Christian "Dual Citizenship" and Civic Duty: Implications of the Accra Charter (2011) for Africa Today

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Introduction

On 25 June 2024, Kenyan youth stormed the Kenyan Parliament buildings. This event was the culmination of many days of unrest, characterized by continuous battles between the youth and state law enforcement agencies (Gachuki, 2024; Makhulo, 2024). What began as a sporadic wave of virtual protests on social media in 2023 rose to a crescendo in April 2024, with emotions and deep sentiments of dissatisfaction with the government eventually spilling into the streets.

The activities on the streets were fueled by Kenya's Finance Bill of 2024, which proposed a heavier tax regime without promising any relief for the strained economy (Omweri, 2024). The youth, popularly known as Gen Z, protested against the lack of representation in national dialogue regarding these issues. They decried the inattentiveness to the problems they raised through carefully coordinated social media interactions, with the protests reaching a high point in 2024 (Ngigi, 2024). These events coincided with a series of alleged government sponsored abductions of key voices affirming these protests. The demonstrations inspired a wave of similar youth initiatives in Uganda, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Ghana, and Nigeria (Bojang, 2024). This unrest was a fulfillment of Lamin Sanneh's (2011:197) ominous prediction that, "in the long run, the

continuing dictatorial abuses will likely spark popular disenchantment and a demand for change."

The nature and scope of church engagement in political and economic affairs within the African context remain a contested issue. Like the Kenyan youth's concern for the state of national affairs, scholars and public intellectuals decry the church's complicity on one hand or inaction on the other (Nzwili, 2024). A case in point are Kenyan Pentecostal ministers who were active in campaigning for and inaugurating the elected president in 2022. Since that time, the key religious figures who stood with the incoming government have done little to comment on or seek remedial action regarding the excesses. In other quarters, religious leaders and institutions encouraged and even actively participated in the protests, symbolizing meaningful action towards a desired societal outcome (Lee, 2024). Churches in the Nairobi area where the political protests were intense, like the Anglican Church of Kenya's All Saints Cathedral, the Presbyterian Church of East Africa's St. Andrew's Church, and Mamlaka Hill Chapel, became a sanctuary for those wounded by security forces during the protests.

These practical interventions and ensuing discourses provide a context for the extent to which the church engages in the public sphere. The "Politics and Religion in the Public Square" conference at St. Paul's University in 21 October 2023 and this special issue are attempts to critically examine this engagement. We are happy to see this special issue come to print. This issue brings together critical reflection on the intersection of politics and religion from various theological perspectives. The discussions at the gathering at St. Paul's University in some ways echoed, albeit in a modest setting, the sentiments voiced militantly on the streets six months later. St. Paul's University's concern for the church follows after a growing tradition among African Christians of critical intellectual engagement with politics from the 1980s (Gitari, 2011; Mejia, 1995; Njoya, 1987; Njoya, 2002; Okullu, 1984). We now focus on one ecumenical effort in the 2010s that holds much promise in framing the discourse that is the substance of this special issue.

Accra Charter of Religious Freedom and Citizenship (2011)

The Accra charter sought to address the question of church involvement in the public sphere. The charter aimed to "bear witness to our dual citizenship as believers and as members of African societies and nations" ("The Accra Charter of Religious Freedom and Citizenship", 2011:198). Twenty senior leaders from academia and the church met from 24 to 26 February 2011 in Accra. Sixteen of these leaders were from West, Central, and East Africa, while the remaining four were from various parts of the global north. The gathering represented many different Christian traditions from diverse places on the continent. At the time, those gathered were coming to terms with pressing issues such as the civil war threatening Cote d'Ivoire, Kenya's recently concluded long and tumultuous constitutional process, the birth of the new nation of South Sudan reconciling with its long and violent past, and Nigeria, along with other parts of the Horn of Africa, contending with religious extremism from various traditions.

It was within this context that the group decided to contemplate what it means to be dual citizens—both of nations within political boundaries and of a heavenly nation. The group considered the idea that societies, as constituted in modern democracies, are temporary arrangements. Guided by their faith, they looked "forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder is God" (Hebrews11:9-10). This was an important time for reflection, given the widespread disruptions in Northern Africa—in Egypt, Libya, Algeria, and Tunisia—where the citizenry mounted pressure on their governments as a way of demanding representation in their everyday life affairs. These disruptions, later known collectively as the Arab Spring, gave hope to those subjugated under despotic rule in this region and had a ripple effect in other parts of the world.

