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Public Within Public: Extending the Notion of Public Theology to Include African Public Praxis

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Abstract: The rapid recognition of the contributions of theology in public spaces in Africa is a positive development. It is understood that theology can only be impactful if it engages public issues in their context. However, the understanding of the public in public theology is blurry because its precise meaning remains debatable. The construct ‘publics’ is hugely influenced by Western conception, where human interaction spaces are categorized into separate sects of social spaces. This conception arguably derives from the Western individualistic operative ideology. The question is whether the notion of public theology can be extended to include African public praxis to contribute to effective engagement with public issues in Africa. This article explores and broadens the concept of public theology by incorporating African public praxis. It investigates how public theology, traditionally understood within a Western context, can be expanded to include African societies’ distinct and diverse practices, experiences, and contexts. First, this article comprehensively analyzes the meaning of ‘public’ in public theology, focusing on unique, distinctive African perspectives and experiences. Second, the article elucidates the multifaceted dimensions of public theology as it intersects with African social, political, and cultural realities. Thirdly, the article offers fresh insights into the transformative potential of theological reflections within African public praxis. The article presents a discussion on the importance of understanding what public theology is in an African context. Understanding public theology in Africa will contribute to its effectiveness. It enriches the discourse on the role of public theology in addressing challenges that Africans face.

Keywords: public theology in Africa; public theology; African public praxis; public life; public theology history; Africa



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1. Introduction

Public theology in Africa has attracted considerable attention and interest across the continent (Forster 2022a, 2022b). This growing interest stems from the recognition that theology possesses a public dimension capable of addressing the myriad challenges faced by a large segment of the African population (Dreyer 2004; Dreyer and Pieterse 2010; Koopman 2007; Magezi 2019b; Nanthambwe 2020). According to Koopman (2007), this public aspect of theology is crucial as it engages with societal issues and seeks to contribute to the common good. Koopman (2007, pp. 281–82) maintains that “theological engagement with public life implies that theology provides a framework, for example, that of the dawning of an age of *shalom* and the coming of the kingdom of God, that gives meaning to and a *telos* for our engagement with public issues”. While acknowledging that theology should engage and address public issues is commendable, the understanding of the public in public theology is debatable. There has been little work developing a conceptual perspective of ‘publics’ to inform the African context of public spheres in public theology. Forster’s (2022b) argument is instructive in this regard. He (Forster 2022b, p. 470) argued that a Western perspective informs and over-influences our view of public theology. Hence, there is a need to have a contextual understanding of faith and public life within

diverse African contexts. Earlier, Ekeh (1975) lamented that the Western experience of the public sphere does not reflect African social spaces.

One of the leading Public Theologians, Dirk Smit, observed that the concept of “public” within public theology remains ambiguous and contentious, as its precise definition is still debatable (Smit 2007b, p. 11; 2017, p. 67). Furthermore, Kim (2020, p. 22) notes that “there seems to be a consensus that it is difficult to define the notion of public theology. Such ambiguity of term causes a serious problem.”

At the center of this problem is that the notion of ‘public’ is significantly shaped by Western perspectives, which tend to categorize human interaction spaces into distinct social spheres (Magezi 2019a; Nanthambwe and Magezi 2024; Smit 2007b). As conceptualized by Habermas (2006), the public sphere represents a space for rational discourse, debate, and democratic deliberation. This understanding of the public sphere has tended to be normative. Hasebrink et al. (2023, p. 83) have criticized this conception of the public sphere for limiting the concept to spaces of well-educated male citizens in Western democracy, which excludes an understanding from other contexts. Notably, Gaye (1998, p. 66) observed that Africa continues to be influenced by definitions shaped by Western perspectives.

The Western framing of the concept of “public” adds layers of complexity when applied to African contexts, where social interactions and community structures cannot be placed in strict categories as designated by different publics (Adebanwi 2017; Hasebrink et al. 2023; Suleiman 2017, p. 81). It is against this complexity that Forster (2022a, p. 6) warns against uncritically applying a Western perspective to the interpretation of religion and public life or the conceptualization of public spheres in the African context. As a result, interpreting and implementing public theology in Africa necessitates a nuanced understanding of local cultural, social, and communal dynamics to ensure it genuinely reflects and resonates with the lived experiences of African communities where the distinction between the “private” versus the “public” does hardly exist (Van Aarde 2008, p. 1224).

