

## **The Role of the Church in Kenyan Politics through Social Justice and Christ's Prophetic Office**

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### ***Abstract***

*This paper examines the post-colonial historical involvement of the church in Kenyan politics and its subsequent decline in influence. It argues for the revitalization and perpetuation of the church's voice in politics, particularly through the lens of social justice and Christ's Prophetic Office as a model. The church has played a significant role in socio-political transformation in Kenya, and Rev. Dr. Timothy Njoya and other individuals whose activism and leadership exemplified this involvement. Rev. Dr. Njoya and others' fearless resistance against injustices and dedication to championing social change made them influential figures within the church and the broader society. Their commitment to upholding the principles of justice and equity in the face of political oppression sparked national conversations and motivated others to take action. However, the church has gradually lost its voice in Kenyan politics over the years, resulting in a diminished impact on policy-making and social change. This decline can be attributed to various factors, including the erosion of moral authority, political co-optation, and the prioritization of personal agendas over wider societal concerns. Consequently, the church's role as a catalyst for positive change has become marginalized, leaving a void in the political landscape. In order to revive and maintain the church's voice in Kenyan politics, this paper proposes the adoption of a renewed focus on social justice and Christ's Prophetic Office as a model. By utilizing the prophetic tradition within Christianity, the church can regain its influence and advocate for the voiceless, particularly the most vulnerable in society, who are often marginalized in political discourse. Christ's Prophetic Office provides a blueprint for engaging with political structures while upholding the values of justice, compassion, and equality. This paper draws on extensive research of existing literature, historical analysis, and interviews to analyze the decline of the church's voice in Kenyan politics and to propose strategies for its revitalization. It highlights the urgency of the vulnerable inclusion in the political processes and argues that an active, socially-just church can empower them to reclaim their voice and contribute to the development and transformation of Kenyan society.*

***Key Words: Politics, Social Justice, Christ's Prophetic Office, Reconstruction Theology***

### **Introduction**

There is a sad political picture in Africa characterized by personal interest, inequality, division and injustice. The need for positive change and social transformation has become increasingly urgent, Kenya is not an exception. Amongst the many institutions which actively worked towards addressing these

challenges were civil societies, non-governmental organizations and the Church in Kenya and more so members of the clergy like Rev. Timothy Njoya, Bishop Henry Okullu and Bishop Ndingi Mwana Nzeki just to mention but a few, who between 1987 to 2007, played a significant role in advocating for human rights and justice, equality, diversity, access, participation, and compassionate governance. Unfortunately, since the 1997 post-election violence in Kenya, the clergy and the church have not been as vocal as they were on the concerns and issues that seemed to affect the welfare of the citizens, failing to criticize the National Rainbow coalition, the Jubilee Alliance and the current Kenya Kwanza government. They appear as if they have been compromised, muted or they cannot generate any uproar to elicit national level dialogue on pertinent issues.

In the just concluded elections in 2022, the clergy and even some churches openly declared their preferred candidates giving cryptic prophesies on who would be the next president, some even went ahead to ceremoniously anoint them as the God chosen leaders for Kenya. Clergy who appeared to be neutral were ostracized and disdained outrightly or shunned altogether. The current president of Kenya, his wife and the Deputy President's wife, who is a pastor, have brandished their Christian faith. Due to this outlandish display of their Christian faith, the clergy have become oblivious to the social injustices committed in government. This is further cemented by the general public's perception that the clergy and government are one. The church being the moral yardstick for society, this research seeks to explore and reignite the post-colonial role of the church in fighting for social justice as witnessed in the early 1990s. In addition, this study seeks to explore the prophetic role of the church in the realms of politics through the lenses of social justice and to generate insights and potential solutions for creating a more equitable and compassionate society.

Based on initial observations and existing literature, this article suggests that a strengthened prophetic role of the church in politics and social justice will foster a more compassionate and just society without compromising the position of the church. By calling attention to systemic inequalities and advocating for compassionate policies, the church can play a crucial role in shaping public discourse, policy formulation, and actions that address socio-political challenges.

### **Research Questions**

1. How did the church in Kenya historically contribute to fostering social justice and political engagement since the early 1990s?
2. What are the signs that a church may lose its prophetic voice?
3. What are the key principles and values that reinforce the church's prophetic role in politics and social justice?
4. What strategies may enhance the impact of the church's prophetic voice in contemporary socio-political contexts as the church emulates Christ's prophetic office and role?

