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Religion Weaponised

An Analysis of the Deployment of Religious Themes in the Discourse of Anglophone Nationalist and Secessionist Leaders and Activists in Cameroon

1 Introduction

Populism, separatism and nationalism are spreading in countries around the world. While many separatist or secessionist propensities are connected to ethnic nationalism or the quest for economic fulfilment, others are fuelled by religion, as has been the case in Northern Ireland, Central African Republic, Pakistan and India.¹

Politics and religion are an odd couple that have maintained or sustained fragile connections due to the centrality of religion in people's relationships with one other and in the construction of a common space. Religion, whether African Traditional, Christian or Islamic, is a fundamental or most important element in the lives of Africans (see Awolalu 1976; Mbiti 1999; Pawlikova-Vilhanova 2020; Wariboko 2017; Ngom/Kurfi/Falola 2020), and as a result permeates all aspects of individual lives and group identities. It is all too normal that it is becoming pervasive. In addressing a problem that concerns their daily lives and futures, Africans do sometimes unconsciously or consciously invoke divine intervention (see Awolalu 1976; Wariboko 2017; Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life 2010). In politics, religious discourse is used to push an agenda, and the misuse of religion may have devastating consequences (see P. Marshall 2018). There are few studies on the issue (see P. Marshall 2018; Campbell 2020).

Religion has been found to be the central reason for conflicts and civil wars in some communities and countries around the globe, in particular when it has some ethnic components. This creates social divisions among the populations

¹ My sincere gratitude goes first to Hanna Acke for her immense patience, warmth and scientific leadership. I also thank, through her, Åbo Akademi University in Turku, Finland, for funding my trip to Turku to attend the BTWS2 conference during which the preliminary findings of this paper were presented. I thank all the reviewers for their insightful comments which were very helpful in the revision of this paper. This article would not have been possible if not for all your support.

within a territory. Moreover, in recent years, a great number of terrorist attacks have been associated and/or attributed to religion and religious groups. Since the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center (WTC), radical or extremist Muslim groups have been blamed for terrorist attacks around the world. But there have been very few attacks attributed to Christian groups. More recently, some religious-induced conflicts have been reported in Sub-Saharan Africa (see Basedau 2017): there was a heavy religious overtone in the 2011 post-electoral crisis in Côte d'Ivoire. More recently (in 2014), in the Central African Republic (CAR) (see Lado Tonlieu 2021), religion was instrumentalised in the divide between the country's North and South, which caused two communities that had long lived together peacefully and harmoniously to initiate a bloody and deadly confrontation. With regard to the case of Côte d'Ivoire, Vüllers (2011) notes that the crisis took on religious connotations due to the fact that the roles of President Gbagbo and his wife Simone were construed as divine (see Raynal 2005; Miran 2006: 88; Vüllers 2011).

Syncretic religiosity also remains a central element in defining the lives of Africans, even in the postcolonial era. Christianity and Islam are quickly expanding their domains in the social life of communities that were initially Traditional (see Wariboko 2017); African Traditional Religion predates and prevailed over every other religion on the continent throughout its history. While holy war introduced Islam in Africa, Christianity was diffused through colonisation. At present, Christianity keeps spreading and Islam continues to permeate the dominion of African Traditional Religion. While Catholicism and Protestantism have become deeply established in the Cameroonian populations, Pentecostal (Evangelical) movements are quickly spreading, winning more converts and exerting more and more influence on society as a whole (see Pawlikova-Vilhanova 2020; Wariboko 2017; Ngom/Kurfi/Falola 2020; Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life 2010). The growth of the number of Pentecostals (Renewalists) among the total population is particularly noteworthy. In 2015, it accounted for 35.32 of the continent's Christian population of 574.52 million and 17.11 percent of the continent's total population of 1.19 billion (see Wariboko 2017).

1.1 Research problem and research questions

Religion is one of the most dividing social elements, and has been the cause of many conflicts. The politicisation of religion is therefore worth studying in the post-modern era, when it was expected that religion would be relegated to the private sphere. It is important to study the new ways in which it is used in society, not only in relation to social media, but also in its political deployment in developing nations. While examining people's comments about the ongoing Anglophone crisis

in Cameroon, I noticed some religious allusions, and was pushed to dig deeper in order to see how these allusions have been used within the framework of the secessionist conflict. The following research questions guide my inquiry.

- RQ1. What is the nature of the allusion or reference to sacred texts in Anglophone nationalist and secessionist social media discourse in Cameroon?
- RQ2. What is the function and effect of deploying religious themes in the secessionist discourse?
- RQ3. What religious ideology can be identified?
- RQ4. What reasons account for the deployment of religious themes in the rhetoric used by Anglophone leaders on Facebook?

1.2 Aim of the study

This paper sets out to analyse the nature and function of religious discourse, as well as the ideological implications of the use of Biblical allusions and references, such as phraseologies, speech acts and biblical metaphors as a persuasive and manipulative strategy in the Anglophone armed secessionist crisis in Cameroon. Anglophone pro-secession activists placed religion at the centre of their nationalist struggle, while Cameroonian identity was repudiated and placed at the margin.

In this article, we push the boundaries in our analysis of religious language and the deployment of religion in political discourse in order to propose that the imbuement of discourse with Bible-like expressions, the militarisation of prayer and recourse to the God strategy (see Domke and Coe 2011: 7) in a socio-political crisis constitute the weaponisation of religion. In the case of the armed conflict between secessionist insurgents and the Cameroonian army, we argue that religion is used by the secessionists as an instrument for legitimising a controversial option – armed rebellion – in order to ultimately resolve the longstanding Anglophone problem. In fact, the conflict is not a religious one. In principle, religion has never constituted a dividing factor between Anglophones and Francophones in Cameroon. Therefore, the conflict does not have the religious motives that the insurgents are trying to give it. Vüllers (2011) notes that literature makes a distinction between “religious civil wars” and “religious violence”. In this view, a civil war is “religious” if the parties of the conflict should differ in their religious affiliations, and/or if religious ideas are an issue in the conflict (see Svensson 2007: 936–937; Toft 2007: 97; Basedau et al. 2011).

1.3 Background of Anglophone nationalism in Cameroon and the deployment of religious themes in violent secessionist conflict

Cameroon is by constitution a secular (lay) country, which means that there is no state religion. Freedom of religion is guaranteed. The Cameroonian people, just like most Africans, are deeply religious. While the majority of the population practices the traditional religion, most of these people would also claim some association with Christianity. Christianity and Islam are the dominant “civil religions” (Wald 2003; Toolin 1983)². It is only during Christian and Moslem celebrations that a public holiday is observed in Cameroon. The religious landscape would suggest that Cameroon is a predominantly Christian country. Sources like Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (2010) and the 2005 population census in Cameroon (BUCREP 2010) reveal that more than 60% of the population self-identifies as Christians, whether it is Catholicism, Protestantism or Pentecostalism. Cameroonian seem to associate Christianity with modernity, while their ancestral religion is what constitutes their roots. Although the traditional religion is ostracised in the public sphere, it remains the matrix of their world view, the soul of the people. The Government of Cameroon regularly calls for ecumenical religious celebrations in order to pray for peace or for any issues of national significance. Pentecostal churches have always organised long periods of fasting and prayers each time Cameroon has been confronted with aggression from external forces, or with internal political upheaval and troubles. Unarguably, Christian traditions prevail over all other religious practices in the public space, to an extent that goes beyond what Torpey (2010) calls “latent religiosity”³.

