

Social justice and the search for the common good in Southern Africa: A public theological perspective

Basilus Kasera
University of Namibia, Namibia
bkasera@unam.na

Abstract

Social injustice and inequality create existential worries and social instability. Public theology, as a method rather than as a discipline, developed as a response to fortify Christian witness in the public arena and to answer to issues such as social injustice. This article builds on this theological method for social engagement and on the inherent social capital that religion holds to produce the common good in a secular environment. As part of reflecting upon the significance of theology in the public sphere, I first will examine the role theology can play to shape our social vision. Secondly, I will examine how the notions of covenant and neighbourliness could be providing a turning point regarding social justice. Thirdly, I address the search for the common good as God's tool to inform alternative and humane associational life. Fourthly, the article will explore theology's role to inform and create a vibrant civic society. The dialogue partners in the article are intentionally chosen to formulate a theological pedagogy distinctive from defensive, and at times violent, postures witnessed in social justice dialogues. I aim to create a space for a more objective examination of habits and practices in search of a fuller description and embodiment of God's Kingdom in Southern Africa. The article explores the following question, how can theology, through pursuing the common good, become a significant social capital generator to influence social justice in Southern Africa?

Keywords

Social justice; common good; Southern Africa; social capital; theology

Introduction

Southern Africa presents a unique opportunity for theological engagement in the public sphere. The social background of this region is one with multi-dimensional forms of structural violence continuing to affect

human development. Its history includes colonialism, apartheid, racial discrimination, civil wars, political unrest, corruption, and authoritarianism. Present structures of huge levels of disparity of income, access to opportunity, multi-dimensional poverty, unemployment and access to education, social and political power – have relegated millions of people to socio-economic hardships.¹ Political reforms to improve the living standards of previously affected communities, for example in Namibia and South Africa, have not wielded much and the general prospect of socio-economic progress, for the majority, looks bleak.

Significant parts of the region (Zimbabwe, Angola, and Mozambique) are shrouded by state-sponsored violence. Force and brutality are common approaches to silence any opposition to the government, freedom of expression, peaceful protests and especially when these are related to elections. The economies of many (if not all) of the states in the region are rapidly weakening and cannot cater for those on the fringes. Marked by huge gaps of inequality in life-enhancing goods, the situation is rife with social unrest. Government administrations keep changing, just for them all to struggle with the same issues as their predecessors. Civil society, which ought to play a vibrant role to keep the government in check, has been politically co-opted and is concerned with advocating for their individual political views instead of addressing real matters of common concern (Scholvin 2014; Olowu & Chanie 2016; Magidimisha et al. 2018).

1 Michael Aeby in *SADC – The Southern Arrested Development Community* writes that “over the past decade, the official unemployment rate of most SADC countries has been rising steadily, except for in Zambia, Mauritius, and Seychelles – the Indian Ocean islands were the only states to register single-digit unemployment. In 2015, the official unemployment rate was estimated to be 10.3% in Tanzania, 20% in Botswana, 24.2% in Angola, 25.3% in South Africa and 28% in eSwatini. The livelihood of a large share of the population of SADC countries, however, depends on subsistence farming and informal sector trade, rather than formal employment. By 2015, a vast section of the population lived below the national poverty line in virtually all SADC countries, including eSwatini (63%), Zambia (54%), Angola (36%) and Tanzania (28%). As elsewhere on the continent, poverty levels were generally higher in rural areas, as exemplified by South Africa and Zimbabwe. In 2011, some 55.2% of South African rural dwellers lived in poverty, while the national poverty rate was 32%. In Zimbabwe, 84.3% of those living in rural areas and 72.3% nationwide were classified as poor. Secondary school enrolment ratios ranged in 2015 from 99% in Seychelles and 90.2% in South Africa to a mere 21.9% in Mozambique and 15% in Malawi” (2019:24).

This deprives civil society of its purpose to “serve as sources of meaning and social engagement” (Smidt 2003:1).

