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## **The church, poverty and public theology in Africa: a reflection in African (Nigerian) context**

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### **Abstract**

The problem of poverty in African contexts is a pervasive one. It continually confronts the Church and society with serious questions on how best to address the problem. There are no easy answers, but that does not mean that there is nothing at all to say concerning it. It could be historically necessary to reflect on what the leading missionary enterprises did to Africa when they came with the gospel within a colonial administration. There were instances in which they were almost oblivious about the plight of the African people as long as the people to whom they presented the gospel would accept it and obey the rules of the church and biblical teaching. Little or nothing was done to address the poverty situation in which the African people suffered and died. But in recent years we have seen some paradigmatic shifts in the sense that many of the so-called mainline churches are now beginning to be open to the sociopolitical dimension of life in Africa. The contribution of the African theologian Samuel W. Kunhiyop will be discussed below to bring him to the centre of the dialogue on the church and poverty in Africa. The reception of the 'theological-logic' of Russel Botman of South Africa alongside other voices of ethical concern will also be closely considered. This essay aims to argue for the responsibility of the church in Africa to intentionally address the economic, political and ecological problems that continue to challenge the problem of poverty in Africa. This would be a call to the Church in Africa to be active and innovative in presenting a holistic gospel that is mindful of the spiritual, academic and social situation of people in different contexts. The article serves as an introduction to how

Christians would hopefully continue to interpret the Bible in responsible and constructive ways.

## **Introduction**

This essay focuses on discussing the ravaging problem of poverty in Africa. As highlighted by Piet Naudé, the idea of Africa can endlessly be problematic in itself (Naudé 2010:221-230). Nevertheless, we shall continue to describe what we mean by “Africa,” perhaps to come to an understanding of its meaning and scope. Africa has historically been associated with blackness and poverty. This is nothing beyond human ideological prejudice against the African people through histories of dehumanization. This kind of view may generally be attributed to the legacy of slavery and historic segregations on the continent. Be that as it may, it is my view that the continent of Africa is loaded with a lot of issues and histories of struggle. This essay attempts to highlight some of the struggles in Africa to create an awareness of it, which will hopefully raise the interest of many readers among African Christian theologians, pastors and writing scholars to critically and (hopefully) adequately rise to the challenging problem and history of the problem of poverty in Africa from an African public theological perspective.

Africa in this context is not just a description of the home of the black race; Africa is historically and technically beyond the home of only black people. Like Nelson Mandela once said of South Africa, I want to postulate about Africa today: it is the home of all those who live in it, and hopefully add the idea of those who work to build and maintain it as a good and beautiful continent. From southern Africa to the eastern, western and northern parts, we more often than not hear stories of human suffering, death and dying, due to various and sometimes intersecting problems of evil, poverty and diseases. In what follows, I would like to provide a survey on the problem of poverty in Africa, with the hope of suggesting some ethical ways that Christian biblical interpreters can closely engage with the problem and hopefully find useful ways of progress in life beyond them.

## Poverty in Africa: A Dialogue with Samuel W. Kunhiyop<sup>1</sup>

In chapter 10 of *African Christian Ethics*, Samuel Waje Kunhiyop briefly describes the problem of poverty in Africa. He opens the chapter with a Malian story as a microcosm of Africa, referring to Harber Sabane, the then elected Mayor of Timbuktu in Mali, who described his African context by saying: “We are very, very, very poor” (Kunhiyop 2008:137). The reality of poverty can be seen especially in the degree of its presence in these words by the repeated use of “very” to emphasise the enormity of the problem. Wilbur O’Donovan, after many years of living and ministering in Africa, discovered that “Poverty is one of the greatest problems in Africa today” (2000:141). He further describes what he calls “[t]he Painful reality of poverty in Africa” within which he discusses the fact that “[o]ne out of every three Africans does not get enough to eat....[t]ens of millions of African children suffer from malnutrition, which means retarded physical and mental development, disease, disability and death” (2000:143; Kinoti 1994).

Furthermore, from the United Nation’s Human Development Report, the five “poorest” countries “in the World are Niger, Sierra Leone, Burkina Faso, Mali and Chad – all located in Africa” (Kunhiyop 2008:137). Regardless of where these countries are located in Africa, the point is that they are African countries and that they are poor. Even the so-called developed countries within Africa, places like South Africa, have a very large number of poor people roaming the streets and living in shacks in townships. The regions and slums where they stay are often very dangerous places because of the incessant presence of violence and dehumanisation.

