



Institutionalizing religion in state politics: A comparative study of King Solomon and Edgar Chagwa Lungu

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how Lungu's institutionalization of Christianity reflects the religious and political dynamics of King Solomon in shaping state-church relations in Zambia. Guided by a comparative study approach, the study used desk research for data collection and triangulated thematic and comparative analyses to interpret the findings. The findings revealed that, though situated in distinct religio-political contexts, both Solomon's and Lungu's institutionalization of religion in state politics reinforced national identity, thereby contributing to their political legitimacy. Solomon's adherence to the Mosaic Law and his temple project served as mechanisms for statecraft and for legitimizing authority. Similarly, by actualizing the 1991 declaration of Zambia as a Christian nation, Lungu strengthened Zambia's religio-political identity and gained political mileage. Unfortunately, the findings also demonstrate that Lungu instrumentalized Christianity for political expediency, which consequently sabotaged the church's prophetic role in political affairs. The study, therefore, challenges the church to always examine theoretical and practical implications before espousing religio-political policies to avert co-optation and partisan politics. It also underscores that Christianity must serve as the power for societal transformation as it refines spiritual, ethical, and political dynamics and must not be leveraged as an apparatus for legitimacy. Consequently, this research contributes to ongoing discourses on the intersection of religion and politics by providing an analytical model that compares biblical narratives with contemporary political leadership in Africa and beyond.

Keywords: Politics and Religion, Solomon, Edgar Lungu, Political Legitimacy, Zambia

INTRODUCTION

Throughout human history, the fusion of religion and politics has been marked by both convergence and tension in the pursuit of the common good. The annals of history attest that some politicians institutionalize religion¹ in state politics to reinforce national identity and social cohesion for their political legitimacy.² King Solomon and Edgar Chagwa Lungu exemplify such political leaders. In ancient Israel, Solomon emerged as

¹ Institutionalization of religion herein refers to national recognition and formal integration of religion in state politics.

² Jeanet Sinding Bentzen and Gunes Gokmen, "The Power of Religion," *Journal of Economic Growth* 28, no. 1 (March 28, 2023): 45–78, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10887-022-09214-4>.

a legitimate ruler by upholding and actualizing the Mosaic and Davidic Covenants as fundamental frameworks undergirding the governance of the nation. His integration of religion in state politics was evident in the construction of the temple and in the collective observance of religious practices (Deut 12:5-7; 2 Sam 7:12-13; 1 Kgs 1-11). Similarly, predicated on the 1991 declaration of Zambia as a Christian nation, Lungu sought to institutionalize Christianity. His efforts were evident in, among other initiatives, the declaration of the National Day of Prayer, Fasting, Repentance, and Reconciliation (hereafter National Day of Prayer).³ His policies reinforced a symbiotic relationship between the state and the church in the pursuit of national interest. Lungu's religio-political legacy ultimately remains unforgettable in the history of state-church relations in Zambia.

Unfortunately, a critical examination of state-church relations during Lungu's presidency (2016–2021) reveals that the church was drawn into partisan politics, compromising its prophetic witness in society. Lungu and the Patriotic Front (PF) appealed to religious authority for political legitimacy rather than for moral and spiritual transformation.⁴ Moreover, under Lungu, the PF and its rival, the United Party for National Development (UPND), leveraged Christianity as an apparatus for political expediency during their electoral struggles. For example, both parties peddled religious rhetoric in populist ways as they were campaigning during the 2016 general elections.⁵ The interplay between religion and politics in Lungu's era demonstrates God's sovereignty and human frailty, just as it was under Solomon in ancient Israel. Against this backdrop, this study aims to explore how Lungu's institutionalization of Christianity reflects the religious and political dynamics of Solomon's kingship in shaping state-church relations in Zambia. The study avers that, by institutionalizing religion in state politics, Lungu instrumentalized Christianity for political expediency, which consequently sabotaged the church's prophetic role in political affairs.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in three interpretive lenses, namely, path dependence, functionalist theory of religion, and Max Weber's theory of legitimate authority. The path dependence theory states that history matters as past decisions or events create trajectories that constrain later choices, influencing institutions or actors to operate within particular paths.⁶ The study applied this perspective to identify historical continuities and inherited religio-political patterns that shaped leadership decisions in each case. In exploring Solomon's kingship, this theory facilitated the examination of the Mosaic and Davidic Covenants as inherited foundations that informed Solomon's religious and political choices (Deut 12:5-7; 2 Sam 7:12-13; 1 Kgs 2:3). It was also operationalized to trace how the 1991 declaration and the established state-church relations created a historical trajectory that influenced Lungu's presidency and policies. Secondly, the functionalist theory posits that religion functions as an integrative power in society because of its ability to shape collective beliefs. It further stresses that religion stabilizes the social order by fostering social belonging and collective consciousness in society.⁷ Using this theoretical lens, the study analyzed how Israel achieved social cohesion and political stability through the centralization of worship in the temple under Solomon's reign and how the observance of rituals and festivals strengthened collective religious identity in Israel (1 Kgs 6-8). The functionalist theory was also employed to explain how public Christian practice bolstered the Zambian national identity and collective consciousness during Lungu's presidency.⁸

³ Austin Cheyeka, "Actualising the Declaration of Zambia as a Christian Nation, 2016 to 2021," *ZANGO: Zambian Journal of Contemporary Issues* 35 (2022): 18–41.

⁴ Chammah J Kaunda, "Christianising Edgar Chagwa Lungu: The Christian Nation, Social Media Presidential Photography and 2016 Election Campaign," *STJ | Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 4, no. 1 (June 30, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.17570/stj.2018.v4n1.a11>.

