

Conclusion

INHERITING THE WIND

We must rise to defend our liberation credentials and bring hope to our people who pinned their future on the historical legacy of this party. We must rise so that the words of Prophet Isaiah ring true. SPLM must lead, the SPLM must inspire, SPLM must unleash its liberation zeal and captivate the imagination of our people yet again.

—Salva Kiir, 2018

This book has examined theology's role in the ideological construction of the South Sudanese nation-state. The condominium period was critical for the institutionalization of mission work in the South, administrative attempts to insulate the South from Arab-Islamic influences, and the cultivation of an English-speaking, biblically literate elite. That period was followed by the First Civil War, which witnessed the emergence of a black liberation theology that buttressed arguments for southern liberation. Foundational to this theology was the sense that southerners were God's people and that he was concerned with liberating them from their northern, Arab, and Islamic "oppressors." This stream of thought was revived during the Second Civil War in the *SPLM/A Update* to contribute a sense of spiritual destiny to the war effort and serve as a unifying mechanism in the face of internal division. Thus, the religious nationalism displayed at independence in 2011 did not emerge spontaneously but was merely another chapter in a genealogy of thought.

This religious thought is noteworthy for its endurance and racialized nature, with a black/African “chosen” and “oppressed” and Arab “oppressors.” While John Mbiti identified southern Africa as a context in which black theology could exist, this study suggests that South Sudan was also a space where religious ideology was heavily informed by racialized political realities. Unlike South Africa (and a host of other African contexts), the population framed as “oppressive” was not white and Christian but Arab and Muslim. Far from being isolated from or insensitive to the sociopolitical realities of the times, religious thought in South Sudan has historically served as an arena for thinkers to define and respond to their circumstances. Rather than the historical North-South conflict being whittled down to race or religion, religious thought was an important space in which racial differences and behaviors were defined.

Race’s centrality in the theological paradigm, however, must not overshadow the religious approaches taken to interethnic relations—relations that, since December 2013, have been openly and violently broadcasted for the world to see. This study has shown that from a Christian perspective, approaches to ethnicity have been ambivalent. During the condominium the state was bent on preserving, rather than eliminating, indigenous cultures. The CMS Nugent School encouraged ethnically driven competition, and moments of division were lamented. Oliver Allison, John Parry, and others contended that Christianity was needed for interethnic amity to exist, while the Catholic *Messenger* newspaper published one editorial that told its readers that “Christianity is now your tribe,” a sentiment that could only be read as an argument for the supremacy of one’s Christian identity over ethnic heritage. While Fr. Thomas Attiyah would later use scripture to inform his *SPLA Update* readers that there were no longer ethnic differences but only those in Christ, Archbishop Paolino Loro offered in 2011 that ethnicities were gifts of God and not to be feared. There has never been an overwhelming sense that ethnicity should be repudiated in favor of Christianity or, conversely, that ethnic identity should reign supreme.

While there has been ambivalence on that point, one element has been particularly consistent—that South Sudanese, in blending their Christian and political imaginations, rarely offered wholesale demonization of Islam. While Muslim individuals and Islamizing governments and policies may have been the targets of rebuke, Islam as a world religion was not altogether vilified in the print mediums—at least, most notably, not by the Sudanese writers quoted in this study. The same cannot be said of the Europeans and Americans who, in the first half of the twentieth century, discussed Islam

in antagonistic, martial terms. Thus, despite the reality that religion certainly was a pivotal factor in the twentieth-century civil wars, the South Sudanese intellectuals under study did not generally frame the conflict as a war against Islam itself. This reality is not only imperative for those who would wish to clothe the civil wars as “Christianity v. Islam” struggles but also illustrates the capacity for adherents of one religion to marshal that faith for their own political (and perhaps revolutionary) purposes without castigating the faith(s) of their political enemies.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SUDAN AND BEYOND

