1 Introduction

To the disappointment of many Marxists in Africa, who believed that religion is a sleeping pill for the oppressed masses, religion has proven that it is more complex than that. Asserting this point even more firmly, the Catholic Theologian Hans Küng observed that “Religion has proven that it can be not only a means of social appeasement and consolation but also […] a catalyst of social liberation: and this without that revolutionary use of force which results in a vicious circle of ever-new violence” (Küng 1992, 13). As a result, the church’s participation in the political life of Africa in the contemporary era is ambivalent and a cause for intense debate and discussion. Any discourse on the place of Practical Theology in Africa conjures images of large crowds listening to powerful sermons from high pulpits, being influenced spiritually or politically. Africa as a whole, East, West, North and South is indeed highly religious with a total number of 599 million Christians (Johnson 2018). It is important to note that religion in Africa is not necessarily a private matter, but it is freely lived and practiced in the public realm. For the purpose of this article, I will be referring predominantly to the southern region of southern Africa/South Africa in particular, as it is one of the largest economies and most Christian country in the continent, with almost 87% of its population of 58 million people professing to be Christian (Schoeman 2017, 2). South Africa is inhabited by people from many different countries of the continent, who come as refugees, migrant workers, and students. The country therefore is a melting pot of cultures and religions from all over the continent. I start by defining Practical Theology and governance. The main aim of this paper is to explore the contribution of Practical Theology in the political life of Southern African society with the aim of enhancing good governance and wellbeing of all people. Then I move to discuss the church’s participation in politics during the pre- and post-independence period. This is followed by a discussion of a few practical strategies to be taken to address the place of governance in the field of Practical Theology.

James Cochrane and his colleagues defined Practical Theology as: “That disciplined, reflective theological activity which seeks to relate the faith of the Christian community to its life, mission and social praxis” (Cochrane, De Gruchy, and Petersen 1991, 2). In a nutshell Practical Theology focuses on the “study of human actions that serve the transmission of God’s discourse to man [sic], in which people function as intermediaries” (Eybers et al. 1978, 268). It is about how the church – through its teachings that come through messages preached from pulpits – influence people to realize the mandate and power they have to shape political decisions. By ‘public’ we are referring to the social realm, where both the church and government influence
people. The public is important for the church and theology because as Allan Boesak puts it “the Christian faith in Jesus Christ is public. It is public because Jesus of Nazareth, took on public form when he became a human person, and because his life was lived in public servanthood and vulnerability in obedience to God.” (Boesak 2005, 3) By governance we mean:

- a particular set of initiatives to strengthen the institutions of civil society with the objective of making government more accountable, more open and transparent, more democratic (Minogue 1997, 21).

Practical Theology or religion is one of the key sets of initiatives that can be employed to strengthen good governance, for it to be more accountable, open, transparent, and democratic as Minogue observes in this definition; whilst arguing for the significance of the church for good political practice. Politics is built on secular assumptions about the world, people power and institutions and these will not always be in continuity with the theology and mission of the church. Politics and governance are secular disciplines with their own meanings, rituals, values, languages, and assumptions. These need to be carefully evaluated before they are applied to the discipline of Practical Theology whose main subject and concern is the church and the kingdom of God. Drawing from insights shared by Stephen Patterson I argue that politics or governance has its own faith assumptions, but these need to be brought into a creative synergy with Practical Theology (Patterson 2004, 90). The boundaries of Practical Theology go beyond the confines of the church, but extend to society at large, where this discipline can be used to analyze the world and provide fresh insights. It is for this reason that my proposal in this paper is that governance must be taken seriously and understood as a key component of the church’s life and mission.

Despite growing secularization in the contemporary world, there is an interesting development in countries in Southern Africa, where religion continues to influence and shape political processes and practices. It continues to break out of the private realm where western secularists had pushed it to. Michael Walzer notes that: “Liberal and left secularists may once have hoped for total exclusion: not only in the religiously motivated militants but also the sentiments and doctrines that motivate them would play no part in political decision making” (Walzer 2007, 147). Those assumptions have not worked in much of Africa, where both politics and religion are treated as two sides of the same coin, which is the total wellbeing of people. This is because generally African culture which means the traits such as values, norms and practices by some African people which distinguishes them from others) and religious life is seen as holistic rather than in compartments especially because human beings too are a combination of qualities, as Setiloane observes “a person is something divine, sacred, weird, holy; all qualities” (Setiloane 1978, 13). Politics, Power and Public are all secular terms. At a glance they have nothing to do with the discipline of Theology, let alone Practical Theology and the ministry of the church. However, as countries
continue to struggle with issues of democracy, good governance, attainment of the common good, the church has to ask the question, what is our role in the leadership; management and development of society and those are questions of Practical Theology.

