

# Johane Masowe Chishanu Church Theology and Spirituality: A Transition from the Written Bible to Holy Spirit Utterances

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## Abstract

This article was written at a time when decoloniality was generating a heated debate at most African universities. The point of departure of the debate is that, since Africans were born into a valid and legitimate religious knowledge system that predates the arrival of Western missionaries on the land, can African Initiated Churches (AICs) acknowledge these valid and legitimate indigenous knowledge systems and still retain the tag “African Christian churches?” These legitimate indigenous religious knowledge systems include, but are not limited to, Africans’ way of accessing the divine through oral transmission without reading books and by shunning temples, as they appropriate African traditional shrines for worship. This is so because the dawn and unfolding of Eurocentric modernity, through colonialism and European missionaries, introduced particular ways of accessing the divine through the reading of books (the Bible) and temple gatherings. These, among other factors, gave rise to the emergence of the Johane Masowe Chishanu Church (JMC Church) in Zimbabwe. Since its emergence in the 1930s, the JMC Church has developed a theology that tries to liberate Africans from colonial hegemony by distancing its theology from White missionary inventions such as worshipping in temples and the reading of the Bible in church, as this church prefers open space worship and the utterances of the Holy Spirit (*tsanangudzo dzewmeya*), among other things. Thus, the JMC Church, like many other AICs, is a reactionary movement that questioned the White man’s innovation, Western epistemologies and European cultural imperialism in a bid to romanticise the past. Accordingly, this article discusses the JMC Church as disregarding the Bible with regard to its spirituality in an attempt to free its theology from Eurocentric hegemony. Thus, the main question raised in this article is: Does the written Scripture matter for theology within AICs in the post-colonial period? Or, does this movement retain the tag “an African Christian church” after disregarding the Bible for theology?



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**Keywords:** African Initiated Churches (AICs); African religious knowledge systems; Bible; decoloniality; Johane Masowe Chishanu Church (JMC Church)

## Introduction

Previous researchers have shown that the Bible is an extremely popular book that has a wide readership, specifically in southern Africa (Chitando 2007; Gunda 2014; Togarasei 2009; West 1999). For Chitando, the Bible is read widely in African homes, schools and churches on a variety of occasions (Chitando 2007, 6). Accordingly, Chitando further suggests that the most significant Christian heritage in Africa is the centrality of the Bible (Chitando 2007, 6). Consequently, the centrality of the Bible and the belief in Jesus Christ are the undisputed Christian tenets of all times. In support of this notion, Mbiti argues strongly that these two elements were well-received by Africans (Mbiti 1987, 21) and remained even after the moratorium (the final cessation of missionary activities in Africa) (Wakatama 2007). Therefore, the Bible has become the chief yardstick to measure the validity of any Christian theology (Mbiti 1977, 17). Mbiti further argues that for those professing to be Christians, nothing can substitute the Bible (Mbiti 1977, 23). Today, copies of the Bible are found in African hospital wards, hotel rooms, schools, prisons and even in most rural homes. Africans regard it as a sacred “magical” book with considerable power to change human lives. Thus, most African Initiated Churches (AICs) do not just read the Bible, but also believe that it has the power to dispel or even destroy the evil powers responsible for the suffering of members of their churches (Gunda 2014, 19).

It is argued that African Christianity, like Judaism and Islam, has developed to become what can be termed a “religion of the book,” since members from different cultural and social orientations are able to relate the biblical message to their socio-cultural repertoire as they use the Bible as a resource to meet most exigencies in life (Sanneh 1989, 7). For Isabel Apawo Phiri (1997, 28), there is no doubt that the Bible in AICs does not only imply a literalist approach to the text, but also a rigorous and reflective approach, since the true claims of the Bible are applied to diverse African contexts (Phiri 1997, 23–28). In addition, Gunda argues that AICs are churches that are not only comfortable with declaring that the Bible is the Word of God, but also take the Bible’s message seriously that Jesus himself is the Word of God (Gunda 2014). Thus, for most AICs, as they read John 1:1ff: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” is translated to mean that Jesus Christ is the Word of God that became flesh through His incarnation. For Dozier (1991, 89), God becomes incarnate in a book (the Bible), and Jesus becomes incarnate as a person from Nazareth. He further argues that by relating Jesus’ life and the ministry of the cross, the Bible becomes a liberating text for African Christians (Dozier 1991, 89).