While there is no major religion-induced conflict, Cameroon has been affected by a enduring socio-political dispute between the Anglophone minority and the

² Wald (2003) and Toolin (1983): Wald defines civil religion as “the idea that a nation tries to understand its historical experience and national purpose in religious terms [...] Civil religion reflects an attempt by citizens to imbue their nation with a transcendent value. The nation is recognized as a secular institution, yet one that is somehow touched by the hand of God.” (Wald 2003: 55). Toolin (1983: 41) defines civil religion as “a self-congratulatory relationship between politics and religion”.

³ Latent religiosity can be observed and deduced from public life. The Christian Calendar of events (just like any religious Christian celebration such as Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, Ascension and Assumption) are adopted, and public holidays are decreed accordingly. Moreover, Sundays are days of rest. On the other hand, we have seen official events, office and business working hours being adjusted to accommodate religious demands, such as during Ramadan, or Muslim prayer time.

Francophone dominant majority – i.e. the Anglophone problem – that led to a secession crisis in 2016. The Anglophone problem (see Konings/Nyamnjoh 1997) in Cameroon has its roots in the colonial period, as Cameroon, which was a German protectorate from 1884 to 1916, was divided between France and England after World War II. After about 50 years of separate administration by the French and the English under the trusteeship of the League of Nations and the United Nations, the two territories were reunited on 1st October 1961 to form a federal state. However, the reunification negotiation, and later on the 1972 unification process, are said to have been marred by deceit.

The Anglophone Problem (see Konings/Nyamnjoh 1997) refers to the long-standing tension between the Cameroonian government and the Anglophone minority with regard to the “socio-political marginalisation” and linguistic assimilation of the latter. Anglophones have always expressed their malaise and disputed the intention of the Francophones to francophonise (culturally assimilate) them. The awareness among various strata of the Anglophone Cameroonians that all is not well and that nothing is done about their plight is the cause of their participation in separatist movements, which are growing in popularity among young and old members of the Anglophone community. In a nutshell, the Anglophone Problem is nurtured by: (a) the inability and failure of successive governments of Cameroon, since 1961, to respect and implement the articles of the Constitution that uphold and safeguard what British Southern Cameroons brought to the Union in 1961. After reunification between French-speaking Cameroon and (English-speaking) Southern Cameroons, Cameroon became via constitution the Federal Republic of Cameroon with two states (three quarters French-speaking and one quarter English speaking) and two official languages: French and English. (b) The violation of the Constitution, demonstrated by the dissolution of political parties and the formation of one political party in 1966, and other such acts judged by West Cameroonians to be unconstitutional and undemocratic; and (c) the cavalier management of the 1972 Referendum that took the foundational element (Federalism) out of the 1961 Constitution. In 1972, following a referendum, the political system evolved from a federal state to a unitary state with one government. The British Southern Cameroons became two administrative provinces called the “North-West” and “South-West” regions. (d) The 1984 law amending the Constitution, which gave the country the original East Cameroon name (The Republic of Cameroon) and thereby erased the identity of the West Cameroonians from the original union. West Cameroon, which had entered the union as an equal partner, effectively ceased to exist. (e) The deliberate and systematic erosion of the West Cameroon cultural identity that the 1961 Constitution sought to preserve and protect by providing a bi-cultural federation. The Anglophone

communities have expressed their dissatisfaction about the union on several occasions, some of which were institutionalised. This is the case with the 1993 and 1994 All Anglophone Conferences (AAC 1 and AAC 2).

Cameroonian Anglophones kept complaining that their recommendations to the Cameroonian government had fallen in deaf ears. Since November 2016, they have vehemently expressed their outrage throughout Cameroon's two English-speaking regions through civil disobedience, arson, scorched land, mass protest, slaughtering of civilians as well as bloody armed conflict to obtain secession. The Government of Cameroon attempted negotiation with the civil society organisation consortium. The leaders of the consortium who negotiated with the Government from December 2016 to January 2017 were Dr Fontem Neba, a university lecturer, Agbor Balla and Bobga Harmony, both lawyers, and Tassang Wilfred, a teachers' union leader. As the negotiations failed, the Government dissolved the consortium. The first two leaders were arrested and jailed, while the others were smuggled out of the country. As a result, some leaders based abroad took over the revolution and became radicalised. As the Anglophone leaders did not have access to the mainstream media, social media became their main means of communication between web activists and the population. Their potential for enhancing enfranchisement, emancipating the masses and engaging with civilians was fully deployed, so as a result, the Government suspended the Internet in the restive regions for three months.

Social media was used to diffuse separatist propaganda without any risk of censorship. Ngouo (2020) discussed web activism among Anglophones, demonstrating how they repudiate the Pan-Cameroonian identity and assert Anglophone nationalism. This is done through carefully avoiding the use of the English translation of Cameroon's official name, "The Republic of Cameroon". They instead use the French "La République du Cameroun". Furthermore, the North-West and South-West regions are two of the country's 10 regional entities, but the separatists assert their rejection of the Pan-Cameroonian nationality by calling them 'Southern Cameroons', 'Ambazonia' or the 'Federal Republic of Ambazonia'. Anglophone Cameroonians are referred to as Ambazonians or Southern Cameroonians (see Ngouo 2020).

The presentation of the socio-political context and of some of the stakeholders shows that religion was not the root cause of the crisis. Most Anglophones in Cameroon are characterised as being very religious with Christianity (both nominal and devout) being the most visibly dominant major religion. When the crisis broke out, many churches located in the Anglophone regions, and even Anglophones living in and outside of the regions, supported subversion and secession, on grounds that they have always felt marginalised. Individuals prayed for

unrest, hoping that God would intervene in favour of Anglophones. The Ambazonian leaders seem to have taken advantage of this religiosity. In fact, some of the diasporic secessionist leaders who had instigated secession and masterminded the bloody armed confrontation were either pastors or religious affiliates based in the USA, Norway, UK, or South Africa, where they were out of the Government's reach. Some of the prominent leaders are:

Sisiku Ayuk Tabe is the first affirmed leader of the Ambazonian Government Council (AGC). He strutted around in foreign cities until he was arrested in Nigeria alongside nine other leaders in January 2018 and extradited (deported). They were eventually judged and sentenced by a military court in Yaoundé.

Ayaba Cho Lucas, a hardliner among the secessionists, is a proclaimed commander of the Ambazonian Defence Forces (ADF). He was granted the Norwegian citizenship a few years ago.

Samuel Sako Ikome (former pastor of Deeper Life in Cameroon) is the current interim president of the Ambazonian Government Council (AGC).

Chris Anu, a US-based pastor, originates from the Lebialem Division of the South-West Region of Cameroon (one of the contested territories). He is the brother of Lekeakeh Oliver, alias Field Marshall, one of the most dreaded leaders of the Red Dragons (Anglophone militia) of Fontem. The latter proclaimed himself King of Fontem on 1st October 2019. Others include Mark Barea, Ebenezert Akwanga and Boh Herbert.