What hope remains for a region faced with so many challenges? The above-mentioned challenges should not be seen as one of all hope lost with only bleakness hanging over the region. I would like to think that we have not entered Dante Alighieri's state which reads “abandon hope all ye who enter here.” The continuous efforts aimed at changing the present situation must be seen as glimpses of hope. In those efforts, we need to slot ourselves in to find viable solutions. However, the desire to transform this region would require more than political activism – albeit admirable. A new conscientisation is needed that recognises our common destiny and embraces an ethical framework to generate a collective social vision. What role can theology play in creating meaningful engagement to produce the common good? While this article speaks of Southern Africa, my particular focus is on Namibia.

Theoretical framework

This article is in the discipline of public theology and uses the theoretical framework of contextual theological studies. It explores what kind of praxis is required to humanise the future and our social interaction. Without ignoring the need for effective and functioning systems, the article explores the place of a moral vision in which the pursuit of social justice becomes part of the cultivation of character. The search for a common good is an attempt to express Christlikeness and bear witness to the values we hold. It endeavours to express what Sagovsky (2008:78–79) calls “a community that works to transform the society in which it is placed into one where human beings thrive more fully because they coexist according to norms influenced by the hope of the coming of the Kingdom of God”.

Theology in shaping our social vision

Theology, particularly public theology, is not simply a social science. Unlike other fields in the humanities, it must justify its place in a plural society. Public theology needs to dialogue with public matters that influence our social vision as an outflow of our missiological understanding of God's

vision for the world. It is a way of looking to express ‘the hope of the comprehensive sovereignty of God’ (Sagovsky 2008:79). Thus, because we believe that God is the creator of the world, we engage in theology that “reflects on the public dimension of our participation in God’s mission to the world” (Storror 2011:25).

As Forster (2020:16-17) argues, we participate in public dialogues that seek to inform the public imagination because we believe that the convictions we carry are not private. The idea that religion should be kept private and out of the public sphere is a misconception. Eventually, all our beliefs get to slip into the public streams of conversations. So, instead of hiding and limiting the role of theology “we need to talk about theological truths with people in non-church contexts” (2020:17). It is a way of unashamedly pursuing the vision of an all-good God in matters of human sociality. Thus, among competing visions of the good, we present an alternative vision, without dismissing many other visions of the good and justice in this plural society. We acknowledge the plurality of society but our place in that plural context is to inform the social imagination of the public for the common good.

If Southern African states truly do grant religious freedom, then doing public theology embodies this liberty. Its role is not to advance a particular religion or ideology but to make use of these available liberties to freely exercise our minds and skills to promote values that would humanise society. A decidedly teleological ethic is envisioned through embracing public theology. Rather than trying to dominate the public, it embraces a theological praxis that teaches “commitment to a supreme value, a fundamental attitude, a privileged command or set of laws, or even a defining narrative that tells us who we are and how we should live” (Doak 2014:50). This understanding and vision that seeks public participation does not impose religion on the public. Instead, Doak (2014:50) argues, it is a truly democratic vision and pursuit. A theology that does not participate in the public dialogue in search of the common good would be denying its own beliefs.

Because public theology is multi-lingual i.e., engages a wider audience, it allows for a new opportunity to engage in critical reflection on issues that affect our society. Part of this engagement is to participate in socio-theological dialogues that can help reshape and redirect our social

interaction which includes developing a robust language and search for the practice of social justice which is based on strong systems of law but driven by a “firm theological perspective of eschatology” (Forster 2015:5). Such an understanding not only seeks a redistributive response towards the victims of social injustice. It points to a covenantal aspect, that greater justice can be achieved by rediscovering our common humanity and inter-relatedness, and by reorienting our social vision. The search for the common good is not only to identify the good required to live a life of dignity but “to imagine a culture ordered differently” by embracing a view that “enlivens and humanizes the social order” (Block, Brueggemann & McKnight 2016: xxii).

