

Embodied grace: The implications of the incarnation to public practical theology in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Christian incarnation, illustrated through the example of Jesus Christ, involves the embodiment of God, the guardian of all creation and the manifestation of Christian beliefs. This divine incarnation operates through boundless love and concern, as demonstrated in God's choice to intimately connect with humanity, as noted in John 3:16. Although global challenges abound, it is evident that sub-Saharan Africa faces unique difficulties, hindering its inhabitants from experiencing the fullness of life intended by God. There is a need to find solutions to the challenges faced by the African continent. In the context of sub-Saharan Africa, the question is: How can practical public theology, informed by the incarnation, be practised in tackling the challenges people face in Africa? The study addresses this inquiry, presenting the implications of the incarnation doctrine as a means to tackle African challenges. It posits incarnation as a foundation for comprehending God's love for Africans and proposes practical ways for resiliently confronting their adversities. The article draws upon existing literature in the field of public practical theology to underpin the core argument of its thesis.

Contribution: This article contributes to the discussion on how theology should be used to address people's concrete challenges in sub-Saharan Africa. The doctrine of incarnation is a unique example whose implications can help the enhancement of addressing people's challenges in Africa.

Keywords: incarnation; public theology; public practical theology; implications; theology; Africa.

Introduction

Africa, a continent grappling with myriad challenges (Myers 2017:149; World Bank 2018a:3), presents a complex scene marked by the ravages of war in nations such as Somalia, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (Fang et al. 2020). The populace contends with impoverished conditions, rampant gender-based violence, inadequate political systems and the scourge of preventable illnesses leading to fatalities. In the face of these daunting obstacles, one is prompted to ponder whether Africa is genuinely embraced by a divine entity.

Such inquiries have been theoretically addressed, often invoking biblical passages like John 3:16 to convey the idea that God's love extends universally. While this assertion holds theological validity, its efficacy is hindered by a lack of empirical evidence from black individuals residing in sub-Saharan Africa, thus undermining its concrete impact. Ultimately, the question of empirical evidence for God's love may vary across individual beliefs and experiences. While theological assertions exist, the practical application of love through meaningful actions can potentially bridge the gap between theological concepts and the lived experiences of people, addressing the challenges raised by the presence of suffering in the context of sub-Saharan Africa (Magezi 2019:131–132). The central question emerges: How can the love of God be tangibly manifested for the black people of sub-Saharan Africa?

The Christian concept of incarnation, exemplified by the life of Jesus Christ, unfolds as the embodiment of God, the guardian of creation and the conduit through which Christian faith finds manifestation. God's incarnation, marked by infinite love and care, is revealed in his choice to dwell among and intimately associate with humanity. This profound theological underpinning transcends metaphor, constituting a fundamental reality that should fundamentally alter our perception of the divine, as White (2017:27) elucidates in his exploration of the impact of the doctrine of incarnation on practical theology.

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The significance of the theological concept of incarnation becomes paramount in determining the efficacy of pastoral care within the church ministry. This article sets out to explore how the concept of incarnation should shape practical approaches in public theology relevant to the African context. Beyond theoretical discussions, it seeks to delve into the practical implementation of this theological concept in real-world scenarios, with a specific focus on its transformative potential for addressing the pressing societal challenges faced by the people of Africa, particularly the black people in sub-Saharan Africa.

By not adhering to a systematic theological approach, the emphasis in this discourse lies on the pragmatic aspects of the doctrine of incarnation, examining how it can contribute to transformative change within the sub-Saharan African context. In doing so, the article aims to illuminate a path towards addressing the multifaceted challenges that Africa confronts, weaving together theology and practical application for a holistic exploration of embodied grace in the African landscape.

Understanding the concept of incarnation from a Christian perspective

This comprehensive exploration of the concept of incarnation serves two pivotal purposes. Firstly, it aims to illuminate the nuanced understanding of incarnation within the Christian context. This endeavour is crucial, considering that the notion of a deity taking on the human form is not exclusive to Christian theology, as aptly noted by Smith (2008) and Poidevin (2009). Secondly, our goal is to distil this intricate theological term into language accessible to any ordinary person, ensuring that the profound idea of incarnation is presented with clarity and simplicity.

Smith (2008) noted in his discussion of incarnation that the concept of a deity taking on human form is not limited to Christian theology. Various religious traditions worldwide have accepted the concept of embodied divinity. This idea extends beyond the confines of a single religious belief system and has been the topic of scholarly investigation in comparative religion (Smith 2008). In Greek mythology, gods show themselves in human form to intercede in mortal issues, frequently with disastrous repercussions (Hamilton 1942). These divine interventions attest to Greek mythology's complicated link between the divine and mortal realms. The narrative of Zeus, the king of the gods, assuming numerous human guises to participate in romantic incidents is one noteworthy example of gods coming to earth in human form.