2 Literature review and theoretical consideration

The connection between religion, (civil) war and armed conflict has regained the interest of researchers since 1980, and Rapoport (1984: 659) has argued that the medieval conflicts were instilled by religious interests. It was not until the 1970s/beginning of the 1980s that there was a resurgence of religious justifications for political violence. In the conflict between Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland, Catholicism and Protestantism were at the centre of contention. Religion-related or religion-instigated conflicts have occurred in Africa and throughout the world (see Basedau/Schaefer-Kehnert 2019; Basedau 2017; Basedau/Pfeifer/Vüllers 2016; Basedau et al. 2011). In most Islamist jihads, religion is always the professed and asserted motive or the legitimating instrument of political violence, extremism and terrorism, as non-Muslims are considered non-believers or unfaithful (see Hide 2014, Paterson 2019). As Hide (2014) comments, religiously (Christianity as well as Islam) motivated violence and political violence, or religious discrimination, occurred regularly as a number of nationalist movements

on nearly all continents, in an effort to build their national identities, used religion as an inalienable part of their self-determination and self-definition during the late 19th century and the beginning of 20th. However, the politicisation of religion (see P. Marshall 2018) does not occur without its share of conflict.

2.1 Conceptual approaches to the study of the politicisation of religion, religious language and discourse in politics

Language is at the centre of communication. In political discourse, it is a powerful tool for mediating between leaders and the people, and for this reason, the choice of words is part of the discursive strategy that aims to determine meaning. From a functional systemic perspective (see Halliday 1992), linguistic analysis of political discourse may look at linguistic elements such as lexical sets, conceptual metaphors, phraseologies and the idioms of allusions and references. Religious language is also used in discourse. Du Bois (1986) identified some of the features of religious language as including: (i) use of rituals, (ii) archaic elements, (iii) euphemism and metaphor, (iv) semantic opacity, (v) unusual fluency, and (vi) magic words. Furthermore, to identify if a speech contains religious (Christian) rhetoric, a preliminary list of religious keywords must be made that includes other religious phraseology. These would be words that directly refer to religion (“religion”, “religious”, “spiritual”, “faith”, “Christian”, “God”, “Lord”, “Almighty”, “heaven”) and religious practices (“pray”, “worship”, “bless”, “church”, “Bible”, “scripture”).

In politics, the Bible has been a familiar and useful literary source (see Dreisbach 2007, 2017; Roche 2015). Indeed, the Scripture has been employed for literary, rhetorical and political purposes. The study of the use of Christian or Bible-like language as a discursive strategy to rally Christian communities in politics also examines phrases, figures of speech, and rhythms that resemble, imitate, or evoke the familiar scriptural (Bible) texts. In addition to allusions, there are many reasons why authoritative texts, including sacred writings, are referred to and cited in political discourse. A study of the Bible’s use in political rhetoric has focussed on how and for what purposes the Scripture is used, as not all uses of the Bible in political discourse have been for strictly spiritual ends. Fornieri (2003) analyses 19th century U.S. president Abraham Lincoln’s use of the Bible and demonstrates that it was part of his accent. Lincoln’s recourse to Biblical text was not cynical or manipulative, unlike many other political figures who do so in bad faith (see Dreisbach 2007, 2017) or, even, as non-Christians. Lincoln used it in at least five different ways (a) theologically, (b) civil theologically, (c) evocatively, (d) allegorically, (e) and existentially (see Fornieri 2003). Dreisbach (2017)

summarises some functions of biblical allusions in political discourse. These include: (1) to enrich a common language and cultural vocabulary through distinctively Biblical phrases, figures of speech, proverbs, aphorisms and the like; (2) to enhance the power and weight of rhetoric through its identification with a venerated, authoritative sacred text; (3) to identify and define normative standards and transcendent rules for ordering and judging public life; and (4) to gain insights on the character and designs of God, especially as they pertain to his dealings with men and nations.

The study of the function of Biblical allusion and reference also focuses on how metaphors and speech acts with religious connotations are used to imbue discourse with sanctity. Keane (2004) emphasised the place of speech acts in general and performatives in particular as well as metaphors in religious language, as metaphors are used to activate ideology. This is in line with Halliday and Hasan (1985: 20), who argue that there are two different kinds of considerations in language, not only the linguistic clues, but also the situational ones. They claim that “The linguistic concerns relations within the language, patterns of meaning realised by grammar and vocabulary, and the other, situational, concerns the relations between the language and the features of the speaker’s and hearer’s material, social and ideological environment”.

The approaches to the analysis of the deployment of religious rhetoric in political discourse presented above do not always contribute to the understanding of religion’s impact on society. There are studies on religion and conflict, on religion and politics, and on the weaponisation of religion. There are also studies on biblical allusions in political speeches, but there are no studies on the weaponisation of religion from a discursive perspective that this paper is investigating, especially with regard to social media. Studies on how religion is weaponised in discourse (and in social media) are rare, if they even exist at all.

Studies about conflict induced by conflicting Christian factions in politics are rare. A few include Chitando (2005), Miran (2005) and Vüllers (2011). Other researchers have also examined religion and politics, looking at how political leaders and politicians make reference to the Bible in their speeches (see Dreisbach 2007, 2017; Roche 2015). More recently, new studies have gone further to question new forms of religious language, as well as new ways in which religion is deployed in politics. Van der Veer’s book (2017) brings together case studies of the political salience of prayer in Nigeria, France, India, Russia and the United States. Ruth Marshall (2016) discusses the centrality of prayer conceived as a form of political praxis; McAllister (2015, 2017) elaborates on the militarisation of prayer in the deployment of spiritual warfare in pro-dominionism politics. Campbell (2020) discusses how politicising religion may have negative effects. Paul Marshall

(2018) opines that the religionisation of politics or the politicisation of religion leads to conflicts.

2.2 The conceptual framework of the weaponisation of religion in social media discourse

As already noted, this study examines how secessionists use religious (Christian) ideology, through biblical references and allusions in social media discourse, to legitimate their fight for secession in Cameroon. It proposes that the deployment of religious political discourse is done “cynically and manipulatively”, which is the weaponisation of religion in discourse. This study is even more important due to the fact that it addresses the weaponisation of religious discourse in new media, which has the potential to disenfranchise voices.

In recent years, the digitalisation of social life with the advent of social media communication, as well as the emergence of electronically mediated communication across all platforms, spaces, sites and technologies (see KhosraviNik 2018) that is enhanced by digital connectivity, has not only enabled social mobilisation with regard to political revolution (see Bardici 2012), but also a proliferation of negative content, such as disinformation. New and social media are viewed as a way to overcome state-controlled media and content, especially in the developing world. However, social media platforms are also increasingly being used as a means of empowering disruptive voices, messages and ideologies (see Bartlett/Birdwell/Littler 2011; Olaniran /Williams 2020). As such, social media has contributed to both the rise of weaponisation in general, and to the weaponisation of religion (see P. Marshall 2018) in the political sphere. It exacerbates the effect of disinformation and can facilitate its use as a political tool to “weaponize” religious intolerance (see Paterson 2019). According to Paul Marshall (2018: 3) “A value is ‘weaponised’ when it is invoked in bad faith, in an effort to peddle insincere political talking points”.