Therefore, this article aims to extend the conceptualization of the notion of “public” within public theology to include an African understanding of ‘publics’ within diverse public spheres. This will be achieved by first discussing the concept of “public” within public theology. This conception is followed by an added perspective of the public from an African perspective. Thus, by describing the different publics within an African context and the added perspective of the public, the notion of public is located within a contextual reality where religious life in Africa is lived as a social and community public experience, but without negating the reality of different religious sub-groupings and community social systems where debates and arguments are conducted, hence conceiving public theology as public within a public in Africa. Beyond conceptualization, the article offers insights into the transformative potential of theological reflections within the identified African public praxis.

2. Understanding of the Public Within Public Theology

The word ‘public’ in ‘public theology’ does not simply refer to the opposite of private. Morton (2004, p. 86) clarified that publics are different from communities in that the emphasis is not on commonalities as in communities but on differences. The publics are social spaces where dialogue occurs. Thus, Day and Kim (2017, p. 2) explained that publics “cohere in the midst of, and because of, the difference and even conflict they accommodate. ‘It is indeed a forum or agora, a space, which allows and indeed encourages encounter with that which is different.’” Publics are characterized by “questioning, doubting, and challenging, as well as asserting, confirming, and agreeing” (Day and Kim 2017, p. 2). Among public theologians, there has been a consensus on what public theology aims to address (Magezi 2022). Public theology deals with issues related to the public rather than exclusively church matters, such as social and political issues (Dreyer 2004; Kim 2017; Mannion 2009). Unlike discussions confined to religious spaces or academic circles, public theology is dynamic and practiced in the wider world. It unfolds openly within society and communities, encompassing all aspects of life and inviting participation from everyone in

the public domain (Smit 2017). While this assertion is ascertained, what constitutes public in public theology is determined by the specific cultural, social, and political realities of the society in which it is practiced. The particular needs, challenges, and perspectives of the diverse groups within a given context shape the understanding of “public” in public theology. The complete discussion of what public may mean is presented by Smit (2013), where he offers six nuances of understanding the public in the modern context.

The different understandings of public means and what is considered “public” can vary widely (Smit 2007a), depending on factors such as the local traditions, power dynamics, societal issues, and the specific audience the theology seeks to engage (Magezi 2022). Therefore, the definition of “public” in public theology is not static but is continually shaped and reshaped by the evolving contexts and communities it addresses. For example, various public theologians have offered different conceptualizations of the “public.” For instance, Tracy (1981) identified three publics: the academy, wider society, and the church. Stackhouse (1997) expanded on this by recognizing academic, economic, religious, and political sectors. Benne (1995) further refined these categories by including the legal sphere. Koopman (2003) proposed another framework, identifying political, economic, civil society, and public opinion as distinct publics. Furthermore, the concept of publics and attendant activities and stances in the public spaces varies in emphasis. For instance, questioning, doubting, and challenging, as well as asserting oneself, are critical elements in Western public engagements, while confirming and agreeing tend to be dominant in some African publics. For instance, conceptualizing traditional community spaces led by traditional leadership like chiefs as additional publics in Africa, Magezi (2022) explained that this public’s role and functioning include gatekeeping and preserving values, sanctioning social and community deviant individuals, and sometimes fueling discord and contradictions with country laws where cultural traditions are threatened. Thus, the definition of public is not as tidy and applicable in other contexts.

By understanding the varying nature of the notion of public influenced by cultural and contextual realities, this article seeks to argue for an extension to include African praxis. This trend has been visible throughout the development of public theology; hence, the next section presents a brief survey of the evolution of public theology, highlighting key moments where cultural and contextual factors have shaped its trajectory. This survey will trace the shifts in how the “public” has been understood and engaged within theological discourse, demonstrating how different contexts, including those in Africa, have influenced and expanded the scope of public theology. By examining these developments, the article sets the stage for arguing that including African praxis is a necessary extension and a natural progression in the ongoing evolution of public theology. However, before engaging in African praxis, it is important to highlight broad historical developments in public theology.

