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## Concretizing the Christian Nation

### Negotiating Zambia's National House of Prayer

Naomi Haynes

In October 2015 the Zambian president broke ground on a new National House of Prayer, a building project meant to reaffirm the country's status as Africa's only self-proclaimed "Christian nation." Over the next four years architects produced three separate sets of plans for the House of Prayer, images of which were circulated among Zambian Christians, primarily church leaders. Each set of plans has provoked conversations about what the House of Prayer should look like. This article shows how discussions of the building's aesthetic features were connected to the theological-political possibilities of Christian nationalism, crystalizing around two competing models of how to go about making Zambia a (more) Christian nation. By tracing the tension between these models through architectural and aesthetic debates, this article shows the link between images and the theological-political imagination. It therefore builds on anthropological analyses of other parts of the world that have emphasized the political power of aesthetics as more than representations of already existing ideas—that is, as an ideologically and politically productive force in its own right.

**Keywords** Christian nationalism, theology, politics, Africa

On November 13, 2018, Zambia's recently appointed Minister of National Guidance and Religious Affairs (MNGRA) Reverend Godfridah Sumaili stood before the Zambian parliament asking for approval for her ministry's annual budget. One of MNGRA's mandates is to "actualize" the constitutional declaration of Zambia as a Christian nation, and discussions of the budget therefore prompted some MPs to reflect on how well their country was living out "the declaration," as it is often known. Those who took this opportunity did not find much grounds for encouragement. Beyond usual complaints about police corruption and pop stars in miniskirts, one member of parliament argued that one of the biggest problems was that Zambia did not look distinctively Christian. As she pointed out, visitors traveling from the airport into the Lusaka city center would see no visible indicator of the declaration. Instead, she went on, those traveling this route were confronted by advertisements for *bashin'ganga*—traditional healers (or, for many Zambian Christians, witch doctors).

It would have been easy to dismiss the MP's remarks as simple gestures of support for a new and struggling ministry, or perhaps the complaint of someone who regarded *bashin'ganga* as a particular danger to the public, if they had not echoed sentiments that I had heard expressed throughout my research on Christian nationalism in Zambia. Church leaders and government officials alike regularly commented on the lack of visible distinctives setting Zambia apart from non-Christian states. In making this point, some of my informants have compared Zambia to Muslim countries, and even to the so-called Islamic State. When one arrived in a Muslim nation like Egypt, I was told, the country's religious identity was immediately evident in sights like minarets, hijabs, and so forth. Zambia, again, was seen to lack such clear markers of its Christian identity. Indeed, Reverend Roger Siliwa,<sup>1</sup> an Anglican priest and national Christian leader, lamented to me that the built environment of Lusaka was characterized by some decidedly non-Christian features, including a growing number of prominent mosques, as well as older buildings from the colonial period that he claimed were constructed by Freemasons.

Reverend Siliwa shared these observations during a conversation about a project that he hoped would alter the Lusaka cityscape in favor of Christianity, literally concretizing Zambia's status as a Christian nation. I had come to see Reverend Siliwa because he was part of a group of church leaders that the Zambian president Edgar Lungu had charged with building a new National House of Prayer. President Lungu broke ground for the House of Prayer in October 2015 in a central site in Lusaka, former forest preserve land that (perhaps not coincidentally) abuts the grounds of one of the oldest mosques in the city. Since the ground-breaking, not much progress has been made on the project, apart from the construction of a monument on the site, the erection of some fencing and earth works,<sup>2</sup> and the preparation of three different sets of architectural plans. Computer-generated images of the first plans were widely circulated in Zambian broadcast and social media; they were also

posted on a billboard at the entrance to the House of Prayer site. These initial plans were later replaced by an entirely new design, which was by turns closely guarded and freely displayed, depending on the audience. During my 2019 fieldwork I was shown a third set of plans that built on and updated the second, making important changes while still keeping the organizing motif the same.<sup>3</sup>