The common good, in which everyone’s humanity is recognised and affirmed, requires both a theological and socio-political framework that can have it materialise. Southern Africans have used *ubuntu* to advocate for a framework of embracing togetherness and human co-dependence. This means the search for social justice needs a praxis that does not reduce humans to mere consumers of their civilisation but in which they can be fully human. Below, I am going to attempt to explore this notion of covenant and *ubuntu* in search of social justice and the common good.

Covenant and neighbourliness

Covenant in this article refers to a theological view of the human connectedness through creation by God. It derives from the fact that we are created in the image of God and with that comes certain social responsibility towards each other. A theological contribution to dialogues of justice using this kind of framework is a way of advocating for distinctive virtues that would humanise society. That is, to appeal to dispositions of caring and fairness from which habits for a human social life would be cultivated for the good of all. Covenant then, emanates from our understanding of God’s creation of the world and God’s redemptive plan for humanity, calling us to be co-workers in the redemption of the world’s broken social order. Because we are created in the image of God we are put in a complex and profound relationship with God, fellow humans, and the rest of creation. We become responsible, in a moral sense, towards one another and the created order.

This is different from just a social contract – which is a secularisation of covenantal relations revealed in Scripture.

Plato in *The Statesman* grounds the notion of the common good in human affairs. He embraced Protagoras' notion of politics and human self-sufficiency. This is also the basis for secular notions of the common good, which humans must pursue and realise on human terms (Plato 1997). The idea of the social contract fits quite well in such a framework in which civil society enters setting up a government system that would allow expected utility for all. This includes the granting of certain rights, but particularly a broad description of property rights. While Adam Smith had endorsed the social contract, he did not think it was the place of the state to entertain the nature of utility. John Rawls (1999:73, 98), while endorsing the social contract went a step further and argued for the need of averting the effect of risk through welfare distribution.

While the social contract serves the purpose of mutual co-existence, it is profoundly driven by the need for self-preservation. Rawls' theory, that calls for welfare distribution, somehow eases the purely individualistic outlook enshrined in social contract views which have no interest in averting socio-economic risks. While Rawls seeks to reconcile the virtue of justice as something interlinked with and derived from the virtue of beneficence, he stops short before the idea of covenant. The theological concept of covenant goes a step further – not to dismiss other views, but to challenge the public understanding of creating a just society. It serves the role of “prophetic critique of social injustice perpetrated” and sanctioned by the states in Southern Africa (Sagovsky 2017:251).

Covenant understanding of social relationships and the making of society is much more radical than a social contract. It extends beyond mere sociality and places moral demands. It appeals to the conscience of individuals and calls for the humanisation of political institutions and practices. The creation narrative that humans are created in the image of God and endowed with dignity, motivates us to seek new ways of conscientizing society to adopt much more humane commitments in the struggle for social justice. The present socio-political and cultural practices constructed on dehumanising arrangements must be redirected to see and realise our interconnectedness, not via a social contract but by a covenant.

Social justice informed by covenant and neighbourliness constructs and supports a structure that affirms the humanity of everyone.

While other views of social justice, e.g., those propagated by John Rawls or Robert Nozick, benefit the understanding of the material distribution of life-enhancing goods, they are not far-reaching in advocating for – 1) the community narrative or that the wellbeing of the individual is interconnected to the wellbeing of the community; 2) the creation of a collectiveness borne out of an authentic spiritual experience, and 3) a divine pedagogy that provides the basis upon which we are to act justly towards fellow humans. The creation account provides a human covenant understanding derived from the covenant in the Trinity. As such, all human relationships and their liberation from dehumanising conditions must be found in covenant relationships to achieve sustainable social justice (de Gruchy 1995:40–41).

Popular works on social justice like that of John Rawls, Amartya Sen and Denis Goulet offer helpful notions for dialogue and are correct about what is wrong with our current structures. These are allied concepts for theology, to which we should listen respectfully and acknowledge that they provide incredible insight. However, we need to employ a thought framework that would not only employ a political language but must be able to challenge the structures of power and governance. This means bringing theological reflections into dialogue with notions of social justice (de Gruchy 2007; Sagovsky 2017; Forster 2020) from something much deeper than the social contract in the search to restore balance and social order.