In the tale of Zeus and Europa, Zeus transforms into a bull to get close to and seduce Europa, who is a mortal princess (Hamilton 1942). Zeus, as a bull, demonstrates the gods' ability to take on numerous forms to engage with people, blurring the lines between the divine and mortal worlds. In addition, the Greek god Apollo frequently descends to Earth in human form to influence human events.

Pantheism, a theological doctrine that differs significantly from Christianity, proposes the embodiment of the divine within the entirety of the cosmos in the myth of Apollo and Daphne (Smith 2008). This viewpoint contrasts sharply with Christian theology, which stresses the divine incarnation only in the person of Jesus Christ (Johnson 2010). Pantheism contradicts traditional Christian understandings of the divine-human relationship by extending the divine presence beyond a single individual to encompass the entire universe (Davies 2006). This fundamental gap in theological frameworks illustrates pantheism and Christianity's opposing views on the nature and scope of divine incarnation.

Following the exploration of various religious traditions worldwide accepting the concept of embodied divinity, it is crucial to transition back to the central theme of Christian theology and its understanding of incarnation. While Greek mythology and pantheism provide valuable insights into diverse perspectives on divine embodiment, our focus now returns to the Christian perspective. In this context, the doctrine of incarnation is succinctly captured in the notion that God the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, descended to earth, living as a man for a finite period. The term 'incarnation' finds its roots in the Latin *incarnatio*, signifying 'infleshing' or 'enfleshment' (Higton 2011:235; Reymond 1985:555–557). The doctrine affirms the genuine divinity and humanity of Christ. It posits that the divine and human natures of Jesus are not juxtaposed independently but intricately united in him within a personal unity commonly denoted as the *hypostatic* union (Grudem 2010; Erickson 2013:669–670). This union does not entail a reduction or amalgamation of the two natures; instead, it is asserted that the distinct identity of each nature has been safeguarded (Erickson 1996, 2013; McGrath 2017). This encapsulates the profound essence of incarnation within Christian belief, a theme that this exploration will unfold and elucidate.

The concept of incarnation in Christian theology underscores God's profound concern for humanity. The belief that God the Son, part of the Trinity, took on human form in Jesus Christ demonstrates a remarkable expression of divine care and empathy towards people. This act of incarnation signifies a direct engagement with human experiences, struggles and joys, emphasising a tangible connection between the divine and the human (McGrath 2017).

Incarnation from the biblical basis

The doctrinal underpinning of the incarnation finds its roots in biblical scripture, with a particular emphasis on the New Testament. Central to this theological concept is the Gospel of John, which provides a foundational narrative regarding the incarnation by accentuating the pre-existence of the Word, identified as the Logos, and elucidating the transformative moment when the Word assumed human flesh (Erickson 1996, 2013). This theological discourse is encapsulated in the poignant passage from John 1:14 (ESV), which unequivocally states, 'And the Word became flesh and

dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth’.

In this scriptural proclamation, the Gospel of John articulates a profound theological assertion, establishing the incarnate nature of the Word. The deliberate choice of words, such as ‘dwelt among us’, conveys a sense of intimate presence and direct engagement with humanity. The passage underscores the tangible manifestation of the divine in the human realm, as the Word takes on corporeal existence, emphasising the experiential aspect of encountering the divine in the person of Jesus Christ. Köstenberger (2004:40) highlighted the main point of John 1:14 which states ‘God now has chosen to be with his people in a more personal way than ever before’.

This foundational text not only establishes the theological premise of the incarnation but also provides a rich and multifaceted understanding of the nature of this divine embodiment. The reference to seeing ‘his glory’ underscores the revelation of divine attributes in the person of Jesus Christ, portraying a transformative and awe-inspiring encounter. Furthermore, the characterisation of the Incarnate Word as ‘full of grace and truth’ encapsulates essential theological qualities, emphasising divine benevolence and authenticity. Milne (1993) commented:

The enfleshment of the eternal Word demonstrates God’s identification with us in our human life, and in particular in our weakness and suffering. There is no parallel anywhere else in the world’s religions to the sympathetic presence of God in Christ sharing our human struggle with us. (p. 47)

The explanation of John 1:14 serves as a pivotal point for theological reflection on the incarnation, providing scholars and theologians with a scriptural foundation to explore the multifaceted dimensions of this profound doctrinal concept. While there are numerous passages in the New Testament on the incarnation, this verse, with its theological richness, becomes a touchstone for discussions on the nature of Christ and the implications of the incarnation within the Christian theological tradition.