However, this article has noted that while the majority of AICs regard the Bible as a liberating text and a religio-magical symbol of God’s presence and power (Ndung’u 2006), the Johane Masowe Chishanu Church (JMC Church) does not use the Bible but

emphasises the reception of God's message only through Holy Spirit utterances (*tsanangudzo dzemweya*). Accordingly, the questions raised throughout this article are: Why do the JMC Churches totally disregard the Bible for liturgy? Furthermore, without the use of the Bible, what criteria does the church use to identify authentic utterances of the Holy Spirit against human utterances full of egoistic and selfish motives? Or, since the church does not use the Bible, does the JMC Church retain the designation of an African Christian church, or has it become another new religious movement (NRM)? These questions have inspired this research because, despite the fact that African churches need to undo Western epistemologies when implementing African Christian theology, certain central Christian spiritual tenets must be observed.

## Methodology

Regarding methodology, two important questions need to be answered, namely, how were the data collected, and how were the data interpreted? Accordingly, several books and articles on AICs were consulted to investigate the authority of the Bible in these churches. Interviews were also carried out to investigate why the JMC Churches disregard the authority of the Bible. After the collection of the data, an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was employed to analyse the data. Thus, the IPA aims to understand the religious experiences of the participants through a hermeneutical interpretation (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). The study followed church protocols that included initially identifying key members deemed to be custodians of church dogmas (gatekeepers), who then helped the researcher to make contact with other participants. The snowball sampling technique was then used to select the participants. Critical with regard to the overt referral methodology was the need for triangulation to ensure the authenticity of the data generated. A sample of the participants was drawn from the white garment churches of the JMC Church, who do not use the Bible for worship. Accordingly, IPA as an interpretive methodology (Tulloch 2004) was used to examine how the Bible came to be deemed irrelevant for this movement. Subsequently, a hermeneutical interpretation was used to construe the criteria used to judge authentic and non-authentic utterances within the JMC Churches in the absence of the Bible. Furthermore, the evasion of harm, informed consent, voluntary participation, privacy and anonymity were some of the ethical principles that were adhered to in this study. Thus, the names that appear throughout this study for the interviewees and informants are pseudonyms.

## Bases for the Rejection of the Bible by the JMC Churches

The JMC Churches encompass various Zimbabwean churches, the members of which wear white garments, and they do not use church buildings for worship, but congregate in open spaces (Mukonyora 2000; Musoni and Gundani 2019). In his PhD thesis, Musoni states that after the death of Johane Masowe in 1973, the Johane Masowe Church split into various JMC Churches in Zimbabwe (Musoni 2017): Johane Masowe Chishanu Vadzidzi; Johane Masowe Chishanu Jerusarema; Johane Masowe Chishanu Mudzimu Unoera; Johane Masowe Chishanu ye kwa Jacobo; Johane Masowe Chishanu

yeNyenyedzi and many other branches of this church in Zimbabwe (Musoni 2017). However, what is common among the splinter groups of the JMC Churches, is that they do not use the Bible for theology and spirituality. The reason why the JMC Churches do not draw their theology from the Christian Bible, while all the other Zimbabwean churches, both mainline and AICs, do, is the focus of this article.