Theological participation that calls for a new ordering to achieve the common good, while informed by political thinking of the Kingdom of God, is an expression of the prophetic vision that rejects the legitimisation of a social order which does not treat God's image-bearers with the dignity they deserve. Understanding our being in covenant with God, through Jesus Christ, offers a relationality in and through which we seek to affirm the humanity of others. Social injustice and deprivation from accessing life-enhancing goods threaten our covenantal relationship with one another. Such a social order cannot be referred to as a social order because it fails to reflect values that ought to hold us together.

The command to love our neighbour demands that we see social justice as an obligation. A society in which social justice is available, in biblical terms, signifies a healthy society. De Gruchy (2007) argues that a healthy society is one in which “human beings live in peace with themselves and in harmony with the whole of creation (*shalom*)” (2007:44). This requires a theoretical framework that would transform our social arrangements and in turn affect the future of human standards of living and quality of life in Southern Africa. Thus, a common future is only possible when our social, political, economic, scientific, cultural, and religious efforts are employed to improve the lives of all members of society. This is a holistic “healing and wholeness of human relationships” (2007:44) without which we cannot envision a flourishing society.

These issues cannot be addressed in vague and universal terms. We need to recognise the complexity of the situation on the ground and not seek simple answers. The Accra Declaration provides the kind of seriousness needed to respond to issues of injustice in the region. However, we cannot assign a single blame but must engage in “dialogue in order to come to a reasonable and comprehensive description of the causes of the misery as well as possible strategies to overcome it” (Haase 2019: 611). If anything, the Accra Declaration tells us that it is impossible to do justice and engage in reordering of society if we are not clear – both conceptually and strategically. Such an approach would require that we acquire the needed support from political, cultural, economic, and social structures with which we can theologically engage towards suggesting solutions.

For example, within the Southern African cultures (credit to the Xhosa people), we find a helpful notion that is like that of the covenant concept – *ubuntu*. The concept implies our interconnectedness and interdependence as humans. It reaffirms the fact that no system can be sustainable unless it is based on benefitting all human persons. The adoption of neo-liberal policies to direct the economies of Southern Africa, especially in Namibia and South Africa because of their history of apartheid, demonstrated “an extraordinary disjuncture with the past” (Bond 2000:53) and socio-economic realities facing millions of the citizens. It destroyed the potential for humane “economic and policy aspirations” by opting for a social contract system that placed a few individuals above the economic scale at the expense of the majority.

Ubuntu must be used with caution so that it does not mean a replacement for the notion of covenant. But that it provides one of the cultural entry points for establishing the kinds of dialogues that seek to humanise the human future. We do not seek to introduce something foreign to the Southern African context, therefore, ubuntu dialogues could be helpful in clarifying the notion of covenant. Not that these are the same things. Covenants emanate from the character of God, and it is the central motif of Scripture, while ubuntu is a socio-cultural attempt that embraces traces of the covenant. A romanticised version of *ubuntu* would be ignoring realities of how this concept has not lived up to its profession in times of crisis, which could be due to reasons of its vagueness. However, if we are going to address the socio-economic issues, a covenantal framework can also be tool for critiquing not only structures but also the economic systems behind much of the socio-economic disparities.

A neo-liberal economic system

If the common might do us some good, we need to confront the economic systems that do not allow us to shape a common good. Countries that emerged out of the liberation struggle promised radical participatory projects which envisaged overturning of fortunes of the previously disadvantaged. However, these promises were hijacked and human development in Southern Africa was placed on a new trajectory of socio-economic disempowerment. The hijack has been by neoliberal economic ideas which have fuelled rapid but uneven socio-economic development in the region. Here we see what Bond (2000:3) calls a “deviation from the liberation movement mandate” that is endemic in governments across the region. Neo-liberal economic systems are more than about markets but also the mindset that they promote, in which our relationships are commodified and there is no place for mercy and sacrifice. It goes against the creation covenant because it treats life as a commercial contract and humans are merely fuel to profits.