The purpose of incarnation

The New Testament, particularly in the Gospel of Mark, echoes the purpose of the incarnation, as Jesus articulates that his descent to earth serves as a ransom for humanity (Mk 10:45; Mt 20:28). This comprehension of the incarnation establishes a foundational understanding of why Jesus assumed human form. Chemnitz, as cited by Fesko (2017:432), asserts that salvation necessitates not only the imputation of Christ’s righteousness but also his incarnation. Erickson (2013:729) further elucidates that the incarnation was imperative to meet God’s demand for righteousness, given the incapacity of fallen human beings to fulfil such requirements. Therefore, a being possessing both divine and human natures was requisite, hence the incarnation of Christ (Erickson 2013).

This perspective has been a focal point for conventional theologians, such as Erickson (1996, 2013), Fesko (2017) and

Grudem (2010), who adopt a ‘from above’ theological approach. This approach accentuates divine revelation, transcendence and self-disclosure of God as the starting point for theological inquiry, relying on authoritative sources such as Scripture, tradition and doctrine to comprehend God and divine truths (Rahner 1970). For example, Erickson (2013) argues that Jesus’ incarnation is fundamental for salvation and intercessory ministry, while Grudem (2010) explores various aspects, including representative obedience, substitute sacrifice, mediation between God and humans, fulfilment of God’s original purpose for humans, an example and pattern in life, a pattern for redeemed bodies and a sympathetic High Priest.

In contrast, liberation theology takes a ‘from below’ approach, emphasising the human experience, contextual realities and the human condition as the basis for theological reflection (Van Huyssteen 1997). Scholars such as Boff (1989:53–54) and Gutierrez (1973) assert that liberation theology offers a distinctive understanding of the incarnation’s purpose, extending beyond traditional perspectives by focusing on the marginalised and impoverished as the central aspect of Jesus’ embodiment (Neely 2000:475). Originating mainly in Latin America, liberation theology contends that Christianity should serve as a catalyst for socio-political liberation, particularly for those facing oppression and marginalisation. In this paradigm, the purpose of the incarnation transcends a theological event, assuming profound significance in the realm of human struggles and societal injustices (Boff 1989; Neely 2000).

Gustavo Gutierrez, a prominent figure in liberation theology, articulated this perspective in his seminal work, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (1973). Gutierrez (1973) contends that the incarnation represents a divine solidarity with the poor and oppressed. This theological stance posits that God, in choosing to become incarnate amid human suffering, intentionally identifies with those on the margins of society, thereby symbolising a radical alignment with the plight of the poor. Gutierrez’s (1973) argument underscores the transformative nature of the incarnation, which transcends theological abstraction to convey a palpable divine engagement with human struggles.

This marked a pivotal juncture for Black Liberation Theology in both America and South Africa, providing a framework for a critical examination of the black experience of marginalisation and oppression through the lens of biblical faith (Boesak 1976; Chimhanda 2010; Cone 1975).

Expanding on Gutierrez’s foundational work, Leonardo Boff, in *Liberation Theology: From Confrontation to Dialogue* (1987), extends the purpose of the incarnation to a proactive intervention against societal injustices. Boff (1987) asserts that the incarnation is not merely a symbolic gesture, but a divine initiative designed to draw attention to and actively address systemic inequities. According to Boff (1987), the incarnation serves as a powerful impetus for challenging

oppressive structures and fostering a socio-political environment conducive to justice. The apartheid era in South Africa serves as a paradigmatic illustration wherein injustice, manifested in the form of racism, functioned as a tool of oppression, leading to widespread economic and political incapacitation among black South Africans (Motlhabi 1989). Motlhabi (1989) argues that racism, inherently linked to politics, is essentially a myth. He posits that racism deemed a secondary factor contributing to the marginalisation and impoverishment of the black masses in post-apartheid South Africa, is fundamentally entwined with power dynamics. Motlhabi (1989) contends that addressing the root causes of power struggles is imperative for effecting significant change, emphasising that the elimination of racism alone would not suffice to alter the prevailing status quo (Van Aarde 2016:5). This perspective offers valuable insights for the critical analysis of the oppressive conditions confronting the black population today. Despite more than three decades since the abolition of apartheid, a substantial segment of black South Africans continues to grapple with its enduring effects (World Bank 2018b; Nanthambwe 2022).