⁵ Nelly Mwale, "Religion and Politics in Zambia: Investigating the Religious Discourse in the 2016 Electoral Campaigns," *ZANGO: Zambian Journal of Contemporary Issues* 32 (2016): 17–42.

⁶ Paul Pierson, "Increasing Returns, Path Dependence and the Study of Politics," *American Political Science Review* 94, no. 2 (2000): 251–267, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2586011>.

⁷ Stanley Madonsela, "Sociological Perspectives on Social Cohesion as the Principal Requirement for Social Stability," *South African Review of Sociology* 48, no. 3 (July 3, 2017): 84–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21528586.2017.1299040>.

⁸ Adriaan van Klinken, "Religion, Sexualities and Politics," In *Religion and Politics in Post-colonial Zambia*, ed. Chammah Kaunda and Marja Hinfelaar, (Leeds: Fortress Press, 2020), 97.

Lastly, Weber's theory states that authority is considered legitimate when subordinates accept it as rightful and justified rather than as a result of mere coercion or exploitation. Weber identifies three types of legitimate authority: traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal.⁹ This theory was used to analyze the sources and expressions of political legitimacy in both cases. It enabled the discussion to scrutinize how Solomon legitimized and sustained his authority through the Mosaic Law, religious traditions, and his charismatic personality characterized by exceptional wisdom (1 Kgs 4:34, 10:23-25). Further, the study utilized this theory to discuss how Lungu's political legitimacy was mobilized through the 1991 declaration and by portraying himself as a humble Christian president and constitutional leader. Weber's theory, therefore, provided a framework for exploring how the two politicians drew on the three types of authority to mobilize legitimacy leaders in their respective contexts. Therefore, the chosen methodology and theoretical framework complemented each other in ensuring that data analysis is both systematic and coherent.

METHODOLOGY

This research employed a qualitative comparative study approach to explore the phenomenon under discussion.¹⁰ This design enabled the juxtaposition of Solomon and Lungu to effectively explore the institutionalization of religion in both political contexts. Solomon and Lungu were selected as comparative cases because they both led within contexts where religion was central to national identity and political legitimacy. Moreover, Zambian politicians and Christian nationalists have also often portrayed the nation as a covenant state modeled on biblical Israel, interpreting presidential authority as a modern echo of Israel's kingship. The covenant nation framework, for instance, portrayed Lungu as a man anointed and chosen by God and legitimized his authority by likening him to King David and King Solomon.¹¹ However, Lungu's presidency more closely reflected the religious-political symbolism associated with Solomon than that of David, thereby justifying the selection of the cases.

Furthermore, the study used a desk research method for data collection, drawing on relevant published sources, including the Bible, journal articles, books, and online media reports.¹² This method was selected because it proved more convenient and efficient than other methods of data collection, such as interviews. It is, however, crucial to acknowledge that this method was limited by its reliance on published sources, which excluded nuanced firsthand perspectives and lived experiences on the topic under discussion. Thus, to mitigate the limitations of desk research and to minimize researcher bias, the study explored diverse data sources and objectively evaluated both supportive and critical perspectives on Solomon and Lungu. A multi-layered theoretical framework was also systematically deployed during data interpretation to ensure the credibility of the findings.

Finally, data were interpreted through triangulation of thematic and comparative approaches. The following procedures were utilized in conducting thematic analysis: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.¹³ A comparative analysis was subsequently conducted using a structured approach. First, the thematic findings from each case were juxtaposed, and the theoretical framework was then applied to guide the identification and evaluation of the comparison dimensions. Second, similarities and differences were analyzed and reported.¹⁴ The integration of the two methods ultimately provided a nuanced understanding of the institutionalization of religion in both contexts.

⁹ Traditional authority derives legitimacy from long-established customs and traditions, charismatic authority from a leader's personal qualities, and rational-legal authority from the established legal framework. Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 212-245.

¹⁰ Elnaz Iranifard and Roudsari Robab Latifnejad, "Comparative Research: An Old yet Unfamiliar Method," 2022.

¹¹ Naomi Haynes, "Presidents, Priests, and Prophets: Covenantal Christian Nationalism and the Challenge of Biblical Analogy," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 29, no. 1 (March 14, 2023): 85–102, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.13866>.

¹² Barbra Bassot, *Doing Qualitative Desk-Based Research: A Practical Guide to Writing an Excellent Dissertation* (Bristol, BS: Bristol University Press, 2022).

¹³ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.

¹⁴ Iranifard and Roudsari, "Comparative Research," 3318.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Solomon and the Institutionalization of Religion

Solomon institutionalized religion in state politics by grounding his kingship in the Mosaic Law. Enthroned under a theocratic monarchy, God commanded Solomon to obey the Law as a necessary condition for the continuity of the Davidic dynasty and for kingdom prosperity (1 Kgs 2:1-4; 3:14; 6:12; 8:25; 9:4-5). He therefore inherited and upheld the Law as the traditional, normative framework that informed his politics in Israel and the surrounding kingdoms. His obedience was exemplified in the wise judgment that he delivered between the two women in 1 Kings 3:16-28, reflecting the principles of justice and impartiality inscribed in the Law (Ex 18:21-26; Deut 16:18-20). This illustrates that Solomon's judicial administration intentionally drew on the Mosaic Law to reinforce ethical practice in the national court system. Additionally, he publicly reaffirmed the Mosaic Law and entreated Israel to walk in obedience to the statutes of YHWH (1 Kgs 8:56-61). His adherence was evident in his prayers, burnt offerings, and the observance of festivals. Solomon's religious commitments signified covenantal fidelity and dependence on God (1 Kgs 3; 8:12-66; 9:1-9). Ultimately, the Law functioned as the societal reference point and religious guide in promoting social cohesion and strengthening national religio-political identity.