I believe that the narrative presented in this study holds several implications for the study of religion and politics in Africa and beyond. To begin, I believe that one of this book’s most critical interventions is the fact that South Sudanese did not stop using the Bible and Christian theology for political purposes after the end of the war in 2005 or the attainment of independence in 2011; on the contrary, such thinking has continued during the post-CPA era. The primary danger of limiting one’s focus on southern religious politics to the civil war years with the North is the inaccurate presumption that southerners only appropriated Christianity in opposition to Islam (and, consequently, that Christianity was no longer politically expedient or useful with the removal of the northern threat). Such a reading would connote that those southerners under study had a narrow objective when invoking God and scripture. The fact that political theology has continued in South Sudan testifies to the more compelling reality that southerners have not forsaken the idea that the spiritual is intimately connected with the material, or that scripture is a useful political resource with a pertinent word for every situation. Given this state of affairs, it would be useful to compare the nature of religion in other national contexts that have emerged after lengthy periods of conflict. In what ways does the manner of religious ideation change when states transition from wartime to postwar status? Charting such changes—or consistencies—across time and space can expand our knowledge about religion’s use as an instrument of war, mouthpiece, resource, and building block for nationalism.

The *SPLA Update*’s use of scripture and theology to interpret enemies and justify violence can lead us to consider other communities that similarly invoked biblical narratives. In Uganda, the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) wants to establish a theocratic state based on Old Testament and Acholi tradition. With Joseph Kony believing himself to be God’s spokesperson and a

medium of the Holy Spirit, the LRA began from the remnants of the Holy Spirit movement, which fought against the Ugandan state in the late 1980s.¹ Hutu preachers in Rwanda used the memory of King Saul and his divinely sanctioned actions against the Amalekites (killing every man, woman, and child) to justify Tutsi destruction.² It will be imperative to note if and how biblical passages are or have been invoked to stoke violence in conflict between Christians and Muslims in places like the Central African Republic.³

Beyond the use of scripture in a bellicose environment, there is also the broader matter of state appropriations of the Bible or Christianity for partisan purposes. How have African and non-African states used religious rhetoric to encourage peace or policy agendas? Amid the war on terror, President Donald Trump's Muslim ban, and the terrorist attacks that have hit France, this question is particularly relevant and revealing for the contemporary geopolitical climate. While one could argue that we are living in an era similar to the late nineteenth century (when some envisioned a global "Christianity v. Islam" struggle), a sign I encountered on the lawn of a Minneapolis church reading "Jesus was a Refugee" in the wake of Trump's ban reinforces the need to look for dissenting undercurrents of religious thought. Just as political theology in Sudan has contained a diversity of appropriations, one must look for the multiplicity of ways that state, non-state, church, and secular actors use scripture to address issues like the US immigration crisis, global warming, abortion, and all forms of state violence against marginalized communities. How, for example, are Catholic immigrants from South and Central America using theology to bolster their claims for access to US citizenship? How are Black Lives Matter activists using religion to buttress arguments for social, economic, and political enfranchisement? How are Muslim citizens in France, the United States, and South Sudan using the Koran as a basis from which to petition those respective governments for equal status in those countries?⁴ The South Sudanese case proves that religion can function as a productive and dynamic technology with which to empower, encourage, and enlighten those in the midst of a violent, revolutionary struggle. Similarly, work must be done on the ways in which clerical and lay theologians the world over are marshaling religion to advance sociopolitical projects in spaces that are defined not by military warfare but instead by more seemingly pacific conflicts.

The international nature of Sudan's civil wars can help students and scholars to think in different ways about religion's mobility in the diaspora. Religion is a space where individuals can stake claims in communities that are much larger than their own. Conversion to Christianity and Islam in

Africa has been described as an entryway into a “global system” that revitalizes Yoruba religion’s “vital core,” and in sub-Saharan Africa independent churches rejuvenated African identity by making “inter-ethnic and trans-cultural associative networks” that are linked by “overarching symbols and doctrines.”⁵ While Matthew Kustenbauder once noted that mobile phones, airplanes, and news media linked seemingly isolated refugee camps and villages to the wider world system, I believe that one of the more fascinating dimensions of my study is the way in which political theology is shown advancing from diasporic print mediums like the *Voice of Southern Sudan* and *SPLA Update* to online venues like the *Sudan Tribune*. How, then, are refugees, immigrants, and all others who are geographically distant from their homes using the internet as figurative pulpits to moralize domestic issues? The internet has made it easier than ever for politically attentive laypeople to broadcast their views to a global audience, making the authorship of those disseminating religiously infused civic messaging more egalitarian. Building off work that Timeka Tounsel and D. S. Williams have done on black women, I believe that by inserting biblical language into online articles and blogs, political discourse can become the stuff of everyday hermeneutics, revealing both the capacity for clerical and lay citizens to express their interpretations through public discourse and their willingness to do so.⁶ The study of African religious politics stands to be strengthened by seriously considering the internet as a venue for religious expression.