2 Pre- and Post-Independence Political Participation of the Church

This essay explores the challenges that politics and governance pose for the church’s participation in democracy formation in African societies. The beginning of the twentieth century saw germination and growth of the seed of African nationalism. This came with the growth of the number of mission school educated elites who were becoming teachers, lawyers, priests, clerks, and authors. This period saw the emergence of political organizations, started and led by African leaders most of whom were leaders in the church both lay and clergy, but also in political organizations or groups. These mission school graduates most of whom were sent overseas by church related institutions to study destabilized the colonial rule in most African countries, by campaigning for the freedom of their people. A good example of this is Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, the first African country to gain independence. Nkrumah was motivated and shaped by Christianity in his early years, as a result he studied theology at Lincoln University and Seminary (Nkrumah 2002, 30). Robert Vinson noted that there was an encounter between Africans in the diaspora and those from the continent which “encouraged the growing idea among Africans and African Americans that they are of the same race, bound together in a programme of transnational racial uplift” (Vinson 2012, 107). This emphasizes the fact that the churches through their educational institutions enabled interaction between continental Africans and Africans in the diaspora, which enabled political exposure and awareness of their situation.

At the heart of the colonial system of governance was the fact that even though the Europeans formed a tiny minority of the population compared to the Africans who were the majority by far, the political and economic power to make decisions remained with them and served their interests. The church collaborated with those who viewed Africans as inferior and instituted paternalistic methods of relating to them, in the name of mission and expression of the love of God for them. The churches were “servants of power” meaning the colonial system (Cochrane 1987). So, whilst in pre-colonial African communities, a person’s status in society was determined by membership to the clan and loyalty to the royal house, with the arrival of the Europeans, through the help of the church, a person’s worth and dignity was determined by their colour, economic status, and allegiance to Christianity (Meintjes 2020). So, discouraging African Christians from political participation was meant to sustain the dominance of the Europeans who continued to rule African communities even
though they remained tiny minorities. This led to some influential African religious leaders also shunning politics and declaring their churches apolitical. A good example of this is the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) which is the largest African Independent Church in South Africa, which declares itself to be apolitical. Haynes notes that: “The church, however, took a rather apolitical stance in relation to apartheid and to the position of non-whites in the society. This was largely because its leaders perceived that their role was predominantly religious and spiritual rather than political” (Haynes 1996, 177).

As a result, even after the end of colonial rule and the emergence of independence in most African countries, Christians were reluctant to participate in the political governance of their countries especially the ordained. This matter was compounded by the fact that after independence as John Gatu observed, Christian leaders “[i]nherited the very churches and governments that were against African freedoms” (Gatu 2006, 132). A good example of this is Archbishop Tutu’s utterances during the emergency of democracy in South Africa. He told his biographer John Allen that, “[h]e had been an interim political leader, standing in for the real political leaders. Now that role is over. He was a pastor, not a politician and had no intention of entering politics” (Allen 2006, 314). Whilst the churches had been very active in the development of mission schools and better education for African people, such institutions did not prioritise political education, governance, and the importance of a conscientized electorate in order to sustain democracy for all people. Practical Theology as practiced in the life of the churches or taught in Seminaries did not explicitly include political education from a church perspective. They would claim to be above politics. Mugambi correctly notes that: “It is important to appreciate that some missionaries claimed to be either ‘neutral’ or ‘above’ politics and therefore justified their refusal to support anti-colonial struggles emphasizing ‘salvation’ rather than ‘liberation’ (Mugambi 2002, 23).