Secondly, Solomon institutionalized religion through the construction of the monumental temple in Jerusalem. Guided by the Mosaic and Davidic Covenants, he set out to build the temple for the LORD (Deut 12:5-14; Sam 7:12-13). He outsourced building materials by establishing a strategic treaty with Hiram, king of Tyre. He then drafted conscripted labor¹⁵ from all Israel to collaborate with Hiram's men in organizing cedar planks and high-grade stones for the construction of the temple in Jerusalem (1 Kgs 5). As chronicled in 1 Kings 6 and 7:13-51, the temple consisted of intricate architectural designs furnished with gold, silver, and bronze. It was also furnished with religious symbolism as it contained equipment and structures for the fulfilment of the priestly and Levitical roles enshrined in the Mosaic Law (1 Kgs 6:13-37; 2 Chron 8:14-15; Ex 38:1; Num 8:14-15). The project was completed over a seven-year period because of its sophisticated designs (1 Kgs 6:38). Additionally, the temple was later complemented by Solomon's iconic palace, which, among other critical structures, included the Hall of Justice, wherein he served as judge over Israel (1 Kgs 7:1-12). The palace was completed in thirteen years. Therefore, the two masterpieces signified the necessary interplay between religious life and politics.

After the completion of the two projects, the consecration of the temple began. Solomon ordered the placement of the Ark of the Covenant into the Most Holy Place, and the glory of God filled the temple (1 Kgs 8:1-11). Subsequently, he extolled YHWH for fulfilling the Davidic promises about the building of the house of the name of the LORD (1 Kgs 8:12-21). He then proceeded to offer a prayer for the dedication of the temple, and he presented seven petitions before the LORD, as highlighted in Table 1. These petitions were theologically grounded, and they all signified Israel's resolve to remain in communion with God through repentance and the forgiveness of sin. Moreover, following the dedication of the temple, God appeared to Solomon and answered his prayer. He simultaneously charged Solomon to observe the Mosaic Law for the continuity of his dynasty or to face consequences for disobedience (1 Kgs 9:1-9). Therefore, applying the path dependence framework to the foregoing reveals that Solomon's kingship was influenced by the earlier Mosaic and Davidic trajectories (Deut 12; Num 18; Lev 1-7; 2 Sam 7:1-17; 1 Chron 22:2-19; 1 Chron 28:2-10).

¹⁵ In Ancient Near East, monarchs typically imposed conscripted labor for monumental state projects, including temples and palaces because they took several years to complete and therefore required thousands of skilled laborers. Unfortunately, forced labor was sometimes exploitative, especially to second-class citizens. Cf. Péter Jenei, "Subjugating and Exploiting the Second-Class Population of the Ancient Israelite State: The Case of Forced Labour (עֶבֶד) in Light of the Population Economy of Ancient Israel," *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 45, no. 1 (2019): 57–72. <http://hdl.handle.net/2263/73746>.

Table 1: The Seven Petitions of Solomon During the Dedication of the Temple in 1 Kings 8

No.	Petition Theme	Reference	Theological Emphasis
1.	Justice in personal disputes	vv. 31-32	God as the righteous judge and the vindicator
2.	Forgiveness after national defeat resulting from sin	vv. 33-34	God as the just restorer of his people
3.	Relief from drought caused by sin	vv. 35-36	God as the sovereign ruler of the creation and forgiver of sin
4.	Deliverance from national calamities	vv. 37-40	YHWH as the merciful God who takes away national calamities
5.	Prayer of the foreigner	vv. 41-43	God's universal sovereignty and inclusivity of all nations
6.	Victory in battle	vv. 44-45	Dependence on God for victory
7.	Restoration after captivity	vv. 46-53	YHWH's covenantal faithfulness, forgiveness, and hope for restoration

Source: Author's own compilation

Religious and Political Benefits

Solomon's covenantal contributions yielded critical religious benefits in Israel. Shifting from nomadic tabernacles and fragmented worship in high places,¹⁶ the temple centralized and standardized Israel's religious practices, such as priestly services and worship (Deut 12; 1 Kings 3:2-4; 2 Chron 7:12). The Ark of the Covenant and the glory in the temple symbolized the stability of YHWH's relationship with Israel (1 Kgs 8:6; 10:13; 27-30). The temple drew international recognition because it functioned as the place of prayer and sacrifice not only for Israelites but also for foreigners who feared the LORD (2 Chron 6:32-33). A functionalist analysis, therefore, reveals that collective religious practices and beliefs served as crucial resources for fostering national social cohesion and cultural identity.

Solomon's integration of religion also brought political benefits in Israel. The peace and prosperity during his reign proclaimed political and socio-economic stability rooted in covenantal fidelity (1 Kgs 2:1-4; 4:20-25; 5:3-4; 10:14-29). The peaceful ambience in Israel during Solomon's reign typified the Messianic millennial reign, which will serve as the ultimate fulfilment of the Davidic covenant (1 Kgs 4:25; Isa 10:1-16; Rev 20:4-6). Additionally, his charismatic leadership and unmatched wisdom earned him fame and honor from all the queens and kings of the earth (1 Kgs 4:29-34; 10:1-13). During his kingship, Israelites witnessed the rebuilding of cities and military investments to enhance trade and to avert military attacks (1 Kgs 9:15-19; 10:26).¹⁷ Solomon also established marriage and vassalage alliances with other kingdoms (1 Kgs 3:1; 4:21; 5:1-12; 9:20-21). In the Ancient Near East, such alliances served as vital instruments for cultivating political diplomacy and military security, along with expanded imperial influence and international trade.¹⁸ Solomon had 700 wives, who were princesses, and 300 concubines (1 Kings 11:3). Solomon's marriage

¹⁶ In the Ancient Near East, worship in high places was often linked to idolatry (Deut 12:1-4). However, YHWH accepted Israel's fragmented worship and sacrifices in high places whenever they were exclusively directed to Him (Jdg 6:24-26; 1 Sam 9:12-14; 1 Kgs 3:1-4). Conversely, He condemned Israel's idolatrous practices in those places as they undermine the Mosaic Law, signifying that it was the object of worship that mattered and not the geographical location (Deut 6:4; 12:5-14; 16:5-6; 1 Kgs 11:7-8; 2 Kgs 22-23; 2 Chron 34:3-7).