In this light, Paterson (2019) discusses the rise of religion-driven cyber terrorism through the weaponisation of religious intolerance in Indonesian cyberspace. He comments that the impact of these technologies in enabling an extremist Islamic “hacktivist” group called “Muslim Cyber Army” (MCA) to access a much larger audience as a means to propagate religious intolerance in a far more pervasive manner. In the same vein, Brooking and Singer (2016) discuss in *The Atlantic* how social media was weaponised by jihadists of the Islamic State. It helped ISIS to become “the first terrorist group to hold both physical and digital territory”, according to Jared Cohen, a former State Department staffer who is now the director of Jigsaw. Through social media, ISIS saturated cyberspace with

hashtags – using armies of Twitter bots – and created and redesigned one-sided skirmishes so that they appeared to be significant battlefield victories.

Weaponisation is becoming a widespread strategy in activism and politics. Just like social media, the body and race, religion is being weaponised. While it is a powerful tool for social and political mobilisation, it is latent unless activated. To use religion's potential political power, activists can invoke it in their political rhetoric. The weaponisation of religion is decried when religion is associated with something that is not in itself religious. P. Marshall (2018) emphasises that religion can only be politically manipulated if it is both present and significant enough to be manipulated.

As proposed in this study, the weaponisation of religion in discourse is enacted through a number of principles:

- (1) Saturating discourse with religious allusions and references in order to attract support from the target religious group (use of citation, intertextuality, idiom, phraseologies, lexis, etc.). This strategy helps to imbue the discourse with sanctity or a religious overtone.
- (2) The deployment of “the God for us” or “God on our side” rhetoric. It consists in:
 - (a) Adjudging or arrogating God's approval: God approves of what we are doing; even in the case of religious conflict, once one of the parties, in good or bad faith, ascribes and arrogates God's approval by rejecting the validity of the other party and, labelling it as evil.
 - (b) Victimhood discourse: God is on the side of the oppressed – we are oppressed, so God is on our side.
 - (c) Demonising the other party: those who are attacking us are evil, they are demonic.
- (3) Diffusion of religious ideology in discourse through the use of religious metaphors: metaphoric reference to biblical imagery and characters, attributing the character (messianic) of Bible heroes to living personages, and associating biblical elements with the current situation.
- (4) The deployment of the rhetoric of spiritual warfare (see R. Marshall 2016) and the militarisation of prayer (see McAlister 2016a, 2016b) in a dominionist project: this consists of using military and warfare metaphors in religious discourse; using words, expressions and phraseologies as spiritual weapons to attack, destroy and enact violence; using spiritual violence to legitimate physical violence. Spiritual warfare consists in exerting spiritual power to liberate society from evil spiritual beings. To that end, God's supernatural interaction with the natural realm is solicited.

3 Methodology, data collection and analysis: Data sources

The rise of digital technology, and especially of social media, is giving rise to multiple approaches to the study of social phenomena, as their spread has fostered a spontaneous and uncontrolled mobilisation of the masses. As we argue in this paper, the use of social media in a separatist insurgency in Cameroon has facilitated the deployment of religion in discourse. While conducting digital ethnography in order to understand the problem, my attention was attracted to the recurrent use of religious (biblical) and Bible-like expressions in the posts and comments on the Facebook pages of Anglophone activists. This incursion of religion into a violent conflict where there is no religious divide between Cameroonian Anglophones and Francophones prompted me to start scrutinising the overall discourse of secessionist leaders and their followers. I started browsing through the Facebook pages of Anglophone activists, observing and tracking all discourse and expressions that pointed to religion in general and to the Bible or Christianity in particular. Most of the Facebook pages were dedicated to the Anglophone problem. The most obvious ones are the following:

- Ambazonian Defence Forces
- British Southern Cameroons Resistance Forces
- English Cameroon for a United Cameroon (EC4UC) <https://www.facebook.com/OneCameroonPeaceUnityCommonsense>
- Southern Cameroons Ambazonia Consortium United Front (SCACUF): <https://fr-fr.facebook.com/SCACUF>

Social media (primarily Facebook) have played a very crucial role in the Anglophone crisis. Most secession leaders reside in the diaspora, and the only means for them to stay connected with the population and armed groups is the Internet. Facebook enabled activists as well as common users to communicate both privately and publicly with peers and the target population within their network, who live either within the confines of Cameroon's Anglophone area or beyond it. In Cameroon, there are 17 million telephone subscribers, with Internet access having soared from 6% to 35% within four years (2016–2020).

Even the moderate activists living in Cameroon preferred to voice their opinion using pseudo account names on social media. As their appearance in the mainstream media was restricted or censored, social media guaranteed them a

platform for freedom of speech. Moreover, the social medium played a double role: that of information channel and mediumistic⁴ instrument.

I compiled a corpus of religious, Bible-like expressions, references and phraseologies that were produced by activists. They were made up of all expressions (appearing in posts and comments, or in responses to a post) that point to the Bible or Christian ideology and practices. Some posts are regarded as prompting posts (by the leaders) while other posts and comments (by followers) are reactions prompted by the posts of some leaders. In some cases, some followers posted comments with a religious overtone under a post that had no connection to religion. Therefore, a lexical item may occur in isolation in some discourse string, or be included in a sequence of discourse where there was an abundant use of biblical jargon. The content was selected because it was imbued with religious ideology.

Below are some samples of prompting messages that were posted by secessionists leaders:

President Federal Republic of Ambazonia: [...] I Am Convicted Deep Down In My Spirit That, Keeping The HOPE of Ambazonia ALIVE, And Trusting the Almighty Is The Only SHIELD We Have Against The Raging Darkness Of Occupation.

On Going Battle in Njinikom. Keep the fighters in Prayer. Fund The Resistance
Tingoh VILLAGE UNDER ATTACK BY LRC, HOUSES ONFIRE. CIVILIANS ARE ADVISED TO STAY AWAY. PUT CIVILIANS & SOLDIERS IN PRAYERS.

Your Defence Forces are battling Cameroon's occupational military in Nkambe. Pray for them.

ONGOING BATTLE IN THE NJINIKOM/FUNDONG AXES! KEEP THE FIGHTERS IN PRAYER.

These religious signs are in the form of lexical words and expressions, idiomatic expressions, phraseologies and speech acts. At the discourse level, we have biblical phraseologies being used as speech acts, and some metaphorical allusion to biblical characters.

⁴ Medium: a means or instrumentality for storing or communicating information/someone who serves as an intermediary between the living and the dead; a spiritualist. Mediumistic is used in this context to capture the fact that social media seems to have acquired another role, a telepathic one through which secessionist leaders communicated to the subconscious mind of the people. Social media was the spiritual interface between the source and the receiver.

4 Data analysis

The study of the deployment of religious rhetorical themes in the discourse – and eventually their weaponisation – by Anglophone secessionists in the armed conflict between them and the Cameroonian Anglophone government is conducted at three levels of analysis: intertextuality, which looks at the nature (lexis [jargon] and citations, phraseologies and idioms) and type of allusion as well as the function of allusions and references to the Bible/Christianity, the pragmatic function (speech acts) of biblical and Christian phraseologies and idioms, and the ideological implication of the references (enacted through metaphor) that result in weaponisation.