Sunday B. Agang, among others, highlighted the problematic effects of corruption in Africa. This may be considered from both the secular political

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<sup>1</sup> The reason for my choice to dialogue with Samuel W. Kunhiyop is mainly because of his interest on giving Christian ethical approaches to questions of life interest in African contexts. He is not alone in his viewpoint but he has been largely ignored by many African scholars specifically on the question of poverty and the church in Africa. I found his reflections on the presence of poverty in the Bible insightful and thus I focus on him in this section.

system as well as the religious (even Church) leadership systems as being one of the keys for breeding unnecessary situations of poverty in Africa. In Agang's view, corruption more often than not leads to violence and violence leads to poverty and dehumanisation (2016; 2017; Kajom 2015). Popular examples can be cited to make this point clear and concrete; places like the North-Eastern regions of Nigeria have seen the ravaging effects of violence through the Boko Haram militia. The people of the Niger Delta region can also tell many stories of ecological and human destruction and poverty because of the historic conflicts that they have experienced around the oil wells in their region. The problem of land ownership and control has been the struggle of the day in Nigeria, mostly between the Fulani Herdsmen and farmers in Benue, Kaduna and Plateau States. Other contexts, like in Kenya, have seen the disastrous effects of Al-Shabaab. In the Central Africa Republic, the recent years of political instability have witnessed actual dehumanisation and intolerance and the notorious South Sudan religio-political conflicts remain an African embarrassment because of the betrayal of an African sense of identity. The so-called "Ubuntu"-identity has been damaged. It is supposed to bring Africans together into solid communitarianism and religious homeliness, especially within the One Body of Christ, so that others who are not within this metaphoric context may see the goodness of God manifested in ways that confront and counter poverty and all forms of injustice.

It is acknowledged that "[p]overty manifests itself in many ways" (Kunhiyop 2008: 138) such as socioeconomic poverty, religious poverty, political poverty, collective poverty and individual poverty. All these forms of poverty do not necessarily mean the "lack" of something good and essential. For example, "religious and political poverty" is not necessarily the lack of basic commodities within a particular context, but rather the lack of the necessary "will" and "wisdom" to responsibly manage them to satisfactory ends. Unfortunately, we have to face the reality that "poverty is pervasive" in Africa, as described by Kunhiyop. He further explains that "Television viewers are bombarded with pictures of weak, hungry and emaciated human beings all over the continent. Beggars roam the streets of most of our cities, laying siege to car owners and begging for coins in order to feed their families and stomachs" (Kunhiyop 2008: 138).

In her book *Surprised by the Man on the Borrowed Donkey*, the South African theologian, Denise Ackermann saw and described South Africa as a context of “deep contrast.” She discusses the gross problem of “[e]conomic inequality” (2014:241; Terreblanche 2002; Terreblanche 2012; Mbeki 2009) that seriously characterised her country in surprising and challenging ways. In connection to the idea of poverty in (South) Africa, Ackermann has another concern, namely the “feminization of poverty”, which she describes as “a pernicious problem in our country” (Ackermann 2014:242). In her effort to help us see the market ideology that has been consuming us in the world today, Ackermann acknowledges that “Consumerism is a worldwide phenomenon” (Ackermann 2014:250; Atwood 2008; Brubaker 2001; Cavanaugh 2008; Childs Jr. 2000; Wheeler 1995). For life to be possible and (hopefully comfortable) for everyone, we need to be serious in deconstructing our consumerism and embrace communal love, care and generosity.

Going back to Kunhiyop, I would like to argue that poverty emerges not within Africa’s needs but mostly from Africa’s abundance. He helps us to focus on some basic needs of Africa that have to do with the social, economic and political systems of life. These spheres of life are replete with cogent needs that need to be closely addressed for Africa to be liberated from herself and be bold enough to rise and thrive. There is no doubt that “Africa’s Needs” are many and as I mentioned previously, these “needs” are not the necessary reasons for poverty in Africa but rather are the result of the misappropriation and mismanagement of the resources which lead to the ever-growing sense of those needs. These needs are pointers to the clarion call that this contribution among others needs to make to raise the consciousness of many who might be unaware of the grim reality of poverty in Africa with the hope that the church as Christian faith community will take the lead in rising against these enormous challenges.