¹⁷ However, the Mosaic Law prohibited kings from acquiring great numbers of horses, many wives, and excess silver and gold (Deut 17:16-17). The underlying rationale was that kings' hearts would turn away from YHWH if they had all those immense possessions, which would lead to idolatry or reliance on human sufficiency. Apparently, Solomon fell short in all the three aspects of the statute (1 Kgs 10: 14-27, 26; 11:3). It is nonetheless fascinating that, except for having many wives, Solomon is not condemned for his excess wealth nor military power. Could it be because his possessions were gifts from YHWH as promised in 1 Kings 3:13? Some scholars still argue that his excessive wealth and military power also contributed to his fall. Cf. Sean E. Cook, *The Solomon Narratives in the Context of the Hebrew Bible: Told and Retold* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017). 78.

¹⁸ Cook, *The Solomon Narratives in the Context of the Hebrew Bible*, 31-32.

alliances consequently contributed to the peace and to the wealth other kings gave him (1 Kgs 4:24; 10:24).¹⁹ Ultimately, the institutionalization of religion consolidated his kingship and established the trajectory of national flourishing throughout his reign.

Covenantal Apostasy and the Fall of Solomon

Despite his achievements, Solomon's later years were marked by apostasy, and this brought regrettable consequences in his kingship. The Law forbade Israel from entering into marriage or forging alliances with idolatrous nations, lest they turn the hearts of the Israelites toward worshiping foreign gods (Deut 7:1-6; 17:16-17). Unfortunately, Solomon entered into marriage alliances, and his foreign wives enticed him into idolatry, turning his heart away from the exclusive devotion to YHWH (Deut 6:4; 1 Kgs 11:1-4). His apostasy was evident in his worship of the gods of his foreign wives, including Ashtoreth, Milcom, Chemosh, and Molech. Transgression was also manifested through the construction of the high places for idolatry (1 Kgs 11:1-8). God told Solomon that he would tear his kingdom from him during the reign of his son, Rehoboam, because of disobedience (1 Kgs 11:9-13). He further raised adversaries against Solomon, including Hadad the Edomite, Rezon the son of Eliada, and Jeroboam the son of Nebat (1 Kgs 11:14-40). Additionally, Solomon's kingship was characterized by harsh conscripted labor and onerous taxation policies, as highlighted earlier. When Rehoboam became king, the people pleaded with him to lighten the harsh labor and the heavy yoke which Solomon had placed on them. Woefully, Rehoboam refused to listen to them and further promised that he would make the yoke heavier. His arrogance provoked the rebellion that culminated in the tearing of the kingdom into two: Israel and Judah (1 Kgs 12:1-24). Solomon's transgressions destabilized the theocratic monarchy, proving that political legitimacy and stability were contingent on the governing legal framework.

Lungu and the Institutionalization of Religion

Governing under a constitutional democracy and under the influence of the 1991 declaration by President Fridrick Chiluba, Lungu utilized civic engagement to institutionalize Christianity in Zambian politics. In 2015, he declared 18th October a public holiday for the National Day of Prayer.²⁰ The day was meant to acknowledge God's sovereignty while seeking His intervention in the national economic crises. In that period, there was a decline in copper prices, from which 70 percent of the nation's export earnings were derived. The Zambian currency also plunged to 45 percent against the United States Dollar. As if that was not enough, the nation was also experiencing falling water levels at hydropower plants, triggering severe load shedding.²¹ Lungu, therefore, entreated all Christians across the country to utilize the National Day of Prayer to seek God's intervention in navigating the national crises.

Following his clarion call, politicians and Christians from various denominations gathered to present national petitions to God, and they believed that He would deliver the country from its economic predicament. In such gatherings, they often invoked 2 Chronicles 7:14 (ESV): "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land."²² Lungu normalized presidential participation in observing the National Day of Prayer and continued imploring Zambians to pray for their country. As politicians and the church collectively presented national petitions to God every year, the event functioned as a state instrument for mainstreaming Christianity in politics. Thus, its integration into the national calendar and placement under state patronage illustrates that Lungu's public policy was rooted in Chiluba's declaration as a historical precedent.

¹⁹ However, as the study subsequently shows, despite the political and economic benefits, Solomon's alliances sabotaged his covenantal fidelity and brought calamity in the kingdom.

²⁰ "President Edgar Lungu Speaks at the Day of Prayer," Filmed October 2015, YouTube Video, 7:41, Posted by "Kamufisa Manchishi," October 18, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UDEw7zTM2rU>.

²¹ Kaunda, *Christianising Edgar Chagwa Lungu*, 227.

²² Mwale, *Religion and Politics in Zambia*, 29.

