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## Chapter 14

### Christianity, Human Rights and LGBTI Advocacy: The Case of Dette Resources Foundation in Zambia

Adriaan van Klinken

As in many other African countries, in Zambia issues of homosexuality and ‘gay rights’ or ‘LGBTI<sup>1</sup> rights’ recently have become heavily politicised and subject to public debate. I have analysed some of these controversies elsewhere, specifically examining the highly political nature of the dominant, mostly Pentecostalist, Christian discourses on homosexuality in Zambia (van Klinken 2013, 2014). These discourses typically refer to the constitutional declaration of Zambia as a Christian nation<sup>2</sup> in order to argue against the acceptance of homosexuality and the recognition of the rights of sexual minorities in the country. They both reflect and reinforce a hostile social and political climate in which LGBTI people face stigma, discrimination and marginalisation. Indeed, the colonial anti-sodomy law criminalising ‘unnatural offences’ or ‘carnal knowledge of any person against the order of nature’ (Zambian Penal Code Act, Chapter 155) in recent years has led to a number of prosecutions of people in same-sex relationships.<sup>3</sup>

However, to prevent and in fact resist monolithic depictions of ‘homophobic Zambia’ as part of a larger ‘homophobic Africa’ populated by a ‘homophobic African Christianity’, in this chapter I explore how in the Zambian public debates we do not only see a mobilisation of Christian discourses *against* homosexuality, but also the beginning of a counter-discourse emerging. I particularly examine the contribution of a local Zambian NGO that, in 2013, spoke out publicly in support of the rights of sexual minorities, using an explicitly Christian rationale and reversing the argument of Zambia as a Christian nation to support its stance. However marginal, their voice is significant as it presents what I call a counter-narrative of Zambia as a Christian nation, and an example of a counter-hegemonic Christian attitude towards homosexuality in an African context. It is also significant because it undermines popular representations, both in Africa and ‘the West’, that the recent controversies about homosexuality reveal a clash between liberal, secular Western values and conservative, religious African values. In fact, as this case study reveals, there exist conflicting visions *within* African societies, and *within* African Christian circles, centred around questions of sexuality and human rights. Offering a detailed and critical analysis of the two statements published by Dette Resources Foundation, and discussing these in relation to broader debates about religion and human rights

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<sup>1</sup> LGBTI stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex. As pointed out below, in this case study the terms ‘gay’, ‘homosexual’ and ‘LGBTI’ are not clearly distinguished and tend to be used interchangeably. Even though the term ‘LGBTI’ is increasingly used in Zambia to refer to a variety of non-normative gender and sexual practices, in fact most of the debates focus on homosexuality, same-sex practices, and gay and lesbian identities. Analysing these debates, this chapter adopts the use of the acronym ‘LGBTI’ but does not pay attention to the specific position and rights of individuals who identify as transgender or intersex (for an account on the various gender and sexual identities in contemporary Africa, including transgender and intersex, see the contributions in Ekine and Abbas 2013).

<sup>2</sup> In 1991, President Chiluba – who identified as a ‘born again’ Christian – declared Zambia to be a ‘Christian nation’, which was later enshrined in the preamble to the country’s constitution (Phiri 2003; see Gifford 1998). This declaration both reflects and reinforces a form of ‘Pentecostal nationalism’ that directly shapes the current debates on homosexuality in the country (van Klinken 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Amnesty International claims that in 2013 ‘At least five men are known to have been arrested under Zambia’s anti-sodomy laws’ (Amnesty International 2014). Moreover, human rights activist, Paul Kasonkomona, in 2013 was arrested and charged with publicly ‘soliciting for immoral purposes’ after he appeared in a TV programme and called for the recognition of the rights of vulnerable groups such as sex workers and men having sex with men in order to adequately address the HIV pandemic. These various cases received a lot of attention in the Zambian media.

