Religion and University Education: Emergence of the Christian University Movement in Zambia

Nelly Mwale 1,*, Melvin Simuchimba 1

1 Department of Religious Studies, University of Zambia [* Corresponding author: nelmwa@gmail.com]

Abstract. This article explores the growth of the Christian university movement in Zambia to revisit the relationship between religion and education in the country. Informed by interpretivism and interpretive phenomenology, the insights for the study were gathered through interviews with purposively chosen Christian university representatives and document analysis. Layder’s adaptive theory and Geiger’s theorisations on the roles of private higher education informed the study. In addition, the concept of religious resource was used to make meaning of how the Christian churches had navigated through the university education landscape in Zambia. The article argues that contrary to the often ascribed reason of addressing the access to university education challenge, the emergence of the Christian university movement in Zambia had much to do with fulfilling the religious motives of the Christian churches, and therefore mirrored the dominance and influence of Christianity on Zambia’s religious landscape.

Keywords: Private higher education; Faith-based higher education; Zambia.

1 Introduction

The growth of Christian universities in Zambia has attracted the attention of the media, any scholarly engagement. Therefore this article is a reaction to this academic silence, as the study on which this article is based was driven by the observable reality of the growing presence of the Church in university education. Despite this growth of the Christian university movement (here taken to mean the surge in Christian universities) in Zambia, and amid the many recent acknowledgments of the global growth of both Christianity and higher education (Carpenter, 2017), little or no distinct attention has been given to the presence of Christian higher education in Zambia, especially when compared to other African contexts where the involvement of the Christian churches in higher education has
not only been acknowledged, and mapped out, but also been analysed. For example, Enegho (2017) has provided a historical and economic analysis of Christian higher education in Nigeria. In the Zambian context, the presence of the Church in the provision of university education has been neglected and Zambian studies on religion and education have been preoccupied with the primary and secondary levels of education (Hambulo, 2016; Simuchimba, 2005; Carmody, 2007 & 2011). Yet Levy (2009) advances the view that the private higher education system has not been a static entity but instead has changed and evolved over many years in response to social, economic and political change; hence deserving sustained critical investigation. Therefore, this article reimagines the growth of the Christian University movement in Zambia not only for making a modest contribution to religion and university education in Zambia, religion and university education for purposes of providing an in-depth understanding of the development of the Christian universities and indirectly documenting this new development for posterity and equipping the relevant stakeholders (Ministry of Higher Education, Higher Education Authority) with knowledge in making and taking appropriate decisions and actions in the sector.

The Christian university movement is spoken of in terms of the surge in universities that claim a Christian identity. As such, our understanding of a Christian university is informed by Benne’s (2001) argument of determining the category of an institution by examining eight aspects of its life (the public relevance of its Christian vision, public rhetoric, membership requirements, the role of the religion or theology department, and whether any such courses are required, the nature and frequency of chapel, the overall ethos, the degree of support by the sponsoring church, as well as the role of the associated church in matters of governance). Therefore, a Christian university was understood as one that acknowledges and embraces a Christian or denominational confessional identity in the mission statements and alters aspects of its policies, governance, curriculum and ethos in the light of its Christian identity (Schroeder, 2002: 9). Most importantly, a Christian university in Zambia was also one that was registered and recognised under the 2013 Higher Education Act in the private higher education bracket.

Theoretically, the article is informed by Derrick Layder (1998)’s adaptive theory which allowed for learning from existing theories and generating insights from the emerging field data. Layder created adaptive theory as a methodological derivative of ‘grounded theory’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Adaptive theory was preferred because of its ability to accept the contribution of general or existing theory and appreciate social-structural or systemic aspects of society (Layder, 1994). Since adaptive theory deals not only with the behavioural aspects of social research (such as activities, meanings and lived experiences) but also systemic phenomena (by tracing the reciprocal influences between individual social activities and their wider environment) (Layder 1998), it presented a frame for
studying and making meaning of why the Christian university movement had emerged in contemporary Zambia. Adaptive theory was further justified owing to the fact that the study was anchored on the self-understanding of the Christian Churches in the sector. The theory was applied by utilising elements of prior theory (both general and substantive) in conjunction with patterns that emerged from data collection and analysis (Layder, 1998: 27). In practice, this allowed for an interconnection between the Christian Church’s meanings, activities and intentions as an actor and the broader ‘system elements’ of society and institutions.