### **Methodology**

The research is based on a qualitative research method based on a systematic review approach of reconstruction theology as hypothesized by Jesse Mugambi, which is a theological framework that seeks to address issues of social and economic justice in Africa. It is a response to the unjust legacies of slavery, colonialism and post liberation theology, aiming to reconstruct African societies and institutions through a theological lens. It is important to note at this point that that reconstruction goes beyond post-colonial theory which focuses on the impact of colonialism in Kenya but focuses more on the aftermath of the new found independence. Jesse Mugambi, a prominent Kenyan theologian, argues that after liberation theology happened the liberated have themselves turned to be oppressors. Reconstruction theology, on the other hand, recognizes the need for theological reflection that is rooted in the African context and actively seeks to challenge new oppressive systems. One of the key tenets of reconstruction theology is the emphasis going beyond liberation theology. This approach promotes the idea that Christianity should empower marginalized and oppressed communities, fostering their spiritual, social, and economic liberation. It emphasizes the collective responsibility for societal transformation, with a focus on eradicating poverty, challenging corruption, and promoting justice. The All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), a pan-African organization based in Kenya, also promotes reconstruction theology. The AACC advocates for social justice and works towards the transformation of African societies through its various programs. These initiatives aim to combat poverty, inequality, and corruption, in line with the principles of reconstruction theology. Reconstruction theology has had a significant impact beyond Kenya's borders, influencing theological discourse and shaping the work of various organizations throughout Africa. Mugambi's ideas have resonated with scholars, activists, and religious leaders who strive to address the injustices and challenges faced by African societies. Reconstruction theology, as hypothesized by Jesse Mugambi, offers a critical lens through which to examine and challenge the oppressive legacies of colonialism in Africa. Its principles of social justice seeing beyond liberation theology, and holistic transformation have been embraced by institutions such as St. Paul's University, the All Africa Conference of Churches, and the Institute of African Studies. By adopting reconstruction theology, these institutions and others across Africa strive to reconstruct African societies and promote equitable and just systems.

### **Literature Review**

In 1990, the executive committee of AACC that met in Nairobi, Mugambi was invited to reflect on the future of the church and the church of the future in Africa. This was the birth of reconstruction theology. He states, "my presentation proposed we need to shift paradigms from the post exodus to post exile imagery with reconstruction as the resultant theological axiom"(Mugambi, 1995, p. 5) Mugambi had observed that even though much gains had been achieved through liberation theology African nations had not achieved much after breaking the chains of the colonizers as opposed to countries such as Japan and West Germany after the devastating effects of world war two. Kobia reemphasizes this notion by

saying, “it is generally accepted that Africans are worse off economically today than they were at independence” (Kobia, 2003, p. 143) Njoya shapes the argument by saying, “that the church is the conscience of the society” (Njoya, 2017, p. 35) Mugambi calls this conscience a higher calling (Mugambi, 1997, p. 195). Being the conscience of the nation social justice is part of the mission of God here on earth. Goodwin in his research paper introduces a thought of social justice as part of God’s mission here on earth and this is achieved by evaluating the Nazarene manifesto when Christ fulfils his prophetic office role in Luke 4:16-21. He states my hope is that the reader will recognize that social justice is a part of the ongoing mission and character of God (Goodwin,2012, p. 2) further Otieno in his book Human rights and social justice: cultural, ethical and spiritual imperatives combines social justice and human rights and he boldly states that the bible is the basis of human rights(Otieno, 2007, p. 110) sadly Parsitau notes that the church has considerably lost its voice and it needs to detach itself from politicians (Parsitau, 2021).

## **Results and Discussion**

It is important to remember the crucial role the church has played in Kenya since 1990. The role of the church and clergy in influencing the government in Kenya has been significant, particularly since the 1990s. This is observed in promoting ethical leadership among politicians and civil servants. it has been in education. With its network of schools, universities, and vocational training centers, the church has played a vital role in the education sector.it has been seen in healthcare, relief, and humanitarian aid these have also been a concern of the church. One of the best known organization with over 400 known Church associated hospitals is CHAK whose vision is Quality Healthcare for all to the glory of God (CHAK n.d. 2021.) .another role is promoting peace and reconciliation. The church and clergy actively facilitated peace building and reconciliation efforts, especially during periods of political unrest and conflict. A report by Africa watch praised the church for her efforts during and after the election violence of 1992. The relief and reconciliation efforts of the Kenyan clergy have significantly mitigated the damaging effects of the violence. Most clash victims rely completely on the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK), the Catholic Church (Nowrojee & Manby, 1993, p. 124), the church is involved in the promotion of gender equality and speaking out against gender-based violence, promoting inclusivity, and empowering women. On the economic front the church has helped in poverty alleviation by encouraging church members and the community to form Saccos. In his introductory remarks as he studied church based SACCOS Maithya notes in his research that the Church is known to initiate economic and social projects to serve several purposes which include poverty eradication among the church members (Maithya, n.d., p. 1). Another role played by the church its safeguarding environmental conservation. Through awareness campaigns, tree planting initiatives, and lobbying for improved environmental policies, the church has contributed to protecting Kenya’s natural resources for future generations. Last but not list is its advocacy for human rights. The clergy and the church, acting as the conscience of the