One of the actual needs that Kunhiyop pointed out is the “[n]eed to develop resources.” The resources that need to be developed are not actually in terms of the elemental naturalness of the resources, this is because we believe that God has naturally endowed Africa among other continents with abundant wealth in terms of human and natural resources. But one of the main areas that need development in this regard is the processing of these natural resources to meet the needs of the poor. “Though Africans are poorer than

people in other continents, they have more children to feed” (Kunhiyop 2008:139).

It is, unfortunately, true that “Africa’s government do not always make wise decisions when it comes to developing and distributing the continent’s resources” (Kunhiyop 2008:139). Many politicians in African governments have made their calling into public service to be a profession that must be paid in millions and billions of dollars, Rand, Naira etc. while the people who have elected them into office and gave them the mandate to occupy those public offices die of starvation or inadequate social amenities. We have very good governing structures in Africa even before the advent of democracy. At this point, I am thinking of the traditional system of Africa’s territorial protection, personal and corporate work ethics as well as the well-known communal system of life that looks into the other in search of oneself and its appreciation. But in the contemporary systems that are mostly democratic in many countries around the world including many African countries, the story is a far cry from actual democracy. This is why some people tend to ridicule Africa’s democracy by calling it ‘democracy.’ It is because of how crazy some politicians have made the democracy become. There is no justice and equity in many senses of governance. This reason among others, calls us to rethink our “African Democracy” into a more preferable option that will be useful to our communal development, not just personal enrichment.

In connection to the above-mentioned need is the ‘need for better health care.’ O’Donovan discovered that “(t)here are already serious problems with poor health in Africa due to tropical diseases and parasites such as bilharzia, malaria, hepatitis, dysentery and other things” (2000:143). It is rightly observed that “[i]nadequate health care means that infant and maternal mortality are high on the African continent” (Kunhiyop 2008: 139). There are well-known health challenges in Africa today like HIV and AIDS, Tuberculosis, Malaria, Ebola, SARS-CoV-2, etc. which need urgent and intensive response towards lasting solutions. The problem with the “Ebola” virus has been reasonably addressed to the extent that I am not sure if there are any serious cases in recent times. Nevertheless, it is not a call for us to relax about it. There is a growing concern about Lassa fever as well as the increase of malaria and other transmittable diseases that appear deadly and are a serious threat to many people in Africa.

Another important need that must not be neglected in Africa is the need for better education. “Poor education restricts the progress of life” (Kunhiyop 2008:140). Many young people are either uneducated or undereducated in Africa today. Many of them are seen parading the streets and are consequentially a threat to the security and wellbeing of the general public. Those young people need to be rescued from the terrible situations that keep them captive to liberate them into a viable life system within which their presence can be felt and their contributions can be accepted and appreciated. Many politicians use those undereducated youth as their political weapons during their campaigns and afterwards to keep themselves safe and to maintain the distance between themselves and their opponents. This has unfortunately taken a very bad and sad turn in northern Nigeria whereby undereducated girls are being misused. These young girls should have been the pride of the nation and by giving them a good education we shall save the country and guarantee a future for the next generation.

There is also a need for food in Africa. One of the seriously challenging reasons for the attention to food security in Africa today has to do with the presence of “natural calamities” (Kunhiyop 2008:140) such as epidemics, drought, deforestation and global warming. Lack of good food to eat is gradually pushing people away from one place to another and worst of all prompting some to disastrous behaviour in order to survive. The church in Africa needs to be careful and mindful of ways to closely respond to these challenges. There is a need to “inhibit warfare” which is mostly caused by poverty and marginalization. Kunhiyop rightly observes that poverty both fuels and is fuelled by wars and internal strife (Kunhiyop 2008:140).

There is a need for good governance in terms of “honest” governance in Africa. As has earlier been mentioned, there is a lot of corruption in the governing systems of African governments today. “Corruption has infected politics and government in Africa” (Kunhiyop 2008:141). It is unfortunate but necessary to face the truth that our African political systems need to be thoroughly reformed and transformed from what they have been and what they are today. It is interesting and timely to note that there is a need “for Christians to live out their faith.” There are many professing Christians in all tiers of government in African countries today but the question is whether they are living according to the principles given in the Bible and exemplified by Jesus

Christ and his disciple. There are many African Christians in public services who do not live up to the expectation of the life of Christ. “Sadly, Christians are also implicated in some of the factors that contribute to keeping Africa in poverty” (Kunhiyop 2008: 142). In a more explicit prophetic voice, Kunhiyop observed that “Christians are also complicit in the corruption that plagues many African countries and inhibits development” (2008:142).