In the analysis that follows, I offer an ethnographic analysis of the various plans for the National House of Prayer in order to tease out how church and government leaders in Zambia imagine a Christian nation. I argue that the changing aesthetic features of the House of Prayer index the interplay of two competing political-theological models that I refer to as the “nation of Christians” and the “Christian nation.”<sup>4</sup> These terms are not entirely my own, and versions of this categorization have featured in public debates about the role of religion in Zambian public life, for example during radio call-in shows. I elaborate on the differences between these models below, but briefly summarize them here as the difference between a grassroots approach driven by individual conversion and the activities of particular churches or denominations (the “nation of Christians”) and a top-down approach driven by intentional, often state-led interventions in key institutions (the “Christian nation”). The conflict between these models has developed against the backdrop of Zambia’s unique experiment in Christian nationalism, now thirty years in the making.<sup>5</sup> Zambia is the only African country to make a state-sponsored declaration that it is a “Christian nation,” a pronouncement first made in 1991 by the Pentecostal president Fredrick Chiluba. Five years later the declaration was enshrined in the preamble to the *Zambian constitution*, where it remains to this day, despite repeated efforts on the part of those who oppose it—including many Zambian Christians—to remove it from the document.<sup>6</sup>

Beyond charting the competing political theologies at play in Zambia, my broader aim in this article is to explore the relationship between image and theological-political

imagination. The relationship between image and imagination more generally is well established, with the latter necessarily entailed by the former.<sup>7</sup> Images are always accompanied by their immaterial apparatus, the “mental picture, which . . . appears in a body, in memory or imagination.”<sup>8</sup> While this is true of all images, the plans for the National House of Prayer may be exceptionally productive for two reasons. First, as Christian images, plans for the House of Prayer are situated in a long tradition of religious practices through which images are used to “[mediate] absence.”<sup>9</sup> Christian religious images, including impressions of the Old Testament temple that inform House of Prayer design, tap into established ways of envisioning the otherwise invisible, and therefore represent particularly potent “technologies of the imagination.”<sup>10</sup> Second, because plans for the House of Prayer depict a structure that does not yet exist, they place a special requirement on the imagination,<sup>11</sup> one that is fundamentally political. As Eli Elinoff puts it, writing about Thailand, aesthetic visions of how a structure will be designed represent a “‘politics in the making’ . . . grounding new political subjectivities in sensible arrangements of the world; offering new modalities of governance and new spaces of participation, debate, and resistance; and producing new possibilities for claims of legitimacy.”<sup>12</sup> As we will see, the House of Prayer also (literally) produces new spaces of political exclusion, as the contested creation of a Christian nation is worked out in images that both reflect and provoke the imaginations of those who create and see them. Seemingly mundane images of pillars, windows, and landscaping, then, constitute an important site of political debate.

Before finally turning our attention to the House of Prayer, it is important to acknowledge the political context in which this project has been commissioned. The last six years have witnessed the arrest of Zambia’s opposition leader on trumped-up treason charges, the closure of a leading independent newspaper, and a controversial court ruling that will allow President Lungu to stand for a constitutionally questionable third term in the 2021

election. Alongside these developments, the current government has, under Lungu's leadership, repeatedly called for Christian unity as an antidote to public opposition and division. Seen from this angle, the House of Prayer is clearly part of a larger political strategy through which the government has courted the approval of an overwhelmingly Christian electorate.<sup>13</sup> In my conversations with key Christian nationalist thinkers, primarily church leaders, many have readily acknowledged that the ruling party is using Christian ideas for its own ends. They are nevertheless willing to go along with the government because it is supporting projects that match their own visions of Zambia as a Christian nation. As an analysis of plans for the National House of Prayer will make clear, these visions are not shared by all of the country's Christians, many of whom disagree about whether theirs should be a "nation of Christians" or a "Christian nation."