Lungu also institutionalized religion through the establishment of the Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs (MNGRA). He established the ministry in 2016 and appointed Rev. Godfridah Sumaili as minister. According to Part II, Article 8 of the Constitution of Zambia Amendment Act No. 2 of 2016, its mandate was to promote national values and to actualize the 1991 declaration for social transformation and sustainable development. The functions of the ministry also included facilitating inter-denominational dialogue, coordinating religious events, including the National Day of Prayer, and preserving Christian and religious sites across the country.²³ In 2020, it designed a policy accompanied by the 2020–2024 implementation plan with robust strategies for mainstreaming national values and principles²⁴ across the country and to operationalize the 1991 declaration.²⁵ The ministry, therefore, served as a strategic conduit through which religion was entrenched in politics and as a platform for the interaction between the state and the church through ecumenical bodies.²⁶ It further endeavored to realize a tangible Christian praxis across the country by integrating biblical values and practices in public policy and governance structures. For example, it planned to lobby the Parliament on the use of the Bible as a source document in the National Assembly.²⁷ However, not all these plans were realized because, after the PF lost the 2021 elections, the UPND dissolved the ministry and relegated it to a department under the Office of the Vice-President.

Furthermore, by entrenching religious rhetoric in the political landscape, Lungu reaffirmed the belief that Zambia must be governed by God-fearing leaders because it is a Christian nation. He leveraged religious rhetoric to frame his presidential addresses and electoral campaigns so much so that his political opponent, Hichilema, also felt compelled to use such language in mobilizing the Christian vote. Nelly Mwale attests that, during the 2016 electoral campaigns, Lungu instrumentalized religion to brand himself as a ‘humble,’ ‘God-fearing leader’ committed to mainstreaming a Christian ethos in state politics. Likewise, Hichilema branded himself as a *kachema musuma* (good shepherd) who would prioritize national interest over his own (John 10; Ezek 34). By drawing on the biblical character of the Prophet Elijah in addressing national crises, Hichilema also positioned himself as a leader who would address Zambia’s problems, including high unemployment levels, inflation, corruption, and electricity load-shedding.²⁸ Religious rhetoric and symbolism in politics reveal that Lungu’s presidency embedded Christianity as a cornerstone of political legitimacy and national identity.

Another way Lungu institutionalized Christianity was through regular presidential attendance at denominational gatherings, where he propagated the Christian nation ideology. He participated in worship and fundraising events convened by different local churches nationwide. On such occasions, he offered financial support and delivered religio-political remarks.²⁹ His speeches emphasized the need for the church and the state to collaborate in addressing national challenges. He further used social media to share his presidential photographs featuring members of the clergy. The presidential photography was strategically

²³ Cheyeka, “Actualising the Declaration of Zambia as a Christian Nation,” 26.

²⁴ National values include the following: morality and ethics; patriotism and national unity; democracy and constitutionalism; human dignity and social justice; good governance and integrity; management of natural and other resources; and declaration of Zambia as a Christian nation. Policy Monitoring and Research Centre, *Analysis of the National Guidance and Religious Affairs Policy* (Lusaka: Policy Monitoring and Research Centre, 2021): 8-13.

²⁵ Cheyeka, “Actualising the Declaration of Zambia as a Christian Nation,” 30.

²⁶ However, the creation of the MNGRA was received with mixed feelings among ecumenical bodies. While the Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia (EFZ), Independent Churches of Zambia, and Bishops Council of Zambia (BCZ) were excited that MNGRA would bolster state-church relations, the Zambia Conference of Catholic Bishops (ZCCB) and the Council of Churches in Zambia (CCZ) expressed concerns. ZCCB and CCZ held that the ministry would make the church susceptible to peddling partisan politics, and this would subsequently undermine its prophetic role. Secondly, considering the economic uncertainties in the country at that time, they were also concerned that the MNGRA was not a priority. Cf. Chammah J Kaunda and Marja Hinfelaar, *Competing for Caesar: Religion and Politics in Postcolonial Zambia* (Fortress Press, 2020). 33-36.

²⁷ Cheyeka, “Actualising the Declaration of Zambia as a Christian Nation,” 31.

²⁸ Mwale, *Religion and Politics in Zambia*, 26-27.

²⁹ Lusakatimes, “President Lungu Donates K250,000 to Ten Churches in Ndola,” *Lusakatimes*, January 2, 2019, accessed December 29, 2025, <https://www.lusakatimes.com/2019/01/02/president-lungu-donates-k250000-to-ten-churches-in-ndola/>.

tailored to depict his religiosity as an ideal leader to govern the country.³⁰ As a result, he reinforced the view that a Christian ethos was an integral part of good governance and moral order in Zambian society.

Finally, he sought to build a National House of Prayer (NHP) in Lusaka's Woodlands area to entrench religion into politics. Following its launch in 2015, the EFZ lauded Lungu because the NHP was interpreted as a stride in actualizing the Christian nation declaration.³¹ The project's architectural design was modeled, though with contemporary features, on Solomon's Temple as Lungu was inspired by the Old Testament motif of David and Solomon in building the house of the LORD in Israel. He instituted the Advisory Board, Fundraising, and Technical Committee comprising 12 members under the leadership of Bishop Joshua Banda to effectively execute the project. The board's mandate was to spearhead the construction of the NHP at a cost of five million US dollars.³² It spent two years strategizing and holding high-profile fundraising events regarding the project. However, the board faced accusations of financial mismanagement, resulting in its dissolution, and Lungu assigned the MNGRA to ensure the completion and operationalization of the NHP.³³

He envisioned that the NHP would serve as a national altar and a state mechanism for cultivating a culture of prayer in the country. He considered it a national instrument that would serve as the unifying place of worship and a landmark symbolizing Zambia's Christian nationhood. Moreover, it was meant to function as an interdenominational center where political actors and the church would meet to address religio-political challenges facing the country. This would also have enhanced the hosting of state-church events, such as national prayers. However, the project stalled because of critical challenges, including the economic impact of COVID-19 and tensions surrounding its purpose.³⁴ When the PF lost power, it was completely abandoned because it was outside the scope of the UPND's priorities.

