff. The University also needs to urgently cultivate and promote religious pluralism and social identity in Zimbabwe. Finally, the University must fight very hard to ensure that the gospel is made relevant to the local context.

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