Interestingly enough, as more black Africans became Christians and received education through mission schools, they were dissatisfied with the political systems that deprived them of basic rights and equality with white people, and the churches that ignored their experiences of political oppression. Racism within education and Christianity from the churches and the mission schools implicitly opened up their eyes to pervasive racism and domination perpetuated by the colonial governments which in many cases was also being assisted by some of the progressive churches. The same churches that laid the foundation for political apathy amongst Africans which in a sense would confirm Marx’s predictions, became catalysts for political resistance in most African countries. As a result, in most African countries the struggle for independence was pioneered and led by mission school educated elites (Hughes 2011).
3 Pulpit, People and Power

The changing impact of politics in African states became most evident when countries such as Ghana, Zambia, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Botswana, and lastly South Africa became democratic. The work that had been carried out by mission school elites, who were also Christians or at least sympathetic to the church in the struggle for liberation ensured that these leaders were viewed positively and drawn into forming the new governments. These newly liberated countries needed a pool of educated and conscientised leaders to help with the reconstruction of their countries and most of these were found in the church. They led the struggle and now they needed to put into practice the values and strategic vision of a free, independent, and democratic society that they had been calling for. A neo-colonial, form of democratic government, built around three P’s, pulpit, people and power. Church leaders including bishops, theologians joined government as cabinet members, heads of department, parliamentarians, and advisers. Thus, the teaching of the church on good governance, equality, development, the common good, service and work ethic were transferred into the new governments meaning that Practical Theology was again thrust into the public realm. For instance, the Rev Frank Chikane who was the General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches during the years of the struggle against apartheid who later became the Director General in the Office of the President in South Africa, is an example of a church leader who became the most powerful official of government in democratic South Africa and saw the synergy between church and politics. Mookgo Kgatla observes that:

Chikane was not only a servant leader within Pentecostal ranks. He was also a servant in government because of the position he held as the director general in the presidency. For Chikane, there is a very thin line that divides the secular and the sacred. He did not see anything wrong with being a Pentecostal and being involved in a secular job. On the contrary, this involvement increased his influence in society and the church. This influence has opened doors for a relationship between the church and government (Kgatla 2018, 13).

This is just one example of how people in many countries in Southern Africa are connecting the pulpit and politics in the public realm in the post-colonial era. It is also an example of how the discipline of Practical Theology continues to be important for governance and politics in Africa. However, there seems to be a lack of intentionality in exploring this interface. As a result, whilst most of the people in government are committed and practicing Christians, many African governments are still faced with challenges of corruption, instability, poverty, poor governance and in some cases of being undemocratic despite holding regular elections.
During the colonial era, English-speaking mainline churches dominated the political landscape in most countries in Africa. These were the churches that supported and led the struggle for independence and mobilized financial support from their sister churches in European countries. However, during the independence era Pentecostal churches mostly from the USA burst into the scene and dominated the religious landscape. They replaced the European originated churches in most of the ecumenical bodies and their theology which is not progressive and tends to lean towards the prosperity gospel became more prominent. This is noted by Paul Gifford in the Ghanaian context, who observed that the “mainline churches [...] remain significant bodies. Nevertheless, in the two decades we are especially considering (1979 – 2002) they have in many ways been eclipsed by something quite new, the charismatic sector” (Gifford 2004, 23). He continues to note that the prosperity theology of these charismatic mainly Pentecostal Churches is spreading throughout Africa. He said that “[w]e has seen how widespread this prosperity theology has become in Africa. It’s preached at length in the newer churches, and these beliefs are ritually enacted, with collections and offerings. They are enforced by countless testimonies” (Gifford 2004, 335).

There has been a proliferation of ministries set up by foreigners from other African countries and citizens. These are proponents of the prosperity gospel and don’t pay much attention to the contribution of the church to the political life of the countries, but rather promote the support of the men or women of God, leading to the growing number of extremely rich pastors some of whom are actually richer than their churches and their converts. This brand of church has thrown a spanner to the wheel of progressive church-state political engagement because it is aligned with the “pro-capitalist economic”¹ agenda and prosperity type of gospel. The focus of this type of religion is on drawing people’s focus away from the public towards a privatised form of faith that promises to enrich the individual both spiritually and economically. It also shifts people’s attention away from the needs of their context and the resources that can be gleaned from African traditional religions and culture to materialistic forms of Christianity. This form of Christianity does not add value to the identity of people in Africa nor does it contribute to their quest for development: socially, economically, and politically. It benefits those who embrace a culture of consumerism, ignoring the plundering of the environment and the need of holding governments accountable as a prophetic role of the church. This is exacerbated by the fact that its Practical Theology is imported from outside the African continent. Making this critique of the prosperity gospel, Gifford observed that “faith theology that is heard so widely in Africa was not devised in Africa” (Gifford 2004, 337).