What is wrong with the neoliberal economic setup? To answer this requires more than political slogans. We need to point out the ethical challenge and existential threat neoliberalism presents for ordinary persons. Giroux (2004: xiii) describes neoliberalism as a system “wedded to the belief that

the market should be the organizing principle for all political, social and economic decisions” which “wages an incessant attack on democracy, public goods and noncommodified values”. National resources are being captured and commodified by international investors; governments have little control and citizens receive little or no benefit. It has created an environment that deepens the chasm between winners and losers, haves, and have-nots, such that, at this rate of relentless elitist profiteering, we see rapid multi-dimensional social chambers that aim at shutting down any space of common human becoming. What is particularly wrong with neo-liberal economics is not profit-making but the inconsideration with which these profits are made.

What should be the task of theology, in response to economic practices that are laced with such inhumanness, greed and exploitation? We must not weaponize theology to serve a particular political cause. We must express in the world the idea of the Kingdom of God, which is a profoundly political notion that transcends partisan politics, to promote the righteousness of God in all human spheres. It seeks justice and the ordering of human institutions. Therefore, we question the ethics that inform or drive neoliberal economic ideas that treat humans as expendable goods for the sake of profit. We also question the abuse and exploitation of God’s natural resources for the benefit of a few who have the capital to manipulate outcomes or political and social power to influence decisions.

Socio-economic inequality severs our connectedness to one another as it puts us in groups where suffering is considered normal and hoarding of resources by the powerful becomes a desire. The negotiated economic settlements, especially in South Africa and Namibia, have continued to strengthen economic apartheid. The neoliberal structures have now come to benefit both Black and White elites, who share much of the economic cake among themselves and leave crumbs for the rest to share. Nowhere is this disparity more obvious than in times of crisis. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic and now the Russian-Ukrainian conflict’s impact on the economies of the world, continue to ravage the living standards and conditions of those at the bottom of the economic chain in the region.

Theology in this dialogue seeks to, as Boesak (2005:25) calls it, infuse “politics of compassion” which should inform even the economies of

Southern Africa. This form of politics implies the need for quality leadership that would cast a vision of the future in which ordinary citizens can enjoy access to social and economic goods which are currently only reserved for a self-made class of elites. For a region still crippled by the effects of slavery, colonialism and apartheid, neo-liberal economic structures enslave the dignity of persons and constantly gnaw at the souls of Africans. It is a slow painful death, an economic ideology without a soul or humanity enabled by weak political and leadership structures.

Political resistance has been offered against these structures, only for the leaders of the resistance to be found to be living in opulence after a few months of decrying economic injustice. The public's trust in politics to transform such a broken and corrupt system has dwindled. Radical neo-socialist movements which have raised flags about corruption and the dehumanising effects of the free market are just as self-centred, power-hungry, corrupt, and opportunistic as the political leaders they are criticising. Civil society organisations are financially wanting and easy to manipulate with donor funds that redirect them into pursuing programmes that no longer speak to the lived experiences of the masses.

This is a systematic war against ordinary persons which is unashamed to eat away the future of our children. It commodifies greed and its rot attracts corrupt opportunists who pretend to have the interest of the people at heart. This is sin wrapped in the garments of investment, economic development, employment creation, progression of science, poverty eradication and all other vague buzzwords. How do we join the cries of protest against: Chinese government investors who employ people under dehumanising conditions without any benefits to pension, housing or healthcare insurance; those who invest billions of dollars to fund quick but environmentally destructively tobacco farms all across the region; destructive mining conglomerates that take most of the profits for themselves while governments secure only a small percentage of shares; oil companies that manipulate poor states to agree to settle for poor deals while they loot the profits for themselves and their investors; absent landowners who buy huge portions of land in Africa just to receive profits none of which they invest in the same communities; international loans that cripple small economies with burdensome interest and conditions of attaching national resources as collateral; governments that seem to be clueless how to restructure and reinvent themselves to

become effective in transforming their economies for the good of the majority?

