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## BOOK REVIEW

### *African public theology*

Agang, B.A. (ed.), (Cumbria: Langham Publishing, 2020), 422 pp, ISBN: 9781783687664

As a continent, Africa is facing numerous internal and external challenges that prevent it from developing towards an Africa that God wants. The overwhelming challenges of Africa have often earned it derogatory names. Agang (2020:xv), in his acknowledgement of numerous African challenges, describes Africa as a continent in transition, with shaky foundations. If contemporary Africa is in transition, what is her destiny and consequence of that transition? Is it towards a better or a hopeless life for Africans? If contemporary Africa has shaky foundations, what made Africa develop these? What could be the remedy? *African public theology* concerns itself mostly with challenges facing Africa as a continent, challenges that shook the foundations of Africa. These challenges range from social, economic, and political to health, educational, and spiritual challenges.

Often, the solution to the challenges of Africa is derived from abroad and formulated by those who have no experience of the Africans' pain and suffering. This book was written by esteemed scholars from various countries in Africa. Its themes cut across theological disciplines such as biblical, systematic, practical, and missional disciplines. Each chapter has questions and a list of additional sources for readers to consult and use, in order to interact with the contents of the book and apply what they have read in their own context (Kunhiyop 2020:xiv). The book is written in such a way that both the elite and the layperson can read, follow and understand its contents. Hence, the readers of the book vary from

theologians and students to ordinary members of the African community and beyond.

The book aims to contribute towards the holistic empowerment of African humanity. According to Agang (2020:xv), it strives to contribute to the renewal of the consciousness of African humanity through the intellectual, critical, and provocative engagement of African practices, mind, and spirituality. It challenges Africans to be infused with a transforming spirit by engaging the scripture and reimagining the interpretation of the scripture and the concept of God and the church. The book mobilises Africans to embody the Christian faith that brings hope of love, justice, peace, and dignity while celebrating diversity.

In addressing African challenges, the book takes a unique and fitting approach of contributing towards the practical engagement of the internal and external challenges of Africa. This is done through the reflective approach that allows theory to interact with African praxis and vice versa, in order to enrich both theory and praxis and to redeem the problematic situation of Africa.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part discusses the fundamental principles underlying the practice of public theology. These principles, derived from Scripture and the understanding of the *Missio Dei* concerning God's creation, are essential to help us engage our context towards an Africa that God wants.

The first part of the book consists of five chapters. The first chapter, "*Why do we need African public theology?*", is written by Agang (2020:3-14), who discusses the following themes: Disconnection between Christian life and public life; the poor concept of the church, clergy-centred ministry, and passive laity; fear of each other, poor African leadership, and poor educational approach. In providing the solutions to these challenges, the chapter suggests that African Christians need discernment from God to enable every African Christian to proclaim and demonstrate the gospel as well as to heal the world. Furthermore, theological education has a critical role to play in this matter, not only by being an institution for empowering prospective ministers, but also by encouraging church members to live a life that glorifies God in all spheres of the African community (Agang 2020:13).

Chapter two, "*Nature of public theology*", is written by Forster (2020:15-26), who argues that God is active and concerned with all spheres of life. Hence, theology must also be interested in all spheres of life. Public theology, in particular, should reflect on the meaning and implication of faith in and for public life, by engaging liberation and feminist theologies. Forster (2020:20-22) also mentions that the nature of public theology must be biblical, multilingual,

interdisciplinary, and competent to offer political direction, prophetic, and inter-contextual understanding.

Chapter three, “*The Bible and the public theology*”, is written by Musa (2020: 27-37), who discusses how we should view and use the Bible. The Bible is not simply a historical book of records; it speaks to the church’s modern context, spiritual formation, and ethical direction. The Bible in Africa must be used for healing, promoting responsible involvement in society, and encouraging the good practice of public theology.

Chapter four, “*Trinity and public theology*”, is written by Aben (2020:39-48), who discusses how the unity and diversity of the trinity enhance the practice of public theology. In his discussion on unity, Aben challenges the rivalry and division that exists among African leaders and communities and suggests *ubuntu*, kinship, and collaboration towards common goals. Discussion on diversity challenges the hierarchy that dehumanises and divides Africans. The author encourages Africans in that everyone has a distinctive role to play in society and, while performing our distinctive role, we need to strive for harmonious coexistence and equal dignity.