Similarly, in *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims* (1990), Jon Sobrino contributes to the discourse by characterising the incarnation as a transformative event that necessitates the restructuring of societal and economic systems to advance justice and equality. Sobrino (1990) argues that the incarnate Christ inspires systemic change. He urges people to rethink and transform their social systems to make them more just and fairer. Systemic change is a term that refers to the transformation of the underlying structures and patterns of a system, such as an economy, a society or an ecosystem. Systemic change can be driven by various factors, such as technological innovation, social movements, political shifts, environmental crises or cultural trends. This understanding of liberation theology motivated South African black theologians to accommodate its emphasis on addressing the whole person and their needs (Motlhabi 2005). Motlhabi (2005) stated:

The expressed concern for black theology was liberation – not only spiritual liberation in the form of traditional, other-worldly ‘salvation’ often preached by the church but also liberation from physical, psychological, social-political, economic and cultural oppression. (p. 45)

Liberation theology’s nuanced interpretation of the purpose of the incarnation extends beyond traditional theological frameworks. Gustavo Gutierrez (1973), Leonardo Boff (1987) and Jon Sobrino (1990) collectively present a narrative in which the incarnation becomes a potent force for social and political transformation, championing the cause of the poor and marginalised and actively challenging systems that perpetuate injustice. This perspective enriches theological discourse by emphasising the relevance and applicability of the incarnation to the lived experiences of those on the margins of society.

African theology, which, in my view, has affinities with liberation theology, interprets the incarnation in a way

relevant to African culture. While African theology, like other theological traditions, is diverse and encompasses a range of perspectives, there are common themes that provide insights into how African theologians have interpreted the purpose of incarnation. For example, the work of African theologian John Mbiti (1975), particularly in his book *Introduction to African Religion*, explores the intertwining of divinity with the communal and ancestral dimensions of African spirituality. Mbiti (1975) delves into how the incarnation serves as a conduit for divine engagement within the everyday experiences of African communities.

Likewise, Kwame Bediako (2000), in his book *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience*, argues that incarnation manifests divine healing and restoration. He asserted that it is because of the incarnation that the healing of the individuals and communities, which includes physical, spiritual and social needs, should be addressed.

Some African theologians emphasise the incarnation as a source of empowerment and liberation, particularly in the face of historical injustices and challenges. One example of such is Benezet Bujo (1992), a prominent African theologian. In his book *African Theology in Its Social Context*, he contends that the presence of the divine in human form is a catalyst for positive transformation. According to Bujo (1992), when Jesus assumed humanity, it engendered a series of transformative effects that extended to individual lives and the broader societal context.

The multifaceted exploration of the purpose of the incarnation across traditional, liberation and African theologies highlights the rich tapestry of Christian thought. Each theological tradition contributes unique perspectives, from the ‘from above’ approach of orthodox theology emphasising divine revelation to the ‘from below’ approach of liberation theology focusing on societal transformation, and the culturally nuanced interpretations within African theology. Despite the diversity in viewpoints, a common thread emerges – the incarnation is perceived as a pivotal means through which God actively intervenes in the lives of individuals, effecting transformative change in their lived experiences. As theologians across centuries and diverse traditions grapple with the wonder of the incarnation, a consensus resonates: the incarnation not only shapes Christian understanding of humanity but also lays the foundation for modern conceptions of freedom, personhood, solidarity and social compassion (Zimmermann 2012). Zimmermann (2012) rightly summarised the purpose of the incarnation by explaining that:

The first theologians of the church were intoxicated with the wonder of the incarnation, and began to unfold what the faith’s deepest mystery – that God had become a human being while in no way diminishing his utter transcendence of creation – meant for our understanding of humanity and of the church’s relation to the world. Based on the incarnation and the consequent development of trinitarian theology, Christianity prepared the way for modern conceptions of freedom, personhood, solidarity and social compassion. (p. 10)

Zimmermann's (2012) insight underscores that the profound mystery of God becoming human, while maintaining transcendence, continues to influence the trajectory of individual and collective lives, offering enduring relevance to the perennial questions of human experience.