Religious and Political Benefits

The integration of religion consolidated Zambia's religio-political landscape under Lungu's presidency. Through national prayers, Christianity offered collective solidarity as the country was facing insurmountable problems. State-sanctioned Christian practices symbolized that national reliance on God was an integral part of governance. Furthermore, the establishment of the MNGRA facilitated interactions between ecumenical bodies and the government in safeguarding public interest.³⁵ In fulfilling its mandate, the ministry consolidated the Zambian Christian nation identity. The 1991 declaration functioned as a religio-political ideology for statecraft and the enforcement of critical constitutional issues, such as sexuality laws. For example, the president was unequivocal on the constitutional prohibition of homosexuality and bestiality in Zambia, so much so that he was willing to reject any foreign aid tied to the promotion of depraved sexual practices.³⁶ A functionalist analysis of his tenure, therefore, shows that religion served as a vital resource for sustaining social cohesion and collective consciousness in Zambian society.

Additionally, by leveraging the Christian nation rhetoric and his public image, Lungu gained public endorsement, especially among the Pentecostal-Charismatic clergy and believers. His electoral victories in 2015 and 2016 rested partly on a 'humble' persona and religious discourse that resonated with the majority Christian electorate. Appealing to Zambia's long-standing Christian national identity helped the president cultivate political legitimacy because religion remains entrenched in both the public and private life of

³⁰ Kaunda, Christianising Edgar Chagwa Lungu, 218-233.

³¹ Lusakatimes, "Church Mother Bodies Welcome Government's Move to Build the 7,500-Seater House of Prayer," *Lusakatimes*, October 28, 2015, accessed December 20, 2025, <https://www.lusakatimes.com/2015/10/28/church-mother-bodies-welcome-governments-move-to-build-the-7500-seater-house-of-prayer/>.

³² Cheyeka, Zambia, a 'Christian nation' in Post Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) Era, 2011-2016, 169-170; Naomi Haynes, "Concretizing the Christian Nation: Negotiating Zambia's National House of Prayer," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 41, no. 2 (2021): 8-10, <https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201X-9127037>.

³³ Haynes, Concretizing the Christian Nation, 8.

³⁴ Cheyeka, Zambia, a 'Christian nation' in Post Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) Era, 2011-2016, 169-170.

³⁵ Kaunda and Hinfelaar, *Competing for Caesar: Religion and Politics in Postcolonial Zambia*. 32.

³⁶ Cheyeka, "Actualising the Declaration of Zambia as a Christian Nation," 26; Mwale, Religion and Politics in Zambia, 26-27. N.A. Voronina, "Evolution of the Concept of a Christian Nation in the Zambian Society," *Uchenie Zapiski Instituta Afriki RAN* 70, no. 1 (March 30, 2025): 162-74, <https://doi.org/10.31132/2412-5717-2025-70-1-162-174>.

Zambian society.³⁷ Moreover, his persona also facilitated the endorsement of the PF administration among the citizens who interpreted political authority using the democratic constitutional lens. Therefore, in Weberian terms, Lungu legitimized his political leadership as he drew on the three types of authority: charismatic, traditional, and rational-legal.

Religio-Political Concerns and the Fall of Edgar Lungu

Notwithstanding the positive outcomes, Lungu's presidency was marked by instances of manipulation of religion for political ends. Under Lungu's presidency, Christianity was instrumentalized to demonized political opponents. For example, during the 2016 electoral campaigns, the PF labelled their main opponent, Hakainde Hichilema of the UPND, as a satanist and persuaded Christians not to vote for him. Similarly, Hichilema and the UPND used religion to delegitimize the PF by labelling Lungu as a corrupt drunkard and by citing unchristian practices, such as hypocrisy, political violence, corruption, and tribalism within the PF administration.³⁸ Christianity was thus invoked for political expediency and for discrediting opponents by framing them as embodiments of moral or spiritual evil before the electorate. This contributed to the escalation of hostility between the PF and the UPND. This illustrates that religion may function as a powerful force for social cohesion, but when appropriated for selfish political interests, it can contribute to social tensions in society.

Furthermore, some sections of the church succumbed to partisan politics. Some clergy in various denominations publicly endorsed Lungu as their preferred candidate. They also accepted financial inducements and turned the pulpit into a platform for political campaigns.³⁹ Moreover, some pastors were complicit as they did not criticize the PF for its explicit political failures. For instance, Lawrence Banda, a UPND cadre, was killed by the PF during the 2019 by-elections in Kaoma, and his UPND colleagues decided to carry Banda's casket as they were protesting over his death in the streets of Lusaka. Instead of condemning the PF over political violence, Pastor Sunday Sinyangwe condemned Hichilema as he believed that the UPND's act was ritualistic and against the Christian national values. He further used his pulpit to declare that Hichilema would never become the president of the Republic of Zambia. His outrageous remarks sparked reactions from the citizenry and exacerbated political tensions between the PF and the UPND.⁴⁰ Additionally, under the auspices of Lungu, some Pentecostal-Charismatic believers established the 'Christians for Lungu Movement' to campaign for him and the PF in the 2016 general elections.⁴¹ Such precedents reveal that sections of the church were co-opted and compromised, shifting from fulfilling independent prophetic witness to peddling partisan politics.

Lungu's administration faltered because of persistent governance failures. Under his watch, Zambia became the first African country to default on its Eurobond debt in 2020, provoking public dissatisfaction over fiscal indiscipline.⁴² As was evident in the ruthless arrests of Hichilema and his cadres, Lungu's administration also thrived on police brutality and the weaponization of justice.⁴³ The regime normalized political violence against opponents during electoral campaigns, injuring and killing UPND cadres, such as Banda. Moreover, the regime also failed to address obnoxious caderism in public places, especially in bus

³⁷ Mwale, Religion and Politics in Zambia, 31-32; Cheyeka, Zambia, a 'Christian nation' in Post Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) Era, 2011-2016, 163-164.