Following Layder’s recommendation that extant theories need to be selected according to the context being investigated, Geiger (1986)’s theorisations on the roles of private higher education were generally used to provide conceptual categories for what the Christian university movement as private provider of university education sought to do in the sector. Geiger (1986) described three main functions of private higher education institutions (PHEIs), which are: to provide ‘more’, better’, and ‘different’ education. The ‘more’ function occurs when private higher education institutions exist to absorb an immense demand which public institutions cannot fulfil, while the ‘different’ function is played when the state allows private provision to respond to certain needs that are not met by the public sector institutions. The third function aids to compensate for the low quality of education found in the public sector by providing ‘better’ education.

The article argues that away from the existing functions of PHEIs advanced by Geiger (1986) provide better, more and different education, the emergence of the Christian university movement in Zambia had much to do with the promotion of the wellbeing of the Church and in the process, religion or Christianity became a resource that drove the movement based on the past track record of the Church’s involvement in the provision of education in the country.

2 Method

The article is based on a study which was informed by an interpretive phenomenological approach in which the unit of analysis was purposively chosen based on its relevance to the study (Mason, 2002; Creswell, 2007). In this case the study sought to provide an in-depth self-understanding on the growth of the Christian university movement in Zambia by exploring the lived experiences of these institutions. Thus aware of the numerous universities associated with Christianity, two Churches and universities were chosen for purposes of depth and most importantly, because they were among the earliest. Document analysis and recorded interviews (with purposively chosen Church and University
administrators) were the main methods of data collection. The guidelines by Scott (1990) on quality control, formulated for handling documentary sources (authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and meaning) also informed the use of documents, which were chosen on the basis of availability.

Data were inductively analysed through the description of the phenomenon and significant statements through ‘horizonalisation’ and the development of clusters of meaning, textual and structural descriptions of the Christian university movement (Creswell, 2007). The process involved the generation and application of codes to the data and the identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns (themes). All this was done while keeping the principles for adaptive theory in check, hence Geiger’s theory on the role of private higher education institutions, helped us make meaning out of the data. Consistent with the interpretivist tradition, the insights from this study are not for purposes of generality, but for providing an in-depth understanding on the growth of the Christian University movement in contemporary Zambia.

3 Context of the Christian University Movement in Zambia

Zambia’s religious demographics indicate that Christianity is the leading religion (Cheyeka, 2014), a scenario that has been mirrored in the private university education landscape where the Christian university movement has been dominant. For example, while the Christian universities had long been established, it was only recently that Muslims embarked on establishing a university. The Christian university movement is therefore a new development in the history of the country’s university education, hence deserved scholarly engagement. This is because until after independence, there were neither public nor private universities in Zambia. The changes in legislation in the 1990s created a new platform for university education as private providers were encouraged to come on board (Ministry of Education, 1996). Under this liberalised educational system, the right of private organisations, individuals, religious bodies, and local communities to establish and control their own educational institutions was recognised and welcomed (ibid). Since then, Zambia has witnessed the growth of private higher education institutions dotted around the country. Needless to mention that for any private university to exist, it must be registered and recognised under the Higher Education Act (Act No. 4 of 2013), which until 2013 was the University Act of 1999. The Act spells out the procedures and regulations of private higher education institutions and highlights the functions of providers of higher education.
4 Findings and Discussion

4.1 Origins of Christian Presence in University Education in Zambia

Generally, Christian presence in higher education in Zambia is tracked to the colonial period when missionaries established schools and colleges for their converts in order to foster the Christian faith (Snelson, 1974). Indeed, it has been acknowledged that in the early days, the missionaries provided education to the locals for purposes of evangelisation (Mwanakatwe, 1968; Snelson, 1974; Kelly, 1991; Carmody, 2000; Simuchimba, 2005). However, all these efforts were concentrated on the lower levels of education, to the exclusion of university education. Thus at independence, Zambia had few university graduates and no university until the establishment of the country’s first public university, the University of Zambia in 1966, followed by Copperbelt in 1987 and others thereafter.