nation, have actively advocated for human rights. Their involvement pressured authorities to address issues of inequality, social injustice, discrimination, and the protection of vulnerable groups. However, these achievements have become old wives' fables and the church has lost its luster.

### **How the Church Lost Her Prophetic Voice**

The Kenyan church, once a respected institution in the country, has over time lost its moral authority in the Kenyan political arena due to several reasons:

**Not preaching the whole gospel of Christ:** First, is the influx of dominion theology proponents or commonly referred to the health and wealth prosperity gospel. It alienates the poor and the less fortunate because they are bewitched or lack the prerequisite faith to change their current status. It is a 'gospel' claiming freedom from sickness, poverty, and all suffering ... promising material, physical and visible blessings to all who would embrace it (Maura et al., 2015, p. 3) secondly tied to this is failure to take up practical steps to fulfil our prophetic voice as the church as illustrated in the Nazarene manifesto as contained in the book of Luke 4:18-21.

**Corruption:** Some church leaders have been involved in corruption, scandals, taking bribes or misusing church funds. This has tarnished the reputation of the church and diminished its moral authority to speak against corruption in the political sphere. This was noted by M'ithiria and Nkatha (2009) as they researched on pyramid schemes which most of them were operated in churches. They state, "Some of the victims of the pyramid schemes had been encouraged by their church pastors to join these schemes to alleviate poverty... Other pyramid schemes, disguised as cooperative societies, had religious association with church personalities" (M'ithiria and Nkatha, 2009, p. 64).

**Political affiliations:** The church, instead of remaining neutral, has shown favoritism towards certain political parties or politicians. This has led to accusations of bias and compromised the church's ability to be an impartial moral voice. Margaret Wanjiru A bishop with Jesus is alive ministries (JIAM) churches was recorded giving money during her campaign and also being associated with a political party ((*YouTube*, 2017.)

**Lack of accountability:** Some church leaders have been accused of using their positions to exploit their congregants or engage in immoral activities without facing consequences. This lack of accountability weakens the church's moral authority to hold politicians accountable for their actions hence losing their moral authority. Gatu sadly points what is defining the new gospel ministers and the clergy that the clerical collar has today become a status symbol, synonymous with power, money, class, and authority, money is killing the church. (Gatu, 2016, p. 287)

**Silence on human rights abuses:** In some instances, the church has remained silent in the face of gross human rights violations perpetrated by politicians or the government. The sad reality is at times it's the very church of Christ that would silence the voice of social justice. Njoya accused Okullu and Muge of retracting their previous positions against the second president of Kenya's regime. He says, "they thought I had gone overboard beyond the church's perceived prophetic role

as the conscience of society; (quoting the newspaper) “Rev. J. Henry Okullu yesterday challenged Rev. Njoya to come out in the open and explain to the nation what he really meant by his controversial sermon” (in PCEA St. Andrews Church) (Njoya, 2017, p. 35) (*The Washington Post*, n.d.).