Perhaps one of the more curious implications of this study concerns the use of religion in arguments for diversity and inclusion. One may walk away from this book believing that South Sudanese Christians used their faith as a weapon against the North Sudanese racial and religious Other. Such a reading would frame the theology that infused the liberation effort as not only partisan but essentially divisive and exclusive, an ideology that encouraged separatism rather than reconciliation across racial, religious, and political lines. Such a conclusion, however, would be problematic for several reasons. First, it flies in the face of the reality that this theology never demonized Islam or Muslims wholesale. Second, it would fail to account for the ways in which theology was used to encourage peace during South Sudan’s internal conflict. Third, it would fail to account for the severe pressures that southerners faced in their struggles against Khartoum. The religious ideations presented in this book were created by people living with crushing circumstances, and that such theology could emerge from such extraordinary circumstances sheds light on Joseph Taban’s assertion that “If there’s a book the South Sudanese cannot remove from their lives,

it's the Bible." Rather than viewing their theology as one that was essentially antagonistic, it would be more accurate to take note instead of their ability to make positive meaning of themselves and their futures despite their perilous circumstances.

Finally, the competing contentions that "Christianity is now your tribe" and that tribes are "gifts from God" are fascinating to think about when considering other contexts in which intergroup relations—whether racial, ethnic, or national—are controversial. Should religions that propose themselves to be predicated on love (whether Christianity or otherwise) justify the inherent value of distinct identities in a world where identity politics are so fraught? Should the priority, conversely, be to accentuate sameness, shared values, and communal identities? While these questions are bound to conjure polarizing answers depending on one's experiences and perspectives, I think that there is something right, compelling, and even urgent about Loro's claim that ethnicities are gifts from God. While religious identities may be essentially transcendent by their connection with the divine, it is dangerous to consider identity politics in a zero-sum manner. Celebrating one must not mean relegating another. On the contrary, seeing that there is intimate connection between one's faith, race, ethnicity, and gender can open the door for honest dialogue and mutual understanding. I pose the same questions for South Sudan that Kristin Anderson did for race in the United States. Is colorblindness good for people of color? In a multicultural and multiethnic South Sudan, what does it mean for people to ignore ethnicity in their interactions? If ethnicity matters in society and in everyday life, what are the implications of not seeing it?⁷ The decision not to see one's race or ethnicity comes with the consequences of ignoring the beauty, pain, culture, and history that accompanies those identities.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

It has been a singular time in which to produce a book on South Sudanese history. Since work for this study began in 2010, South Sudan has transitioned from being a part of the Republic of the Sudan to independence to a nation that has emerged from its own civil war. While the history of southern nationalism—and indeed, the history of the nation—is still evolving, some conclusions can be drawn at this particular moment.

Despite the temptation to marvel at the fact that an internal war erupted less than three years into independence, the recent conflict did not occur spontaneously. Nor does the violence signify a total failure of the national

project, a turning away from the long-standing racial and cultural identifications with blackness and Africanness. This study shows how race, in response to conflicts with North Sudanese, came to dominate identifications of self and community. Changing times call for changing responses, however, and race in the current environment has become less salient than ethnicity. Still, the appalling ferocity of ethnic violence since 2013 raises some legitimate questions. How effective was Christianity's contribution in encouraging a sense of cross-ethnic nationalism? How should one assess the true impact of the Biblical idioms that infused political rhetoric before and after the CPA? In a religious thought that placed such importance on race in defining oppressor and oppressed, how does the current state of ethnic division complicate ideological understandings of the South Sudanese nation-state?

South Sudan is not a singular case. Almost every nation has had to contend with existential disputes, problems, and civil wars that threatened their principles and existences. One needs to look no further than the Sudan, which had to deal with the consequences of the Torit Mutiny mere months before its 1956 independence. Others might argue that South Sudan's current trauma proves that Frantz Fanon wrote with prophetic accuracy in the following excerpt from *The Wretched of the Earth*:

Nationalism, that magnificent hymn which roused the masses against the oppressor, disintegrates in the aftermath of independence. Nationalism is not a political doctrine. . . . If we really want to safeguard our countries from regression, paralysis, or collapse, we must rapidly switch from a national consciousness to a social and political consciousness. The nation can only come into being in a program elaborated by a revolutionary leadership and enthusiastically and lucidly appropriated by the masses.⁸