The public practical theology concerns

Embarking on the exploration of public practical theology mandates a foundational understanding of the intricate web woven by its constituent terms. Before delving into the specific concerns of public practical theology, it is imperative to grapple with the elusive task of defining this multifaceted domain. As Mannion (2009:122) wisely acknowledges, defining public practical theology may be a task more formidable than unravelling what it is not – a theology devoid of public relevance. In defining public practical theology, Dreyer (2004:919–920) first defines public theology and then explains the task of practical theology to give a comprehensive conceptualisation of the term. Dreyer (2004) states:

'Public theology' is a fairly recent term referring to a theology which critically reflects on both the Christian tradition as well as social and political issues. This dialogue is seen to benefit both theology and society. (p. 919)

Dreyer (2004) distinguishes between practical theology and public theology by asserting that 'not all practical theology is public theology. In other words aimed at non-ecclesial general audience'. This statement indicates that, according to Dreyer's (2004) perspective, the audience for public theology is not the 'church' but rather the 'public'. It may take me another study to explain what public means; however, Mannion (2009) helps us to understand what precisely public theology encompasses in the following statement:

So, to chart briefly the scope and range of public theology, we can begin by saying that most contributors to such discourse would agree that public theology is theology that is social, political, and practical. But I would argue that at its best public theology involves theological hermeneutics in the service of moral, social, and political praxis. (p. 122)

Smit (2017:75) usefully explains that public theology distinguishes itself from church theology by its engagement with the public sphere. Unlike the discourse confined to the secure and secluded spaces of worship, theological faculties or professional theological societies, public theology is dynamic, enacted and practised in the world at large. It unfolds openly in society, communities and the controversial 'public sphere', encompassing the entirety of life, where everyone is invited and should be able to participate. This form of theology extends beyond conversations among insiders, reaching out to all individuals who share the public space, from the streets and markets to the realms of public avenues.

The difficulty of defining practical theology is visible in Richard Osmer's (2008) work when he emphasises the tasks of practical theology rather than the precise definition.

Osmer's approach to practical theology, as elucidated in 2008, transcends a conventional definitional framework. Rather than presenting a static definition, he advocates for an understanding of practical theology through the lens of interpreting its inherent tasks. The four pivotal questions posed by Osmer – namely, 'What is going on?' 'Why is this going on?' 'What ought to be going on?' and 'How might we respond?' – function as guiding principles for the tasks of practical theological interpretation.

This methodological shift suggests that practical theology is more effectively comprehended through active engagement with its tasks rather than a rigid adherence to abstract definitions.

Osmer's framework (2008) underscores the practical and contextual aspects of practical theology by addressing the dynamic interplay of situations, motivations, normative considerations and potential responses. This approach underscores the importance of situational awareness, interpretative depth and responsiveness in practical theology, fostering a nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of its role in addressing real-life issues.

In essence, Osmer's perspective encourages scholars and practitioners to view practical theology as a dynamic process of interpretation and engagement rather than a static concept defined in isolation.

However, Miller-McLemore (2012) attempted to define practical theology as referring to:

An activity of believers seeking to sustain a life of reflective faith in the everyday, a method or a way of analysing theology in practice used by the religious leaders and by teachers and students across the theological curriculum, a curricular area in the theological education focused on ministerial practice and subspecialties, and finally an academic discipline pursued by a smaller subset of scholars to support and sustain these first tree enterprises. (p. 20)

The significance of praxis within the domain of practical theology is underscored by scholars such as Graham (2017:3–4) and Beaudoin (2016:9), wherein practice is not only acknowledged but also construed as inherently theological and consequently holds theological import. This implies that the accentuation of practice within the purview of practical theology carries theological significance, as posited by Graham (2017) and Beaudoin (2016). Consequently, practical theology is construed as a concerted effort to elucidate and comprehend the existential dimensions of faith within the broader context of worldly existence, as articulated by Magezi (2019:119).

The focus on public issues in practical theology has made it to be recognised as public practical theology. The transition from an emphasis on practical theology to the domain of public practical theology constitutes a noteworthy evolution recognised by several authorities in the field of practical theology (Dreyer 2004; Dreyer & Pieterse 2010; Magezi 2018; Osmer & Schweitzer 2003). Osmer and Schweitzer (2003:218)

provide insightful elucidation by articulating three discernible facets encapsulating the task of public practical theology.

Firstly, it entails positioning the public as a key constituency for practical theological discourse. Secondly, it mandates the incorporation of everyday concerns and issues into the purview of practical theological reflection. Lastly, public practical theology is charged with the responsibility of fostering a meaningful dialogue between theological perspectives and the prevailing ethos of contemporary culture.

Noteworthy debates surrounding this paradigmatic transition include considerations of the socio-cultural relevance and contextual responsiveness of practical theology. Dreyer's (2004) and Dreyer's (2011) works, for instance, delve into the complexities of integrating everyday concerns and issues into the reflective domain of practical theology. This aligns with the assertion made by Osmer and Schweitzer (2003:218) regarding the second facet of public practical theology, which underscores the necessity of incorporating the mundane aspects of life into theological reflection.