3. Historical Development of Public Theology

While the terms ‘public theology’ or ‘public church’ were introduced to theological circles by Martin Martyr and Robert Bellah in the 1970s (Kim 2017, p. 40), theology has always engaged in social issues. Magezi and Manzanga (2024) demonstrate how public theology has been understood throughout the Bible. However, in this brief survey, we will focus on the development of public theology from the Reformation era to the present African public theology.

Thus, to position the current discussion within African public theological praxis, it is imperative to provide an overview of the historical developments in public theology in order to demonstrate its social engagement over time. Miller-McLemore (2008), writing on the history of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), advised that knowing your history assists in building an understanding of how to scaffold new theological developments.

3.1. The Global Development of Public Theology

According to Kaemingk (2021, p. 2), public theology as a distinct discipline only emerged in the late twentieth century, making it a relatively recent field of study. However,

discussions about the relationship between faith and public life have existed since the beginning of Christianity (Kim 2017). Stackhouse (2007, p. 86) suggested that while the term “public theology” is relatively new, its popularity grew quickly, not because it introduced new theological concerns.

3.1.1. Public Theology Development in the Reformation Era

The events of the Post-New Testament Era continued until the Reformation, where public theology focused on the church’s dynamic relationship with the world, as reflected in the works of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and other reformers (Kim 2017; Mannion 2009; Stanciu 2020). Kim (2017, p. 44) posited:

Although the main issue the Reformers faced in the sixteenth century was about the Christian church itself, the interpenetration of secular and spiritual in the sixteenth century meant that no reformation of religion could take place without the transformation of public order of the commonwealth, nor could such transformation be institutionalised without the assistance of secular rulers.

This predicament led the Reformers to explore new ways for religion and theology to engage with broader society, especially within the public and civic spheres (Mannion 2009). Haight (2005) noted that in his efforts to explain God’s interactions with humanity throughout history, John Calvin’s ecclesiology addressed the church’s role in society, referring to the church as the “society of Christ”. The Reformers made the following contributions to public theology as presented by Kim (2017, pp. 46–47): (1) They challenged both secular and ecclesiastical authority, redefining the concept of authority. (2) They advanced modern democracy through the idea of the “priesthood of all believers”, introducing democratic notions of authority. (3) They promoted the notion of the “priesthood of all believers”, where individuals relate directly to God, guided by their conscience, challenging political monopolies—a crucial concept in public theology.

Notably, the Reformers viewed political and societal involvement as less relevant, believing in God-ordained political authorities and focusing primarily on the church (Kim 2017). However, despite emphasizing soul conversions, they engaged in diverse ways with issues of their day (e.g., see Calvin’s Institutes).

3.1.2. Public Theology Development in Post-Reformation Era

As Mannion (2009, p. 136) attests, the post-Reformation Era saw public theology concerned with missionary activities, indigenous people’s response to missions, official ecumenical and grassroots movements, various forms of Christian socialist movement, and the social gospel and Catholic social teaching.

The concern for public theology during this period is prominently seen in the writings of Archbishop William Temple (1942), who extensively discussed the church’s role in public life—in his book *Christianity and the Social Order*, Temple (1942) grappled with the church’s involvement in socio-political and economic matters, highlighting (1) the Christian heart and conscience’s sympathy for those who suffer, (2) the educational impact on social and economic systems, (3) Christian justice, and (4) the duty to conform to the “Natural Order”, which reflects God’s purpose.

Another key theologian is Reinhold Niebuhr (1955), who, in his book *Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, argued for the significance of human action in the formation of government and the responsibility of individuals to pursue justice. He articulated a triangular covenant of justice involving God, the ruler, and the people.

The contributions of these theologians helped coin the concept of modern public theology. Firstly, Martin Marty (1981) introduced his perspective on public theology through his book *Public Church: Mainline–Evangelical–Catholic*. Secondly, Jürgen Habermas’s publication *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas 1989) spurred discussion about the public sphere. Thirdly, David Tracy’s book *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralistic* (1981) proposed that theology addresses three publics: the academy, the church, and society. Tracy (1981) argued that the three

branches of theology—fundamental, systematic, and practical—each correspond to these respective publics.