4.1 Biblical and religious intertextual figures in Anglophone secessionist discourse

Intertextuality consists of creating meaning in a text (hypotext) by using part of another text (hypertext). In the Anglophone secessionist discourse, religion is activated through intertextual figures that may include allusions, references, quotations and calques that are primarily lexicosemantic. The analysis of the utterances (posts) shows a use of words and lexical expressions that were borrowed from the biblical and Christian lexicon or jargon. There are different categories of allusions:

(a) Lexical-semantic expressions referring to biblical lexis and concepts

These include expressions and words associated with divinity, Christian rituals, Bible characters, references to religious institutions and rituals as well as direct citation and/or paraphrasing of Bible scripture. The posts below illustrate this:

- (1) No amount of diplomacy would ever work with LRC⁵. LRC is a devil, and the only way to reform the devil is to kill the devil
- (2) The **evil** regime will soon beg to be our peaceful neighbor
- (3) Pa Tassang is an honourable man fighting to liberate his people. Your **satanic** franco-phone Beti Ewondo regime tried to corrupt but this incorruptible man stood on the side of his oppressed Ambazonian **brethrens**. No amount of insults will dampen his resolve so go

⁵ La République du Cameroun.

tell your **evil demon** in Yaounde that he will one day pay for his crimes against the Ambazonian people. **We shall be free in Jesus name amen.**

- (4) Dr Ben, You have constantly call our fellows brothers and sisters to be wise, to remain patriotic and focused on promoting values such as peace, education, God Luck, Our Almighty GOD is watching each and every one of us.
- (5) The person who writes this is an idiot..not different from this bad government..anyone supporting this government must go to hell..idiot

A Christian reading the above posts is struck by the presence of the words that he or she is familiar with. There is reference to religious rituals like prayer and praying; to biblical lexis and concepts like “hell”, wickedness, evil (referring to negative entities); to biblical figures like “Jehovah” (a variant of God’s biblical names), “Jesus” (the messiah or saviour), “Almighty God” (the supreme being), “King Nebuchadnezzar” (a Bible character who is assumed to be one of the first great world emperors), “Judas” (the Jesus disciple who betrayed him), the “devil” and “satan” (allusions to the biblical figure who is antagonistic to God and humans).

(b) Reference to Biblical characters

In other instances of allusions to Christianity, we observe allusions to biblical figures such as “God”, “Jesus”, “Judas”, “Satan” and “King Nebuchadnezzar”, as in the following examples:

- (6) Pls be conscious and stop disturbing our peace and united country by the will of GOD. So stay where u are quiet and enjoy what **Satan** have provide.
- (7) We are not biafra, but copying wrong styles of Biafra that failed them and will continue to failed until they gain back their senses as King Nebuchadnezzar did, plead for mercy and worship God and acknowledged Him as the only one who has power on earth and beneath and also above.
- (8) Judas played his role for mankind to be free. The Judas(es) in our midst will also play their roles for Ambazonia to be free.

(c) Biblical citations and paraphrases

In some of the comments provided by the followers, whether in response to promptings or not, the activists make verbatim or partial citations of the Bible. In others, they paraphrase the scriptures.

- (9) My eyes are fixed on the prize, until we reach Buea. For one who holds the plough and keeps looking back is unfit for Ambaland 😊
- (10) No peace for the wicked
- (11) General as a pastor I say NO Weapon form against you shall prosper go ahead liberate your land
- (12) Well spoken General RK. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob will certainly protect you till Buea 🙏🙏

In the above utterances, the propositions “NO Weapon form against you shall prosper” and “No peace for the wicked” are verbatim citations of Isaiah 48:22 and Isaiah 54:17, respectively; the story of Daniel 4 is also paraphrased when King Nebuchadnezzar is evoked. Furthermore, just like in the many instances of the Bible (Exodus 3:6/ 3:15/ 4:5) where God refers to himself as “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob”, the activists use the same expression in their post (12). We also have partial quotations of the Bible with excerpts from Philippians 3:14 (“My eyes are fixed on the prize”) and Luke 9:62 (“who holds the plough and keeps looking back”).

(d) Biblical/Christian phraseologies and idioms

Anglophone secessionist discourse abounds in biblical phraseologies and idioms that imbue it with sanctity. As will be shown in the following section, some of those expressions have performative force.

4.2 Pragmatic analysis: speech acts and Christian phraseologies (incantation, blessing, curses, swear words, invocation)

Christianity has inherited many rituals from Jewish traditions, including religious mysticism. Dennis (2007) states that both the Bible and Jewish mysticism emphasise that God created the universe by means of a series of “speech acts”, “the power to use words to construct and to destroy under certain conditions”. He premises that some special mystical power is enacted through the pronunciation of God’s names, through words and phrases that God speaks, and the Hebrew alphabet.

Anglophone separatist leaders and their followers use a variety of pragmatic artifices as a rhetoric tool were inspired by biblical and Christian ideology. Some phraseologies, idioms and propositions are used as swear words, blessings and judgemental proclamations (imprecation) with performative effect. They are

classified according to their effects and their functional intent within the discourse. Their use may be for incantations, blessing and well-wishing, cursing and swear words. They are classified as expressive (thanking), declarations (cursing and blessing), directives (prayer requests) and other categorisations.

(1) Assertive (representative) speech acts

These describe the situation and commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition, e. g. assertions, claims and reports.

In (13) and (14), the speaker asserts that “The lord is your strength” and “through the grace of god both the living and the dead shall get to Buea”. By making those statements, the Anglophone activists assert the way that they represent the future, their position in relation to God and their secessionist project.

- (13) Thanks you General Rk. The lord is your strength.
- (14) Gen. Ivo remain our inspiration in spirit and Gen R K .our inspiration in the physical. Whether dead or alive and through the grace of god both the living and the dead shall get to Buea

(2) Expressive speech acts

These express the speaker’s attitudes and feelings towards the proposition (excuses, complaints, thanks and congratulations)

In (15) we have a prompting post that was followed by comments in the form of expressive speech acts. The ones with religious language are highlighted.

- (15) British Southern Cameroons Resistance Forces:
LRC attacked lower Bafut today. Left THREE LRC terrorist demons six feet deep!
All BSCRF soldiers safely back in base. No civilian casualties noted.
Property damage to be assessed during daylight.
No Retreat, No Surrender! #FundGroundAction #AmbazoniaMustBeFree

Comments

Brave warriors 

We thank God and you our valiant warriors.

Until we reach Buea.

Congrats comrades

Amen we thank God for that protection

(3) Declarations

Declarations are speech acts that alter the reality in accordance with the proposition of the declaration using “In Jesus name” and “Amen”. Both are adjacency pairs in Christian liturgy.

In (16), “in Jesus name” is used as a declaration. In (15) above, one of the followers responds to a statement with “Amen we thank God for that protection”. In (17) and (18), another concludes their own statement with “Amen.”

- (16) Nfor Vivian shut up pa I pray God will deliver u **in Jesus name**
- (17) We shall be free in Jesus name Amen
- (18) May God c u an de people Ambazonia through.. Amen !!