In what I am calling the "nation of Christians" model, the nation becomes Christian as more and more people convert to Christianity and become active in local churches. The aggregate weight of these individual conversions may result in institutional or political change in time; for example, as more elected officials convert (or as more converts are elected to public office), policy decisions will more likely be informed by Christian values. But such efforts are only ever the by-product of shared personal conviction, rather than the result of intentional interventions aimed at transforming key institutions. Theologically, the nation of Christians model turns on the notion that a nation cannot be declared Christian by fiat any more than a person can claim to be a Christian simply because she was brought up in a Christian household—or indeed, as one of my informants pointed out, in a self-proclaimed Christian nation. In contrast, by the "Christian nation" model I am referring to an intentional, top-down (and in the Zambian case, state-led) program aimed at Christianizing a nation through active interventions in the public sphere. A Christian nation in this model is the result of direct efforts to Christianize key institutions, such as media outlets, schools, and

universities. In Zambia, the Christian nation model takes its cues primarily from biblical Israel. It is also informed by Christian nationalist movements in the United States and in other parts of Africa.

Zambian proponents of the Christian nation model organize their position around what they see as the divine covenant that the country entered into when it was declared a Christian nation in 1991. The theological structure of the declaration is fundamentally Pentecostal in orientation, and its primary purchase today is still among Pentecostal believers. The nation of Christians, in contrast, is largely the province of members of what Zambians often call “traditional churches,” by which they mean Catholic and mainline Protestant groups, which together make up the numerical majority of Zambia’s Christians. In practice, while the guiding theological and political principles of the nation of Christians and Christian nation paradigms are fundamentally different, the ultimate structural and institutional ends of these models may be very similar, potentially leading to some slippage between the two paradigms. What is more, while the difference between the two models is sometimes articulated locally, more often than not both paradigms are subsumed under the overarching idea that “Zambia is a Christian nation.” Turning our attention to the National House of Prayer, what we will be watching for is how the differences in these models are worked out through competing visions of what the planned structure should look like.

### **Designing the House of Prayer: From Modular Modern to Solomonic Superstructure**

In the middle of 2019, the last time I was in Zambia, visitors to the National House of Prayer site did not find much to see there. The lot had been cleared of much of its vegetation, and the Zambian army, under the auspices of the chaplaincy, had stationed a few soldiers to guard the property. Next to the army encampment was a white tent like those used for outdoor parties—thick plastic windows and a peaked roof—where there were weekly prayer

meetings. Apart from the first stages of the fencing (and subsequent earth works, installed in 2020), the only construction to take place on the site at the time of this writing is a monument dedicated when President Lungu broke land for the House of Prayer. The monument was designed by a young Lusaka architect named Jethro Sikalumbi, who President Lungu also commissioned to create the first designs for the House of Prayer. Working with the advisory board, Sikalumi developed a set of images that were widely circulated in Zambia. These designs depict a sleek, modern structure with wide windows stretched across the facade and a prominent red cross balanced against a sweeping front awning. {←AU: Please note “facade” is the preferred spelling of *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11<sup>th</sup> ed., which this journal uses for consistency of spelling (by using the first variant given).} The area around the House of Prayer is landscaped with trees and a small pool; grass-covered medians cut across a sizable parking lot. Walking me through this design during fieldwork in 2017, members of the advisory board spoke proudly of its state-of-the-art features, including an altar that could flip between Protestant and Catholic orientations with the touch of a button.

This last feature speaks to the central design challenge of the House of Prayer as envisioned by Sikalumbi and the advisory board. The latter was an interdenominational body, and while it skewed Pentecostal in composition, it nevertheless represented the concerns of a broad swathe of Zambian Christianity. This diversity brought with it different ideas about what to include in a space for Christian worship. Would there be a baptismal font? A vestry to allow for the storage of sacred articles? Efforts to resolve these disagreements usually yielded modular solutions, such as a (re)movable font and the much-vaunted rotating altar. By creating a structure that could accommodate a wide range of Christian religious practices, Sikalumbi’s design for the House of Prayer treated Zambia as a composite “nation of



Christians,” a religious aggregate that, while united under the overarching framework of Christianity, nevertheless retained a strong sense of individual or denominational distinction.