Today, public theology enjoys broad support from both theological circles and churches, as demonstrated by the establishment of the Global Network for Public Theology (GNPT), the International Journal of Public Theology, and numerous centers and institutions within universities and church denominations (Forster 2022b; Kim 2017).

3.2. Public Theology in Africa

The history of public theology in Africa is complex and deeply intertwined with the continent's diverse cultural, social, and religious traditions (Maluleke 2020). Tracy (1981) argues that all theology is public theology. In his important book *African Religions and Philosophy*, Mbiti (1991) discusses the pervasive and intrinsic nature of religiosity in Africa. Combining these two arguments, we can conclude that public theology has been practiced in Africa long before it was formally recognized as such. This fact is well articulated by Fatokun (2005), who showed the African practice of Christianity way before the missionaries came to Africa. However, as it is known today, public theology has its roots in Africa, and this section will briefly explore that.

3.2.1. Public Theology Development with Early Missionaries Influence

While Africans had practiced public theology of some sort even before missionaries (Mbiti 1991), it was during the missionaries' activities that public theology as it is known today was enhanced. Wild-Wood (2024) and Morris (2018) outline how missionaries from Europe and North America brought Christian religious teachings and engaged in social issues such as education, healthcare, and economic development. Their (missionaries) work laid the groundwork for the interplay between faith and public life; hence, it pioneered public theology as we know it today. However, the missionaries' enterprise had some disadvantages (Morris 2018; Pawliková-Vilhanová 2007). Pawliková-Vilhanová (2007) argued that the Christian mission significantly contributed to the Westernization of Africa, often accompanied by colonial undertones and a complex legacy of cultural imposition. This Westernization was further facilitated by Africans not being resistant to new influences and cultural patterns that differed from their own. Therefore, the public theology practiced with the arrival of missionaries in Africa was significantly influenced by a Western perspective of life.

3.2.2. Public Theology Development in Colonial and Post-Colonial Era

Public theology during the Colonial Era was developed to address the challenges and issues of colonization. Public theology addressed colonial rule's ethical and moral implications, critiquing and often challenging colonial authorities and policies. During the colonial era, African theologians began to critique and reinterpret the Christian message to address the socio-political realities of their context (Eze 1997; Ogunyankin 2019). The period saw the emergence of African/Black and liberation theologies, which emphasized social justice, human rights, and the fight against colonial injustices such as land dispossession, discrimination, and exploitation. It is during this period that Magezi (2019a, p. 7) makes the following observation:

The African theological movements that emerged prior to and during the democracy of African states are African theology and Black theology. They arose in response to the mistakes, oversights, and disregard of African people's culture, practices, and worldviews by missionaries.

Prominent figures like Desmond Tutu and Allan Boesak in South Africa used theological arguments to support the anti-apartheid movement, advocating for racial equality and justice (Boesak 2021; Motlhabi 2008). In other countries like Malawi and Zambia, which gained independence earlier than many other African nations, it was during this period that public theology addressed the challenges of dictatorship as their liberators like Kamuzu Banda and Kenneth Kaunda turned into dictators (Nanthambwe 2020).

3.2.3. Theological Movements and Ecumenism

In the post-colonial period, African public theology continued to evolve, influenced by various theological movements that addressed the challenges of dictatorship as their liberators, like Kamuzu Banda and Kenneth Kaunda, turned to us and the growth of ecumenical organizations. The establishment of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) in 1963 was a significant milestone, as it played a crucial role in uniting different Christian denominations to address social issues collectively. This organization facilitated cooperation among churches across Africa, allowing them to collectively tackle problems such as poverty, injustice, and human rights abuses, thereby amplifying their impact on society (Byaruhanga 2015).

Additionally, this era witnessed the emergence and development of contextual theology, which aimed to interpret and express the Christian faith in ways that resonated with African cultures, histories, and experiences. Contextual theology emphasizes making theology relevant to the African context by incorporating indigenous traditions, languages, and cultural expressions. This approach allowed African Christians to see their faith as deeply connected to their identity and everyday lives (Ilo 2019; Magezi 2019a).

By addressing local realities and challenges, contextual theology sought to empower African Christians to engage more effectively with social, political, and economic issues, thus continuing the tradition of public theology in a relevant and transformative manner for their communities (Boesak 2021).