As earlier indicated, this essay aims at providing the reader with some leading and challenging issues around the phenomenon of poverty in Africa with the hope that the Church can be motivated to take the discussion and the quest for truth and justice further in the search for the Africa we want and that God wants us to live in. This will be possible if we pick up the challenge for doing public theology within biblically revealing truth, and a humanly honest sense of engagement in the ways we see, think, pray and respond to the realities around us. In what follows I would like to provide a short survey of poverty from biblical perspectives of both Old and New Testaments and then suggest some theological thoughts that can be useful in responding to these private and public, life-threatening realities.

## **Poverty in biblical perspective**

Stephen Adei agreeably suggests that “Poverty is a recurring theme in the Bible.... Many are poor because we live in a world where injustice and skewed economic order mean they lack access to education, land and other means of improving their material conditions (Jas 5:1-6)” (Adei 2010:788).

In this section, the idea of poverty will be discussed briefly from both Old and New Testament perspectives as indicated above (Hoppe 1987). There will not be exhaustive discussions of the concept in terms of linguistic analysis. This will be left for further critical and comparative studies.

### ***Poverty in the Old Testament***

Humanity as “Adam” was created in the abundance of God’s provision (Gen. 1 &2), in the sense that everything that mankind needs was provided in their first home before the coming of the problem of sin as rebellion from God (Gen. 3). Sin was the first reason that pushed humanity away from the abundance of God’s provision into the world of poverty (lack and needs). While out of the

Garden of Eden mankind had to toil and suffer because of their rebellion against God's will and plan for their lives. The fact that work became tedious and life was lived under very harsh conditions brought a new perspective to the life and role of mankind in the world. Nevertheless, the grace of God has already been sufficient to all the generations that came and gone until the time of the law when God's provision came to the people of God in God's generosity and generative love. Even though mankind has fallen into sin, God's heart of love was always open to man and to search for them. This is seen in the body of the law given to the Israelites especially on issues that have to do with God's concern for the wellbeing of humanity.

The Pentateuch is replete with God's legal provision of protection and principles that help the poor to be well taken care of by those who are rich in context (Michael 2015: 72-73). The poor were not neglected in the Torah. "God in his love and mercy made provision for them" (Kunhiyop 2008:144 cf. Exodus 22:21-24; 23:6-11; Lev. 19:9-10; Deut. 15:4-5; also see Gelin 1964; Gutierrez 1991, 2013, 2015 and Hughes and Bennett 2006).<sup>2</sup> Furthermore during the time of the prophets, "being poor became synonymous to being oppressed (cf. Amos, 2:6; 4:1; Isa. 3:14; 10:1-2; 11:4; cf. Kunhiyop 2008: 144). There was no room for the oppression of the poor, widows and orphans in the Old Testament. Whoever did that was rebelling against the revealed will and law of God. This is mainly to teach the people of God to learn to take note of those in need and to live according to God's ordained principles of neighbourliness.

In wisdom literature, the issue of poverty and being poor was not neglected. But rather it receives practical attention from a correlative perspective. This shows that people do not become poor for no reason, but that it must be connected to some kind of cause (cf. Prov. 19:1; 28:6; 19:22). One may ask within the context of the wisdom literature and more especially the book of Proverbs, what causes poverty? The answer that one may readily encounter in response to the foregoing question could be either or both of the following; Laziness (10:4; 19:15, 24; 20:13; 21:17) and foolishness (Prov. 11:14; 10:14-16;

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<sup>2</sup> For more on what God says concerning the poor and poverty cf. Deut. 15:11; Ps. 140:12; 74:21-22; Prov. 31:8-9; Ps. 82:2-4 etc.

13:18). The call within this book in particular is for the life of responsibility and wisdom which leads to success and affluence.

Poverty is also mentioned in the Psalms. Like in Proverbs, poverty is also related to some kind of circumstances and/or people that must have caused it. Thus in the book of Psalms, the enemies of the poor are the wicked ones (cf. Ps. 10:4-7; 140:4, 8; Kunhiyop 2008:145).

After considering the problem of poverty in the Old Testament we shall now turn our attention to the New Testament for further explorations.