While efforts in Christian higher education are linked to the colonial era, university education initiatives are of recent origin in Zambia, given that the Christianity has globally been involved in university education since the 12th century. In Zambia, the Church vividly appeared on the scene of providing university education after the 1990s when in the quest to increase access to university education; the government of the Republic of Zambia began to encourage the establishment and accreditation of private universities (Kelly, 1999). This led to the birth and recognition of many private higher education institutions. As of 2017, there were fifty-five private universities in Zambia (Gazette Notice No.232 and 561 of 2017). Of these, the majority, have a Christian inclination in their mission and values. As such, Altbach’s (2000) description of private higher education as the fastest growing segment of the entire higher education system is true for Zambia too, which has recorded the growth of many categories of private universities and whose role and contribution remains undocumented.

Notable Christian denominations that took a lead in responding to the liberalisation policies of the 1990s by establishing universities include the Roman Catholic Church (Zambia Catholic University and DMI St. Eugene) and the Seventh Day Adventist Church (Rusangu University) among others. While literature in Zambia and Africa indicates that Christian denominations have established schools largely for evangelisation purposes, (Snelson, 1974, Carmody, 1999) and that churches have been at the centre of the transformation processes in society (Walsh and Kaufmann, 1999) respectively, not much was known as to why the Christian churches in Zambia had expanded their provision of education to the university level from their own perspectives. This article therefore sought to empirically uncover the self-understanding of the Christian churches on the emergence of the Christian universities in contemporary Zambia.
4.2 Emergence of the Christian University Movement

Away from the 1990 policies on liberalisation that created an enabling environment for the Christian churches to establish their own universities, the churches had their own agenda too which accounted for the growth of Christian universities in Zambia. To start with, the Christian universities emerged in the hope of widening access to university education. These universities were either transformations of the existing bible schools or distinct from the bible schools. In the words of Geiger, this related to playing the ‘more’ function in the provision of university education. Geiger (1986) notes that the ‘more’ function occurs when private higher education institutions exist to respond to an immense demand which public institutions cannot meet. In this regard, Zambia’s public universities were unable to absorb the population requiring university education. The high demand for higher education has partly been triggered by the expansion of primary and secondary education, leading to the increase in the number of qualified secondary school graduates seeking higher education (Masaiti & Mwale, 2017). For instance, only 8% of school leavers accessed public universities in Zambia (Revised Sixth National Development Plan, 2013). For illustration sake, more than 50,000 pupils complete secondary school each year, while higher education institutions have a total intake of about 10,000 (Mweemba and Hampwayne, 2012). This means that only about a quarter of the applicants to higher institutions are admitted each year, leading to a high demand for admission in the private institutions.

The studied Christian universities pointed to setting up their universities in a bid to address this challenge. For example, the Catholic university sought to respond to the access challenge in their justification for expanding the provision of education to university level. Vatican radio reported that the Zambian bishops had responded to the need to provide tertiary education to the ever growing number of school leavers in the country by establishing the Catholic university in 2008 (4th April, 2011). Similarly, the Protestant Church was driven by the quest to serve the needs of those who met the university requirements…and had no place to turn to for a balanced preparation for life (Akombwa, interview 2018). Seemingly ambitious in nature, this represents the aspirations of addressing an access challenge to university education which cannot be addressed by the public sector. It must be noted that though the Christian universities claimed to have been established in order to address the access to university education challenge, their enrolment and graduate numbers were still low as compared to the public universities. As such, they were only making a modest contributions thus far to this cause and it was hoped that with time, the output from these universities would make a significant contribution towards addressing the demand for university education.
The Christian university movement was also driven by the quest to provide a different kind of higher education as allowed by the State to do so. In Geiger (1986)’s words, the different function occurs when the State allows private provision to respond to certain needs. In the Zambian context, these needs were tied to the growing demand for university education which translated into the liberalisation policies (MoE, 1996). The Church responded to this call by not only offering university education, but also providing her own nature of university education. An important characteristic of this university education was the holistic kind of university education which emphasised moral formation. For example, Catholic education was grounded in the integral development of the human person in accordance with the Gospel values (Calareso et al, 2011). Catholic Education was therefore understood as being above all a matter of communicating Christ and helping to form Christ in the lives of others (John Paul II, 1979), with the specific purpose being formation of boys and girls, men and women who would be good citizens of the world (Chilambwe, 2018).