“In Jesus name” is a phraseology that is used as a declaration in Christian circles. According to Geoffrey Dennis, the use of names of power is a pervasive aspect of all religious spells and is considered critical to lending efficacy to an incantation. These may include God’s names, angels, the righteous dead, even one’s mother. In Christian circles, “In Jesus name” is used to claim divine backing of the request. In secessionist discourse, it is used to claim God’s validation of the stated declaration. It is usually followed by the utterance “Amen”.

“Amen,” which means “so be it”, is used in Christian rhetoric or discourse to express agreement with something that has been said, or to affirm that what one has said is right. Its use is widespread among Pentecostal evangelicals (see Wharry 2003). In church services, it is uttered repeatedly in response to speakers’ declarations, as a Gospel truth marker (see Ndzotom Mbakop 2018) or spiritual well-being statement, and as a rhythmic marker (see Wharry 2003). In this study, followers of the separatists say them in response to declarations or sentential statements uttered by their leaders as a way of expressing their consent and approval.

(4) Directives and declarations that use formulaic words for blessing and well-wishing

In religion, a blessing (also used to refer to the bestowing of such) consists of the infusion of something with holiness, spiritual redemption or divine will. In the context of Ambazonian discourse, blessings are usually pronounced by followers of the leaders who want to wish them well. They are also given in the form of requests to God that favour the territory and its future leaders. In the context of our study, the concept of blessing contributes to understanding the concept of

weaponisation in that the blessings are invoked for the secessionists, while curses are rained down upon their opponents. The following posts illustrate this point.

- (19) May Jehovah bless you abundantly in Jesus name amen
- (20) God bless Ambazonia thank you H. E DR SAMUEL SAKO IKOME Ambazonian president #draft draft drafts till freedom
- (21) May God strengthen you brave General RK long live Ambazonia and shot live the strogle
- (22) Commander Ayaba! God bless you! Long live Ambazonia!
- (23) Dr. Ayaba Cho. You are a great fighter but Unification will help us complete this winning struggle. God bless and protect you. Senior software Engineer Germany
- (24): Thank you our Revolutionary Leader for the great Sacrifice. We trust your know-how in such an unprecedented moment. May God continue to grant you wisdom and protect you.
- (24) Thank you our Revolutionary Leader for the great Sacrifice. We trust your know-how in such an unprecedented moment. May God continue to grant you wisdom and protect you.
- (25) God is in control as we remember fallen heros, God's will shall be done the word of God is power can see you reading it that is why you are different keep up our General God is watching your back
- (26) A great lost from Batibo we the mothers we honor our son thanks for your sacrifices RIP and we honor the rest of heroes. ***You guys are cover with the blood of Jesus Christ***

(5) Use of formulaic and magic words for incantation, cursing, swear-words and spells

“An incantation or spell is a spoken word, phrase, or formula of power, often recited as part of a larger ritual, which is recited in order to effect a magical result” (Dennis 2007). It is also the act of using words in order to induce enchantment, charm or cast a spell on somebody or something. In religion, incantation is done through the utterance of magic spells and the use of opaque language. Some phraseologies that are stated and often repeated carry charming powers. In the Pentecostal charismatic circles (see R. Marshall 2016), it is assumed that the invocation of God through the pronouncement of the name of Jesus has power to change the order of things, first in the invisible world, then in the visible one. When pronounced with the will of God, these phrases are expected to have performative effects in the invisible and visible realm. In saying them, the speakers are actually asking for divine intervention or for malefic powers to enter into battle on their behalf. In most instances, some of the swear words are used to cast a curse on someone, or bless them.

Cursing is mostly associated with negative emotions such as sadness and anger, which is why people in the online world mainly use curse words to express

their anger towards those who do not support the separatist agenda. In the Ambazonian discourse, we have noticed curse-like invectives. By using these “theurgic” spells (see Dennis 2007), the speakers assume that God has in some way delegated that power/authority to them in order to act or to reverse a situation. The examples below illustrate this point.

- (27) The Lord God! The Lion of the tribe of Judah, and the Mighty Man in battle will fight for you, brave warriors!!! I cover all of you with the blood of Jesus Christ, and I blind the eyes of the enemy, paralyze their hands and weapons in the matchless name of Jesus Christ!!!

- (28) Any spirit of power struggle and lies telling in Tassang Wilfred, out-out, out, out in Jesus name
- (29) God punish devil may EC4UC go to hell.in order to get your own position you are being against your brothers and sisters right. That position you'll never get. God punish devil idiot!!!
- (30) And sheep will attempt to follow his deadly order. That fake president is a dangerous cultist terrorist looking for innocent souls to devour. But the God that we serve has given us authority to trample over him. That's exactly what we are doing. God punish the devil.

In (27), there is an imprecation which reads “I blind the eyes of the enemy, paralyze their hands and weapons”.

(6) Prayer and Invocation

In many instances within the discourse, directives are used for prayers and invoking God, to seek his direct intervention and interference in the conflict on behalf of Ambazonian fighters. The prayers also invoke divine help and assistance for the people.

- (31) Amen, and may the hands of God continue to uphold and strengthen you as you lead Ambazonians to freedom from LRC.
- (32) General Rk the most loving in the land we thank you so so much may God empire you the more to take us to Buea in Jesus name Amen
- (33) Lord open the eyes of Ambas to know that we are just beginning the revolution. Help Ambas that they will not faint in this race till we reach our destination.
- (34) Ooh God listing to the cry of our general Rk ,Big number and the rest may u continued to strength them until will we are free my uncle general Ivo we shall continued to cry ,and pray for your loving spirit to rest in peace and also protect the other general u left behind to continued the struggle (water and water with God everything is possible)

4.3 Functions of religious deployment in Anglophone separatist discourse

Activating religious themes in an armed conflict situation in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon is a means of imbuing the crisis with religious meanings and significance, as there is otherwise no religious divide between Cameroonian Anglophones and Francophones. In this situation, the secessionists use a plethora of metaphors and images borrowed from the Bible to rally Christians to their plight and objective: liberation from the francophone yoke.

The use of a specific type of religious rhetoric by Ambazonian leaders, divine ordained rhetoric, is a manipulative discourse strategy aimed at increasing Anglophone expectations for victory over the Cameroonian military.

In this regard, the Amba war draft posted on the Facebook wall of Sako Ikome (the interim president of the Ambazonia defence council) clearly portrays the leaders' decision to place religion as a central issue in the armed conflict to liberate Ambazonia. It reads:

- (35) I Am Convicted Deep Down In My Spirit That Keeping The Hope Of Ambazonia Alive, And Trusting The Almighty Is The Only SHIELD We Have Against The Raging Darkness Of Occupation.

In the discourse of Anglophone activists, there are many metaphors that reference biblical scriptures. These include: the journey of Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land; the assignation of messianic characteristics to Ambazonian leaders and fallen heroes; and the transfer of this characterisation into the spiritual realm as a form of spiritual warfare.

(a) The metaphor of the Hebrew exodus and journey to the promise land

As represented in the following post, the Cameroonian Government is Egypt, the Ambazonians are the Jews leaving Egypt and Ambazonia is their promised land.