³⁸ Mwale, Religion and Politics in Zambia, 33; Voronina, Evolution of the Concept of a Christian Nation in the Zambian Society 170; Kaunda, Christianising Edgar Chagwa Lungu, 236; Cheyeka, Zambia, a 'Christian nation' in Post Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) Era, 2011-2016, 165; Austin M. Cheyeka, "Christian Nationalism in Zambia, 1991 to 2024," in *The Routledge Handbook of Religion and Nationalism*, ed. Jeffrey Haynes (New York, NK: Routledge, 2026), 278, 10.4324/9781032643502-20.

³⁹ Kaunda, Christianising Edgar Chagwa Lungu, 236-237; Cheyeka, Zambia, a 'Christian nation' in Post Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) Era, 2011-2016, 163-165.

⁴⁰ "Pastor Sunday Sinyangwe Says Hichilema Won't Enter State House, Performing Rituals," Filmed October 2019, YouTube Video, 03:12, posted by "Zambian Portal," October 15, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kXfx6aVG3GE>.

⁴¹ Cheyeka, Zambia, a 'Christian nation' in Post Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) Era, 2011-2016, 165.

⁴² Mange Chileshe, *Legal Implications of the Eurobond Default* (Lusakatimes, 2021).accessed November 1, 2025, <https://www.lusakatimes.com/2021/02/08/legal-implications-of-the-eurobond-default/>.

⁴³ Lusakatimes, "Zambia Police Justifies the Handling of Female UPND Cadres in Luanshya Riot," *Lusakatimes*, October 7, 2016, accessed January 2, 2026, <https://www.lusakatimes.com/2016/10/07/zambia-police-justifies-handling-female-upnd-cadres-luanshya-riot/>.

stations and marketplaces across the country. The PF cadres taxed bus drivers and marketeers while terrorizing and assaulting ordinary citizens who sought to oppose them. Consequently, the proliferation and influence of cadres in public places subverted and implicated state institutions, including the police, judiciary, Ministry of Local Government, etc.⁴⁴

As if that was not enough, in 2020, the country faced incidents of ‘gassing,’ where ‘mysterious criminals’ sprayed poisonous chemicals in people’s homes. Such incidents affected about 1,198 people in 370 households in the Copperbelt Province and about 162 people in 30 houses in North-Western Province. Such cases were also reported in various townships in Lusaka, causing widespread unrest and mob justice against the suspects.⁴⁵ The perceived government failure to conduct apt investigations and prosecutions of the gassing suspects eroded public trust in the PF. The declining legitimacy culminated in Lungu’s defeat by Hichilema in the 2021 general elections. Therefore, the above flaws demonstrate that the integration of religion under the PF was more symbolic than transformational, given the disjunction between rhetoric and praxis.

Comparative Analysis

A comparative analysis reveals that both Solomon and Lungu operated within inherited religio-political trajectories that constrained and influenced their leadership choices. Solomon’s kingship was grounded in the Mosaic Law and Davidic Covenant, which were a historical normative framework for the continuation of the dynasty. Similarly, Lungu’s institutionalization initiatives were shaped by the legacy of the 1991 declaration that has positioned Christianity as an integral part of national identity. It is also critical to recall that Lungu often quoted God’s response to Solomon in 2 Chronicles 7:14 and that the NHP project was modelled after Solomon’s temple to echo Israel’s religious symbolism. This shows that Lungu also drew on Solomon’s leadership to bolster collective identity and to address national problems. Thus, both leaders illustrate path dependency because their religio-political decisions were shaped by earlier precedents.

Additionally, a functionalist view of Solomon’s kingship and Lungu’s presidency demonstrate that religion served as social capital for statecraft in both contexts. Religion provided a public moral framework and fostered social cohesion in Ancient Israel and Zambia. Further, collective religious actions exemplified solidarity in navigating spiritual and political challenges. In Solomon’s case, the dedication of the temple involved nationwide participation in worship and religious sacrifices. His petitions signified a shared dependence on YHWH in addressing national problems. Similarly, Lungu sought countrywide observance of the National Day of Prayer to show a collective acknowledgement of God’s sovereignty while seeking His intervention in the socio-economic issues facing the country. The examples reveal that religion and politics intersected in the collective pursuit of the common good under Solomon and Lungu.

Solomon and Lungu emerged as legitimate political leaders because they drew on the three types of legitimate authority. Solomon derived his authority from the Mosaic Law and religious traditions that undergirded his kingship and Israel’s relationship with YHWH (1 Kgs 3:5-14, 8:65). Israel and the surrounding kingdoms accepted his leadership as just and rightful not only for being a wise charismatic king but also for constructing the iconic temple and bringing prosperity in the land (1 Kgs 3; 6-8). Likewise, Lungu’s presidency was grounded in the Zambian constitution and in the Christian nation tradition. He also mobilized political support through his public persona and social esteem and was accepted because the integration of a Christian ethos in state politics resonated with Zambians.

Another notable similarity is that both faced the consequences of their respective transgressions. As previously discussed, Solomon established political and marriage alliances with other kingdoms, which brought idolatry into Israel and turned his heart from exclusive devotion to YHWH. God consequently raised adversaries against Solomon and subsequently tore the kingdom apart during the reign of Rehoboam.

⁴⁴ Nicole Beardsworth et al., “Study on Political Cadres and the Financial Sustainability of Local Authorities,” *SAIPAR Briefing Paper Series*, no. 6 (2022).