## Discussion of the Research Findings

The first reason why all the JMC Churches do not use the Bible during their church services is the fact that for them, the Bible was used as a tool to subjugate Africans. Thus, the church founder, Johane Masowe himself, forbade his church members to read and use the Bible (Dillon-Malone 1978). The main reason why Johane Masowe preached against the Bible was his understanding that the Bible was the White man's book used as a tool to Westernise African cultures (Dillon-Malone 1978). Johane Masowe shared his sentiments with a plethora of African scholars who asserted that the Bible is the White man's book used by colonisers to colonise Africans. Among these scholars is Canaan Banana, who argues that the Bible must be rewritten because it has become irrelevant to people in post-colonial communities (Banana 1993, 17). According to Banana, there are portions of the Bible that the oppressor used to make other people suffer (Banana 1993, 18). He also contends that the Bible was written for certain people of a certain community; hence, the need for Black Africans to write a Bible that speaks to the needs of Africans (Banana 1993, 19). This notion of the "Bible as the instrument of oppression" is also supported by Mapuranga (2013, 6), who highlights the rejection of the Bible by African Women Church leaders, such as Mai Chaza (real name Theresa Nyamushanga) of the Guta raJehovah Church in Zimbabwe. Mai Chaza rejected the Bible because, in her opinion, it was used as the final authority by Western mission churches to oppress women (Mapuranga 2013, 8). In this vein, Mofokeng (1988, 34) makes the following statement about the Bible and colonisation:

When the White man came to our country, he had the Bible, and we had the land. The White man said to us "let us pray." After the prayer, the White man had the land, and we had the Bible. (Mofokeng 1988, 34)

Perhaps because of the ambiguous history of the Bible's arrival in Africa, the JMC Church's total rejection of the Bible is an attempt to assert itself against the dominant discourses of Western imperialism and colonialism perpetuated by the Bible. Thus, it is argued in this article that all the JMC Churches posited that a true African church is a church that teaches its members to abandon White missionary inventions and ways of communicating with God through the Bible (Machingura 2014). This dogmatic stance has ultimately led to the rejection of the Bible, even to the extent of creating a new scripture, *tsanangudzo dzemweya* (explanations by the Spirit) within the JMC Churches, with the intention of replacing the Bible that is regarded as a Scripture for Europeans (Gifford 2008, 204).

The second reason why the JMC Churches do not use the Bible as their source of theology is the fact that the JMC Churches believe that God's revelation cannot cross racial and cultural boundaries. By insisting that the Scripture cannot cross racial and cultural boundaries, the JMC Churches posit that although the Bible was used as the source of God's revelation in European/White communities, it cannot be used as such in Black African communities. The reason for this submission is that during the early days of the JMC Church, most Africans were not capable of reading and writing. The JMC Church was founded in 1930, and at that time, most Africans could not read and write (Dillon-Malone 1978). It is against this background that Johane Masowe taught his members to burn the religious books from Europe, since their African forefathers did not have books (Dillon-Malone 1978, 17). For Johane Masowe, it was not God's intended purpose to disclose His revelation in books only (Bibles and hymns), knowing that most Africans were not capable of reading. However, even today, where most Africans can read and write, JMC Churches do not use the written Bible as a source for their theology.

To add to this argument, an occasion is recorded by Matthew Engelke when someone paid a visit to the Johane Masowe Church in Chitungwiza. Not knowing that the JMC Church was a church whose members did not use the Bible for theology, the visitor stood up to express his gratitude for the help he had received from Madzibaba Godfrey Nzira in dealing with his afflictions by quoting a Scripture from the Bible (Engelke 2004, 76). Immediately, an elder in the congregation asked him to stop speaking. The humiliated visitor then sat down. Later, Godfrey Nzira stood up and made the clear pronouncement that in the JMC Churches, there is no need for the Bible (Engelke 2004):

Here, we don't talk of Bible. What is the Bible to us? Having it is just trouble. Look, why would you read it? It gets old. Look again after keeping it for some time it falls apart, the pages come out. And then you can take it and use it as toilet paper until it is finished. We don't talk Bible-talk here. (Engelke 2004, 77)

The question is: Why would a church leader allege that the Bible is trouble and recommend using it as toilet paper? Nzira questioned the authority of the Christian Bible, advocating the continuity of God's revelation through the *Tsanangudzo dzemweya* (Spirit utterances). Simply put, from the JMC Church's standpoint, the Bible was only relevant to White communities who grew up reading books. Besides, the Bible has received more than its fair share of attention as both a colonial and post-colonial book. For this Black African church, the Bible is a foreign book to Africans, which presents other people's history; hence, making it more difficult for an African church to use it. According to my informant, in effect, the Bible does not speak fully to an African person (Madzibaba Chimuti, interview 01/11/2019). Citing the book of Numbers, which is dedicated to outlining the history of Israel as an example, Madzibaba Chimuti disavowed the relevance of the Bible for Africans (Madzibaba Chimuti, interview 01/11/2019). For this reason, the JMC Church congregants argue passionately that the Bible does not speak to African communities, but to the communities across the sea