The House of Prayer advisory board carried the project for two years, holding several high-profile fundraising events and promoting the plans that Sikalumbi had created. In 2018, however, the board was dissolved amid accusations of financial mismanagement, and oversight of the House of Prayer was handed over to the Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs (MNGRA). The shift in control from church to government was accompanied by a change in the political theology that shaped the House of Prayer’s design, which was reflected in a new set of architectural plans. In place of Sikalumbi’s sleek modern images, the new House of Prayer looked like a Sunday school representation of an Old Testament temple, with large external columns, wide sweeping staircases, and huge stone slabs inscribed with the Ten Commandments.<sup>14</sup> I first saw this second set of plans at a MNGRA-sponsored workshop about the government’s “Prophetic Agenda for National Transformation,” held at the Anglican Cathedral of the Holy Cross in August 2018. The design was presented to a crowd of several hundred church leaders by then–Secretary to the Cabinet Dr. Roland Msiska, who explained that the outside of the House of Prayer had been modeled on King Solomon’s temple, while the inside was made to look like King David’s mobile tabernacle: an open auditorium where each of the ten thousand seats would have an unobstructed view of the platform. Images of the newly redesigned House of Prayer brought the audience to their feet, and the sound of cheers and enthusiastic applause joined the echo of plastic shofars, which I had spied peeping out of the handbags of several women as they arrived.<sup>15</sup>

Three weeks after I first saw the temple-themed plans I made my way to the Department of Public Infrastructure to interview the architects responsible for the new House of Prayer design. After losing my way several times in the dense warren of government office

buildings, I finally located the right department and was soon introduced to the architect in charge, a slim young man named Madalitso. Madalitso and I met the following day, along with another architect, called Lucas, who had also worked on the design. The three of us sat in an empty office, perched on listing desk chairs and surrounded by rolls and rolls of blueprints. Strains of American country music filtered through the closed door from desks on the other side of the wall, where half a dozen architects worked at a row of desktop computers. On the way into the office I had spied a printout of the House of Prayer plans pinned to the wall and was disappointed that, although the plans had been made public during Dr. Msiska's presentation, I was not allowed to photograph them.

When Madalitso and Lucas were given the job of designing the National House of Prayer they were sent a brief by Dr. Msiska that, as they put it, sent them back to the Bible. Most of their design inspiration came from scripture, they explained, and they had found the biblical instructions for Solomon's temple well suited to their task; after all, this temple was also a "national house of prayer" like the one that they were designing. The biblical motifs continued, albeit more subtly, in the tabernacle-style auditorium. Madalitso and Lucas told me that Dr. Msiska had insisted that the auditorium be built without any internal supports; his aim was that a speaker standing in the front would be able to see the faces of every person in the audience, just as everyone in the audience would be able to see the speaker. Taken together, the temple-inspired exterior and tabernacle-inspired interior created a potent image of the Christian nation paradigm. I have already noted that biblical Israel is the predominant model for proponents of the Christian nation framework, and by appealing to Solomon's temple as a "national house of prayer" just like the one they were building in Zambia, the architects connected Zambia's current political institutions to those of Old Testament theocratic kingship.<sup>1</sup> Their vision of Christian nationhood is further elaborated in the interior "tabernacle" auditorium, which not only draws further on Old Testament imagery, but also

unites the nation in one common form of biblical worship, rather than allowing for diversity of practice the way that Sikalumbi's design had.

In these two architectural models, then, we have aesthetic representations of two very different theological-political paradigms. Although the move of control of the House of Prayer from the church to the government was accompanied by a shift in the organizing ideology of the project, this change did not go uncontested. As we will see, design decisions about the House of Prayer prompted debates about aesthetics that served as a mechanism for discussing Zambia's future as a Christian nation—or a nation of Christians.