These questions are not only political and economic, but are also questions of justice, human value, theology, and ethics. I do not imply that neoliberalism, as a system, is unethical. But as a system, it is not designed to replicate the resources we have for those at the bottom of the economic chain. It is also incapable of replicating its way of life to be a norm. By its very design, it can only thrive by systematically limiting the number of those who can share in the benefits it offers. It is this exclusivist and classist nature of the system that we are opposed to. With enough power and opportunity, those with more will continue to have more and greed will initially kick in as competition becomes the driving ethic. By so doing the weak, poor, and vulnerable are sacrificed to the forces of the market. Market forces have proven to have no self-correcting measure or even to say it is enough. The culture of neoliberal economic ideas is of competition, and of winners. It does not cater for those who may not be as fortunate, gifted, strong or resourced.

This exploitative and resource hoarding element of neoliberal economic ideas and practices is not the way of Christ and his gospel. Christians are called to be a voice for the voiceless and advocate for the widows, orphans, poor, weak and strangers. What should this look like in practical terms? The practical involvements should also cast-off utopian dreams of a poverty and suffering free world. We would also not achieve much by throwing ourselves at the feet of socialist economic systems as opposed to neo-liberalism. Getting rid of neo-liberalist economic structures is both difficult and impossible in the current context. Radical revolutionary groups like the Economic Freedom Fighters and Affirmative Repositioning which attempt to get rid of these structures risk not being taken seriously.

Theology as critical solidarity and participation

This section is intentionally weaved to be socio-theological, as an attempt to indicate the dialectical complexity of theology and participation in the social ordering. If theology, by its basic definition, is the study of God, then it matters how God is concerned with the world. Thus, the study of God

carries implications regarding participation in ordering society. Besides offering a critique of what is wrong, we also need to call for participation. We are not spectators on the side-lines of society but members and participants. Moreover, God desires that we represent God's will in every sphere of human activity. If "the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it" (Ps. 24:1), then Christian heirship begins on earth. When we say, "Thy Kingdom come," we are making a material confession for the here and now as evidence of the future reign. Thus, like the Hebrew prophets and Christ we seek to reimagine God's activity in human affairs "to heighten the tensive relationship between a vision of the fulfilment of God's universal reign ('on earth as it is in heaven') and the provisional nature of God's immanence ('among you')" (Hanson 2017:34).

For example, the Accra Document's appeal to covenant (par. 19–20) implies that all of creation is knit together, and the Creator has placed us in the world to be part of its preservation. Thus, God's covenant in creation, now expressed through Christ calls for practical commitment. However, this is not a naïve dream of a world in which things would be perfect. A covenant informed notion of participation does not ignore the reality of the fall and that all human life is tainted by sin. As such, our search to affirm God's best in Southern Africa but accept that this is a second-best attempt. Utopian standards as promoted under various subliminal socialist persuasions, often packaged as revolutionary, are impractical. The kinds of socio-economic participation needs: 1) to reflect the bare minimum of what God requires for people to sustain dignified lives; and 2) to be practical in the context of a fallen world and doable within the structures. Since covenant is about pursuing to attain what God requires "We must sacrifice our radicalism on the altar of what is actually achievable in our broken and messy world" (Doherty 2014:145).

This search to reimagine God's activity in human affairs is driven by the very idea of the common good. It calls for moral, economic, and political reform of institutions in Southern Africa to work towards restoring human dignity. As such, we seek to bring theology to dialogue in public. However, we do not intend to do this through "finely-honed theological principle or prescriptive, authoritative pronouncements, but a new model of" (Russel & Bradstock 2017:165) engaging institutions, systems, and structures. What informed this desire should not just be the economic and social systems.

Instead, we need to be driven by the doctrine of the coming Kingdom of God. We do not intend to achieve perfect socio-economic conditions – in the here and now – that would be idolatrous and engaging in an unrealistic project. Nevertheless, the Kingdom of God is a realm in which the people of Southern Africa are called to live in the here and now, this implies that we need to then discern what kinds of corresponding activities are required to bear tangible witness.