(*vemhiri yegungwa*) from whence it came (Musoni and Gundani 2019). For them, God speaks to Africans orally, hence advocating for (*Tsanangudzo dzemweya*) Spirit utterances). *Tsanangudzo dzemweya* is a total package that includes visions, dreams and the historical oral narratives regarding the call of Johane Masowe, as an African Apostle (*tsoro yaJohane*). Therefore, it is argued in this article that the authority of the Bible has been replaced by the centrality of *Tsanangudzo dzemweya*. Thus, while most AICs revere the Bible as the vehicle for revealing God's divine revelation for all times, the JMC Churches disregard it. Accordingly, the absence of the Bible as a vessel containing God's revelation in JMC Church services, suggests that the church has moved from *sola scriptura* to *sola pneuma*. In this regard, the JMC Churches subscribe to a theology of continuous revelation. For them, the Bible, as a book, was meant to be a source of theology for those who used books as sources of information.

The third reason why the JMC Churches do not use the Bible for its theology is that those who use the Bible interpret it differently; hence, becoming the source of disunity among Christian denominations in Africa. The JMC Church congregants argue that there is no unanimity or coherence in interpreting the Bible. For them, Christian denominations who use the Bible as their source of theology interpret and understand scriptures differently; thereby creating confusion (Madzibaba Madzore, interview 05/11/2019). Madzibaba Madzore argued in an interview that, if the Bible is inspired by the Holy Spirit and those who use it are also inspired by the Holy Spirit, why do we then have different interpretations of the Bible? In other words, if the Bible is inspired and sufficient as far as theology is concerned, why do Christians, particularly those who use the Bible, disagree with one another on texts and topics; resulting in numerous Christian denominations? Besides, the JMC Church members posit that the Bible contradicts itself. The Bible is incoherent and contains inconsistencies and errors, yet Christians who use it claim that it is the inspired Word of God, inerrant, authoritative and sufficient (Madzibaba Amos, interview 05/11/2019).

Examples of inconsistencies cited by Madzibaba Amos in an interview are as follows:

Did Peter deny Christ three times before the cock crowed (John 13:38) or three times before the cock crowed twice (Mark 14:30, 72); Was Jesus on the cross (Mark 15:23) or in Pilates court (John 19:14) at the 6th hour on the day of the crucifixion? When did the women visit the tomb? "At dawn" (Matt 28:1) "Very early ... just after sunrise ..." (Mark 16:2) "Very early in the morning" (Luke 24:1) or "Early ... while it was still dark" (John 20:1)? (Madzibaba Amos, interview 05/10/2019)

Perhaps one could ask how are these members of a church, which does not use the Bible for theology and spirituality, able to detect the inconsistencies and incoherence in the Bible, a book they do not use for liturgy? Through interviews, the researcher established that the fact that all the JMC Churches do not use the Bible for theology and spirituality, does not imply that the church members do not read the Bible, or that they have never read the Bible. The JMC Churches, like the Muslims, read the Bible, but they do not refer to it for their church theology. Thus, to read the Bible does not necessarily denote

using it for spirituality. Some of these JMC Church members were once members of missionary churches where the Bible was read and used for spirituality (Bishau 2010). Other JMC Church members undertook Bible studies in schools and universities (Tawona 2015). In fact, the JMC Church members argue that what makes them disregard the Bible is that no standard rule is followed or prescribed when understanding what is written in the Bible (Tawona 2015). For instance, the Christian denominations' theologies differ widely on various biblical themes, such as their understanding of pneumatology, marriage and water baptism, to mention only a few. While some Christian denominations advocate monogamous marriages, others advocate polygamous marriages, all based on one Bible. Again, Christian denominations' interpretation of the Bible differs concerning whether or not Christians should drink alcohol, and if so, what is the quantity of alcohol they may have. It is against these and other facts that the JMC Church has transitioned from *sola scriptura* to *sola pneuma*.