What can we learn from the historical survey of global and African public theology? Two key insights that will help the discussion on understanding the concept of “public” in public theology within an African context are crucial. Firstly, the significance of context in public theology is paramount (Forrester 2004; Mannion 2009). Public theology addresses contextual realities, with its content co-determined by the context (Pears 2010; De Villiers 2013). This has been evident throughout history, as public theology has consistently emerged in response to the challenges faced by people. The contextual theological perspective emphasizes that the circumstances of those engaged in theological efforts influence and even shape all forms of Christian theology. Second, there is the matter of cultural relevance in public theology. Grenz (2000) posits that being human inherently involves being embedded in culture, and the various cultures of people across the centuries shape the practice of public theology. Ignoring cultural context is a serious error that missionaries in Africa made, leading to cultural disorientation among Africans (Turaki 1999).

The above discussion indicates a clear engagement of theology and contextual issues that affect people. In that engagement, the agenda and priority of issues have tended to be influenced by context. Thus, context and culture play a huge role in determining the understanding of the public within public theology as well as determining the engagement agenda. Having noted the contextual influence of public theology and its focus, we turn to the notion of the public within an African setting in public theology.

4. The Extension of the Notion of Public to Include African Praxis in Public Theology

There is a divergence between Western and African understandings of “publics” (Suleiman 2017). However, the divergence does not suggest that there is no common agenda, networks, or common themes. The convergence and shared perspective and agenda are evident through the Global Network for Public Theology, which “fosters scholarly exchange about the contribution of Christianity to public discourse in such diverse fields as social ethics, environmental ethics, political ethics, and more” (GNPT 2024 n.p). The emphasis on divergence seeks to highlight contextual nuances.

According to Adebani (2017) and Hasebrink et al. (2023), the Western interpretation of the concept of “public” introduces additional complexities when applied to African contexts, where social interactions and community structures often differ. The Western distinction between “private” and “public”, highly valued in the West, does not always apply in Africa. Advancing research in African public theology requires a proper understanding of how people perceive what is public in this context. For instance, while religious-related issues

may have been considered irrelevant in the Western world as a result of the 19th-century Enlightenment (Morton 2004; Van Wyngaard 2008), they are very important in Africa, hence the need for more research in public theology (Nanthambwe 2024).

With this understanding, we pose the following question: How is the concept of “public” perceived in Africa? This question might seem nonsensical to some, given Africa’s heterogeneous nature and diverse populations (Brundson 2017; Forster 2022b; Ma Mpolo 2013). While this diversity is undeniable, certain elements are common across many African cultures, allowing them to be seen as a unified group. Ma Mpolo (2013) identified these elements as the sanctity of life, the connection between illness, misfortune, and sin, the role of spirits and ancestors in community life, and holistic life experience. It is through understanding Africa by these elements that it is not wrong to look at it as a whole, which is the perspective this article takes. Further to the above four elements identified by Ma Mpolo (2013), which he called *homo africanus*, another binding glue at the continental policy level is the Africa Agenda 2063 (The Africa We Want), which is “Africa’s blueprint and master plan for transforming Africa into the global powerhouse of the future” (AU 2024, n.p). The Africa Agenda 2063 (The Africa We Want)—articulates a vision for a prosperous, united, and integrated Africa, acknowledging both the diversity of African peoples and the shared values and aspirations that unite them. This agenda highlights areas of common identity and shared goals that suggest a degree of homogeneity across African nations, cultures, and communities despite their diversity (AU 2024).

Without examining deeply the complexities of African identity and what it means to be African, we begin our discussion by examining the Western understanding of the public. The discourse on what constitutes the public in the Western context started with Habermas’ influential conceptualization of the public sphere in 1962, initially published in German and later translated into English in 1989 (Smit 2007b; Willems 2012). According to Habermas (2006, p. 73), the public sphere is defined as follows:

By “the public sphere”, we mean, first of all, a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body.

Habermas (2006) may have drawn his concept of the “public” from the Classical Greek *agora* (Hasebrink et al. 2023). The *agora* of Ancient Greece, often referred to as the heart of the Greek polis (Dickenson 2017), was a public square where politics, administration, religion, and commerce converged. It was an open space where temporary market stalls were set up, and Greeks gathered to trade and discuss contemporary issues (ibid).