### **Christ Prophetic Office Exemplified in Social Justice**

As proposed by Mugambi, we need to reconstruct the church and the clergy and regain the once important role God gave the church. John Calvin in book 2 chapter 15 formulates the work of Christ in the three offices of Christ by stating; to know for the purpose for which Christ was sent by the father and what he conferred upon us, we must look above all the three things in him; the prophetic office, kingship and priesthood (Calvin & Calvin, 20, p. 494). As the anointed one we shall only concentrate on how Christ manifests his prophetic office through teaching and proclaiming the word of God. Just like the Old Testament prophets did we shall explore some verses that point us to Christ teaching on social justice practically in the gospels. Matthew 7;12 Jesus start by teaching to treat others as we would want to be treated but two of the very convincing scriptures are as follows: the first being Mat 25:35-46 in this portion of scripture Christ teaches his disciples to pay special attention to the: hungry, strangers or foreigners or refugees, the naked, the sick, and those in prison, Campolo and Aeschliman in their book offer fifty ways you can feed a hungry world in response to Christ’s teaching in mat 25:35-40 they say, “caring for the least of these has never been more pressing an demanding than today.” (Campolo & Aeschliman, 1991, p. 10) the second being Luke 4;18-21 in this portion Christ declares the reason he was anointed, it was so that he would proclaim good news to the poor ,proclaim freedom to the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind and to set the oppressed free and to proclaim the year of the Lords favour. Goodwin captures this well in his research paper that a sent out church is the one that does the mission of God he says Luke demonstrates the inclusiveness of God’s saving plan by spotlighting Jesus’ compassion for groups of people who were on the margins of society.(Goodwin, 2012, p. 8). Finally, Luke 10: 30-37 is probably the best example of social justice is when trying to answer who is my neighbour. Jesus point out that there was a priest and a Levite who were busy with their ecclesiastical duties but Christ points out the one who showed mercy was better and extolled them to go and show mercy to the helpless. Just like he taught them in Luke 11; 42 insists that we show mercy justice and the love of God. As we can clearly see Christ play well his role as a prophet by revealing the truth about God’s kingdom, and interpreting and applying God’s will to the world. As a prophet, Christ speaks with authority, wisdom, and insight, guiding people towards a deeper understanding of God’s purpose and calling as he uses parables. He exposes false beliefs and practices, calls people to repentance and offers guidance for righteous living challenges injustice and oppression. Overall, Christ’s prophetic office is characterized by a divine revelation of truth, compassion, and a relentless pursuit of justice and righteousness. We may not have time to explore further teachings in the New Testament like in James 1:27 which states, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to

look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world". Neither shall we explore teachings by the Old Testament prophets on the same but the following text can corroborate the prophets role in social justice they include but not limited to: Psalms 82:3, Isaiah 1:17, Isaiah 58, Jer 22:3, Micah 6:8 and Zac 7:9,10.

### **Church Application of Christ's Prophetic Office through Social Justice**

O'Donovan asks and gives a firsthand answer to a spiritual problem. What can Christians do in a situation where the government not only refuse to help but hinders those who are willing to help? The answer is they can appeal to God in prayer (O'Donovan, 2000, p. 138). Maybe the Clergy and the church in general forgot to pray for the nation according to Rom 13. However, faith requires some practical action. There are several things the church and the clergy can do to regain the lost glory it's through reconstructing itself and start rebuilding by the church focusing on social justice in a new way. There was a time the clergy was the custodian of all knowledge and to shape the next phase of our nation we need clergy with wider knowledge or incorporate professionals in their board of management or council of elders to strategically deal with the rising matters on social justice just like Nehemiah in the post exilic period. Mugambi elucidates that in contemporary Africa, religion has served both conservative and transformative function with positive acclamation ... Nehemiah working in the imperial court of Babylon, hears the cries of the people in Jerusalem, and undertakes to lead the people to build their country. He applies the managerial knowledge, skill and experience he had accumulated in Babylon and succeeded to mobilize his people for the reconstruction of Jerusalem (Mugambi, 1997, p. 20).

Poverty and income inequality: Social justice can address these problems by advocating for fair economic policies, providing equal access to education and resources, and promoting equitable income distribution. There is a serious growing trend both at government and with its members on the issue of debt default Maithya (n.d.) notes this in his research, there is need to teach the church members to save borrow pay promptly their debts (Maithya, n.d.) However the church should also scrutinize government short term and long-term borrowing because government debt has a direct effect on citizens' wealth. Chossudovsky sadly noted the disparaging effects orchestrated by IMF and World Bank in Rwanda in 1990, by devaluing their franc there was inflation and increase in fuel prices. He says the state administrative apparatus was in disarray, state enterprises were pushed to bankruptcy and public service collapsed. Health and education disintegrated under the brunt of the IMF-imposed austerity measures (Chossudovsky, 2003, p. 108) the church needed to keep on asking the right questions on citizens' taxation and other macro, micro and fiscal policies.

Lack of Access to Education: Social justice can address the problem of inadequate education by advocating for policies that ensure equal access to quality education for all children, regardless of their socio-economic background or location. A PCEA minister while serving in the rural area of Maralal in Samburu County fought for the right to education for children. Mahadew (2019) researched on the

case where Rev. Ndoria Stephen challenged the Minister for Education, Kenya National Examinations Council and the Honourable Attorney General of the Republic of Kenya before the High Court of Kenya in October 2012 (Ndoria Stephen v Minister for Education and others, Petition No. 464 of 2012; hereafter, the Ndoria case (Mahadew, 2019, p. 18),

**Gender Inequality:** Social justice can address gender inequality by advocating for gender-responsive policies, promoting women's empowerment and equal opportunities in education, employment, and leadership positions. In 2022, the Presbyterian Church celebrated 40 years of women ordained in ministry, The Anglican Church celebrated the first female bishop in Kenya (ACNS, 2021.)