The fourth reason why the JMC Churches do not use the Bible is the notion that the Bible is the crystallisation of Western European cultures. The JMC Churches argue further that the cultural context of the Bible is noticeably different from that of the African culture; hence, for them to adopt the Bible for their church spirituality, is to adopt Western cultures (Madzibaba Morris, interview 25/10/2019). Madzibaba Morris further argued that, from time immemorial, God spoke to our forefathers through dreams and many signs without the Bible (Madzibaba Morris, interview 25/10/2019). Thus, the African culture constitutes part of the Scripture handed down from one generation to another for this church. While other Christian churches argue that a person can use his/her cultural lens to read the Bible, the JMC Church members posit that the Bible has its own culture; and reading it using one's cultural lens results in many distortions and a great deal of confusion leading to perennial religious conflicts. Accordingly, this African church has more in common with the African traditional religion than its assimilation with Western Christianity. The church's notion of God's presence in dreams and visions is the cornerstone of their faith and is central to understanding why and for what reasons the JMC Churches reject the Bible. Having raised these arguments as the basis of the JMC Churches' transition from the written Scripture to Spirit utterances, one would be asking, how are the church services of the JMC Church conducted without the centrality of the Bible?

### The JMC Church Services: Events and Programme

This article has shown that the JMC Church in Zimbabwe has transitioned from using the Bible in the church to a revelation that comes from the Spirit alone (*tsanangudzo dzemweya*). For the JMC Church, *tsanangudzo dzemweya* is manifested in three ways, *tsoro yaJohane* (historical narrative of the calling of Johane), (*hope*) dreams, and (*zviratidzo*) visions. These three manifestations of the Holy Spirit, summarised as the *tsanangudzo dzemweya*, become indispensable indicators of the divine presence. Accordingly, JMC Church services held from 09:00 to 15:00 every Friday, feature a number of events. The church service is divided into two main sessions. The first half

is devoted to the narration of the call of Johane Masowe, visions and dreams, while the second half is devoted to exorcism/*kushandirwa*.

Elders of the church, specifically those men who had served with Johane Masowe himself, will take turns in reminding the congregants of what the Holy Spirit had instructed the church to follow. In the event that there is no elderly man who walked with Johane Masowe, any other man is selected to outline the history of the church and not a woman. The narration of the history of the church is commonly known as *nguva ye nhorowondo* (history time) or *rwendo rwe mutumbi mitatu* or *tsoro ya Johane* (Madzimai Tsitsi, interview 22/05/2016). Literally, *tsoro ya Johane* denotes a historical narrative of the church history, starting from how God visited Shonhiwa Masedza (religious name Johane Masowe), then Mudyiwa Dzangare (Emanuel) and, lastly, Sandros Nhamoyebonde (Nyenyedzi) (Musoni 2017). After outlining the history of the church, members are also reminded of what is referred to as rules and regulations (*miko ne mirairo*). Chief among the rules and regulations are the Ten Commandments, dietary rules, marriage and burial rituals (*tsika dze muPositori*). These are summarised as the rules and regulations that distinguish JMC Church members from other Christian denominations. Accordingly, the narration of the history and origin of the church, and the outlining of visions and dreams become the main preaching session of the JMC Church in Zimbabwe. During the first half, all other church members who have dreams and visions take the floor. It, therefore, implies that there is no preacher of the day, but members of the church arrive for the session, expecting to be reminded of the history of the church and listen to dreams and visions. Throughout this session, spiritual songs are sung, marking and introducing events within the session. The researcher noted that the majority of vision seers and dreamers were women. However, the interpretation of their visions and dreams was left in the hands of male elders. Male elders (*vakokeri vomweya*) are given a chance to interpret the visions and dreams because they are considered to be more spiritual than women. It is perhaps for this reason that the prophetic office at most *Kirawa* (no English name, but “sacred spaces”) is mainly dominated by men. This leads to a discussion of the other half of the JMC Church Friday services devoted to exorcism (*kushandirwa paKirawa*).