### ***Poverty in the New Testament***

From the start of the ministry of Jesus, the poor are addressed in the way He lived and taught. The concept of being “poor” does not necessarily refer to physical lack but rather it could be pointing to one’s spiritual state of being. It is good to be “poor in spirit” (Matt, 5:3; Luke 6:20) for this kind of people shall experience God’s abundant provision in Jesus Christ that fulfils their lives. It may be striking to note here that Jesus was among the poor in the NT (Matt. 8:20; Luke 9:50; Kunhiyop 2008:146). The life of a poor widow features in Mark 12:38-44 and is used as a framework to criticise those who are rich and unwilling to make sacrifices from the abundance they have been blessed with. This widow’s generosity is a point of departure to remind us of the scarcity of resources in the hands of many women (widows) in Africa, yet, to call us to the Christian possibility and responsibility of giving by faith and hope.

The rich are further criticised by Jesus during his encounter with the rich young ruler (Mark 10:21; Luke 18:22). This is a person who had so much that he was not willing to give up anything for any other person. This kind of life does not show any sign of true repentance to follow Jesus by faith and hope. This kind of life must be critically confronted and reconstructed within our hermeneutical lenses and active participation in helping those in need around us. Jesus’ life was one of surprising invitations, awe-inspiring words of grace and wisdom, and wonderful extensions of love and life even to the poor. The invitation to the great supper (Luke 14:10-24) clearly demonstrates that the poor also do have a space in Jesus’ life and economy. These “poor” may be hermeneutically understood today to mean those who need God’s salvation. Yes, they are indeed poor, and we have a lot like them in present African

contexts. Thus, whether poverty is something physical concerning the lack of enough food to eat or clothes to wear, the life and teachings of Jesus challenge us to be true disciples who care and give to those in need. The parable of the poor Lazarus and the Rich man (Luke 16:19-31) feature clearly in the teaching of Jesus that those who are marginalised, exploited, and neglected by the rich can be assured of God's presence and care. This is the calling of the church in Africa today. The story of the encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus (Luke. 19:1-10) further describes how the evangelist Luke, criticised the evil structures of dishonesty and selfish-aggrandisement. Jesus confronted Zacchaeus in his affluence and that encounter led Zacchaeus to a new life of generosity and honesty.

The problem of poverty was confronted in the active care of the early church. As reported by Luke, there was "no poor" among them (Acts 2:44-45; 4:33-35; Kunhiyop 2008:147). This is because the members of the early church have created spaces within themselves that those in need among them could share. No one held onto anything and claimed that it belonged to them alone. The caring and sharing life of the early church was legendary and it is a continual challenge for us in Africa today. The caring nature of the church was not just a collective effort but is also reflected in their individual lives of service toward one another. This could be seen in the life and ministry of Peter and John at the temple gate (Acts 3). On their way to the place of prayer, they met a beggar. He was begging for money but the disciples did not have any money with them that they could give him. But they prayed for him and gave him wholeness through their love and care. We have a lot of beggars in contemporary Africa; we need to think of what to do for them, how to pray for them and when to reach out to them and hold their hands so that they can get onto their feet and walk.

We are further challenged by the helping hand of Tabitha/Dorcas (Acts 9). She was most probably not a very rich woman, but she was willing to help those in need around her. The problem of poverty in her context includes the lack of clothing for the vulnerable. She spent her time and skill to provide clothing for those in need. When she died her testimony filled the air, she was not left dead but rather by the help of God and in God's power, she was brought back to life through the prayer of Peter. We need such prayer warriors in Africa who will

be humble enough and willing enough to listen to the needs of people in context and always be ready to take those needs to the Lord in prayer.

In the life and ministry of the apostle Paul, we could see the interface of need/poverty and satisfaction/supply. Some passages present us with the record of Paul's calling and the Church's example of help to those in need (Rom 12:13; I Cor. 16:1-2; 2 Cor. 8:1-4; 9:1-2). Within these verses, we can see his challenging principles of giving in love and hope thus identifying and meeting the needs of the church with the gifts of God's grace. The brother James also called for justice to the poor (James. 2:1-6). This is done in the context of ecclesial segregation especially between the rich and the poor. But James, through the power of the Holy Spirit, admonishes the Church to be Christ-like and humble, persevering in good deeds that actively characterise their faith in Christ.

From the above exploration of poverty and being poor in the New Testament we could see that the phenomenon does not only entail material poverty but also spiritual poverty. In one sense poverty is good and desirable, for it is only in our state of spiritual and ethical poverty that God's grace and mercy will be manifested to help us. Nevertheless, despite evidence of people who suffered from material poverty, they were never neglected by the Church. When help was called for, believers, both individually and collectively, strived to meet the needs of those within the Church community. In what follows in this contribution we shall briefly reflect in terms of some further elaboration on the nature and calling of the Church as a community of active responsibility even to the conditions of the poor among us in Africa.