Chapter five, “*Public theology and identity*”, is written by Hendriks (2020:49-63), who argues that the view of a human being created in the image of God and our new identity in Christ compel us to be relational, concerned with the suffering of others, and live an alternative lifestyle that promotes the kingdom of God.

The second part of the book explores the topics that are relevant and important to Africa. It explains the process of applying practical public theology principles in various contexts of the African community (Agang 2020:xvi). The explanation of principles of public theology requires the mobilization of African people to embody the values and principles of an Africa that God wants. The essence of those values and principles requires us to adopt a theology that addresses African societal challenges, in order to bring about positive changes to African communities. The second part of the book also challenges us to relate our faith with everyday lives. It is concerned about tension between the privatization of faith and public square.

The second part of the book consists of twenty-one chapters that engage various themes such as the state; economics; education; the environment; science; health, and many more. I will not discuss all of these twenty-one chapters but will highlight the themes in the chapters and how they are approached. The chapter, “*The state*”, written by Teklu (2020:267-278), relates to the nature of the state, the challenges of the state in Africa, and how public theology should engage the state through constructive engagement and critique. The chapter, “*Economics*”, is written by Naudé (2020:97-112),

who discusses the types of economic systems in Africa, the challenges of the African economy, and how Christians may participate in economic life. The chapter, "*The environment*", is written by Conradie (2020:157-173), who emphasises that the issue of environment is now a concern of every social sector such as public, church, academy, society, and so on. Conradie also discusses various flawed theologies that contributed to the degradation of the environment and new theological approaches that contribute to a healthy environment.

The third part of the book highlights the primary responsibility of the church in practical public theology (Agang 2020:xvi). The book endeavours to explain the concept of the church, because an understanding of this concept has implications for how the believers in the church witness the gospel in word and deed within their context. In this third section, three chapters strive to mobilise the church and African Christians to achieve the Africa that God wants. The first chapter, "*Christianity and the church in Africa*", is written by Michael (2020:367-377), who focuses on the growth of Christian faith that led to positive development in African society; the types of Christian faiths that exist in Africa, and the paradoxes of modern African Christianity that lack authentic transformation of context. The second chapter, "*Mobilizing the church in Africa*", is written by Sebahene (2020:379-389), who discusses the concept of the church and its primary responsibility as witnessing the gospel in word and deed. Most important in this chapter is the discussion on mobilizing the church by breaking down the divide between sacred and secular, being salt and light of Africa, empowering the laity to embody the gospel, living the values of the Kingdom of God, and setting the example. Hendriks (2020:391-400) wrote the last chapter of this book. This chapter concludes with a discussion on moving "*Towards Africa that God wants*" and provides practical and theoretical solutions such as that Africans need to develop a conscience to glorify God in every sphere of life; start a spirit-led movement, and adopt a church practice that reflects a trinitarian perspective, a kingdom perspective, and living a transforming gospel.

It must be emphasised that this book does not provide all the answers to African challenges. There is still a need for contextual, biblical, intercultural, and African-initiated practical solutions to many of the challenges of Africa. However, this book has laid the foundation and pioneered the way forward that future research, teaching, and learning in Africa must be centred around a problem-solving approach that addresses the challenges facing the African community. It encourages African Christians to be involved in Spirit-led movements that encourage African community members to be active agents in changing their own situation. The book challenges us that Christian faith must shift from private and pious faith to being prophetic and transforming African

humanity and societal structure to serve the will of the Kingdom of God. The book contributes to the review of training in African theological institutions and ministry in congregations that must now shift from being clergy-centred to being the centre of empowerment of all the congregation members.

In conclusion, I do recommend the book *African public theology*, as it is a monumental work by Africans. It will leave a lasting legacy of benefit to the future of African Christianity and is admired for its constructive approach to persuade Africans to initiate a process of moving towards an Africa that God wants, where its citizens place their trust in God who empowers African believers to be participants in the Spirit-led movements to transform Africa.