This is the most significant time for which almost all members will be waiting. Long queues will be seen at the sacred spaces, *Kirawa*. The JMC sacred shrine (*Kirawa*) is marked by a white cloth, small clay pots and plants, such as water reeds and the alovera plant (*gavakava*), among other plants. These are the marks that differentiate sacred spaces from profane spaces in JMC Churches. It is also imperative to note that prophets in the JMC Churches are not visible in the way in which Zionist prophets are. In fact, their possession of the Holy Spirit is notable because it is not noticeable (Engelke 2004). Indeed, JMC Church prophets are not prone to fits, trances, speaking in tongues or displays of ecstasy (Engelke 2004). What reveals that they are possessed is what they say and how they speak. It is in this regard that in both these two JMC Church sessions, criteria that distinguish between true Holy Spirit utterances and human utterances include, but are not limited to: 1) the closeness to the late founder Johane Masowe; 2)

the dreams and visions of only elderly women; 3) the use of objects, as instructed by Johane Masowe; and 4) the non-payment of services rendered by Masowe prophets. These are, among others, criteria developed for this church movement in Zimbabwe.

### JMC Church Criteria for the Authenticity of Holy Spirit Utterances

From the information gathered, the first criterion developed to distinguish between the non-authentic and authentic spiritual utterances of the Holy Spirit, determined by the JMC Church, is that only elderly men who lived during the time of Johane Masowe can take turns to outline the call and teachings of Johane Masowe (Madzibaba Mode, interview 05/04/2018). The study also noted that in the event that elderly men are not present, any elderly male congregant can do the narration of the history of the church. This narration of the history of the church is extremely important because it constitutes part of the Scripture. Thus, everything pertains to worship, from the seating arrangement to the dress code and what to eat and not to eat; everything is articulated during *nguva yenhorowondo* (time for narrations) by the elderly male congregants in the church. The Johane Masowe movement is, therefore, a parallel movement to the Jesus movement overseas. For this movement, as Jesus Christ had 12 disciples (all being men) who went down to disseminate the doctrine of Jesus to different people in his community, so the male JMC Church members disseminate the doctrine among their compatriots. God raised Johane Masowe to preach repentance to Black Africans (*kuti vasafa vachindo raswa*/to escape eternal condemnation), as God did to raise Jesus Christ to preach repentance to those across the sea (Madzibaba Joromia, interview 21/05/2019).

The second criterion used to distinguish between authentic and non-authentic Holy Spirit utterances, as set out in the JMC Church, is that only elderly women are permitted to share dreams and visions, while only elderly men are given a chance to interpret those visions and dreams. Young women are vocal song leaders, while most young men maintain order during the service. The understanding is that elderly women have the wisdom to separate genuine visions and dreams from casual dreams (*hope dzechando*). Likewise, elderly men are responsible for the decoding of visions and dreams. These dreams and visions are also part of the Scripture. Accordingly, the JMC Churches argue that, from time immemorial, God used to speak to their forefathers through visions and dreams. These dreams and visions are considered to be more contemporary to address the contemporary problems than the Bible, which was written over centuries ago. For them, the Bible is stale food (*munya*), given that there are visions and dreams received from God in the present.

The third criterion developed to distinguish between an authentic spirit manifestation and a non-authentic Holy Spirit manifestation, is the recognition and use of designated prophetic objects. We have realised that the prophetic office within the JMC Church is occupied by the majority of young men and a few young women. These are the people one will find at *Kirawa*, detecting and diagnosing spiritual problems and offering solutions for them. Thus, for one to identify a true prophet in the JMC Church, certain objects must be visible around the prophet at *Kirawa*. JMC Church prophets use

prophetic objects for prayer rituals (*miteuro*). Each JMC Church prophet must not have more than three small clay pots (*mbiya*) (Musoni 2017) in which water and small stones, commonly known as *mhombo* (Dodo 2014) are kept. From the interviews, it transpired that all clients who come for exorcism, will go home with three stones (*nhombo*) to use for their problems (Madzimai Netsai, interview 15/03/2019). JMC Church prophets do not use metal containers. Again, an authentic JMC Church prophet should not use certain objects, such as needles and salt (Madzimai Melisa, interview 03/04/2019).