Moreover, the responsibility attributed to public practical theology in fostering meaningful dialogue between theological perspectives and the prevailing ethos of contemporary culture invites examination in the context of wider theological discourses. Notable theologians such as Tracy (1981) and Vanhoozer (2005) have engaged in discussions regarding the intersection of theology and culture, offering insights into the challenges and opportunities associated with such dialogues.

The call for a robust engagement with contemporary culture in practical theology aligns with Tracy's (1981) emphasis on a hermeneutical approach to theology that acknowledges the contextual nature of theological interpretation.

In synthesising the insights on public theology and practical theology, the emergence of public practical theology as a distinct field becomes evident. This evolution, as recognised by authorities such as Dreyer, Magezi and Osmer, encapsulates the dynamic engagement with the public sphere, the integration of everyday concerns, and the fostering of meaningful dialogue between theological perspectives and contemporary culture.

The evolving nature of public practical theology signifies its responsiveness to the challenges and complexities of the modern world. As theologians grapple with the shifting dynamics of societal, political and cultural landscapes, the imperative for a theology that actively engages with the public, addresses real-life concerns and dialogues with diverse perspectives becomes increasingly apparent.

The incarnation and public practical theology convergence

Kim (2017:40) defines public theology as a 'critical, reflective and reasoned engagement of theology in society to bring the

Kingdom of God, which is for the sake of the poor and marginalised'. The definition of public theology given by Kim (2017:40) is insightful as it gives the same concern for the people as God did in becoming a human. The above discussion of the purpose of incarnation clearly shows that it was for the wellbeing of humanity that God assumed the flesh. Whether one understands the purpose of incarnation as a conservative or non-conservative, the truth remains that it is for the people that the incarnation of God is meant to benefit. God's love for the people is clearly manifested in Jesus becoming a human (Rm 5:8). Kim's (2017) understanding of what public theology is, links very well with what Jesus said in Luke 4.

Luke 4:16–18 records:

¹⁶And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read.

¹⁷And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

¹⁸The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed,

¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (ESV).

In the above passage, Jesus presents the manifesto for his ministry. He announces what the good news that he came to proclaim was about. He defines his gospel as the proclamation of the good news to the poor and the oppressed (vv. 18–19). The Gospels present Jesus repeatedly reaching out to those who were the poor and marginalised of the society: women, Samaritans, lepers, children, prostitutes and tax collectors. This shows that Jesus' message in Luke 4:16–19 should not be restricted to the spiritual dimension only but also to public issues that affect people daily.

While the emphasis by the conservative theologians has been on the spiritual benefit of the incarnation, the Luke passage and the evidence in Jesus' ministry defy that. Therefore, the African understanding of salvation aligns very well with what Jesus is offering in Luke 4. For example, Mbiti (1986:158) challenges the conventional spiritualised understanding of salvation, asserting that it extends beyond the narrow scope of being 'saved from sin'. In his exploration of the holistic concept of salvation, Mbiti (1986) employs the example of the Israelites' liberation from Egyptian slavery. He emphasises that, in the Exodus narrative, the Israelites are initially depicted not as sinners but as individuals who have suffered wrongdoing and peril. Mbiti (1986) underscores that God's intervention in saving them with mighty acts transcends solely spiritual salvation, encompassing physical deliverance from the hardships endured in Egypt. This analysis by Mbiti (1986) reveals that salvation is not confined to deliverance from sin alone; rather, it encompasses a broader scope that includes physical deliverance. Furthermore, the Exodus story, according to Mbiti (1986:159), affirms the dual nature

of humanity – both physical and spiritual – necessitating salvation that addresses both dimensions.

In the incarnation, God exhibited his compassion for humanity. Public practical theology, informed by the compassion of God that is manifested in the incarnation, calls for involvement that extends beyond theoretical reflection to active involvement in addressing society's needs.

Vanier (1989) argues that people in society and their experiences should be the focus of practical theology. This argument is echoed by Juma (2015:1) who asserted that the goal of one's theological training should not be solely the church but to be equipped for the service in the world. Both Vanier (1989) and Juma (2015) show that theology that does not benefit society is a vain enterprise. I agree with Vanier and Juma's assertion and want to argue that numerous challenges that Africa is facing are because of the version of theology that the Western missionaries introduced. To me, it looks like the influence of colonialism also affected the version of debates about God that Africans were allowed to engage in.