The practical implications are that theology must say and do something about the repressive and covenant violating political systems in Zimbabwe, Angola and Eswatini. It must confront the institutionalised corruption of liberation movements in Mozambique, Namibia, and South Africa. We need to be in critical solidarity with systems and movements that desire to see a humanised future for Southern Africa. But we must also undertake the role of critical participation through our churches, civil society and political programmes and activism. We must take part in the things of the earth without forfeiting our mission to political parties and systems. We therefore acknowledge that sometimes society will only attain certain outcomes by being directly involved in secular affairs.

This critical stance is a way of participating in God's liberating agenda for humanity, which includes spiritual, material, political, social, and economic well-being. As Boesak (2019) argues, it is not "that one could say 'God' and abide with oppression, and one could say 'Jesus' and abide with injustice" (722 of 6766). Our understanding of being in covenant with God through the work of Christ makes us people who are restless and would not accept anything other than God's will on earth. The idea of the common good is deeply buried in the Christian understanding of the incarnation, God who is with us i.e., who is present, concerned and wants us to be involved in witnessing the reality of God's kingdom on earth.

The idea of the common good, from a theological perspective, is borne out of the experience of having received God's grace and called into communion with one another. The communion is not just a symbol of fellowship but also of justice, as demonstrated in the lifestyle of the early church (Acts 2:43–44). The early church was not just meeting the needs of believers but was responding to the social and economic structures of society. They were demonstrating what God requires of us, in the church and the world. Their

radical stance demonstrated that Christianity is spiritual but also engaged with practical life and the needs of the community.

Theology, which is the arm of the Christian faith that engages the implication of what we believe, is not only an exercise of ideas. It should demonstrate how Christians should think and interact in a way that will affect society for good. This may include fostering political engagement. By doing so, we contribute to making our faith an active part of society in generating the necessary social capital to produce the common good. The context of Southern Africa is calling us to (re)evaluate the role and task of theology in public dialogues that concern issues of justice and human dignity. It needs to speak not only the language of God in the City of Man but also seek the will of God and God's action.

We live in a religiously and socially pluralist society, let alone a growing secularised political environment. How should we participate in such a situation? The Christian faith is not foreign to society or the public life. It “forms a vital part of civil society and, at least partly through the generation of social capital, helps provide a richer” public more attuned to issues of social justice in the region (Williams 2003:171). Williams goes on to say that “religion has too much to say about the shape of social life to sit and only exert its influence indirectly. Sometimes it simply *must* be political” (2003:171, italics in original). This is crucial for those of us living in Southern Africa with a context steeped in so much socio-economic injustice. Our search to participate in the reshaping of society is part of taking our confession and faith seriously. It is a recognition “to focus our attention on understanding who God is and how he is at work in our contexts ... not just in the church, but in all of society” (Forster 2020:25).

This search to participate in the transformation of the social order attempts to put our theology into action, by examining the kinds of ethical frameworks that inform society. It attempts to transform our culture, as part of our cultural mandate. The task is not small and should not be taken lightly. Christian participation in these public issues implies a missional undertaking, for we become both salt and light. Thus, the public life in Southern Africa will suffer from profound defects without Christian presence and contribution. The way of silence and being spectators amid

the present levels of dehumanising injustice, economics, and politics, will only make us accomplices in the triumph of evil.

Conclusion

The idea of the common good is more than just socio-political. It is deeply rooted in the creation covenant. We need to be concerned with the well-being of people living in Southern Africa because they are made in the image of God. This search for their well-being cannot be left in the hands of political players alone. Theology must take an active public role, not to drive the political agenda but to bear witness to the values of God's kingdom in Southern Africa. This article explored this notion and teased out what critical solidarity and participation might look like. It has attempted to create the needed space for theological dialogue outside its traditional confinements to enter where life-altering decisions are being made. I hope with all Christians who are concerned for the good of this region, that we become more involved in the social ordering of our various societies as part of our Christian witnessing and become more discerning of opportunities that may allow us to become ambassadors of the gospel through socio-political participation. I hope that our hearts and minds may be able to ask where God is at work in Southern Africa and how we can be part of expressing God's Kingdom.