### **Breakfast with Church Leaders: A Tempest over Teacups**

In July 2019, two dozen national church leaders (heads of umbrella bodies like the Christian Council of Zambia, or of large denominations) joined MNGRA staff for a breakfast meeting at Lusaka's prestigious Taj Pamodzi hotel. After helping themselves to a buffet of eggs, sausages, grilled tomatoes, and sliced melon, the group listened to presentations by members of the ministry staff. One item on the agenda for the morning was the House of Prayer, and Madalitso was on hand to walk the audience through the most recent set of plans, which he had developed with the help of other Department of Public Infrastructure architects. The new plans kept with the temple and tabernacle motifs, though the facade of the building had been updated to look less like a facsimile of Solomon's temple. The newest design was more modern, with wide, multipaned windows behind understated columns, flanked as before by massive stone tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments. As with previous designs, Madalitso emphasized that they had intended the building to stand out, to catch people's eyes from far off, thanks especially to a raised foundation. The grandeur of the building would evoke the Old Testament, he went on, through costly materials, intricate designs, and state-of-the-art technology. The final element of the presentation was a video animation of the

design, which Madalitso said gave us the perspective of “flying into” the House of Prayer, as those who made use of the building’s two helipads would do one day.

Once Madalitso had finished his presentation, the floor was opened for questions about the House of Prayer. These came quickly. After inquiries about the disparity between the seating and parking capacities, and about the costs (estimated at K365,000,000,<sup>16</sup> according to Madalitso), a representative from the United Church of Zambia, Dr. Peggy Kulima, asked if it would be possible to change the design a bit. As Dr. Kulima continued, she was very careful with her words, and it was hard for the audience—or at least for me—to catch her meaning at first. She began by saying that her reaction to the design might just be because she was from the “old school,” but to her the building looked a bit . . . Here her voice trailed off, and the room strained to hear. It sounded to me like she had suggested that the House of Prayer, with its aesthetic emphasis on broad windows and clean lines, looked too Islamic for her liking. This was not initially clear, though, and Madalitso, who had been charged with fielding questions, asked her to elaborate her point, and specifically to say what she would like to see in the building. Dr. Kulima cleared her throat and replied plainly that she had hoped there would be a cross in the design. Here several others murmured in agreement. As it was, Dr. Kulima went on, reiterating her earlier point so all could hear, she thought that the building looked too much like a mosque. Here Minister Sumaili, who was presiding over the event, jumped in to voice her agreement that a cross would be a good thing, and to reassure Dr. Kulima that the design could be modified. The idea that the House of Prayer looked like a mosque resurfaced later in the discussion, when another pastor suggested that the building looked too Islamic, and that the architects ought to include an image of the Bible in the design to counteract this perception (though later a member of MNGRA staff remarked that this would not do enough to disambiguate the structure, as the Bible and the Quran looked very similar).

These comments suggest that the images of the House of Prayer that Madalitso presented were not, at least in the eyes of some church leaders, recognizably Christian. Perhaps the issue was that these pastors and bishops were, as Dr. Kulima put it, members of the “old school,” but when they looked at the updated vision of Solomon’s temple, they did not see a site of Christian worship. While there is probably more than a little Islamophobia informing these comments, they also index the different theological models that Zambian Christians draw on when imagining a Christian nation. As we have seen, the temple model that informs later designs of the House of Prayer appeals to Old Testament ideas, which are more widely supported by Pentecostals than they are by members of “traditional churches” like the United Church of Zambia. A few days after the breakfast meeting, MNGRA sponsored a parallel gathering for members of the Lusaka Ministers’ Fellowship, an interdenominational body that is largely Pentecostal in composition. The meeting included the same presentation about the House of Prayer, given by Madalitso, which met with a much different reception from this Pentecostal audience. Rather than greet the new design with questions, members of the Minister’s Fellowship stood to their feet, cheering and applauding the design.

To say that people like Dr. Kulima found the House of Prayer unrecognizable as a place of Christian worship is effectively to say that they felt it did not look like a church. This is precisely what the ideological and material architects of the House of Prayer were aiming for. Those behind the project have always maintained that the building would not be a church, and it is notable that in their communications words like “church” or “cathedral” are never used. Instead, the building is referred to either as the House of Prayer or as the national “altar,” nomenclature that further emphasizes the Old Testament orientation of the Christian nation model. This careful distinction between the House of Prayer and church buildings provides further insight into how the Christian nation model differs from the nation of