## Theological logics<sup>3</sup> for a transformative public theology in Africa

The leading question that we wish to closely ponder upon and respond to within this contribution is this: what can, and should Christians do, in Africa, about the problem (and crime) of poverty? This is where we need to reflect on some useful theological logic to meaningfully and responsibly respond to the problem of poverty in Africa. One of the big challenges before us is to learn from our mistakes and see how to start living better for and with others. Our failure to know where our mistakes are will continue to keep us within its darkness but the moment we realise where the problem lies will be our moment of liberation from it. We must not deny the presence of poverty and suffering in Africa and we cannot claim that we are innocent. Sampie Terreblanche, a respected South African economic historian has amply shown how Christianity has been used as a tool for colonisation and segregation (Terreblanche 2002). In other words, it has been abused as a tool for oppressing and impoverishing the other (the black other etc). Early in this essay, we have seen Kunhiyop's observation in the sense that Christians are also "complacent" about the poor condition of life in Africa. This kind of passivity is also an addition to the problem, not its solution. But at this point, we need to think and act better in order to lead the way for the liberation of Africa from the deadliness of poverty. Our theology at this point must be an existential one, in that it should be concerned about the possibility and the flourishing of life.

We need to note with Sider once more that we as Christians live in such a way that there are "rich Christians" within the "age of hunger" (1977). There is no doubt that "hunger" in this context can be interpreted from different metaphoric perspectives including of course the spiritual hunger for the word of God. John Stott among other evangelical Christian theologians and writers insists that Christians around the world need to be people of the gospel. We

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<sup>3</sup> The idea of 'theological-logic' comes from the contribution of Russel Botman and its reception by Dirkie Smit (Botman 1994; 2002; Smit 2015:3-13). This notion points us to the new pattern of life and thinking of Christians from a theological perspective.

need to share “God’s word for today” (1992). If the need of our context includes economic and ecological needs, we cannot turn a blind eye to it. The Bible has been given to us as a faith community, yes, for theological and spiritual formation and transformation, but also the social-ethical formation and transformation of our ordinary lives and societies. There is the need to use biblical teaching and principles for social change in the sense that we see the coming of justice in our socioeconomic life in Africa and beyond. E. Calvin Beisner has critically argued that we need to be “compassionate” in the way we use our God-given resources in a “world of scarcity” (1988). This act of “compassionate” care and justice is what we need in contemporary Africa to adequately face and transform our socio-economic challenges. This is a good and useful theological logic<sup>4</sup> that cannot be overemphasised.

Denise Ackermann also joined the lead of theologians, from a South African context, on how we need to theologically and responsibly respond to our African socioeconomic problems, not least the problem of poverty. Ackermann argues that we need to acquire the art of sharing the blessings of God with freedom. This is the act of knowing when “enough is enough” (2014:237). Ackermann rightly saw herself in a way different from those around her and her radical view prompted her to a new way of speech when she admits that, “I am a ‘have’ living in the world of great need” (2014:237). This is the actual starting point of our transformation in Africa when we come to the moment of truth, the *Kairos* that brings us to the light of who we are and where we are so that we can know what we need to do, not only differently, but usefully for and with others who are not us in many ways.

Our new vision of ourselves in relation to others is a good theological logic that reminds us of our unity and responsibility in Christ. Ackermann, after long heart-pounding discussions, faced the fact that “I resort to the truth that everything on earth belongs to God, that all I have is temporary, to be held in trust, to be accounted for, and to be used wisely” (2014:264). This is what we need our “rich” Christians and political elites to learn to do, to learn that we

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<sup>4</sup> I borrow the notion of “theological logic” from our late Vice Chancellor and theologian Prof. Russell Botman (Stellenbosch University) as well as its articulation by Dirkie J. Smit in Botman’s memorial lecture.

are co-human beings in the world of need and that we are all stewards of God's blessings. This is when we need to stand up to our calling for compassionate justice, active solidarity and faithful stewardship.

As a Christian community another theological logic that we need to consider is our understanding of the fact that we are called into the household of God (Eph. 2:11ff). Living in God's household entails living together and with responsibility, with a great sense of love and sensitivity to the needs of others. In Ackermann's words, "Living together in a household signals interdependence, relationship, belonging and the common desire to keep the household sustainable, both socially and economically" (2014:271). Jesus has called us into an "abundant life" in Him. We must not trivialise this "life" to material affluence alone, but we cannot lose sight of the fact that we are given life and one another to experience the richness of the blessings of life together. We need to constantly rethink our theology within categories that can be useful towards providing a viable and enjoyable life together (McFague 2001).