¹ I have borrowed this term from my friend Roderick Hewitt (2014).
Therefore, it is not surprising that Practical Theology’s contribution to good governance, if any, is limited.

5 Developing Afro-Centric Practical Theologies of Governance

As seen from the earlier discussion, theologies that came with the missionaries did not address the issue of the role of the church in the governance of society. They tended to be aloof towards politics, encouraging Christians to leave politics with politicians because Christianity itself was a colonial project because it “came to Africa through extensive and intensive contacts between Africa and Europe” (Bongmba 2016, 25). Elsewhere I noted that “theologies that came with the missionaries, that continue to be taught in the churches today, are Eurocentric” (Kumalo 2015, 171). This is because at worst they were sympathizers of imperialism and at their best they were just paternalistic towards Africans (Elphick 2012).

For the church to make a tangible contribution in the development of good governance in Africa, it needs to develop a variety of practical theologies of governance and democracy to guide its participation in the deepening of democracy for the African nations. These theologies must emanate from the experience of continued exploitation of the African people and their natural resources be they human or natural as a result of neoliberal economies and multi-national companies. A theology of governance needs to encourage participation in political processes such as elections, debates, campaigns as part of citizen responsibility and witness to the fact that God stands for justice. Aquiline Tarimo has noted that, “political organizations cannot ignore the role of religion. Religion plays the role of formation of attitude and character. It is unfortunate that the public sphere, the place where we debate public policy, is hostile to religion” (Tarimo and Manwelo 2008, 103).

A Practical Theology of governance would give us the foundational motivation for responding to these concerns. It would teach us that “this earth belongs to the Lord with all that is in it” (Ps 241). So, God is the head of the earth as a household, which is a just, democratic home where all are equal and are to be treated with dignity. Such Afro-centric practical theologies of governance will also need to draw insights and experiences from African traditional forms of leadership with emphasizes community, equality, hospitality, sharing and ubuntu (humanness), which is a deep sense of interdependency and belonging together (Shutte 2001, 12).
6 An Eco-Theology to the Injustices of the Politics of Development

There is a huge negative impact to the environment by policies of economic development that are passed by African governments through their political actors. These policies have allowed the cutting down of trees, pollution of rivers and burning of fossil fuels, which has led to climate change, unpredictability of weather patterns, drought, natural disasters, and escalated poverty. There is a need for the church to develop a pro-active eco-theological understanding of its ministry especially with regard to the policymakers. Humanity living in harmony with the environment has always been part of African culture and religion. Kaoma asserts that “As Africans, we pride ourselves as the daughters and sons of the soil. Therefore, the destruction of the Earth means our own death and ultimately life, as we know it” (Kaoma 2015, 3). But modernity and industrialization has alienated the community from the environment. The teaching of the church brought with it the doctrine of dominion where people were told that God had given them the earth and all that is in it for their exploitation and pleasure (Gen 1:28). This theology of anthropomorphocentricism gave theological justification to environmental injustice, thus depriving political leaders of a message of caution when passing policy, so that they could remain pro-environmental. Kapya Koama has observed that “the future of the African continent depends on how Christians and politicians move to address the recurring ecological crisis” (Kaoma 2015, 24).

7 The Church as an Agent of Democracy and Good Governance

Another area of life that call for the church’s intervention is to facilitate servant-leadership formation that equips people both lay and clergy with skills to act as agents of a culture of democracy and human rights for all people starting from the home to the church, local society, and national government. Emmanuel Ngara observed that “if leaders are needed for the church in Africa today, there is an even more desperate need for leaders in the secular sphere” (Ngara 2004, 10). The church can contribute by producing servant leaders for the sake of good governance. It is the norm for the Christian community to care for one another so that all can experience life in its fullness and that should be the main aim of governance. In their seminal work on the History of the church in Africa Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed (2000, 6) asserted that:

Reception of the Gospel is, on the deepest level, an expression of African peoples’ conscientization’ by which they rise to a new awareness, a new consciousness kindled by faith in Jesus Christ and his message, I have come that they may have life and have it more abundantly (John 10:10).
Seen from this perspective, the church has the capacity to conscientize people to appreciate freedom, good governance, and promotion of peoples’ holistic wellbeing. Governments can legislate and run educational campaigns on democracy and rights, but they need the assistance of the church in inculcating a culture of democratic practice in people. So, the church can be an agent of democracy and human rights, through its justice ministries and Christian education classes, that can be developed through the discipline of Practical Theology.