Oelofsen (2015) pointed out this when she argued that:

... structures of government and other institutions, the way in which a country is economically organised, as well as the way in which former colonial subjects were encouraged to think, are often still determined by the former colonial powers in post-colonial countries, as a result of the economic and cultural power the former colonisers wield. To claim that the colonial project stops having an impact on the newly decolonised country and its citizens, is to misunderstand how deeply the colonial project affected these countries and their citizens. (p. 130)

The above issue shows why Lartey (2013:129) contends that practical theology in Africa must pursue and engage in the activities of postcolonising God. Why? Because it shows that the theologies that were taught by the missionaries during the time of colonial rule are unable to help Africans address the issues that the continent is facing. According to Pope John Paul (1991), 'the theological dimension is needed both for interpreting and solving present-day problems in human society'. Consequently, theology transcends the mere dissemination of nebulous concepts regarding God. Its essence lies in grounding itself, delving into discussions concerning humanity, and delineating pathways for human flourishing on earth. In essence, theology necessitates a tangible and pragmatic engagement, shifting beyond abstract notions to address the practical dimensions of human existence and the potential for thriving within the earthly context.

The convergence of the incarnation and public practical theology becomes evident in their shared focus on addressing the pressing needs of humanity. The compassionate nature of God, exemplified in the incarnation, serves as a powerful impetus for active involvement in societal issues within the framework of public practical theology. As Jesus proclaimed the good news to the poor and oppressed, public theology

aligns with the African perspective on salvation, emphasising a holistic understanding that transcends spiritual dimensions alone. The call for postcolonial engagement in practical theology in Africa recognises the impact of historical forces on theological discourse and advocates for a theology that actively contributes to addressing contemporary challenges. This convergence underscores the transformative potential of theology when grounded in the lived experiences of individuals and communities, shaping a theology that not only interprets but actively participates in solving present-day problems for the flourishing of human society.

How should incarnation inform public practical theology in Africa?

Thus far the article has argued that the incarnation of Jesus should transform the way practical theology is performed in Africa. How would public practical theology informed by incarnation look like?

Firstly, the assertion posited in this article underscores the imperative for practical theology in Africa to assume a public-facing stance, particularly when viewed through the lens of the incarnation. By incarnation, God became involved in public issues. To fortify this perspective, one can draw upon foundational theological principles and precedents that emphasise the transformative nature of the incarnation.

The argument unfolds within the broader context of a call to adjust theological discourses on the African continent, steering away from abstract deliberations towards a more tangible and concrete engagement with the myriad challenges faced by the populace. This contention rests on the premise that the profound societal issues plaguing Africa, including but not limited to poverty, underdevelopment, armed conflicts, injustices and corruption, necessitate a substantive shift in theological discussions towards practical interventions that directly address these pressing concerns. Forster (2022) posited:

In this sense, I would contend that theologians in Africa, from Africa, and those concerned with Africa, should rightly centre African concerns and lived experiences in their theologies. Of course there will be differences amongst Africans themselves, given the diversity of African contexts. (p. 9)

To fortify this perspective, one can draw upon foundational theological principles and precedents that emphasise the transformative nature of the incarnation. The incarnational model, exemplified by God's embodiment in human form, inherently implies a divine participation in the concrete realities of human existence. Moreover, historical instances of practical theology responding effectively to societal challenges in Africa can be elucidated to reinforce the argument.

For instance, the role of liberation theology in addressing social injustices in post-colonial Africa, as reflected in the works of African theologians such as Desmond Tutu (1984), provides a compelling illustration of theology catalysing concrete change. Tutu, influenced by the transformative

aspect of the incarnation, actively participated in the anti-apartheid movement, advocating for justice, equality and human rights. His practical theology extended beyond theoretical discussions, making a tangible impact on societal issues. This approach aligns with the core contention that theological debates must evolve beyond theoretical realms to actively confront and improve the prevailing issues faced by the African continent.

Another example is how faith-based organisations (FBOs) have responded to human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) or acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) pandemic in Africa. The HIV or AIDS epidemic posed a significant public health challenge in many African countries, affecting communities and individuals on a large scale. Public practical theology in response to HIV or AIDS involved faith-based organisations providing support, education and care. These initiatives, often influenced by the idea of God's involvement in human suffering (as demonstrated in the incarnation), contributed to addressing the practical needs of those affected by the epidemic.

Additionally, environmental stewardship in East Africa is an issue. The ecological challenges faced by East African nations, including deforestation and climate change, have led to a growing awareness of environmental issues. Informed by the idea that God's incarnation signifies a concern for the entirety of creation, practical theology in East Africa involves initiatives promoting environmental stewardship. Churches and communities engage in tree-planting campaigns, sustainable agricultural practices and advocacy for ecological justice.