Motivations for the Accra Meeting

The Accra meeting provided a context for these Christian leaders to envision new ways of expressing their devotion to God that would meaningfully engage with their realities. The group was aware that within the tenets of Christian faith, there were injunctions to give due regard to the governance structures within which a pluralistic society lives, and where citizens are challenged to

share their humanity. The group was convicted that "faith gives its noblest expression in settings where all are free to follow their religious convictions" ("The Accra Charter of Religious Freedom and Citizenship", 2011:198).

The gathering aimed to realize that such a context for free worship in a pluralistic society could only come together if the governing structures secured order and peace to allow freedom of worship ("The Accra Charter of Religious Freedom and Citizenship", 2011:198). The charter represented, at the time, a formidable attempt to guide responsible thought and action around the matters pertinent to this special issue. The charter reached back to historical and theological resources, using them to craft a framework for Christian responses. These responses have implications for the political, economic, and social issues that prompted upheavals all over Africa at the time and continue to be a source of ongoing concern.

The charter established that governments are set up by common consent and are required to create the atmosphere for the common good to take root. However, means other than the government are required for "the production of the values essential for moral progress" ("The Accra Charter of Religious Freedom and Citizenship", 2011:198). Divine rule and the governance of the nation-state both demand allegiance, but these allegiances are not mutually exclusive. From within the Christian context, the duties of shared faith complement the understanding of the responsibilities of citizens in a state.

Through its extensive set of affirmations, the charter critiqued government failures that are endemic in post-independence Africa. The charter also challenged, in equal measure, the Christian nationalist trajectories that have threatened to derail good order and societal well-being in a pluralist Africa. Additionally, the charter stood against the inaction within churches and church institutions regarding political action against injustice. The resulting document provided a vision of what responsible Christians could do to build a better future for the modern pluralist African nation.

The Salient Points of the Charter

The charter established fundamental differences between political sovereignty and divine sovereignty. Within political boundaries, governments are to assist

in developing the well-being of the human family. However, governments can also hamper that goal when they crush religious freedom. Freedom of religion is not a pretext to fragment or misuse human and other resources. Rather, such freedom provides a reason to master the conscience, so that believers, as citizens, can exercise patience, tolerance, and esteem for those with whom they live. It is within this context that compassion can be stirred up to create an environment that uplifts society. In the work of "civic righteousness", people of faith are answerable to their Maker and to their fellow human beings in achieving this task.

The charter draws from the understanding that Christians living in African nations in modern times are citizens of earthly nations and are answerable to divine rulership. They share a common heritage, living lives in kinship with one another, where the virtues of home and society are interwoven into the fabric of the nation-state. It is within that understanding that they are to act in the interest of the common good. They uphold government under law for purposes of this common good and for the common security and protection of all individuals.

To this end, governments should not compel, prohibit, favour, or obstruct the institution of religion. Rather, governments are responsible and accountable to their people to provide a healthy environment that makes it possible for faith to be lived for the mutual benefit of the nation and faith communities. The independence that forms the political, social, and moral core brings responsibilities among its citizens for civic duty and accountable governance for Christians living within this environment.

This civic duty inspires the enactment of God's purpose for all creation and the responsibility to uphold shared humanity. Such an environment affirms the equality of all under the law and rejects "the use of coercion and repression in matters of religion, political affiliation, and personal choice" ("The Accra Charter of Religious Freedom and Citizenship", 2011:198)

Within the framework of the charter, citizenship should not diminish the citizen's status as a moral being. That is because the state is not an alternative to the church, which sees itself as "the edifice of human worth, freedom, and well-being" (198). Rather, citizens who affirm their faith as Christians bind

themselves together through their moral commitments. They interpret citizenship through this frame as an opportunity to align with and propagate God's purposes for His creation.

For the citizen who is a believer, the charter outlines the duty owed to the Creator and the manner in which that duty acts within society. Such a duty calls for the repudiation of violence while acknowledging that all citizens can practice their faith freely under the direction of their conscience. The believers has a responsibility towards those outside their religious confession. In the spirit of shared humanity fostered by their faith, the citizen contributes to the wellbeing of all, as an act of Christian charity and in response to the command to "love thy neighbour." This dual citizenship is not easy to live out. The charter illustrates the intricacy of this dual legacy of citizenship in the world and submission to divine sovereignty.