8 Re-Examining the Guiding Principles of Governance

The guiding principles of governance in the African continent are built on the separation of religion from politics, relegation of faith into the private realm, whilst leaving politics to the public. It is the role of the church to identify those areas that need to be guided by Christians or at least religious principles that would add value in the guidance to good politics that promote life, rather than deny it. If the church and institutions of theological education are to engage seriously with the challenges of bad governance in African nations, then a practical theological revision is important in the development of leadership both for the church and the nation. African countries have a history of unrest, “coup d’état” and leaders who do not want to leave power, as a result of a culture of patrimonialism and personality cults that are embodied by leaders. Bhekithemba Mngomezulu notes that: “From the bad side, one factor that is glaringly knitting the African continent together is the issues of African leaders who, once elected, or once they forcefully ascend to power, literally refuse or only grudgingly agree to leave office” (Mngomezulu 2013, xx). The church can emphasize shared and rotational leadership. Reminding leaders that the greatest is not the one who is serving, but the masses who are being served. These principles will change the ethic of self-serving leadership to one that emphasises servanthood.

9 Participating in the African Renaissance

Recent years have seen the rise of African leaders wanting to promote the development of the continent and freeing themselves from economic dependency from the West. This is coupled with the quest to retain and promote all that is African, other than always consuming ideas from the rest of the world especially the West. Presidents like Ian Khama of Botswana, Thabo Mbeki of South Africa, Jakaya Kikwete of Tanzania and Paul Kagame of Rwanda advocated what is known as “African solutions for African problems (Nathan 2013). This belief in the regeneration of Africa was first sparked by Pixley ka Isaka Seme in an award-winning speech at Columbia University in 1906, when he prophesied the “[r]egeneration of Africa.” (Ngqulunga
This quest for the regeneration of Africa includes an appreciation of African culture, its systems of governance and spirituality. The church must join the politician’s attempts at affirming Africa as an important role player in global development issues. The Ghanaian African Theologian Kwesi Dickson was amongst the first to observe that religion “cannot escape the necessity of being incarnated in African culture” (Edusa-Eyison 2013, 95–119). Edusa-Eyison takes the conversation further by emphasizing the push for theology in Africa to concern itself with political renewal. He observed that:

Churches began discussing political issues, and subsequently were informed. Therefore, theology in West Africa does not concern itself only with the cultural issues: it also addresses political and social issues. Indeed, theology must be helped to think in theologically relevant ways (Edusa-Eyison 2013).

In many African countries the church – through Practical Theology – is one of the institutions that can add weight to the government’s programmes of appreciating the heritage and resources that come from the African context. If the church supports those calls by giving them a theological rationale many people will participate in those programmes.

10 Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that there is fresh focus on the interface between the discipline of Practical Theology and the governance of society in Africa. I have argued that Practical Theology must be employed to help us study, understand and even perfect the governing of society instead of it being shunned because we want to honour the doctrine of separation of church and state. Despite the lack of recognition and appreciation, the interface between Practical Theology and governance, as well as the significance spirituality of politics in Africa is growing. With the emergence of independence in most African countries there has been a realization that the two cannot be kept apart. They need to inform each other. Politics is becoming more and more important for the future development of democracy and freedom of the African people as well as faith, for Africans remain religious. So, these two realms are bound to connect and move closer to each other. There is a need for Practical Theology to embrace its role in the shaping of politics in the African continent. In their research on the interface between Christianity and politics in Africa, Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steeds are among many other intellectuals who have concluded that these two are interlinked and refuse to be separated and thus should not be separated. It is for that reason that I agree with Küng’s assertion that Karl Marx’s prediction of religion being an opium of the oppressed masses has been proven wrong in most African countries where churches have contributed to the struggle for freedom and rights of people, though with ambivalence and not without ambigu-
ities. The facts show that in Africa, politics are religious, and religion is political, therefore Practical Theology to continue its endeavours to find its place in the public realm so that it can contribute to the development of good governance in this continent.

**Bibliography**