Secondly, the imperative arises that practical theological ministries in the African context demand a meticulous process of contextualisation. The embodiment of the divine in the incarnation serves as a quintessential paradigm, illustrating God's intentional involvement with humanity within a distinct cultural and historical milieu. This theological underpinning posits that practical theological ministries in Africa ought to be intricately woven into the fabric of specific cultural and historical contexts, resonating with the diverse needs and dynamics inherent to various African cultures (Bosch 1991).

The incarnation narrative, as a theological archetype, underscores the significance of adapting practical theological ministries to the features of African cultures. This involves a conscientious consideration of the unique social, cultural and historical dimensions that characterise the diverse societies within the continent. The call for contextualisation, therefore, necessitates a nuanced understanding of the rich tapestry of African cultures, emphasising the need for practical theological endeavours to reflect the intricacies of these cultural landscapes.

For instance, as far as health and healing practices are concerned, traditional African approaches to health and healing often involve a holistic understanding of wellbeing, incorporating spiritual, physical and communal dimensions.

Practical theological ministries engaged in health initiatives must recognise and integrate traditional healing practices where appropriate. This might involve collaborating with traditional healers, incorporating communal rituals into health awareness programmes, and addressing health concerns within the broader framework of holistic wellbeing.

Additionally, regarding the inclusion of community development in theological discourse in Africa (Nanthambwe 2023), economic challenges and underdevelopment are prevalent issues in many African communities which makes the people not enjoy the life that God has meant for them. Practical theological ministries addressing community development could tailor initiatives to align with local economic structures, traditional communal values and specific needs. This might involve supporting local entrepreneurship, agricultural projects or educational programmes that resonate with the cultural and historical context of the community (Nanthambwe 2023).

Thirdly, the imperative emerges for practical theology to fervently engage with issues of social justice, a commitment underscored by God's profound identification with the marginalised and oppressed. The critical examination of pervasive challenges such as rampant inequalities, child labour and gender-based violence (GBV), which starkly manifest as a form of suppressing womanhood across the continent, demands a comprehensive and resolute response. This mandate is anchored in the theological principle that posits the intrinsic value of humanity, each person being created in the divine image. While the rhetoric surrounding these issues has permeated theological discussions, a discernible disjunction persists between dialogue and effective, tangible interventions. It is evident that African nations continue to grapple with the persistent and pernicious manifestations of these social injustices.

Fourthly, a nuanced examination of the socio-political dynamics underpinning inequalities, child labour and GBV within specific African contexts is warranted. Drawing on empirical research, case studies and anthropological insights, scholars can elucidate the complex interplay of historical, cultural and economic factors contributing to these social issues. This academic scrutiny ensures a holistic understanding of the challenges at hand, facilitating more targeted and effective interventions by practical theology.

Examples of successful practical theological engagements with social justice issues can be incorporated to illustrate the transformative potential of theological interventions. Initiatives such as faith-based community organisations advocating for gender equality, grassroots projects combating child labour and theological reflections guiding social justice movements can be cited to underscore the capacity of practical theology to effect positive change on the ground.

Public practical theology in Africa, informed by the incarnation, would involve a proactive, culturally sensitive and socially just approach that addresses the tangible needs of the people

while drawing inspiration from the transformative essence of God's embodiment in human form. It should actively collaborate with local communities, incorporate indigenous knowledge and utilise storytelling as a means of communicating theological insights. Examples such as community advocacy, grassroots projects and theological reflections can further highlight the practical and transformative impact of theology in addressing societal challenges.

Conclusion

The theological significance of God incarnating as man holds paramount importance in contemplating its transformative potential for African communities. This article systematically examines the concept of incarnation and elucidates its direct implications for the efficacy of public practical theology on the African continent. It is crucial to recognise that the challenges faced by Africans should not be construed as divine abandonment, but rather as a call to deliberate upon the inspiration and methodologies for addressing these challenges.

The incarnation of Jesus Christ serves as a testament to God's profound concern for humanity, both in Africa and beyond. The article initiates its exploration by delving into the Christian perspective on incarnation, acknowledging, however, that the concept extends beyond the confines of Christianity. Subsequently, the discourse extends to an analysis of the parameters of public practical theology. Emphasising its distinction from abstract considerations such as doctrines and dogmas, the article underscores that public practical theology is fundamentally concerned with addressing the practical challenges that individuals encounter in their daily lives.

The convergence of the themes of incarnation and public practical theology is then expounded upon in the article, delineating the commonalities that underscore their interconnectedness. The discourse concludes by articulating specific ways in which the incarnation should inform the trajectory of public practical theology in the African context. In doing so, the article not only underscores the relevance of theological insights for practical issues but also underscores the imperative for a nuanced understanding of how theological tenets can actively contribute to the holistic betterment of African societies.

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