Dirkie Smit (2007b), a prominent South African public theologian, recognized the challenge of understanding the public in the abovementioned context. Smit (2007b) noted that Habermas’ concept of the “public” pertains to the type of society that typically developed in Western countries during the modern age, situating it within specific Western developments and a particular era. According to Smit (2007b) Habermas’s structural changes led to the emergence of the “public” in Western societies, a concept previously non-existent in the same form. Over time, this notion of the public became increasingly threatened and eventually ceased functioning as it once did. Habermas’s perspective, filled with assumptions, raises significant questions about our understanding of the term “public” (Smit 2007b). Some of Smit’s questions, which prompted the research for this article, include: If the “public” in this technical sense developed only relatively late in Western societies, what existed before? What is the situation in other communities and societies worldwide and in different cultures?

It is from the above understanding of the public that most definitions of public theology depart from. For example, the definition of public theology by Forrester (2004, p. 6) states:

Public theology, as I understand it, is not primarily and directly evangelical theology which addresses the Gospel to the world in the hope of repentance and conversion. Rather, it is theology which seeks the welfare of the city before

protecting the interests of the Church, or its proper liberty to preach the Gospel and celebrate the sacraments. Accordingly, public theology often takes ‘the world’s agenda’, or parts of it, as its own agenda, and seeks to offer distinctive and constructive insights from the treasury of faith to help in the building of a decent society, the restraint of evil, the curbing of violence, nation-building, and reconciliation in the public arena, and so forth.

The abovementioned conceptualization assumes a universal understanding of what is public. This is also evident in Resane’s (2019, p. 1) definition, which succinctly states, “Public theology is always public, speaking in public places and addressing public issues for the sake or benefit of the public interest.”

Both conceptions of public theology emphasize the idea of “public” without adequately explaining what is considered public. For an African to grasp the concept of public theology, it is crucial first to address what “public” means. Day and Kim (2017) highlighted this by stating that understanding how theology interacts with the public begins with defining the term “public.” But how crucial is it?

Like Western countries, many African countries distinguish between private and public spheres (Kin’gori 2022). Events such as weddings, funerals, religious ceremonies, and traditional celebrations are considered public. However, aspects like sexual life, marital issues, and general life struggles are seen as highly sensitive and are not to be discussed publicly (Falola 2003). These topics are often viewed as embarrassing and inappropriate for public discourse. In East Africa, for instance, there is a proverb that underscores the importance of keeping family matters private: “*cia mucii itiumaga ndira*” (Home affairs must not go into public) (Kin’gori 2022). This cultural attitude has contributed to the persistence of issues such as gender-based violence (GBV), HIV and AIDS, and child oppression, as many cultures are reluctant to address these problems openly.

According to Day and Kim (2017), public in public theology refers to a domain within our social life where something akin to public opinion can be generated. It is accessible to all citizens. The public sphere emerges whenever private individuals gather to create a collective public entity. But how should “publics” be understood in Africa? Nanthambwe and Magezi (2024), in their recent article *The African Pastor as a Public Figure in Response to Gender-Based Violence in South Africa: A Public Pastoral Intervention*, suggest a nuanced understanding of “publics” within the South African context, which can be extended to the entire continent. They argue that beyond the commonly identified publics, such as those presented by Day and Kim (2017, p. 2)—including the academy, the wider society, the church, economic, political, civil society, and public opinion—it is crucial to recognize African traditional forums as distinctive publics.

African traditional forums as publics were suggested by Magezi (2022, p. 13), who described them as:

A vital social space within African communities despite their weaknesses. They are accessible and in proximity to people to be able to address their challenges and public pressing issues. These forums are community people centred, which enables them to detect community needs and intervene appropriately. More importantly, the forums provide people with a sense of respect and dignity, as they are grounded on people’s cultures, customs and norms. Christianity has no special treatment or privilege in the traditional forums. As a religion, it competes for influence and recognition with religious pluralism that characterise traditional forums. At best, Christianity is integrated within the existing religious pluralism. Christianity is cynically and skeptically integrated by such forums. Christianity is associated with cultural destruction due to its demonisation rhetoric of syncretism that disparages indigenous religious practices.

