

ROBERT MUGABE

Mourning the loss of a liberator or celebrating the death of a dictator? A Christian response

Compiled by Mike Burnard

Former Zimbabwean president, Robert Mugabe, passed away on Friday 6 September 2019 in Singapore. He was 95 years old.

MUGABE THE MAN

(Information from Wikipedia¹ and Cheryllyn Dudley² - former South African Member of Parliament)

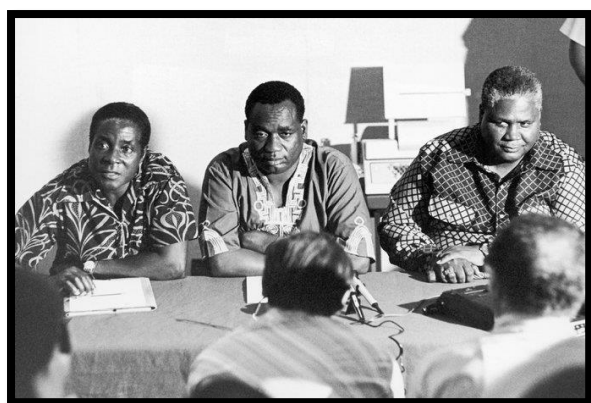
Robert Mugabe was born on 21 February 1924 to a poor Shona family in Kutama, Zimbabwe (then Southern Rhodesia). He was described as a loner and a studious child, known to carry a book even while tending cattle in the bush.

After his carpenter father left the family when he was 10, the young Mugabe concentrated on his studies, qualifying as a schoolteacher at the age of 17. Following an education at Kutama College and the University of Fort Hare (South Africa), he worked as a schoolteacher in Zimbabwe (Southern Rhodesia), Zambia (Northern Rhodesia), and Ghana. Angered that Southern Rhodesia was a colony of the British Empire, governed by a white minority, Mugabe embraced Marxism and joined African nationalist protests calling for an independent state led by representatives of the black majority.

After criticising the government of Rhodesia in 1964, he was imprisoned for more than a decade without trial. During his time in jail, he gained three degrees via correspondence, but the years in prison were painful. Mugabe's four-year-old son by his first wife, Ghanaian-born Sally Francesca Hayfron, died while he was behind bars and Rhodesia's leader at the time, Ian Smith, denied him leave to attend the funeral.

MUGABE THE POLITICIAN

In 1973, while still in prison, he was chosen as president of the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), of which he was a founding member. Upon his release, he headed to Mozambique, from where he oversaw ZANU's role in the Rhodesian 'Bush War', fighting Ian Smith's predominantly white government. He reluctantly took part in the peace negotiations brokered by the United Kingdom that resulted in the Lancaster House Agreement. The agreement ended the war and produced the 1980 general election, in which Mugabe led ZANU-PF ("Patriotic Front" was added after merging with ZAPU) to victory. As Prime Minister of the newly renamed Zimbabwe, he led an administration that expanded healthcare and education and — despite his professed Marxist desire for a socialist society — adhered largely to mainstream, conservative economic policies.



Mugabe's calls for racial reconciliation failed to stem growing white emigration, while relations with Joshua Nkomo's Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) also deteriorated. In the Gukurahundi (a series of massacres) of 1982–1987, Mugabe's Fifth Brigade crushed ZAPU-linked opposition in Matabeleland in a campaign that killed at least 10,000 people, mostly Ndebele civilians. Internationally, he sent troops to the Second Congo War and chaired the Non-Aligned Movement (1986–89), the Organisation of African Unity (1997–98), and the African Union (2015–16).

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Mugabe

² <https://www.facebook.com/cheryllyn.verdondudley>

While pursuing decolonisation, Mugabe emphasised the redistribution of land controlled by white farmers to landless blacks, initially on a "willing seller–willing buyer" basis. Frustrated at the slow rate of redistribution, from 2000 he encouraged black Zimbabweans to violently seize white-owned farms. Food production was severely impacted, leading to famine and drastic economic decline. Opposition to Mugabe grew (including international sanctions), but he was re-elected in 2002, 2008, and 2013 through campaigns dominated by violence, electoral fraud, and nationalistic appeals to his rural Shona voter base. In 2017, members of his own party ousted him in a coup, replacing him with former vice-president Emmerson Mnangagwa.

Through his decades in power, Mugabe gained the reputation of being a dictator who ruled by threats of violence. Many Zimbabweans trace the reversal of his – and their – fortunes to Mugabe’s 1996 wedding to his secretary Grace Marufu (41 years his junior), following the death of his widely respected first wife, Sally, in 1992. Her eventual presidential ambitions were the trigger for his close allies in the military and the ruling ZANU-PF party to oust him from power.