- (36) When we picked up Arms to defend our homeland we knew we might not make it to **the Promised Land**.
- (37) This words breaks my heart courage great fighter u will make it to the promise land for God is with u
- (38) Let the God of king Solomon continue to renew your wisdom as you lead us to the promise land president we are behind you

Through evoking this metaphor of the journey of the children of Israel from Egypt to the promised land, the secessionists align the circumstances of the Anglophones with those referred to in the corresponding scriptures and use the analogies of the Judeo-Christian Bible to support their secessionist campaigns.

(b) Assigning messianic characteristics to some Anglophone leaders and fallen armed fighters

The assignation of messianic characteristics to the Anglophone leaders is a consistent discursive strategy used by Ambazonians. They presume that their move to secede is “God ordained”, with leaders and fighters seen as sent by God to help their cause. In some statements, a leader is characterised and qualified as a “chosen one”, as shown in the following posts.

(39) Dr you are the chosen one to lead this struggle. **God** is Not a Man. CIC Ayaba Cho Lucas, Was Born For This Course

When some fighters died in the battle fields, the tributes paid to them depict the role that has been assigned to them: that of the Messiah, in the likeness of Jesus Christ, who shed his blood and died to save humanity from doom.

Tribute to a fallen fighter:

(40) Gen Ivo. You gave ur life so that we may be free!!
Just like Jesus Christ, you bled and died [...], for our motherland Ambazonia. God sent you as his son, but once again the people rejected their own saviour. I am 100% convinced that you had to die for us to move ahead. Ambazonia will be free.

(41) [...] No mortal can stop the freedom you died for. Miss you My General, shake glad hands with the Man of War, the Ancient of days, Jesus Christ!

(42) Legends to the heros who bought the land with their blood...

(c) Militarisation of prayer and the metaphor of spiritual warfare

From the Charismatic Pentecostal perspective, secessionists comprehend their struggle from a spiritual warfare perspective that “[...] is a collection of rituals, practices and discourses that aim to do battle with (typically) invisible supernatural threats” (Marshall/Prichard 2020: 4). In the biblical ideology, God is the Lord of hosts who leads his people to battle. Biblical stories provide a variety of conflicts between the Chosen People and their enemies, whereby God always stood

on the side of the Chosen People to help them thrive. This is exemplified by a passage from Exodus in the Bible, Chapter 17, verses 8 to 11. Here, Moses asked Joshua to go to the battlefield, while he (Moses) was to go to the mountain to pray. The outcome of the battle was determined by Moses having his hands lifted up. It is also inferred from Biblical ideology that beyond the visible realm, there is an invisible realm where spiritual beings wage war, and humans can influence the outcome through their prayers. The warfare ideology or paradigm is a biblical construct that shows that there is demonic and satanic opposition to the believer achieving felicity. As such, the believer has to wage war against these forces to reach their desired end.

By regarding the Ambazonians as fighting the raging forces of occupation, the Ambazonia leader implies that God is on their side as “a shield”, and is going to help them prevail over the “darkness of occupation”. This statement helps one infer that a spiritual dimension is given to the armed conflict between the Ambazonian militia and the Government of Cameroon’s military forces. From this perspective, the Government of Cameroon, the oppressor, has assumed the role of Satan and the Ambazonians are fighting to free themselves from bondage. In the corpus we have expressions such as “satanic francophone”, “evil demon” and “satanic”, which are used to characterise the Government of Cameroon or the political entity “La Republique du Cameroun”. Furthermore, “the devil” is used metaphorically to refer to Cameroon, which is assumed the role of oppressor of Ambazonians. Cameroonian political entities and figures are associated with negative biblical entities such as “Lucifer, Devil, satanic (.) regime, your evil demon, bondage, yoke, Hell”, and the secessionists or Ambazonians are assigned positive characterisations. From the point of view of the secessionists it is valid to assume that the conflict is first and foremost a spiritual war. This helps to legitimate the armed confrontation.

The following prompting post and responses to it illustrate this point.

(43) TINGOH VILLAGE UNDER ATTACK BY LRC. HOUSES ON FIRE. CIVILIANS ARE ADVISED TO STAY AWAY. PUT OUR CIVILIANS & SOLDIERS IN PRAYERS.

It is well our ancestors will cover you all [...] the intruders will be put to shame...fear not our brave warriors

We are in prayer for now hence thanks our head man for your ideas

God will protect u all in Jesus name

God protect wuna

It shall be well with you people in Jesus name I pray

The Lord God! The Lion of the tribe of Judah, and the Mighty Man in battle will fight for you, brave warriors!!! I cover all of you with the blood of Jesus Christ, and I blind the eyes of the enemy, paralyze their hands and weapons in the matchless name of Jesus Christ!!!



We also see warfare vocabulary like “battle”, “fight”, “brave warrior”, “enemy”, and “weapon” in utterances like “[...] Mighty Man in battle will fight for you, brave warriors!!!”, “cover all of you with the blood of Jesus Christ, and I blind the eyes of the enemy, paralyze their hands and weapons”. As illustrated by the above posts, God is invited to participate in the armed conflict in order to give the impression that the Ambazonians are “fighting for the Kingdom of God” (Vüllers 2011).

(d) Adjudging or arrogating divine backing of the insurgency

One of the secessionists’ discursive strategies consists of adjudging or arrogating God’s support of the insurgency based on the victims’ discourse (see Chilton 2004), which states the syllogism that “God is on the side of the oppressed”. Since Anglophones are victims of the oppressor or aggressor – in this case, *La République* – God is on their side.

- (44) [...] Thanks Cho, keep on. God is on the side of the oppressed
- (45) [...] Lord open the eyes of Ambas to know that we are just beginning the revolution. Help Ambas that they will not faint in this race till we reach our destination.
- (46) hat do u have to tell us today big man and before u say anything remember with u or without u we will have our restoration because God almighty has already ordained that. At the point when we feel we are at the end of the rope, we are not at the end of hope. God is seeing us through.

(e) God for us rhetoric

Anglophone secession leaders resorted to the “God for us” rhetoric to legitimise their decision to pursue armed confrontation against the Government of Cameroon and its military. The God-for-us or God’s-on-our-side rhetoric is one manipulative tool used by political leaders. Establishing a relationship between God and politics is what Domke/Coe (2010), quoted in Roche (2015: 7), called “The God Strategy”. It consists of claiming that one’s cause is supported or backed by God, inspired by God; or of invoking God for the purposes of partisan politics. We see a number of statements and propositions that suggest that the activists presume that God is on their side. Phrases and expressions like “into sustainable peace-flavored independence of a God-ordained richly progressive nation in varying ramifications”, “[...] the battle is almost over. Christ is on the throne and we are on the winning side”, “God is on our sides because we stand for justice”, “God given opportunity”, “God has spoken already and freedom is around the Conner”

clearly reveal that the secessionists presume that God supports their cause. As such, this assumption contributes to the legitimisation and validation of their controversial campaign. The statements and claims also presume that God does not support the Cameroonian Government and the military – just the Anglophones.

The posts below illustrate this analysis.