The fourth criterion for distinguishing between authentic and non-authentic Holy Spirit utterances, is that a prophet should not demand payment for a service rendered (Baba Morris, interview 12/12/2019). JMC Church members are taught that a true prophet does not charge for his services, but members can show their appreciation for the service given after they have seen the results. However, one would be asking: Are the above criteria watertight, given the situation that the church does not have a Bible to try and test all the spirits? Finding answers to this question is not straightforward, given that even those churches that use the Bible have perennial religious problems with regard to human rights abuses. However, from the interviews, it transpired that members were arguing that the criteria proved to be sufficient, since the criteria have been in use since the death of the founder Johane Masowe, who died in 1973.

The last question that remains is: Can the JMC Church qualify for inclusion under the taxonomy of a Christian Church? For Oosthuizen, the JMC Church is a post-Christian movement (Oosthuizen 1968). Indeed, Sundkler argues that the movement is non-Christian (Sundkler and Steed 2000), while Engelke (2004) and Mukonyora (2000) maintain that the JMC Churches are Christian churches that do not read the Bible. This article observes that those who posited that the JMC Churches are post-Christian, non-Christian and syncretic movements, were guided by a theory that states that “any religious movement that does not regard the Bible as normative of its spirituality is non-Christian” (Burrige 2001; Holt 2005, 13; Mbiti 1986).

The following passages reveal how the JMC Churches refer to themselves.

### JMC Churches’ View of their Church

An interesting online article by Madzibaba Tawona raised important arguments about whether the movement is a Christian movement or not:

We of Johane Masowe *yeChishanu*, are not Christians, simply because the word “Christians” is not a revealed word. It is a word originally drawn from the Persian and Mediterranean native languages, just like me, as a Shona person, has the word *Mwari* for God. That doesn’t mean the word *Mwari* becomes a revealed word as time goes on and ends up with a sect called *VekwaMwari* or *Veumwari*. So, we are disciples of Johane Masowe. And we, the disciples of Johane Masowe, unlike Christian, we don’t use the Bible. Christians believe their flawed Bibles as the living Word of God. We, *veMasowe*, believe it is the timeless Living Holy Spirit of the Lord, which is the true Living Word

of God. You cannot have the Holy Spirit as a Living Word, and a written record, as a living word at the same time. You can only have one. (Tawona 2015, 4)

In support of the above quotation, I inferred from the interviews that the JMC Church members believe emphatically that Jesus was sent by God to the White communities and was killed by Whites; hence, He did not preach in person in Africa (Baba Gibson, interview 18/05/2018). However, after his death, his Spirit went back to God, and the same Spirit descended on Africa, entered into Shonhiwa Masedza first, then into Mudyiwa Dzangare and lastly into Sandros Nhamoyembonde (Baba Gibson, interview 18/05/2018). After that, the Spirit went back and did not come back but sent the Holy Spirit who is leading them now (Baba Antony, interview 18/05/2018). One informant argues that the term “Christians” was the appellation for those who walked with Jesus *mhiriyegungwa* (overseas):

The disciples of Jesus were given the nickname “Christian” because they resembled Jesus whom they had walked with. Likewise, we are also nicknamed *vadzidzi va Johane, chechi yeMadzibaba, chechi ye Masowe, chechi yenguvo chena* (Apostles of Johane, the church of the Apostles, the church of Masowe, the church of white robes) because we resemble *mutumwa Johane Masowe* (the Apostle Johane Masowe). (Madzimai Melissa, interview 18/05/2018)

From another interview, Baba Titos has this to say:

When we kneel down to pray, we open our prayer this way, “*Zita raBaba* (God), *reMwanakomana* (Jesus Christ), *neremweya Mutsvene* (Holy Spirit) (the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit).” What it means is that we believe that the same Spirit which was in Jesus of overseas is the same Spirit that worked in Johane, Emanuweri and Nyenyedzi (*tinotenda kumweya we Mwanakomana kwete Jesu wakabaiwa mhiri yegungwa*) (we believe in the Spirit of the Son, not Jesus who was killed overseas). (Baba Titos, interview 18/05/2018)