This Journal Edition

As the gathering in Accra applied their commitments to their social and political context at the time, they determined that "political failure and the corresponding growth of religious allegiance have demanded from religious leaders fresh ideas about restoring confidence in the right of citizens to decide their own political destiny" (Sanneh, 2011:197). The church, both as a corporate entity and as individuals, is duty-bound by their faith to participate in the process of developing this new vision. Sanneh (2011:197) further pointed out that "Scripture and the experience of the Christian tradition do give us important models of religion in the public order."

Contemporary Christian leaders have a wealth of history and theology to mine in the quest for satisfactory answers to the issues at hand. This is the posture of the leaders who signed the accord, and it is the spirit that guides the editorial task which has produced this journal.

This special issue originated from a workshop designed for early career scholars, specifically postgraduate students, early PhD candidates, and postdoctoral researchers. The primary purpose of the workshop was to provide a space for mentorship, academic development, and networking opportunities. Entitled "Politics and Religion in the Public Square", the

workshop was co-hosted by the Department of History, Mission, Religion, and Practical Theology at St. Paul's University, with generous funding from the Yale MacMillan Center's Project on Religion and Society in Africa. The event took place on 21 October 2023.

As recognized in the Accra Charter, religion in African countries has creatively navigated colonial legacies and the push for democratic reforms in recent decades. The conference explored the often-blurred boundaries between religion and politics in contemporary times, along with the resulting implications. This theme is central to both the conference and this special issue, which investigates the positive and negative outcomes of the interrelationships between religion and politics, examining how these relationships manifest within religious communities and the political arena (Parsitau 2017).

For instance, the emergence of new religious movements in African cities carries both religious and political dimensions. These movements represent either unique branches of mainstream religious traditions or social and spiritual innovations within failing economic and welfare systems in the diaspora (Adogame 2016:3). Media representations of politics and religion also play a critical role in this discussion. Political interventions, such as government restrictions, have significantly impacted the legal registration of religious organizations in recent decades in countries like Rwanda and Kenya.

Violent extremism (VE) remains a significant issue on the African continent, with nearly half of all terrorism-related deaths occurring in sub-Saharan Africa, and more than one-third concentrated in four countries: Somalia, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali (UNDP 2023). In response to these complex socio-political contexts, the workshop featured presentations from biblical scholars, theologians, legal scholars, philosophers, and religious scholars. This publication compiles six of these papers, incorporating perspectives from West, East, and Southern Africa.

The first article, titled "Christianity and Democracy in Nigeria", explores the historical tension in Nigeria's transition from military dictatorship to democratic governance. While focusing primarily on this West African nation, the article also addresses the broader challenges of democratic leadership

across Africa, which are rooted in ethnic, religious, and socio-economic divisions. The author argues that Christianity has a distinctive role in promoting the democratic principles of human dignity and respect for authority. This argument is substantiated through a concise biblical and theological analysis.

"The Impact of Politico-Religious Extremist and Militia Violent Groups on Peace and Development in Africa" examines a significant obstacle to peace and development in Africa. It provides a comprehensive analysis of Violent Extremism (VE) through case studies of groups such as Al-Shabaab in East Africa, armed conflicts in Sudan, Joseph Kony's insurgency in Central Africa, Boko Haram in West Africa, and ISIS in North Africa. The author assesses the intertwining of religious and political motivations behind these groups. Central to VE groups are their conflict-driven ideologies, problematic hermeneutics, and theological perspectives that either assert fighting for divine causes or opposing those with differing ideologies. The article highlights how many VE groups claim exclusion from democratic political processes or religious participation, leading to leadership conflicts where certain groups feel marginalized. It also details the detrimental consequences of politico-religious conflicts, including murder, property destruction, underdevelopment, insecurity, and food scarcity.