(Banchoff and Wuthnow 2011; Hackett 2004; Wangila 2010), and LGBTI human rights in Africa (Maguire 2004; Engelke 1999), this chapter provides insight into the possibilities and difficulties of an alternative African Christian discourse about, and attitude towards, homosexuality and LGBTI persons.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Controversy around Dette Resources Foundation**

‘Dette Resources Foundation Welcomes Gay Marriage Rights in Zambia’. This was the heading of an article published at the *Zambian news website, Tumfweko*, on 27 March 2013. The text of the article itself was a statement signed by Jane Kaluba, executive director of Dette Resources Foundation, a local Zambian NGO. However, as she explained later, the heading was not original but had been chosen by the *Tumfweko* editors (interview with Jane Kaluba, Lusaka, 8 July 2013). The opening of the statement reads:

We take great exception to accusations by Home Affairs Minister Edger Lungu that some Civil Society Organizations in Zambia are being used or about to be used to fight for gay rights in the country for money. To the contrary, our support for people with different sex orientation has nothing to do with the money the minister is insinuating. (*Tumfweko*, 27 March 2013)

The ‘accusations’ that Dette Resources Foundation (henceforth, Dette) here responds to, refer to comments by the Zambia Home Affairs Minister, Edger Lungu, in response to an advert published by the European Union’s delegation in Zambia in the newspaper *Zambia Daily Mail* (21 March 2013). This advert announced a call for grant applications under the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights: Country Based Support Scheme for Zambia, and it explicitly mentioned discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity as a key issue of the scheme. In his reaction, Lungu commented that the EU should ‘take the fight for gay rights to Europe’ because ‘this is unZambian; it is not part of our culture’ (*Zambian Watchdog*, 25 March 2013). He further claimed to know that ‘some money-hungry civil society organisations will fall for the money but we are waiting to see which Zambian will get the money and start championing same sex marriages’ (*ibid*). Lungu’s strong, undiplomatic response must be understood in the political context in which the incumbent Patriotic Front (PF) government was under pressure of the opposition to make clear it did not support ‘gay rights’, after rumours were spread in the run-up to the 2011 Presidential elections that the PF would legalise homosexuality once voted into power (van Klinken 2013, 524). Lungu’s reference to homosexuality as ‘un-Zambian’ illustrates the broader tendency among political leaders in various African countries, most famously Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, to make sexuality a key tool through which African cultural authenticity is expressed, and a site where the purity of the post-colonial African nation is at stake (Ndjio 2013). Lungu’s suggestion that some civil society organisations would ‘fall for the money’ offered by the EU reinforces the depiction of those Zambian organisations that do recognise and protect the rights of gay and lesbian persons as being agents of Western neo-colonial imperialism. It is this insinuation that Dette Resources Foundation, as a local civil society organisation, denies and protests against in its statement.

Dette had made headlines earlier, in July 2012, when it launched a survey on homosexuality in Zambia, aiming to gain insight into the number of LGBTI persons in the country and the problems they are facing. The announcement of this survey was already enough reason for Dette to receive serious threats and condemnation from political, religious and other societal circles, with Lungu as

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<sup>4</sup> I use the term ‘LGBTI persons’ with some hesitation because this originally Western term does not necessarily cover the variety of same-sex and other non-normative sexualities in Africa and prioritises a conception of sexuality as identity that does not necessarily fit well into African contexts. However, as mentioned above, the term LGBTI is increasingly used in Zambia and wider in Africa, and the notion of LGBTI *persons* is strategic as precisely the humanity of individuals who are part of sexual minorities is often denied.

Home Affairs Minister even calling for a criminal investigation against the NGO (Shalala 2012). Despite (or possibly as a result of) all this pressure, the March 2013 statement suggests that Dette had grown in its commitment to speak out publicly in support of people with a different sexual orientation. This statement again provoked a huge amount of discussion, both on the Tumfweko website and in other media and society, accompanied by more threats and condemnation. Hence, Dette felt the need to publish another statement, which again appeared on the Tumfweko website, this time under the heading ‘Dette Supports Homosexuals’ (Tumfweko, 29 April 2013). Here, Dette further explained its stance, saying that it did not want to promote any (homo)sexual acts, but to support and defend the rights of all human beings, including sexual minorities.

### **Defending LGBTI Human Rights**

In its statements, Dette adopts the terminology of human rights to express its concern about the situation of sexual minorities in Zambia. These minorities are, in the first statement, mostly referred to as ‘gays’ or with the acronym LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons), while in the second statement none of these terms are used but instead ‘homosexuals’ is the key term. The basic point of both statements is that human rights apply to these sexual minorities as much as they do to any other human being. In other words, there is not a specific set of ‘gay rights’ or ‘LGBTI rights’, but only fundamental human rights:

These people are no different from the rest of us in terms of rights and duties. These people have such rights as life, good health, education, employment and protection by the state from internal and external enemies. (Tumfweko, 27 March 2014)