Christians model. Recall the MP's lament at the lack of visible markers of Zambia's Christian status, most notably on the busy thoroughfare that connects the airport to the Lusaka city center. In fact, that route passes by a number of prominent churches, not to mention scores of advertisements for Christian concerts and crusades, as well as ubiquitous Christian phrases emblazoned on shopfronts and minibuses, so often taken in social scientific literature as markers of Pentecostal expansion in Africa.<sup>17</sup> With eyes open for these images—the lofty peaks of church roofs, the promises of blessing and deliverance arcing across billboards and banners—it seems strange that anyone would fail to recognize Zambia's Christian status. However, if we approach the problem in the light of the models used here, it becomes clear that what these sights represent is a nation of Christians—just so many churches or Pentecostal ministries, so many individual events or enterprises—rather than the comprehensive, totalizing vision of the Christian nation. It is therefore no surprise that the MP was able to take her listeners on a tour of a familiar road, littered with markers of Christian adherence, and nevertheless claim that the route lacked adequate signs of Zambia's unique Christian status. Seen from this angle, the staunch insistence that the House of Prayer is not a church takes on new meaning. In the Christian nation paradigm churches cannot by themselves index the country's Christian identity; what is needed instead is another kind of structure, a building that is emphatically not a church, but that instead hearkens back to an era of temple worship and divinely ordained kingship. In contrast, by asking that the House of Prayer take a form that members of the “old school” considered more appropriate for a church, Dr. Kulima was attempting to shift the design back toward the nation of Christians paradigm, making individual or traditional church buildings the primary architectural marker of Christian identity.

The conflict between the Christian nation and the nation of Christians that emerged at the breakfast meeting did not conclude with the promise of a cross on the House of Prayer.

As hotel staff cleared our plates and empty coffee cups, questions continued to pour in, stretching the breakfast meeting into the lunch hour. During this time, one pastor returned to the question of how Christians from different denominations were to use the building. As we all know, he began, Catholics worship in a different way, with a different altar and in churches where they are surrounded by statues of saints. Was there any way to accommodate such differences in the House of Prayer design, perhaps by purchasing some movable saints that could be brought in when Catholics wanted to worship in the building and then stored away when Protestants came in? This comment, which was echoed in other remarks throughout the morning, shows a church leader again trying to return the House of Prayer to the nation of Christians model, by orienting the design toward the practice of particular Christian groups and toward the decisions made by the advisory board in the first set of plans.

In these discussions, church leaders and government officials, including a government architect, argued for two very different visions of how Christianity ought to shape public life in Zambia. This debate occurred not through consideration of the theological or political merits of the Christian nation or nation of Christians paradigms, but rather through a discussion of design choices sparked by images of the National House of Prayer. What these images afforded, in other words, was a public debate about who and what religious space was for, about what made a building or a motorway or a country look Christian—and about what it meant for such spaces and places to be Christian in the first place. Discussions of movable saints or a cross on the building's facade were therefore “not simply about aesthetics, but rather about the distinct and contested worlds to which these aesthetic visions consigned [people]”<sup>18</sup>—about, in other words, how Zambian Christians from different church or denominational backgrounds imagine their place in a self-proclaimed Christian nation. In particular, the design of the House of Prayer under the Christian nation paradigm is structured by Pentecostal ideas that easily muffle other Christian voices.

Theologically speaking, the defining characteristic of Pentecostalism is its egalitarianism, which turns on the biblical promise that the Holy Spirit is poured out on “all flesh,”<sup>19</sup> regardless of social standing. It is this democratic logic that informs the House of Prayer’s expansive interior, with its uniformly unobstructed view of the stage. We know from other examples that Pentecostalism’s egalitarian tenets do not always translate into expanded opportunities for all of its adherents. Writing about rural Malawi, Peter von Doepp has shown that open-ended religious structures—equal opportunity leadership positions, for example—typically reproduce, rather than overturn, existing social hierarchies. In contrast, denominations with circumscribed but nevertheless clearly demarcated roles for marginalized groups, in this case women, “offered the possibility for greater and unique styles of participation in religious life.”<sup>20</sup> Women from these more highly structured congregations were also more engaged in the democratic process beyond the church. Building on these conclusions, Jane Soothill has argued that Pentecostalism, with its famously open leadership structure, is especially “susceptible . . . to reproducing the dynamics of local power relations.”<sup>21</sup> Pentecostalism’s well documented egalitarianism therefore easily (re)produces hierarchy instead.<sup>22</sup>