**Environmental Degradation:** Social justice can address environmental degradation by advocating for sustainable development practices, promoting environmental education, and holding accountable those who perpetuate environmental harm. Kenya Forest Service in partnership with the PCEA set out to plant 15 billion trees as well as employ technology with a mobile application called Jaza Miti App (Jones, 2023).

While there are many complex and inter related issues that the church can air their voice always such as: Corruption. By advocating for transparency, accountability, and a strong legal system that punishes corrupt individuals regardless of their social status or political influence even if it's the very church as recently occasioned in a matter involving PCEA Kitengela (Ngotho, 2023). Social justice can address unemployment by advocating for equal job opportunities, promoting vocational training and skill development programs, and supporting entrepreneurship among marginalized groups. Social justice can initiate talks on ethnic tensions and tribalism by promoting societal cohesion, cultural integration, and fostering dialogue and understanding among different ethnic groups through community engagement programs and training. (*MTI-East-Africa-2021*) Political Instability. Social justice can address political instability by advocating for democratic governance, promoting the rule of law, and advocating for peaceful conflict resolution mechanisms that place the interests and well-being of the community at the forefront.

### **Recommendations and Further Research**

The church should strive to recreate itself and rebrand itself and stand out to be a force to reckon with on matters of good governance, give the voiceless a voice and reach the marginalized with the best services equitably. Church holds a fundamental responsibility to address social justice issues and advocate for equality and justice. While engaging in social justice initiatives is vital for fostering a more equitable society, it is equally important to explore the potential effects and dangers when the church commits too much to these issues. They include Watering down of theological integrity especially when interpreting scripture (hermeneutical integrity). While the pursuit of social justice aligns with the values of compassion and solidarity, an excessive focus on these issues can potentially dilute the church's theological integrity. There is a danger of



compromising core biblical teachings and moral principles in favor of popular societal trends or political ideologies. The church should carefully discern the balance between addressing social justice issues and maintaining theological integrity, ensuring that its actions and advocacy are rooted in a solid biblical foundation and the teachings of Christ.

Over-commitment to social justice issues may inadvertently lead to polarization within the church community and wider society. When the church takes a strong stance on specific social justice concerns, it runs the risk of alienating those who hold differing views or prioritize other aspects of Christian teachings. An excess focus on social justice without fostering unity and inclusivity can create division and an “us vs. them” mentality, hindering productive dialogue and collaboration necessary for sustaining meaningful change. While the church has a prophetic voice in Kenya as it imitates Christ it has to contend with certain issues that don't pop up immediately. Therefore as the church plugs itself into social justice afresh it must watch out on the issues that plunged it to lose its prophetic voice or turn out to be like any other Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) or civil society. Here are nine questions that the church needs to ask itself on the social justice it wishes to promote:

1. Does it agree with the scriptures and the creeds the church ascribes to?
2. Does it elevate the status of Jesus as the savior and redeemer of the world?
3. Does it agree with apostolic tradition of the pre Nicene era i.e. 325 AD?
4. Does it conflict with other theological teachings i.e. original sin, the nature of man, eternity etc?
5. Does it promote one social justice claim and oppress another social justice claim?
6. Does it prevent us from standing for our core business as Christians which is evangelism?
7. Does it glorify sin and man's selfish nature (hedonism) or sympathize with groups or individuals that may oppose the church position i.e. lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning etc (LGBTQ+)?
8. Does it promote syncretism (mixing two religions) or other no biblical teaching i.e. power of attraction; follow your heart, will power, and situational ethics by Joseph Fletcher etc.
9. Does it encourage the clergy to engage in deep research and studies on other social sciences especially on the millennium development goals and sustainable development goals?

## **Conclusion**

Though the church is called to actively engage in social justice issues, the church must be cautious of the potential effects and dangers of overcommitting to these pursuits. Balancing social justice efforts with spiritual growth, maintaining

theological integrity, fostering inclusivity, avoiding excessive politicization, and preserving core religious functions are vital. By pursuing social justice in a thoughtful and balanced manner, the church can authentically address injustices while still nurturing the spiritual well-being of its members and maintaining its essential role as a spiritual community.

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