Especially in the second statement, after the organisation had become subject of controversy and public debate, Dette explicitly states that it does not want to support ‘homosexuality acts’ – explaining that ‘homosexuality like any sexual matter do [sic] not need to be championed’ – and it leaves open how it morally evaluates same-sex practices. However, describing itself as ‘an organization agitating for human rights and equal respect among people of different groupings’ (Tumfweko, 29 April 2014), Dette undertakes to ‘join other countries in protecting the rights of people with different sex orientation’. In the statements, Dette argues that the Zambian government, and Zambian society more generally, should respect the fundamental rights of sexual minorities, reminding the public that Zambia is a signatory to the United Nations Declaration for Human Rights and has implemented this through its legislation. The first statement suggests that there is a domestic law preventing ‘victimization of people by color, sex orientation, religion, political affiliation’ among other grounds. This is incorrect – sexual orientation is not explicitly included in the anti-discrimination clause in Zambia’s constitution or laws, though the current (1996) constitution has an inclusive formulation of grounds for protection from discrimination.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Dette’s second statement admits that the constitution is silent ‘on matters of homosexuality’, but referring to the general anti-discrimination clause, it argues that the constitution ‘does prevent victimization of any sort from any one including the state’.

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<sup>5</sup> Article 40 of *The Constitution of the Republic of Zambia* reads: ‘Every person has the right not to be discriminated against, directly or indirectly, on any grounds including race, sex, pregnancy, health, marital, ethnic, tribal, social or economic status, origin, colour, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language or birth.’ In the current constitutional review process, the anti-discrimination clause has become subject to political debate, with the Human Rights Commission, in its comments on the new draft constitution, explicitly stating that ‘the provision should be exhaustive rather than inclusive’ because an open-ended provision ‘may lead to the handing of certain rights to or inclusion of certain groups that the people of Zambia may not be ready or willing to accept ... [particularly] members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Inter-Sex (LGBTI) community’ (Human Rights Commission Zambia 2012).

Dette's deployment of human rights discourse is strategic: it seeks to broaden the scope of the widely accepted framework of human rights – endorsed by the Zambian government and enshrined in the constitution – in order to include a minority group that in the Zambian context is not recognised as such. This strategy fits into a recent development, that is, 'the emergence of "human rights" as a central vehicle and framing device for LGBT political claims, particularly in international contexts' (Kollman and Waites 2009, 2; for a discussion on Africa, see Akanji and Epprecht 2013). As various scholars have commented, this strategy is not free of risks, first because of the popular perception in Africa of human rights conventions as originating from, and being based on, Western systems of thought, and added to that, second, because also homosexuality and LGBTI identities more generally are considered as 'a Western invention'. This leaves a gay or LGBTI rights agenda particularly vulnerable to be seen as 'a not-so-subtle form of Western neo-imperialism' (Epprecht 2012, 228). In other words,

a key cost of the rigid universalism of the human rights lexicon is that it can impede dialogue, and risks being perceived as part of Western imperialism. In response, we need a conception of human rights in which the substantive culturally specific content of human rights conventions and discourses remains subject to debate and revision. (Kollman and Waites 2009, 7)

In view of the difficulties with the cross-cultural application of human rights, and the problem of a largely secular, moral-legal approach to human rights, Gerrie ter Haar has underlined the need for an 'inculturation of human rights' in Africa that incorporates a moral-spiritual dimension and takes serious religious ideas that can buttress human rights (ter Haar 2009, 63–67). Against this background it is of crucial significance that Dette's statements present an explicitly religious, Christian rationale for the defence of human rights in relation to LGBTI persons. The organisation clearly seeks to contextualise its LGBTI advocacy work in the local Zambian epistemologies in which human rights and issues of sexual diversity are being received. This is done in two ways: by providing a theological argument as to why human rights also apply to LGBTI persons, and by reversing the argument of Zambia as a Christian nation.