In view of these analyses of Pentecostalism, the political stakes of the competing visions for the National House of Prayer are clear. Uncluttered by markers of denominational specificity, the tabernacle-style auditorium seems like a religious space with room for everyone. However, it is not difficult to imagine that this expansive vision may not work as well in practice; one person’s extraneous saint is the guarantor of another’s full religious participation. Just as Pentecostalism’s open-ended church leadership structures easily reproduce established social hierarchies, then, the open-ended space that marks the Pentecostal vision of the National House of Prayer easily sidelines other forms of Christian practice by not providing them the aesthetic or architectural features necessary for worship.



Here Pentecostal Christianity, and with it the Christian nation model, becomes hegemonic in its purported lack of structure or restriction, which ostensibly leaves room for other practices and ideas, while ultimately failing to create space for them. It may be too much to suggest that doing so will also muzzle the voices of non-Pentecostal Christians when it comes to democratic participation, but insofar as the National House of Prayer is meant to gather a worshipping body politic, this may indeed prove to be the case. Debates about what this new building should look like therefore encode significant discussions about which voices count in imagining Zambia as a (Christian) nation.<sup>23</sup>

### **Conclusion: Images and the Theological-Political Imagination**

The idea that visions of the nation depend on the imagination is not a new one. As Benedict Anderson famously argued, what we call nations or nation-states are “imagined communities”<sup>24</sup> that emerged historically as shared languages and expanding print media gave rise to a growing awareness of one’s place in a larger political whole. Anderson later updated his study to include visual representations like maps and museum displays as techniques of the imagination, but language remained the principal focus of his analysis. As the example of Zambia’s National House of Prayer has shown, grounding the political imagination so firmly in the linguistic or discursive makes it difficult to recognize the important role that images play in this process. What “textual historiography” like Anderson’s misses, argues Christopher Pinney, is the political power of images—not only as representations of already existing ideas, as Anderson suggests, but as productive forces in their own right. Depictions of the god Ram as a muscled warrior, to take one example from Pinney’s discussion of India, are not simply “visual manifestation of an ideological force,” but rather “[create] their own force field” through an imaginative engagement with the theological-political.<sup>25</sup>

As Pinney's study makes clear, debates about images might be articulated in aesthetic terms, but they are fundamentally political. To take another South Asian example, Kajri Jain's excellent analysis of Hindu megastructures in India shows that even as architectural projects like these provoke critique "at the level of genre,"<sup>26</sup> they also open up "an experimental zone where new possibilities and new identities are forged," to return to Pinney's words.<sup>27</sup> My aim in this article has been to trace the imaginative theological-political possibilities explored as people interact with images of Zambia's planned National House of Prayer. As we have seen, discussions of the architectural and aesthetic features of the project have centered on competing notions of what makes a building fit for Christian worship—what it should look like, what amenities it requires, and so forth. While the debate is carried out in these terms, what is at stake is not just whether the House of Prayer will include a cross or mobile icons, though of course these are at issue as well. Beyond questions of what the House of Prayer will look like, images of this planned structure contain and provoke ideas of what it means for Zambia to be a Christian nation and of how this should be realized.

There are aspects of the House of Prayer that I have not been able to engage here. Both Jain and Pinney are careful to emphasize the broader political economic context of the aesthetic projects and processes they explore, the technologies of production and networks of patronage that make the production of religious images possible. We have not touched on this aspect of the House of Prayer—the government contracts that will be awarded and the materials that will be imported, for example—but, as we have already seen briefly, the political implications of the structure are not limited to whether Zambia is better off as a Christian nation or a nation of Christians. It is by no means certain whether the House of Prayer will ever be built, particularly if the ruling party changes in the next election. But even if the House of Prayer is only ever realized in computer-generated images, debates about

what it means for Zambia to be Christian will continue to shape the horizons of the country's theological and political imagination.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This and names of all other informants, apart from high-ranking government officials, are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> For a recent photo of the site, see "Zambia: National House of Prayer Construction Works Progress," *Rhodesia Times*, October 19, 2020:

[www.rhodesiatimes.com/index.php/news/item/3356-zambia-national-house-of-prayer-construction-works-progress](http://www.rhodesiatimes.com/index.php/news/item/3356-zambia-national-house-of-prayer-construction-works-progress).