Stanley Hauerwas, one of the leading American ethical theologians, reminds us that as Christians we need to be "A Community of Character" which will be our stepping stone towards building or constructing a useful Christian social ethics (1981). The character that we must have and also exhibit from the Church into the larger world context is the life of Christ (Phil. 2:5-11). But first of all, we need to learn to be conforming daily to the image of Jesus Christ (Rom. 12:1ff). We need to be people of godly character. Kunhiyop succinctly mentioned that we need to learn to be the "salt and light" of the world according to the teaching of Jesus Christ (2008:154). Within our Christ-likeness, we need to be active in upholding "human dignity". This is our act of sharing the gospel of Christ in practical ways as we follow His example while also setting a good example for others to follow (Kunhiyop 2008:155).

Kunhiyop agreeably sees our need to responsibly respond to the plight of the poor as part of our gospel to them when he said, "A proper response to the poor involves presenting the whole gospel" (2008: 157). We can also share God's blessings with those in need when we give to "charity" (2008:159). This is the gift of grace. We cannot tell the extent of help and blessing that our gift will do (cf. Matt. 25: 31ff; Ishaya 2017:132-146). From a general sociopolitical responsibility network we need to learn to suggest, accept and "implement

policies that help the poor” (Kunhiyop 2008:160). Wilbur O’Donovan suggests that the Church and the State (government) must work together against the deadliness of poverty when he said, “Human governments also have the authority to take actions which will help to relieve conditions of extreme poverty” (2000:147; O’Donovan 1996). We can help alleviate poverty continuously by creating and sustaining “Church-based NGOs” (Kunhiyop 2008:161). Through these Church-based NGOs, we can strategically provide what O’Donovan calls “the principle of empowerment” (2000:156). The Church can empower its members and even trained pastors towards becoming actively involved in living useful and profitable lives in the world.<sup>5</sup>

Dewi Hughes in his book *Power and Poverty* helps us to see God’s role in giving and managing the blessings of life in the world. The blessings include material blessings as well. He calls the Church to its proper role from her self-understanding as “God’s Governed Society” namely the Church (2008:191). We need to always realise that we are in the ordered society of the Supreme Ruler (2008:193). The Church must understand itself as a gathering community, (i.e., local assembly) for the making of disciples while actively getting involved in helping for the flourishing of life. The Church is also seen as a suffering community (2008:200). This does not mean that we should be complacent with suffering especially when it comes with injustice, or when it can hopefully be avoided, but more than that the Church needs to know its identity as a joyful community (2008:208). The Church must also be a community that speaks God’s words (2008:225). This is the advocacy nature

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<sup>5</sup> Let me briefly share a story from Nigeria (especially for international readers). At ECWA Theological Seminary Kagoro, Nigeria where I currently serve as lecturer, the vision of equipping pastors for the pulpit ministry and beyond came about under the visionary leadership of Prof. Sunday B. Agang whose ideas with Dr. Dennis Shelly, a missionary from America, led to the establishment of the Skill Acquisition Center at the Seminary. Earlier they had started a Seminary fish pond which produces fish for staff and students. Right now students at the Seminary are being trained to serve not just from the pulpit but also as active people for social development. This engagement with society gained some good theological grounding in the introduction of the Master Degree Program called, “Christian Theology and Public Policies.” Presently, the Seminary has extended it to the PhD level. These are interesting developments in the Seminary that will surely continue to help to make our theology public and relevant in context.

and calling of the Church in the world. The Church as we shall see as we finish up this section must closely understand itself as the community of the Kingdom of God.

Stanley Hauerwas in his *Christian Existence Today* argues that there is an interface of life between the Church and the World (Hauerwas 1998). There is life within and between both realities. In our search for a useful public theology in Africa, we need to critically reflect on how the Church and the World (State?) can meaningfully enrich each other. We need to also understand that there is “living between” both entities. Following Wessel Bentley and Dion Forster from the South African perspective, we are called to think about our theological logic of negotiation for an inclusive society whereby religion is seen as a means to an end and not an end in itself. The interface between Church and State should be one of creative existence that enriches both entities (Bentley and Forster 2012).