### **A Christian Account on LGBTI Human Rights**

'Every [human] creature', Dette points out in its second statement, has received 'God given rights'. Hence, by virtue of the 'common humanity' to which LGBTIs belong, they also have these fundamental rights that, therefore, need to be respected and protected. The theological foundation of human rights on the biblical notion of human beings being created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1, 26–27), reflected in this statement, echoes a long tradition of Christian thinking about human rights. Both the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Roman Catholic Church have primarily based their understanding and support of human rights on this doctrine of the *Imago Dei* (see Justitia et Pax 2011; WCC 2008). For example, at its 5th Assembly in Nairobi, 1975, the WCC adopted the following declaration, which has been reiterated in more recent statements: 'Our concern for human rights is based on our conviction that God wills a society in which all can exercise full human rights. All human beings are created in the image of God, equal, and infinitely precious in God's sight and ours' (quoted from WCC 2008). Referring to the same doctrine, the Catholic document *The Church and Human Rights* states that human rights are 'inviolable, inalienable, and universal' and that the Church 'feels injured when the rights of a man [sic], whoever he may be, and wherever he may be, are ignored and violated' (Justitia et Pax 2011, 27, 34). Despite the sexist language, the latter comment is important as it means that regardless of the answer to the question whether homosexual practice is sinful or not, homosexual people (and other sexual minority groups) have intrinsic human rights that need to be defended.

Indeed, the Roman Catholic Church in Zambia in 2012<sup>6</sup> issued a statement saying that even though homosexual acts are ‘seriously wrong and sinful’, people who feel inclined to these acts ‘are fellow human beings [who] must not be discriminated against’ (Samasumo 2012). This relatively nuanced statement was strikingly different in tone compared to concurrent statements of the Council of Churches in Zambia (CCZ, associated with WCC; representing the mainline Protestant churches) and the Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia (EFZ, representing Evangelical and Pentecostal churches), who both not only stated that homosexual relationships are immoral and sinful, but also explicitly opposed any possible attempt of the government to decriminalise such relationships (CCZ 2012; EFZ 2012).

Dette itself remains rather vague about its moral evaluation of homosexual practices. The organisation literally states that ‘people regardless of what they do in their own “insanity or sanity” still retain their God given rights’ – leaving open whether or not homosexuality is a(n) (in)sane practice. Clearly Dette does not want to make itself vulnerable to the accusation of ‘promoting homosexuality’ (though of course such accusations have been made) but is unequivocal about its support of LGBTI persons on the basis of their social position – the discrimination and marginalisation they face – and their intrinsic, ‘God-given’ human dignity and rights. Concretely this support means that the organisation protests against proposals to subject LGBTI persons to ‘punitive measures’, as that would be ‘cruel’ and ‘inhuman’, and argues that ‘it is better to allow these people to live freely’. This can be read as a protest against the current criminalisation of same-sex practices in Zambia, though that point is not explicitly made. Dette further denounces the fact that ‘LGBTI in Zambia have been forced to live in hiding and isolation’ and emphasises that ‘as human beings [they] need to be treated with love, respect and dignity’. The organisation states that ‘Like any other human beings, homosexuals have rights to health services, life, association, expression, liberty among others’, and it is clear that precisely these rights have become seriously under threat in the current socio-political climate in the country.

Basing its understanding of human rights on the biblical doctrine of the *Imago Dei* and then applying this to LGBTI persons, Dette seeks to root its defence of the human rights of sexual minorities in a religious language and theological narrative most Zambians are familiar with.<sup>7</sup> In a country that has officially been declared a Christian nation and where 85–90 per cent of the population identifies as Christian, Christianising the discourse on LGBTI human rights is a crucial part of inculturating these rights. With Christianity having become an ‘African religion’ (Bediako 1995), such an inculturated Christian account is crucial in order to go beyond the popular perceptions of human rights in general, and LGBTI human rights in particular, as Western, secular and imperialistic (Atiemo 2013).

The potential effect and possible impact of Dette’s statements could be twofold. First, by referring to homosexuals as people who, like any other human being, are created by God and therefore have ‘God given rights’, Dette humanises homosexuals and other LGBTI persons and intervenes in the demonisation of sexual minorities in popular Zambian rhetoric (see van Klinken 2013). One of the most critical forms of ‘othering’ that is at work in Zambian debates, namely, the depiction of LGBTI persons as ‘inhuman’ and ‘satanic’, is interrogated here. Second, by presenting a religious, explicitly Christian rationale for its support of the human rights of homosexuals, Dette undermines the opposition created in the Zambian debates between, on the one hand, LGBTI rights as

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<sup>6</sup> This was in the mid of a public debate following a speech of UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon in the Zambian parliament where he called upon the government to recognise the rights of sexual minorities.

<sup>7</sup> It is noteworthy that in the Zambian context, Christian LGBTI persons themselves have also embraced the notion of the *Imago Dei* to negotiate their sexual and religious identities and claim a space for themselves (see van Klinken and Phiri, forthcoming).