These forums are not bound by global connection, international common interests, or influenced by democratic ideals. They are driven and influenced by traditional values that should be preserved at all costs. These agora find themselves in conflict with liberal

democratic ideals that are viewed as Western projects that should be resisted. Therefore, understanding the interests and dynamics of these unique African fora assists public theology in being realistic about the suspicion of Christianity and the emancipation sought through such engagements. Viewing public theology from this perspective, which is an African stance in some situations, it (public theology) has an internal function to transform itself and deal with its historical baggage while at the same time challenging traditional practices like gender-based violence that enjoy support from traditional forums. For this reason, [Magezi's \(2017\)](#) critique of ubuntu, whereupon traditional fora draw, challenged African public practical theology to develop categories and models that transform such an inward African public perspective (geographical community) to a common good, which is truly national and global, bound by the bond of communion humanity. [Nanthambwe and Magezi \(2024\)](#) emphasize that this recognition is vital for effective public theology. Traditional forums in African communities, such as village assemblies, elders' councils, and other indigenous forms of communal decision-making, represent unique and influential public spaces. These forums play a critical role in shaping societal norms and values. By acknowledging these spaces as valid and important publics, public theology can more effectively engage with and challenge harmful cultural practices ([Magezi 2022](#)).

This approach is critical in addressing issues like gender-based violence, where harmful practices are often deeply rooted in cultural traditions. Public theology, informed by the recognition of these traditional forums, can work to transform these practices, promoting a vision of life that aligns with the fullness of life intended by God, as highlighted in John 10:10. This holistic approach ensures that interventions are culturally relevant and resonate deeply within African communities, thereby fostering meaningful and lasting change. Therefore, "publics" in African settings must be examined to refer to civil society opinions and include any aspect of life that can be improved by sharing diverse perspectives ([Nanthambwe and Magezi 2024](#)).

5. Public Theology Intersecting with African Social, Political, and Cultural Settings

Discussions on the intersection of public theology with African social, political, and cultural settings have overtly been presented in a recent publication titled *African Public Theology*, edited by [Agang et al. \(2020\)](#). In the foreword of the book, [Kunhiyop \(2020\)](#) presents the stance of African public theology, stating that it does not only address the concerns of believers, theologians, and the church but also engages with the broader aspirations and ambitions of the African continent, as outlined in the African Union's Agenda 2063. The African Union Agenda 2063 advocates far-reaching public policies to tackle the continent's darkest demons of bad governance, corruption, socioeconomic injustice, religious competition, tribal and ethnic conflicts, and political domination.

For example, we have seen the impactful role of public theology in combating the insidious practice of apartheid in South Africa, where churches and pastors actively spoke out against such inhumane practices ([Nanthambwe 2022](#)). The collective efforts of religious leaders and communities played a pivotal role in the struggle against systemic racism and injustice, providing moral guidance and support to the anti-apartheid movement.

Similarly, in Malawi, Catholic Bishops advocated for democracy when President Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda became a dictator ([Nanthambwe 2020](#)). Such movements, where religious leaders have spoken out against poor governance and pushed for policies to combat poverty and injustice, have been widespread across many African nations ([Nanthambwe 2020](#)). This trend is also noted by [Forster \(2022b\)](#), pp. 482–83, who highlights the significant shifts in public theology in Africa, particularly the influence of religion on the political landscapes of African countries.

Additionally, the emergence of various theological movements across the continent, such as Kairos theology, Black theology, African theology, liberation theology, and feminist theology, exemplifies the powerful influence of public theology in addressing social ills ([Le Bruyns 2015](#)). These theologies were not merely academic exercises but deeply rooted in African people's experiences and struggles. Kairos theology, for instance, arose as a

prophetic response to apartheid, calling for a radical commitment to justice and human dignity. Similarly, Black and liberation theologies sought to affirm the identity and humanity of oppressed communities, while feminist theology challenged gender-based inequalities and promoted women's empowerment (Le Bruyns 2015).