It is tempting to conclude that South Sudan proves Fanon correct that, upon independence, the aims and utility of religious nationalism were achieved but never actually possessed the power to construct and preserve national peace and unity. Gordon Buay's critique of government attempts to push the Cush moniker on the new nation illustrates the tenuousness of biblical insertions in the construction of national identity. He raises legitimate questions about South Sudan's exclusive claims to being the Land of Cush and the educational and theological backgrounds of the military officers who tried to insert Cush into the national anthem. What value, then, does the infusion of religious idioms into national identity have if those connections are thin or inaccurate? Is it mere propaganda—as Buay

termed Garang's actions—or is it constructive? The veracity of the claim that religious (and other) nationalisms are not fit to sustain the nation-state may also be proved by the civil war's dead, refugees, and shattered dreams.

And yet, the utility of religious thought in the nation's political sphere historically or moving forward cannot and should not be wholly rejected. On the contrary, recent years have shown that the Bible's continued appropriation in political claims making is an outgrowth of longer-term behaviors. Biblical borrowings since the CPA have been used to celebrate, discuss, and critique South Sudanese authority and nationhood. One of my interview participants, Bishop Anthony Poggo, authored *Come Let Us Rebuild: Lessons from Nehemiah* (2013). He looks to the book of Nehemiah to provide lessons for the construction of South Sudan. While he was still in the writing process, Poggo shared his reasoning behind the project with me:

I'm looking at . . . the lessons that we learn from Nehemiah on building the nation, and so a number of things that are in my view are relevant to [the] South Sudan context. . . . We need to be Nehemiahs to be able to build this nation. . . . Nehemiah was patriotic . . . a pray-er . . . a planner . . . patient in the face of the challenges that he faced. . . . We are talking of lessons and principles that we can learn from the word of God that can be useful and important.⁹

A couple of months before the war's first shots were fired, I met with two students from the Juba Diocesan Model Secondary School and was taken aback by their use of the Old Testament to express their hopes and wishes for the government. One of the students, Grace, called on government ministers to come to church, pray, and ask God to give them wisdom so that they could rule wisely. She noted that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 9:10), and that if leaders go to church and fear the Lord, "they'll do good." The other student, Diana, mentioned that when God asked Solomon what he desired, the king responded with wisdom. She also quoted from Proverbs 21:1, stating that the king's heart is in the Lord's hands. With these thoughts in mind, she expressed her wish for the authorities to come to the Lord. "If they did not call on the Lord to come and guide our country," Diana opined, "it will be in vain. . . . They should call on the Lord and then they can be in control. God will be the one guiding them . . . just following his footsteps."¹⁰ Even anthem-critic Gordon Buay illustrated the continued potency of biblical borrowings when he responded to claims about his loyalty to the Kiir regime. Appointed by Kiir as an ambassador in 2014, Buay was alleged to be involved in a coup plot. He dismissed the

charge and was quoted in early January 2015 as likening his relationship with the president to that between “Jesus Christ and Jehovah.”¹¹

South Sudanese have repeatedly found the Bible to be a critical source for sociopolitical power, dissent, defense, and meaning making. Whether biblical Cush was or was not limited to South Sudan’s modern boundaries means little in comparison to the power of being able to claim that one’s tribulations and liberation were prophetically foretold. It does not matter that elements of the Moses-Joshua narrative are inconsistent with John Garang and Salva Kiir; it is the script that allows southerners to envision themselves as moving toward and reaching the promised land, whatever that place might be. The Bible, in South Sudan as elsewhere, has provided a script for action, a lexicon for resistance, a vehicle for defining “us” and “them,” and ways to understand and respond to various circumstances. Its mutability in South Sudanese history is rivaled only by its endurance as a politically relevant text.

Continued appropriations of biblical symbolisms and themes in southern political discourse warrant continued study on the meanings of such invocations. Rather than symbolizing the failure of religious thought in the national project, this period of conflict could prove to be yet another in a list of chapters in which Christian thought is appropriated to fit contemporary circumstances. Rather than the traditional Arab enemy and black African oppressed, new heroes and villains are bound to emerge to fit a new type of theology. Regardless of what the future may hold, the Bible—with its characters, narratives, themes, and symbols—will continue to be a source of political inspiration, argument, and vocabulary to address and define issues facing the nation.