- (47) A lot of heat will be produced in this process and thank God, we have a formidable cooling system, “corporate prayers” for peaceful exit from bondage in the yoke of *La République du Cameroun* into sustainable peace-flavored independence of a God-ordained richly progressive nation in varying ramifications.
- (48) It's a no vote simply rigging of election. The regime is accursed but at the appointed time the Almighty God will straighten up things for the good of the weak. Paul Biya who made himself equal to God killing human randomly - it's a pity. Maranatha and Shalom
- (49) God is on our sides because we stand for justice. evil can never prevail over good. The LA republic government fail to understand that one with God is majority. my fellow southern Cameroonian prayer is a sure key to success. So let's keep praying God while protesting peacefully hoping that Jehovah will fight for us in Jesus name
- (50) Nobody can stop this God given opportunity to regain our statehood. The struggle continues.
- (51) God has spoken already and freedom is around the Conner. The pressure is mounting because the battle is almost over. Christ is on the throne and we are on the winning side
- (52) You shall reach Buea and help build the nascent Ambazonia Army. God will see you through

In the above posts, there are constant and consistent references to God, and in every instance the secessionists claim that God is on their side. We have a diversity of expressions and utterances, which include “peace-flavoured independence of a God-ordained”, “God is on the side of the oppressed”, “God is on our sides because we stand for justice”, “God has spoken already and freedom is around the Conner”, “God is with us”, and “God is seeing us through”. Knowing that most Anglophones are religious, the secessionist activists (leaders and followers) use Bible metaphors and imagery to build a storyline for baiting the anglophones into armed conflict, which would enable them to obtain independence from the satanic and oppressive regime of *La République du Cameroun*.

The historical case studies attest to the fact that more often than not, leaders and politicians resort to religious rhetoric when they are desperate in the middle of a crisis (see Day/Adam 2018; Dreisbach 2014). During times of crisis, the deployment of religious language and the invocation of God appear to be ways of either expressing one's impotence or rallying the followers of a religion to one's cause. The functions of the God strategy or allusions to the Bible in political discourse have mainly been studied in the USA, where the focus has been on the use of biblical imagery to rally Christian communities. In fact, the use of biblical

metaphor in discourse helps one to construct their ideology. In the case that is the focus of this article, it is used to legitimise secession.

5 Discussion

Without a doubt, religion is a very divisive element within society. Our analysis of the Anglophone pro-secession discourse data has shown that the socio-political crisis has assumed a religious overtone and that social media has been an empowering tool in this regard. This study has provided data that show that separatists tactfully use language to diffuse the belief that Ambazonia, the territory which they are fighting to recover or to establish is in fact their promised land, just as the armed conflict has been ordained by God. It was assumed by Anglophone activists that Ambazonia, their new nation, is a Christian one, in contrast to *La République du Cameroun*, which is characterised as an evil entity.

In addition to allusions and references to the Bible, Anglophone web activists used biblical phraseologies and other speech acts to perform invocations, curses and blessings. We have suggested that there is actually no religious divide between Anglophone and Francophone Cameroonians. There are therefore no grounds to claim that Francophone Cameroon is a devilish occupational force and that the would-be Federal Republic of Ambazonia has a biblical and Christian foundation with God's backing. Imbuing the secession discourse with Christian themes is therefore a form of weaponising religion. Religion is instrumentalised to rally more mass support to the separatist cause. As Roche (2015) notes, Domke and Coe's (2010) "God strategy" or Ericson's (1980) "God-centered or/biblical rhetoric" is a strategic and carefully executed political act, not necessarily a genuine belief in or reliance on God. As the activists seem to have made the fight for secession from Cameroon a continuation of the Jews' Exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land, their invocations and prayers aim at calling on God to intervene and free them from their oppressor. Or, in other words, they are fighting a spiritual battle to witness God's Kingdom to come and restore the freedom taken from them by LRC.

Prayer is perceived and employed as a weapon of warfare in order to carry out spiritual violence. It is also a central means of redemption praxis within the Pentecostal milieu (see Tarusarira 2020; McAlister 2016a, 2016b, R. Marshall (2016). Anglophones use it in their quest to secede. The instrumentalisation of religion for political aims has also been posted on social media in other cases of conflict in Africa (see Basedau 2017; Basedau/Schaefer-Kehnert 2019). In Côte d'Ivoire (see N'Guessan 2015, Vüllers 2011), a cross-section of Christian peoples

likened the role of Gbagbo to that of a Messiah who had come to liberate their nation from the Oppressor, the French. In the current Anglophone crisis, abduction, arson attacks and the butchering of so called “traitors” have been perpetrated by Ambazonian fighters in order to advance their cause, which has led to forceful condemnations from the national and international community. Their claim that God would support barbaric violence is more than questionable. However, the secessionists still claim to have God’s support, as they see the Anglophones as the elect people at the centre of God’s attention, even as they are also marginalised as refugees. The politicisation of religion (see P. Marshall 2018) is an issue of debate, just like the militarisation of prayer (see McAlister 2016a, 2016b) in (socio-)political struggles; the more extreme of the two being the weaponisation of religion. Morris-Chapman (2019) discusses an Ambazonian theology of liberation that examines the question of self-defence in relation to acts of state-sponsored violence. He explores the question of resistance to the State as a reaction to the postcolonial marginalisation that Anglophone Cameroonians experienced. Resorting to Christianity as a means to validate violence is comparable to Islamist terrorism, where jihad is the driver of barbaric and violent acts. Islamic religious arguments are sometimes used to legitimise violent terrorism as they claim that governments and political entities that have no respect for Islamic laws must be fought. They also refuse to acknowledge those leaders as they claim to only acknowledge a higher divine law whose application is binding for them. According to Paterson (2019), most Islamic terrorists in Indonesia consider all those who do not condone their actions as infidels. The members of these groups consider themselves to be engaged in a struggle between good and evil, where every outgroup entity embodies evil (see Juergensmeyer 1997). Religion is therefore instrumentalised to legitimate terrorism, and this misuse is a form of weaponisation.

6 Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the religious discourse deployed by Anglophone secessionists engaged in armed conflict with the Cameroonian government and military. We found that Biblical allusions and Christian phraseologies were used to imbue the discourse with Christian ideology. This study claims that this discursive strategy amounts to weaponisation, that is, involving God in an armed conflict as a means to rally support from a large quantity of gullible Christians in Cameroon’s Anglophone regions. This armed conflict has become violent, as the Ambazonian fighters and government forces have resorted to gruesome killings.

Ambazonians fighters claim to be doing it in the name of God, who has ordained this struggle. Vüllers (2011: 6) warned that the politicisation of religious identities can result in believers committing violent acts at specific times and locations. Religious extremism should not only be viewed from the perspective of an isolated group carrying out violent attacks in the name of religion, it also encapsulates those social struggles in which religion is used as a weapon. It includes using religious beliefs to justify violent acts or invoking God's assistance while committing these same acts. Weaponising religion is very common in the political discourse of liberal democracies where religion is central to the public life. For instance, in the USA, where Americans have long been committed to a series of beliefs that attribute a special, God-given role to America on the global stage (see Roche 2015). Consequently, in times of crisis, their leaders use allusions to the Bible to rally the support of Christians for their projects.

This study shows that religion is gaining ground and has become a controversial and problematic aspect of the public and political sphere. It has highlighted how much religion is still a powerful force in the Cameroonian socio-cognitive environment, thereby contributing to the debate regarding secularisation in democracies. This tends to contradict post-modern discourse's prediction that religion would lose its authority.

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