These movements highlight public theology's dynamic and transformative potential to engage with and challenge oppressive systems, advocating for a more just and equitable society. They also underscore the importance of contextualizing theological reflections to address specific social, cultural, and political issues facing African communities. For example, Nanthambwe's (2024) study shows how churches are ensuring that the lives of the people in their communities are being transformed. As the study shows, this transformation goes beyond spiritual to include social, economic, and political dimensions. Churches actively participate in community development projects, advocating for social justice, providing education and healthcare services, and promoting economic empowerment initiatives. This holistic approach to transformation underscores public theology's vital role in addressing their communities' multifaceted needs, ultimately contributing to a more just and equitable society. Through these efforts, public theology has significantly contributed to pursuing justice, reconciliation, community development, and liberation across the continent.

6. Insights into the Transformative Potential of Theological Reflections Within African Public Praxis

Theological reflections within African public praxis hold significant transformative potential, particularly in addressing social, cultural, and political issues (Agang 2020). Here are three insights to enhance public theology's transformative potential in Africa.

Firstly, there is an urgent call for decolonizing theology in Africa, a topic extensively explored by Forster (2022a) and Maluleke (2020). Central to these discussions is the recognition that Christianity practiced in Africa bears significant Western influence that often does not resonate with African contexts. This influence is apparent in theological discussions held in churches and taught in theological curricula, where some topics may not directly address the pressing concerns of African communities. For instance, debates on the existence of God may not align with the everyday religious experiences of Africans, as Mbiti (1991) underscores the inseparability of African religious beliefs from their cultural identity and social life.

Therefore, instead of prioritizing abstract theological issues, there is a need for decolonizing public theology to focus on addressing real challenges faced by people across the continent. Forster (2022a) advocates rethinking and reshaping theological education and practice to reflect African contexts and values authentically. This transformative effort aims to move beyond Western-centric paradigms and embrace indigenous knowledge systems, fostering a more relevant and impactful theological discourse in African societies.

Secondly, public theology must prioritize discussions on liberatory praxis. The widespread issues of gender-based violence (GBV), poverty, corruption, injustice, and other societal ills in Africa demand a theology that actively seeks to liberate people from these afflictions. Many of these challenges are deeply rooted in cultural patterns that perpetuate the oppression of marginalized and voiceless communities (Nanthambwe 2020, 2022). In Africa, public theology needs to adopt a framework that aligns with Cone's (1975) portrayal of a God deeply concerned with human suffering and actively working to liberate the oppressed from powerful systems of oppression. This theological approach should not be indifferent to the realities of injustice and suffering but should engage with them directly, seeking transformation and justice. Furthermore, African public theology should prioritize the voices and experiences of those most affected by these injustices, amplifying their narratives and advocating for systemic change (Nanthambwe and Magezi 2024). By centering on liberatory praxis, African public theology can catalyze social change, challenging oppressive structures and promoting the dignity and rights of all individuals within African societies.

Thirdly, amidst the tumultuous political landscapes in Africa, public theological reflections must consistently emphasize the pursuit of social justice as a transformative solution. In the context of Southern Africa, Kasera (2022) observes that Southern Africa presents a unique opportunity for theological engagement in the public sphere. The social background of most African countries is one with multi-dimensional forms of structural violence continuing to affect human development. Therefore, public theology must capitalize on the African social landscape to engage with grassroots movements and civil society organizations to amplify voices advocating for social justice. Public theology reflections must be geared to support community-driven initiatives that address local inequalities and empower individuals to participate actively in shaping their societies. By fostering solidarity and collective action, public theology builds more just and democratic African societies where everyone can thrive and contribute to the common good.

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, this article emphasizes the growing recognition of theology's role in African public spaces, highlighting its importance in addressing context-specific issues. While Western frameworks have traditionally shaped the concept of 'publics' in public theology, the article argues for a broader understanding incorporating African public praxis. By exploring African societies' unique social, political, and cultural contexts, the article demonstrates how public theology can be redefined to resonate more effectively within these diverse settings. This redefinition enhances the relevance and impact of public theology in Africa and contributes to the global discourse by offering fresh perspectives and transformative insights grounded in African experiences. Ultimately, the article underscores the necessity of contextualizing public theology in Africa to ensure it is both meaningful and effective in addressing the continent's complex challenges.

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