The Church as the Kingdom of God has its context and task within a particular life and world context. Dion Forster’s contribution to the collection of essays on the relationship of the Church and the State is titled, “God’s Kingdom and the transformation of Society” (Bentley and Forster 2012:73). In his contribution, he presented something that is an almost controversial option for a secular state as one that represents God’s common grace in a free society within which everyone could live and flourish with dignity. Forster certainly did not opt for a godless society, or even an anti-God society which is a common ideological understanding of being “secular” in many contemporary understandings. But rather the Church has a prophetic calling in light of its God-given responsible space and actions: “Christians have God-given responsibility to engage any power, whether an individual or an institution, that acts contrary to the principles of the Kingdom of God and the Gospel of Christ” (2012:78). It is interestingly agreeable and challenging to note from Forster’s view that, “[e]very believer is to be a prophet, listening for the will of God in society and living to see *that* will enacted” (2012:78). He further concludes his challenging essay with the following words, “The Kingdom of God, as expressed in both the Old and New Testaments of the Christian Scriptures, espouses social justice, economic responsibility, peace for all people and stewardship of the earth’s resources” (2012: 81). In this light, we

need a public theology in Africa that lives and thrives within the framework of the Kingdom of God in the world.

In agreement with practical-public theologians like Jürgen Hendriks (Hendriks 2004; 2016:1-16), Russel Botman (1994; 2002); Allan Boesak (Boesak 2014:1055-1074) and Dirkie J. Smit (Smit 2007:431-454; 2015:3-13), our African theology must be deeply biblical, with the sense of its identity, vision and mission rooted in the gracious, generative and generous love (*agape*) of God revealed through the incarnational presence of Jesus Christ. We need a public theology that is characterised by fellowship/companionship (*koinonia*) and service (*diakonia*) that will transform and empower the African contexts to be communities that God desires. This is the vision for active relational responsibility that challenges and changes the present status quo to the life context of compassionate justice and prophetic witness of the abundance of life given by God for all His people against the harsh, exclusionary, and dehumanising presence of poverty in Africa.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the above contribution attempts to call for a creative response to the problem of poverty in Africa from biblical-ethical paradigms. In what has been discussed above this article has moved the idea of poverty from a sociopolitical sense and systems to the inner human sense. Thus, it argues that poverty is not necessarily a lack of what is needed but rather the injustice of other human beings within a given system through their ideological thoughts and lifestyle that makes life difficult for many. Poverty in Africa is not the lack of resources but the lack of good ethical responsibility on how to creatively and constructively use what has been given to the common good of everyone. Secondly, the article received the “theological-logic” of Botman into another dimension, namely, the theological-ethical dimension. This notion as the new Christian pattern of reasoning and action has been used in the areas of discipleship in conversation with Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s contributions (Botman 1994; 2002; Smit 2015:3-13)). But in this contribution, it has moved to the sphere of the theological-public-ethics of the human life of responsibility. This does not intend to neglect the original emphasis on discipleship but rather to add to it by applying it to the social ethical and life of the Church in the context of poverty in Africa. These notions may not seem novel to many South African

readers, nevertheless, the conversation with Samuel Waje Kunhiyop has brought another voice into the conversation that may not have been very widely known or used.

The painful presence of poverty and its disastrous effects have not been neglected in this essay. A few instances have been highlighted as points of departure. We have also reflected alongside very important voices of biblical theologians who have given meaningful contributions in various contexts and from various points of interest. Nevertheless, our concentration has been on how to suggest the rise of a public theology in Africa that can be useful in addressing the problems of poverty in our contemporary contexts.

We have discussed biblical principles given by God and exemplified by God's people on how the poor should be treated. If we take those thoughts seriously, we shall surely have good and meaningful achievements in our theological interest for a public theology that addresses the poor conditions of life. We also need to continue to think and rethink our theological logics from different perspectives and in conversation with different scholarly interests and possible suggestions with interest on thoughts that help us to better understand the Bible and our Christian traditions in contexts and how they can be utilised to better thoughts and actions for a better life.

Poverty can be avoided in Africa if we choose to be true to the kind of life that God has called us to live. We must never lose sight of our calling and ministry to the other. The Church must continue to be a hopeful agent for the world. This will lead us into the complex and simple obedient actions that will eventually renew our lives and contexts. The idea of transforming society for a better understanding of God and ourselves has been our leading vision. Within this calling, we shall continue to encourage the Church and various theological institutions (Seminaries and Universities) to think and articulate these truths and produce materials and manpower that will be useful in actually transforming our lives and world.

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