‘a secular thing’, and on the other hand, Christianity as the defining characteristic of the Zambian nation. This could enable a paradigm shift in Zambian public debates: from a discussion on LGBTI rights versus Christianity, to a Christian discussion about the understanding of human rights as they relate to LGBTI persons.

### **The ‘Human’ of LGBTI Human Rights**

As much as Dette’s strategy can potentially be effective, its impact is yet to be seen and is, in fact, likely to be minor in the foreseeable future. One of the major problems is that Christianity itself in Zambia and wider in Africa is enormously diverse and plural, which also affects the understanding of human rights. The line of Christian thought presented by Dette is an (in the Zambian context radical) interpretation of ecumenical Christian (that is, Catholic and mainline Protestant) thinking about human rights. However, as is obvious from the above quoted CCZ and EFZ statements that explicitly endorse the criminalisation of homosexuality, Dette’s interpretation is far from widely accepted. The strands of Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity that have become very popular in Zambia and also shape the attitudes and beliefs in other denominations, have at least an ambivalent attitude towards human rights.<sup>8</sup> This is exemplified, for example, in the criticism by EFZ director Rev. Mwanza in response to the above-mentioned European Union advert. His criticism that the EU is ‘promoting the so called “human” rights that are contrary to our fundamental Christian values and our rich African and traditional beliefs and practices’ (Mwanza 2013) could also have been addressed to Dette.

Apparently, different strands of Christianity have a different understanding of what the ‘fundamental Christian values’ are. In this context, it is noteworthy that Mwanza in his letter puts the word ‘human’ in ‘human rights’ between quotation marks: it illustrates that what is at stake in the controversy about LGBTI human rights in Zambia (and possibly wider in Africa), is a clash over the humanity of LGBTI persons. This becomes even clearer when looking at the comments posted in response to Dette’s statements after they were published on the Tumfweko website. Many comments denounced Dette’s Christian-inspired call to recognise LGBTI human rights, using equally religiously-inspired language to argue that homosexuality is ‘inhuman’ and that it ‘degrades humanity’, that ‘Zambia did not sign any human rights for faggots’, that ‘human wrongs are not human rights’ and that ‘gay rights are demonic’ (comments posted on Tumfweko, 27 March 2013). This type of thinking illustrates the emergence of ‘human rights exceptionalism’ in relation to sexual minorities in Africa, most poignantly exemplified by Ugandan Minister of Ethics and Integrity, James Nsaba Buturo’s infamous remark that ‘homosexuals can forget about human rights’ (quoted in Cheney 2012, 89). It is easy to recognise that this type of human rights exceptionalism is ‘simply unacceptable’ (Cheney 2012, 91), yet it must be realised that this exceptionalism might actually be inspired by an evangelical concern with human dignity. After all, in this line of thought criminalising homosexuality is a way of preventing gay and lesbian people from inhuman behaviour, and thus a way of protecting their true humanity, that is, their *Imago Dei*.

This fundamental divergence of understanding underlines the need, in the words of Gerrie ter Haar, ‘not to limit ourselves in human rights debates on an exclusive focus on the “rights” aspect, but also consider the “human” aspect. We have to ask ourselves not only what it means to have rights, but also what it means to be human’ (ter Haar 2009, 62). This is the key question that needs to be addressed before any significant progress can be made with LGBTI human rights advocacy in Zambia and wider in Africa, because otherwise ‘human rights talk’ will continue to ‘fall on deaf ears’

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<sup>8</sup> Regarding Pentecostalism, some scholars are rather positive about its contribution to human rights, among others referring to the Pentecostal emphasis on the notion of every human person being made in the image of God, and the egalitarian, democratising tendencies within Pentecostalism (cf. Miller and Yamamori 2007, 33–34). However, as with its commitment to democracy, Pentecostalism’s commitment to human rights might be as long as it corresponds with its own religio-political project (cf. Marshall 2009, 209).