<sup>3</sup> Material about the House of Prayer was collected during fieldwork in Lusaka over nine months between 2017 and 2019. During this period, I had conversations about the House of Prayer with church leaders, members of the now-defunct House of Prayer Advisory Board, architects, and civil servants. I have also had access to House of Prayer publicity materials, including press releases and some internal documents, and have closely followed media coverage of the House of Prayer. Lastly there are the designs themselves, all of which I have seen, though as of this writing I have only been able to secure copies of the first set. My research was funded by a Future Research Leaders grant from the Economic and Social Research Council (UK), grant number (ES/N017412/1).

<sup>4</sup> My use of the term *theological* here reflects an understanding of theology as a largely grassroots endeavor, which is in turn informed by Pentecostalism's democratic view of religious specialization (see Haynes, "Theology on the Ground").

<sup>5</sup> For discussions of the declaration, see Gifford, "Chiluba's Christian Nation"; Phiri, "President Frederick J. T. Chiluba of Zambia."

<sup>6</sup> For Zambian Christians in opposition, see Hinfelaar, "Debating the Secular in Zambia."

<sup>7</sup> Belting, *Likeness and Presence*.

<sup>8</sup> Mitchell, “Four Fundamental Concepts of Image Science,” 16.

<sup>9</sup> Meyer, “Mediating Absence;” also see Kirsch, “Visions and Evidence” for a particular discussion of this process in a *Zambian Christian movement*.

<sup>10</sup> Sneat, Holbraad, and Pedersen, “Technologies of the Imagination.”

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Archambault, ““One Beer, One Block””; Nielsen, “Futures Within.”

<sup>12</sup> Elinoff, “A House Is More Than a House,” 612; also see Jain, “Gods in the Time of Automobility.”

<sup>13</sup> See Sperber and Hern, “Pentecostal Identity and Citizen Engagement.”

<sup>14</sup> A similar structure has been erected in Brazil under the auspices of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (see Carpenedo, ““Light for the Nations””).

<sup>15</sup> See images at *Christian Nation Project*, [thechristiannationproject.net/haynes/](http://thechristiannationproject.net/haynes/) (accessed November 19, 2020).

<sup>16</sup> This was approximately \$27,605,505 at the time.

<sup>17</sup> E.g., Meyer, “Christianity in Africa.”

<sup>18</sup> Elinoff, “A House Is More Than a House,” 625.

<sup>19</sup> Joel 2:28.

<sup>20</sup> von Doepp, “Liberal Visions and Actual Power,” 282.

<sup>21</sup> Soothill, *Gender, Social Change, and Spiritual Power*, 139.

<sup>22</sup> We could similarly claim that Pentecostal ritual practice, like Pentecostal social organization, also reproduces hierarchies among believers, a point I have argued for the *Zambian case specifically*. See Haynes, “Egalitarianism and Hierarchy.”

<sup>23</sup> Space does not permit me to discuss the role of other religions in this process of imagination, but suffice it to say that those at the forefront of the House of Prayer project do not believe that Zambians who worship at a “different altar,” as they put it, should have a say in the running of a Christian nation. While they certainly would not advocate the disenfranchisement of Zambia’s Muslims or Hindus, they would like the visible presence of religious minorities minimized, whether in business, the media, or the built environment of Lusaka.

<sup>24</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

<sup>25</sup> Pinney, “*Photos of the Gods*,” 8.

<sup>26</sup> Jain, “Gods in the Time of Automobility,” S23.

<sup>27</sup> Pinney, “*Photos of the Gods*,” 8.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the use of Jewish imagery in Christian nationalist projects, see Kaell, “The Hebraic Style.”