This article has shown that AICs have emerged as a reactionary movement to deal with missionary inventions and ways of communicating with God. However, the question one can raise is: To what extent have AICs’ theologies transitioned from being products of colonialism or have AICs become the rotten fruit of the poisoned tree of colonialism? Accordingly, the response to these questions may take various forms, with a range of approaches across what could be called “hard” and “soft” expectations of decolonisation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2017). Thus, this article has shown that two approaches have been developed within AICs, that is, the soft and hard approaches to the decolonisation of an African church. Related to the soft approach to the decolonisation of an African church, Maluleke, as quoted by Gerald West, posits that an African Christian theology cannot be propagated without the Bible and argues that the Bible is indispensable for all Christian theologies (West 2016). Thus, the soft approach is where scholars purport that the Bible can be interpreted using different lenses; hence, we have Christian feminism seeking to redeem women using the same Bible, which seems to be extremely

patriarchal. Accordingly, the soft approach to decoloniality allows the Bible to be anything to anyone in different settings. Politicians can use it to subdue the masses, while other church leaders can also use it to manipulate the gullible members in their churches. As a result, such a soft approach may succeed in weeding out some of the most blatant roots of colonialism (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2017), but in doing so, it keeps the semblance intact of Eurocentric knowledge systems dominating in churches that claim to be African independent, indigenous, initiated and instituted churches (AICs).

However, those who call for a hard approach to the decolonisation of an African church in a post-colonial era posited that it is “uncomfortable” to analogise the African stories with other nationalities as recorded in the Bible (West 2016). Mokgethi Motlhabi, as quoted by West, further argues that to compare the Israelites to Black Africans was both dangerous and functionally meaningless. Motlhabi accepted that the nature of God was multiplex, and that theology would assume different forms from different vantage points:

The people in the Bible had their own lives. You can't use examples from the stories of other people and claim that you know, because God liberated the Israelites, therefore, he will liberate me. That Blacks were created in God's image did not necessarily mean that God had covenanted with them, as had happened with the Israelites. (West 2016, 344)

Perhaps it is against this background that the JMC Church chose a hard approach by disregarding a Bible-based theology. The JMC Church has further rejected the label of “Christian” on the grounds that it is misleading, even though the church believes that the Spirit of God, which worked in Jesus Christ (*Mwanakomana*, the Son), also worked in Johane Masowe, Emanuweri and Nyenyedzi. Accordingly, this article argues that the JMC Churches subscribe to a theology that proclaims the continuous incarnation of God in different settings.

## Conclusion

In this article, it has been shown how the JMC Church transitioned from a church that believed in a theology based on the Bible to a theology based on Holy Spirit utterances. Accordingly, the work of the Holy Spirit, within the JMC Church, is manifested in three ways, namely, *tsoro ya Johane*, *JMC Church history*, the narration of visions and dreams. These three ways are summarised as *tsanangudzo dzemweya*. Holy Spirit utterances become the main Scripture of the JMC Church in Zimbabwe. The argument raised in this article is that the JMC Churches prefer Holy Spirit utterances over the written word, because for them, the Bible was used as a tool to subjugate Africans. Furthermore, they argue that God's revelation does not require one to go to a Western school to access God's revelation hidden in the pages of the Bible. Adding to that, parts of the Bible are incoherent and inconsistent, and lastly, they claim that there is no standard agreed-upon method of interpreting the Bible. Accordingly, the Bible can mean different things to different readers in different settings. Thus, while African academics

have recently started reflecting on decoloniality within the halls of universities, the JMC Church started on this path many decades ago. By rejecting the Bible and turning to Holy Spirit utterances instead, the JMC Church has embarked on a radical programme encompassing both decoloniality and the celebration of indigenous African identities. However, what is critical to note is that JMC Church efforts at addressing Western epistemologies by the total denigration of the Bible, has left the movement as more of a post-Christian movement (Oosthuizen 1968) than a Christian church in Zimbabwe. This is so because while Christian denominations differ with regard to interpreting the Bible, borrowing from Mbiti (1986), Burridge (2001) and Holt (2005), Christianity as a religion is Bible-centred.

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