(Engelke 1999, 290). Such debates also need to attend to crucial questions about the understanding of individuality and personhood in Africa in relation to African ideas about ‘corporate existence’ and communal moral norms (Wangila 2010), as these interplay with perceptions of sexuality, sexual identity and LGBTI rights in complex ways. As Lydia Boyd (2013, 697) argues with reference to Uganda, the anti-homosexual rhetoric of born-again Christians ‘reflects a tension between two divergent frameworks of ethical personhood in Uganda, one related to the Ganda value of *ekitiibwa* or “respect/honor”, and the other based in a discourse of rights, autonomy, and “freedom”.’ As long as these questions are not adequately addressed it is hard to speak of a successful inculturation of LGBTI human rights in Africa.<sup>9</sup>

In view of the need to adequately address the question of LGBTI persons as *human* beings, it is a pity that Dette, especially in the first statement, tends to speak about LGBTI’s primarily as victims, that is, as ‘weak (...), vulnerable and marginalized people’ victimised because of their ‘sex orientation’ (Tumfweko, 27 March 2013). This language, which is victimising in itself and tends to deprive LGBTI individuals of their agency, is balanced in the second statement which reads that ‘many of these people are outstanding professionals’ making significant contributions to society, and that they are also ‘our neighbors, business partners, brothers, siblings and colleagues’ (Tumfweko, 29 April 2013). The latter emphasis is key to a strategy of truly humanising LGBTI persons in Zambia. However, a beginning is yet to be made for LGBTI Zambians, in the words of the African LGBTI manifesto, to reclaim and share their stories, their lived realities, their contributions to society and their hopes for the future (cf. Ekine and Abbas 2013, 52).

### **Reversing the Christian Nation Argument**

In addition to its theological account on LGBTI human rights based on the doctrine of the *Imago Dei*, Dette has yet another strategy to contextualise its advocacy for LGBTI persons in Zambia. This strategy consists of an appropriation of the figure of Jesus Christ and a subsequent reversal of the Christian nation argument.

In Dette’s reading of the Scriptures, Jesus Christ was on the side of ‘the weak and the marginalized’. Thus, the first statement refers to ‘the Son of God frequenting the house of prostitutes which earned him a condemnation from people that thought they were more holy than the Son of God.’ The point of this phrase is that the attitude of Dette towards homosexuals resembles the attitude of Jesus towards prostitutes: not one of condemnation but of solidarity and support. What follows from this is that those who nowadays condemn and discriminate against homosexuals are like those who criticised Jesus. The statement here refers to the gospel story about a woman, often believed to be a sex worker, coming to wash Jesus’ feet, with the disciple Judas Iscariot protesting against that. It then reads: ‘The people whose rights we are trying to protect could be compared to the weak people that frequented the feet of Jesus in the scriptures seeking help and support. Jesus gave us an example of siding with the weak when he said: “I did not come for the righteous and the strong but [for] the weak”.’ Invoking this story, Dette does not only equate its own support of sexual minorities with Jesus’ habit of siding with ‘the weak’ in society, but also equates its critics and opponents with the figure of Judas Iscariot – the disciple who later betrays Jesus. Taking Jesus as an example of compassion and solidarity with those who are marginalised in society is nothing new, but explicitly

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<sup>9</sup> I follow here Abamfo Ofori Atiemo’s notion of the inculturation of human rights as ‘a process of encounter between the universal and the local that eventually results in the activation and redevelopment of local elements, which share some affinity with the universal ones, in such a way that both the local and the universal are mutually transformed. Applied to human rights, the resulting local version must overlap in meaning and practice with other local versions and harmonize with the global one. (...) At the base of this stance lies the conviction that in the realm of human rights the effort is made to divest issues such as justice and injustice of all ambiguities so that liberty and inclusion are always virtues and oppression and discrimination are exposed as vices’ (Atiemo 2013, 6–7).



including LGBTI persons in this category of ‘the marginalised’ who deserve Christian solidarity is, in the Zambian context, a controversial step. Dette puts into practice what a few African theologians have recently been calling for, such as Ezra Chitando when he writes:

Our compassion should not be restricted to those groups described as ‘acceptable’ by the church. Many Christians ... find it hard to feel compassion for sex workers, homosexuals, drug users and others. They might demand the conversion of individuals whose lifestyles are considered problematic. Only then would they consider being compassionate towards them. Such an attitude fails to recognize the revolutionary nature of Jesus’ compassion. (Chitando 2007, 55; see also Gunda 2013)

Clearly, Dette does recognise and is inspired by the ‘revolutionary nature’ of the compassion and solidarity shown by Jesus and does not fear the consequences of following this example. Even more, referring to the example of Jesus, Dette reverses the Christian nation argument, which often is used to argue against the acceptance of homosexuality in Zambia, into an argument in support of sexual minorities:

We suggest that, as a nation dedicated to Christ by virtue of Zambia being declared a Christian nation, we need to reconsider our position on Homosexuals. ... Jesus, the man whose name Zambia has been declared, never condemned people, sinners or persons with different sexual orientation. (Tumfweko 29 April 2013)

This can be read as a radical critique of Zambia as a self-proclaimed ‘Christian nation’, as the obvious suggestion is that a country criminalising and discriminating against sexual minorities disqualifies itself as a Christian society.