While premised on the quest to offer holistic education, this mission of the Church seemingly pointed to the need for incorporating a spiritual ethos in the life of university education. These aspirations to produce a particular citizenry were manifested in the institutional mottoes of ‘the truth shall set you free’. This was translated into providing an atmosphere not only tailored to academics but also exposing students to what life was all about (through experiences meant to help students develop into complete human beings – academically, spiritually, socially and physically). These efforts included spiritual services and worship opportunities, sports activities, prayer meetings, campus clubs and recreational activities among others. As Benne (2001) notes, the chaplaincy in Christian universities remains a key element. For example, the office of the university chaplain coordinated and superintended over all spiritual related activities, including consultation and counselling, regardless of a student’s religious affiliation in the Catholic university. The institution had spiritual gatherings such as Catholic Student Community (CASC), Youth Forum and ZAFES. As Calasero et al (2011) point out, the Catholic University seeks to develop the whole person, emphasising the moral, religious, social, as well as the intellectual aspects, in an integrated fashion that helps students discover and develop fully their human dignity and potential. These activities intended to nurture students in a holistic manner were also reported in the university. For example, the Protestant Church expressed its mission in university education as preparing students not only for professional careers but also equipping them physically, mentally, socially and spiritually by providing quality holistic Christian education at tertiary level to all who met the University’s entry requirements. These narratives pointed to the establishment of the Christian universities in order to provide holistic university education and produce a particular kind of citizenry.
The Christian university movement was further motivated by the desire to offer a different education through the quest to be centres that fostered excellence, service, and integrity. The ‘different’ role was therefore played by emphasising on service which is captured in different philosophies guiding the churches’ in the provision of university education. For example, the Catholic university understood the mission of service as expressed in the *Ex corde Ecclesiae* (1990), and was therefore related to being of service to the Church and society, pastoral ministry, cultural dialogue and evangelisation. In this regard, Zambia Catholic University was set up so to be the:

University that provides a living institutional witness to Christ and his message through research in the light of the Christian message and to put new discoveries at the service of humankind and society; and accord professional training that incorporates ethical values and a sense of service to individuals and to society, and to foster dialogue between culture and faith (Zambia Catholic University website, accessed on 20th February, 2018).

With service as one of the primary goals of a Catholic university, this entailed that the institution ought to engage in a study of serious contemporary problems that would better serve the human community at a national and international level (Calareso, et al, 2011). The understanding of service thus calls on students and teaching staff alike to learn to be “attentive to the poorest and to those who suffer economic, social, cultural or religious injustice, ‘the option for the poor’ (Komakoma, 2003). This was translated into working towards bridging the gap between the rich and poor by making it possible for students from poor backgrounds to access and complete university education, including the adult literacy programmes that targeted women (Zambia Catholic Education Secretary, interview, 2019).

The philosophy on education (expressed in educating the head, hands and mind) also inspired the Protestant Church. For example, through the student work programme which entailed giving students an opportunity to work and earn some money while studying, the students were exposed to virtues of being of service in practical terms. This is because as they worked on the farm and other ventures in a bid to raise funds for their education, the students also acquired valuable practical knowledge and skills. The notion of service research in which different research projects such as the medicinal properties of the baobab and moringa tree were embarked on. As such, the Christian universities had emerged in order to offer a different kind of university education that gave preference to the poor in the hope of addressing equity in university education and at the same time to empower the students with virtues of industry and personal development in different spheres (Chilambwe, 2018). This option for the poor was understood in light of lower tuition fees as compared to public universities.
The quest to provide ‘better’ education, though not very vivid in the mission of Christian universities found expression in the institutions’ pursuit to accord professional training that incorporates ethical values and fosters dialogue between culture and faith. This was exemplified in the institutions’ advertisements. This element of advertising demonstrated the competitive nature of the university education landscape in twenty-first century Zambia. The quest to provide better university education was also understood in light of the enabling environment that facilitated for this role especially in a context of an inadequate public higher education sector. As such, the Christian universities had emerged to compliment the public higher education.