The author of "The Nexus of Politics, Religion, and Violent Extremism in Malawi" provides a country-specific analysis of VE. He offers a historical perspective on violent extremism in Malawi from 1891 to 2003, focusing on significant events such as the Chilembwe uprising of 1915 and Dr. Kamuzu Banda's sacralization of politics during his thirty-year rule from 1964 to 1994, which resulted in the persecution and exile of over 21,000 Jehovah's Witnesses to Zambia. The article concludes with an examination of violent religio-political extremism in Malawi. While acknowledging the potential of religion for socio-economic development, the article critically observes that political fanaticism and religious fundamentalism can exacerbate, legitimize, and inflame various forms of violent extremism. It underscores that such extremism fundamentally arises from the beliefs and actions of individuals who resort to violence to achieve their objectives.

The fourth article, titled "A Contention for the Separation of Church and State in Kenya", expands on previous arguments by examining how Christianity has

been utilized to justify political excesses. It highlights the dual issues of state interference in religious matters and a compromised church that has lost its moral authority in society. This discussion is contextualized by recent events, including the impeachment of Kenya's Deputy President in his second year of office and the inauguration of a new Deputy President on 1 November 2024. The article was written before official responses from church bodies such as the Evangelical Alliance of Kenya (EAK) and the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCK) to the proposed Religious Organizations Bill of 2024. It illustrates how President Ruto has coopted churches in Kenya for political gain, contrasting with previous regimes where the church actively participated in socio-political liberation movements. The article contends that the separation of church and state is essential for maintaining the church's role and voice in the political realm.

The fifth article, "The Role of the Church in Political Reform: Lessons from Ethiopian History on the Relationship between Church and State", examines the historical connection between the Ethiopian Orthodox church and the state from 325 to 1974. This relationship has facilitated significant socio-economic development in education, judicial systems, and healthcare. The article focuses on the pivotal moment of Emperor Haile Selassie's fall in 1974, viewed as a precursor to a secular Ethiopia. It investigates the impact of religious law on Ethiopian state law during the Middle Ages and its influence on Ethiopian identity. Additionally, it discusses the shift to modern codified state law, based on the *Fetha Nagast* (Ethiopian king's law), which supports religious and cultural diversity, leading to the development of the current constitution in 1995.

The sixth and final article, "The Interface between the Christian Concept of the Common Good, the African Concept of *Ubuntu*, and Politics", delves into the nuanced relationship between these philosophical frameworks. Moving beyond the "separationist" and "transformationist" strands of the politics and religion debate, the article explores how the Christian concept of the common good and the African philosophy of *ubuntu* intersect within the political sphere. Both concepts emphasize communal well-being, social harmony, and ethical responsibility towards others. The Christian notion of the common good focuses on promoting justice, solidarity, stewardship, and the well-being of all society members. *Ubuntu*, deeply rooted in African tradition, stresses

interconnectedness, compassion, and the intrinsic value of every individual within the community. The article examines how these philosophies converge and diverge in addressing societal challenges and shaping political discourse.

Conclusion

This special issue offers a platform for African voices to engage with the intersection of politics and religion. It presents a rare broad-based survey of perspectives from West, East, and Southern Africa. The material also delves into country-specific contexts to illuminate the issues affecting African states and the continuing significant role of religion. Religious leaders must pay attention to the impact of their actions, recognizing that their action may inspire either positive or negative responses. Negative responses might include violent extremist groups or the politicization of religion for electoral mobilization. Positive outcomes may consist of enhancing development, peace, and security across the continent. We hope that these articles will inspire further reflection and deeper consideration of these enduring themes in African life and society.

The Accra Charter declared "religious freedom as the charter of citizenship and solidarity in a rapidly changing world of overlapping rights and responsibilities" ("The Accra Charter of Religious Freedom and Citizenship," 2011:200). It provided a vision of responsible Christian engagement required in a modern, cosmopolitan African nation. Its commitment to historical and theological resources crafted a useful framework for Christian responses to issues such as those that prompted upheavals across Africa. Like the charter, this special edition critiques persisting failures that call for immediate resolution.

Together with the charter, this special issue equally challenges Christian nationalism and insubstantial actions, both of which have been problematic in Africa's recent history. This issue intends to contribute to guiding responsible Christian thought and action around the issues raised. The task is as urgent as it is essential because, in Sanneh's (2011:197) words, "The choice no longer is between religious anointing of dictatorial power and moral indifference, or between resignation and subjugation, but rather between despair and hope."

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