By presenting an explicitly Christian argument in favour of the recognition of sexual diversity in Zambia, Dette subverts the monolithic representation of Christianity prevalent in Zambian debates and enables an alternative imagination of Zambia as a Christian nation. The organisation presents an example of what postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha calls ‘counter narratives of the nation’. Such narratives interrogate the nation’s totalising conceptual boundaries and ‘disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which “imagined communities” are given essentialist identities’ (Bhabha 2010, 213). In this case, it is the homophobic narrative of Zambia as a Christian nation that, in the words of a government minister, has ‘no room for gays’, that is being interrogated here.<sup>10</sup> Presenting an alternative Christian attitude to LGBTI persons in Zambia, Dette disturbs a monolithic representation of Christianity as a religion preaching hate and intolerance towards sexual minorities and denying their human rights and dignity, and hence also undermines the deployment of this type of Christianity as the moral foundation of the nation. Importantly, Dette does not present a diametrically opposed narrative, such as through a strictly secular argument about Zambia having signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The counter-narrative presented here subscribes to dominant narrative of Zambia as a Christian nation but then disturbs it by questioning the politics of exclusion and marginalisation of sexual ‘others’ that many people assume to follow from it. In view of the above mentioned need to contextualise and inculturate debates about human rights, and LGBTI human rights in particular, in local African epistemologies, this strategy is significant and might potentially be effective.

As much as Dette interrogates the prevalent homophobic narrative of Zambia as a Christian nation, it should be noted that the organisation does not necessarily call into question a heteronormative understanding of Christianity or a normatively heterosexual definition of the nation. Calls for Christian attitudes of love and acceptance can still be embedded in the view that homosexuality is a sin – and as pointed out above, Dette does remain silent on this question, possibly

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<sup>10</sup> Minister of Justice, Wynter Kabimba, was quoted as having stated that ‘there is no room for gays in Zambia’ and explaining that as follows: ‘As Zambians, we declared that we are a Christian nation and there is no way we can allow this un-Zambian culture. I want to urge all Zambians to rise and denounce this vice’ (Namaiko 2013).

for strategic reasons. Moreover, by referring to LGBTI persons as people with ‘strange tendencies’ (Tumfweko, 27 March 2013), Dette also implicitly (and probably unintentionally) contributes to the othering of sexual minorities and reinforces the idea that heterosexuality is the ‘normal’ form of human sexuality. In the statements, the organisation does not adopt a radical queer political frame, that is, ‘a perspective that embraces gender and sexual plurality and seeks to transform, overhaul and revolutionise African order’ (Ekine and Abbas 2013, 3). Despite these criticisms, the ‘LGBTI friendly’ approach presented by Dette offers a basis for hope and in fact is already rather revolutionary in the contemporary Zambian context.

## Conclusion

The dominant narrative about the relation between religion and human rights, and particularly the relation between religion and LGBTI human rights in Africa, is one of opposition. In the context of Zambia, this opposition is particularly manifested in the emergence of a dominant public and political discourse in which Zambia is imagined as a Christian nation that cannot recognise the human rights of sexual minorities. Against this background, the statements published by Dette Resources Foundation can be considered as a meaningful and critical intervention, even if their societal and political impact might be limited or at least is not directly visible. The case study illustrates that, besides an oppositional relationship, it is also possible that Christianity in Africa can be mobilised as a resource to challenge homophobia and defend LGBTI human rights. Dette’s statements only present a beginning of a systematic account on human rights in relation to sexual minorities from an African Christian perspective, and several critical issues that need further attention have been identified above. However, the case study is significant as it prevents a monolithic depiction of Zambia, and Zambian Christianity, as homophobic; it makes us aware of the ways how dominant homophobic discourses are being challenged and contested, not only by outside voices and forces, but also locally, and provides insight in emerging counter-discourses. Their effects and impact is yet to be seen and cannot be predicted, but it is hopeful, at least, that the current hostile social and political climate in which LGBTI persons face stigma, discrimination, marginalisation and persecution, does not remain unchallenged.

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