Using the adaptive theory as a lens, the Christian university movement pointed to Geiger’s roles of private higher education (more, different and better) and the Higher Education Act’s ascribed functions of higher education. Hence away from playing these roles, the emergence of the Christian university movement had more to do with integral human development and the promotion of the Church’s well-being. For example, with regard to Catholic universities, other than being above all a question of communicating Christ and of helping to form Christ in the lives of others (John Paul II, 1979):

Catholic universities are critical tools in evangelisation.... We do not only focus on training would be professionals but we also teach social teachings of the church so that Christ is communicated to change the world for better. We also focus on spiritual growth of our students so that they are helpful to society in future (Chilambwe, 2017).

Therefore, the widening of access to university education, the offering of a particular kind of university education and creation of particular environments in which the learning took place was ultimately for the good of the Church as all this was informed by Church policies and teachings on education. As such, university education remained part of the mission of the Church.

Most of the reasons accounting for the establishment of the Christian universities by the churches in the study found an expression in the religious resource as a concept. In the words of Ellis and Ter Haar (2006), religious resources produce knowledge that could be beneficial for development purposes. These include religious ideas (what people actually believe), religious practices, religious organisation (how religious communities are formed and function), and religious (or spiritual) experiences (such as the subjective experience of inner change or transformation) (Ter Haar, 2005: 22–7). Thus the religious ideas of spreading the faith through education in response to Mark 16:15, ‘Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel…’ was reflected in the establishment of Christian universities. The Churches’ philosophies on integrated, holistic and quality education enshrined in their doctrines further translated into establishing universities so as to produce a particular kind of citizenry. Both churches
believed in providing a study environment that stressed the acquisition of advanced skills, ethical, moral and spiritual formation.

The religious practices of living the social gospel and serving the needs of the poor also inspired the Churches to establish their universities in order to contribute to the socio-economic development of the country (Chilambwe, 2017). This was through their quest to set up universities so as to supplement State facilities in university education. The organisation and structures of the Churches also inspired the establishment of the universities because while the universities were open to people from different religious orientations, the immediate pool or clientele was the church membership itself (Akombwa, 2018).

More so, the experiences of the churches gained over time gave the universities the reputation. The Church in Zambia had been well recognised as a partner in provision of social services, hence they hoped to use the experiences gained at the lower levels to provide quality university education (Chilambwe, 2018). As such, the Christian universities were established in order to conserve the gains at these lower levels and foster their religious goals.

Furthermore, the motivations for the Churches to establish their universities mirrored the conducive environment that supported their growth. As such, religious bodies have seen it as their duty to provide higher education to the society especially by contributing to the demand for university education in areas, which had no such facilities. The emergence of the Christian universities also points to the society’s religious pluralist nature which finds expression in tolerance for varied alternatives or an intolerance that barred certain groups from mainstream institutions. Thus other than the liberalisation policies, the religious declarations, and in particular the declaration of the country as a Christian nation has also indirectly contributed to a fertile ground for the booming of the Christian university movement in contemporary Zambia.

4.3 Conclusion

The article explored the emergence of the Christian university movement as a new development in post 1990 Zambia. It was established that the Christian university movement had emerged to largely provide ‘more different and better’ university education and that all these reasons were facilitated by both local and global realities as the Christian churches and their universities were responding to these realities. The article argues that contrary to the often ascribed reason of addressing the access to university education challenge, the emergence of the Christian university movement in Zambia had much to do with fulfilling the religious motives of the Christian churches, and therefore mirrored the dominance and influence of Christianity on Zambia’s religious landscape.
References