Bibliography

- Aeby, M. 2019. *SADC – The Southern arrested development community? Enduring challenges to peace and security in Southern Africa*. Upsala: Nordic Africa Institute.
- Block, P., Brueggemann, W. & McKnight, J. 2016. *An other kingdom: departing the consumer culture*. Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons.
- Boesak, A.A. 2005. *The tenderness of conscience: African renaissance and the spirituality of politics*. Stellenbosch: SUN Press.
- Boesak, A.A. 2019. *Children of the waters of Meribah: black liberation theology, the Miriamic tradition, and the challenges of twenty-first-century empire*. Kindle Version. Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers.

- Bond, P. 2000. *Elite transition: from apartheid to neoliberalism in South Africa*. London: Pluto Press.
- Doak, M. 2014. *Reclaiming narrative for public theology*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Doherty, S. 2014. The kingdom of God and the economic system. In: J. Kidwell & S. Doherty (eds), *Theology and economics: a Christian vision of the common good* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 143–156.
- Forster, D.A. 2015. What hope is there for South Africa? a public theological reflection on the role of the church as a bearer of hope for the future. *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*. 71(3):1–13. DOI: 10.4102/hts.v71i3.2814.
- Forster, D.A. 2020. The nature of public theology. In: S.B. Agang, J.H. Hendriks, & D.A. Forster, (eds), *African public theology* (Bukuru: Hippo Books), pp. 15–26.
- Giroux, H.A. 2004. *The terror of neoliberalism: authoritarianism and the eclipse of democracy*. London: Routledge.
- de Gruchy, J.W. 1995. *Christianity and democracy: a theology for a just world order*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- de Gruchy, J.W. 2007. Public theology as Christian witness: exploring the genre. *International Journal of Public Theology*, 1(1):26–41. DOI: 10.1163/156973207x194466.
- Haase, H. 2009. Theological remarks on the Accra Confession. *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 65(1):610–612. DOI: 10.4102/hts.v65i1.281
- Hanson, P. 2017. The Bible and public theology. In: S. Kim & K. Day (eds), *A companion to public theology* (Leiden: Brill), pp. 25–39.
- Magidimisha, H.H., Khalema, N.E., Chipungu, L., Chirimabowa, T.C. & Chimedza, T.L. (Eds). 2018. *Crisis, identity and migration in post-colonial Southern Africa*. Cham: Springer.
- Olowu, D. & Chanie, P. (eds). 2016. *State fragility and state building in Africa: cases in eastern and Southern Africa*. Cham: Springer.

- Plato. 1997. Statesman. In: J.M. Cooper, (ed.), *Plato: complete works* (Indianapolis: Hackett), pp. 294–358.
- Rawls, J. 1999. *A theory of justice*. Revised ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Russel, H. & Bradstock, A. 2017. Politics, church and the common good. In: S. Kim & K. Day (eds), *A companion to public theology* (Leiden: Brill), pp. 164–186.
- Sagovsky, N. 2008. *Christian tradition and the practice of justice*. London, United Kingdom: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.
- Sagovsky, N. 2017. Public theology, the public sphere and the struggle for social justice. In: S. Kim & K. Day (eds), *A companion to public theology*, (Leiden: Brill), pp. 251–270.
- Scholvin, S. 2014. *The geopolitics of regional power: geography, economics and politics in Southern Africa*. Surrey: Ashgate.
- Smidt, C. 2003. Introduction. In: C. Smidt (ed.), *Religion as social capital: producing the common good* (Waco: Baylor University Press), pp. 1–18.
- Storror, W. 2011. The naming of parts: doing public theology in a global era. *International Journal of Public Theology*, 5(1), pp. 23–43. DOI: 10.1163/156973211X543724.
- Williams, R.H. 2003. The language of God in the city of man. In: C. Smit (ed.), *Religion as social capital producing the common good*, (Waco: Baylor University Press), pp. 171–189.