⁴⁵ Mirriam Chabala, “370 Households, 1,198 People Affected by Gassing So Far - Minister Tells Parley,” 2025. accessed December 21, 2025, <https://diggers.news/local/2020/02/20/370-households-1198-people-affected-by-gassing-so-far-minister-tells-parley/>.

Similarly, Lungu's fall was the ultimate consequence of a series of political failures, such as the weaponization of justice, caderism, fiscal indiscipline, etc. Despite affirming the Christian ethos and reinforcing state-church relations, Lungu's administration was hypocritical as it did not consistently exhibit moral and ethical behavior in managing public affairs. The citizens were thus dissatisfied and voted the PF out of power during the 2021 general elections.

Furthermore, Lungu's and Solomon's political lives demonstrate human frailty and divine providence. Although Solomon's kingship was an imperfect historical model, it serves as a prefiguration of Jesus' perfect millennial reign. The golden age under Solomon foreshadowed the future messianic reign that will be an embodiment of universal peace and prosperity (Isaiah 11:6-9). His temple and its functions typified the new temple described in Ezekiel 40-48. Solomon, therefore, served as an imperfect type of the perfect king, Jesus Christ, whose universal reign shall be defined by eternal perfection without a dot of human frailty. Similarly, notwithstanding Lungu's explicit politicization of Christianity, his initiatives providentially safeguarded Zambia's religio-political identity, countering the pressures of global secularism. God used Lungu's flawed institutionalization project to counter the affirmation of secular ideologies, such as homosexuality and bestiality in Zambia. Through his regular public appeal to religious and constitutional authority, he repudiated depraved sexual practices. This was evident in the sentencing of a gay couple to 15 years of imprisonment. His explicit intolerance of perverted sexual practices sparked criticism from Western media and Daniel Foote, the former United States ambassador to Zambia. He, however, remained unapologetic and resilient because of his religious and constitutional convictions. He further rejected any foreign aid tied to the affirmation of homosexuality.⁴⁶ Ultimately, Lungu's contributions remain indelible in Zambian history because they safeguarded national identity and averted secularism.

The key distinction between Solomon and Lungu is that they governed in different religio-political contexts. Whereas Solomon governed in a theocratic monarchy in the Ancient Near East, Lungu served in a constitutional democratic system within the contemporary African context. Thus, the forms of institutionalization adopted by each leader differed, as they reflected their respective settings. Solomon built the temple, which centralized worship and national religious rites and served as a monumental structure symbolizing Israel's identity in accordance with the covenantal frameworks. In contrast, Lungu utilized state policy and civic engagement to institutionalize Christianity in state politics. Although Lungu modeled the NHP project after Solomon's temple and often invoked 2 Chronicles 7:14, his religio-political setting remained a constitutional democracy and not a theocratic monarchy. Even if completed, Lungu's NHP project would not have functioned exactly as Solomon's temple because of the dispensational differences. Solomon's dispensation was about covenantal actualization while foreshadowing Jesus' earthly ministry and his millennial kingdom. Lungu's era, in contrast, was shaped by missio-politics, where Christianity was integrated into governance structures to respond to the contemporary political and social realities. Finally, the successes and failures of the two leaders differed. Solomon's reign moved from the golden age to idolatry and ultimately the tearing away of the kingdom, whereas Lungu's presidency moved from the symbolic actualization of the declaration to political failures that culminated in his loss of power in 2021.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has shown that institutionalizing Christianity in politics can bolster religio-political identity and state-church relations in Zambia. However, the gross flaws in the PF administration reveal how politicians leverage Christianity for political legitimacy rather than for spiritual, ethical, and political transformation. Lungu sacralized his presidency and co-opted sections of church because they lacked collective critical acceptance of his policies. Based on these findings, the study underscores the following:

1. **Implications for Current State-Church Relations in Zambia and Beyond:** Politicians must refrain from instrumentalizing religion for political legitimacy and from co-opting religious institutions to

⁴⁶ Klinken, "Religion, Sexualities and Politics," 95; "Ambassador to Zambia Recalled Over Gay Rights," Filmed December 2019, YouTube Video, 02:04, posted by "Scripps News," December 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jq9YCflj7Ik>.

circumvent ethical scrutiny and accountability. To avert co-optation and engaging in partisan politics, church leaders should collectively examine theoretical and practical implications before adopting any religio-political policies. It should also safeguard its prophetic voice by rejecting political inducements and by ensuring shared understanding of its missio-political function in society. Furthermore, it must consistently advocate for concrete societal transformation and must consistently condemn the instrumentalization of Christianity. Through ecumenical bodies, it should partner with the state to provide biblically grounded and contextually sensitive prophetic witness in reinforcing national identity. Finally, the church should also discern human frailty and God's providence as it fulfills its mandate in society.

2. **Directions for Future Research:** The comparative-analytical model and the findings of this study are applicable in diverse African contexts, especially in societies grappling with the intersection of religion and state politics. Future research can draw on this model to explore the dynamics of religion and political legitimacy in other countries. This would enrich the ongoing discourse on the interplay between religion and politics beyond the Zambian case.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this article has explored how Lungu parallels Solomon in the institutionalization of religion in state politics. It has shown how the fusion of religion and politics strengthened national identity in both Ancient Israel and contemporary Zambia. The study has further revealed that Lungu instrumentalized Christianity for political legitimacy, thereby co-opting the church and sabotaging its prophetic role in Zambian society. State-sanctioned Christian practice functioned as an apparatus for political gain rather than for reshaping Zambian political dynamics. In light of the foregoing, the integration of Christianity in state politics must transcend symbolic declarations to cultivate visible societal transformation.

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