While he was sometimes portrayed as a “madman”, the reality is that Mugabe was extremely intelligent and those who underestimated him usually discovered this to their cost.

MUGABE THE “CHRISTIAN”



*The Economist*³ of 20 November 2017 reflected on perhaps the biggest paradox of Mugabe’s life – the impact of religion in his life. “Christianity, and in particular the Catholic fraternity known as the Society of Jesus, was a defining feature of his early years,” *The Economist* reported. The report makes specific mention of the late Heidi Holland, a journalist who had unique access to Mugabe, and her assessment that “Mugabe’s childhood was steeped in piety, revolving round a Catholic mission station.

“Abandoned by her husband and distraught at the teenage death of her oldest son, Mugabe’s mother took him to Mass every day. Robert was a favourite pupil of his headmaster, Father Jerome O’Hea, a Jesuit of Irish origin. Both the priest

and his mother encouraged young Robert, a bookish and solitary child, to dream of a great future, while also drumming into him the habits of Catholic piety.”

In recent times, his lifelong confidante, Father Fidelis Mukonori (who knew Mugabe well during the guerrilla campaign that brought an end to white rule), insisted that “Mugabe’s Catholic faith, and his habit of saying the rosary, sustained him during the years when he was commanding a rebel army.”

However, much of Mugabe’s life – including the fact that he began a relationship with a much younger woman while his first wife was gravely ill – did not sit comfortably with claims that he was a devout Catholic. His geopolitical friends, which included the ‘godless regimes’ of China and North Korea, also caused controversy.

While there may be questions about Mugabe’s religious convictions and whether he had a personal relationship with Christ, there is clearly religious fervour in his family – his mother would say the rosary several times daily and his two younger sisters did missionary work.

³ <https://www.economist.com/erasmus/2017/11/20/the-impact-of-religion-on-robert-mugabe>

MUGABE THE DIVIDER

Mugabe was a man who divided global public opinion like few others. To some, he was an “evil dictator” who should have ended his days in jail for crimes against humanity. To others, he was a “revolutionary hero” who fought racial oppression and stood up to Western imperialism and neo-colonialism.

Even within Christian circles, Mugabe was adored by some and despised by others. Many social media posts following his death included calls for him to “burn in hell for all the hardship he caused”. Some posts referred to David beheading Goliath, a ‘villain’, and used that to justify a response of hatred and unforgiveness.

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

The Bible is uncompromising in its assessment that we are ALL sinners and in need of the saving grace of Jesus. If I stand alongside Adolf Hitler and Robert Mugabe, all three of us deserve hell, without Christ’s redemptive grace (Romans 3:23). It is by grace that we are saved, regardless of how ‘good’ or how ‘bad’ we are in human opinion.

In this context, two responses drew my attention the past few days. The first was by Cheryllyn Dudley, a former South African Member of Parliament who was born and raised in what was Rhodesia at the time. On her Facebook page, she wrote the following:

“I sincerely hope that Robert Mugabe ... made peace with his Maker before he died. The words of our Lord Jesus come to mind: ‘Father... forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us...’ I hope, with a grieving heart, that he was able to forgive those who had hurt him, and be forgiven the things he did that so tragically hurt so many. It is difficult to celebrate Robert Mugabe’s life, but I refuse to celebrate his death, unless I could be sure he had made right with his Maker and had been forgiven.”

The second response that resonated with my heart was from Mary Jo LeBlanc⁴ who blogged the following after the death of Stephen Hawking (a staunch atheist). While written about a different person, the same principle applies:

“Contrary to sugar-coating the Gospel, Jesus instructed His disciples to use righteous judgment (John 7:24). His command, ‘judge not’, was qualified with instructions on when and how to judge (Matthew 7:1-5). Viewing the extensive writings and claims of Stephen Hawking [or the brutal rule of Robert Mugabe], it is not difficult for someone with a Christian worldview to grasp the critical state of the man’s soul. Instead of gloating at his demise, should not each one of us grieve when we imagine anyone entering eternity without Christ?

“It’s easy to get on a soapbox and criticise the beliefs held by others; it’s quite another to lovingly share the Gospel with someone who needs Jesus. In our zeal, let’s not rush to blasting jabs and condemnation, nor to delivering a sugar-coated false Gospel. Let’s not crow behind our keyboards, taking pot-shots at those with whom we disagree. Rather, let’s respectfully comfort this grieving family (Galatians 6:2). Let’s fervently share the Gospel with those facing eternity without Christ (Philippians 3:14). Let’s speak the truth in love, defending it with meekness and fear.”

“But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defence to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear.” 1 Peter 3:15

SOURCES

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<https://creationtoday.org/a-christian-response-to-the-death-of-an-atheist/>



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