Nexus between Church and Society: An Appraisal of the Role of the Church in Society from a Wesleyan and Biblical Perspective

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Abstract

This article examines the close relationship between the church and society and argues that they are interdependent. Drawing on theoretical research and a literature review, this paper will briefly survey the church's historical relationships and then evaluate its role in society through the lenses of Wesleyan and biblical theology. It will appraise the arguments for the separation of church and state and of church and politics. The article argues that the church is the conduit of biblical, godly living in love, holiness, and justice, as God expects for society as a whole. Secondly, the article examines the church's role in African societies and assesses its contribution to African social transformation and governance. It further argues that the church's role in society is pivotal as salt and light. The article concludes by providing an analytical evaluation of the African church's impact on society, given the shift of Christianity into the majority world and the global south, and offers necessary recommendations.

Keywords: Religion, church, society, state, politics, political reforms, church-state relations.

Introduction

Two objectives guide this paper. First, what is the relationship between the church and society? Second, what is the church's role in its relationship with society regarding social transformation? The paper interrogates an intriguing question in African Christianity: How is the African church's biblical teaching impacting social transformation and political reforms across the African continent? This question is pivotal given the shift of Christianity to the Global South, according to statistics that attribute high percentages of Christianity in most African countries, some as high as 80% and the increasing social disintegration, rampant corruption, greed, poverty, incessant wars and abuse of power in leadership, both in the church and in society. One further intriguing question is that this is occurring on a continent where, in antiquity, most societies subscribed to the *ubuntu* philosophy, defined as 'I am because we are', in which social integration and care were integral and paramount in most tribal societies. The once-dark continent seems to have turned into a starving, bleeding continent post-independence, and yet it subscribes to a high population of Christians. The paper will explore and evaluate these questions through the lenses of Wesleyan and biblical perspectives.

Definition of Church and Society

The definitions of church and society show that they are intricately related. Society is defined as 'the people who live in a country or region, their organisations, and their way of life'.[1] Menn describes the church as 'a heavenly and eschatological assembly of everyone who subscribes

[1] 'society', *Collins English Dictionary – Complete and Unabridged* [website], edition 2025. from https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english-word/society (accessed 8 February 2025).

to Christ's New Covenant and Kingdom'.[2] Purkiser represents the church as 'the community of people who have confessed Jesus as the Son of God and have believed and trusted Him as their Saviour, united under His leadership to carry out His purposes in the world'.[3] In the New Testament, the word 'church' derives from the Greek εκκλεσια- (*ekklesia*), meaning 'called out', referring to those whom God has called to live a life of holiness, distinct from the world. The church is called out from society and yet remains part of society. Earle states, 'Ekklesia is reserved exclusively in the New Testament for followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, viewed collectively as a local body of believers or the aggregate of believers everywhere'.[4]

Most of the definitions surveyed underscored the church's interrelatedness with society. The church is called out of the society and sent by the Triune God to the same society in which it exists, and it seeks to serve the wider society to which Jesus sent it.[5] A recent book by Bush argues that the ministry of the church occurs in society.[6] According to Bush, society is the context in which the church serves the community in which it exists, including through involvement in social transformation and political reform.

Abridged Historical Review of Church and State

There is much literature on the separation of church and state and even more on the separation of church and politics.[7] It is impossible to review such massive literature in an article. This article limits itself to the resources informing its objectives. The most recent and comprehensive publication by S.K. Green gives a historical appraisal of religious freedom, tolerance, sacred and secularism.[8] It focuses on separationism, primarily in the USA and on the ensuing legislation by the US Supreme Court. While the book provides a cogent historical account, it does not address the role of individual Christians and their contributions to society. It focuses mainly on the institutional debates. In one controversy, however, it notes that one of the justices pointed out that 'we (implying Christians) are religious people whose institutions suppose a Supreme Being'.[9] A critical evaluation of the controversies reveals that its main contention concerns American democracy, of which there is no consensus.[10] "True separation of Church and State has never existed in this country (the USA), that judges and public officials have always been willing to compromise on the concept, resisting taking the principle to its logical conclusion and the line of separation from being a wall, is a blurred, indistinct, and variable barrier depending on the circumstances of a particular relationship."[11] Another recent contribution is Nehrbass's book, which focuses on cultural interconnectedness and interdependence. It demonstrates how cultural fluidity makes the separation of church and state precarious, arguing that theology sees the world through God's eyes, citing Skillen and

[2] J. M. Menn, *The Church: Its Nature, Mission, and Purpose*, Appleton, Wisconsin, Equipping Church Leaders East Africa Inc., 2021, https://www.eclea.net/books/church.pdf (accessed 12 July 2024).

[3] W.T. Purkiser, *Exploring Our Christian Faith*, Kansas City, Missouri, Beacon Hill Press, 1978, p. 339.

[4] R. Earle, *Word Meanings in the New Testament*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker Books, 1997, p. 210.

[5] Jesus before his ascension commissioned his disciples: '"As the Father has sent Me, I also send you". When He had said this, He breathed on *them*, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit"' (John 20:21-22, NKJV).

[6] J. Bush, *Practical Theology in Church and Society*, Eugene, Oregon, Wipf and Stock, 2016.

[7] Africa Nazarene University E-Resoources lists 90,818 resources on 'church and state', 102,125 resources on 'church and politics' and 121,284 on the 'separation of church and state'.

[8] S.K. Green, *Separating Church and State: A History*, Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 2022.

[9] Green, *Separating Church and State*, p.13.

[10] Green, *Separating Church and State,* p. 16.

[11] Green, *Separating Church and State* p. 191.

McCarthy.[12] Nehrbass points out, 'Aquinas and Calvin theorised that God created us for political life as much as for every other cultural sphere…Citizenship in earthly political communities is thus as much a part of the revelation of God and our identity as God's image bearer'.[13]

Nehrbass further contends, 'Humans as bearers of the image of the triune God are stewards of the order of creation, and social activity is the way we maintain this order'.[14] To underscore the imperatives of Christian involvement in society, he asserts 'Jesus' imperative to change the world'.[15] He also sees a theological and biblical imperative, 'once a theology of culture situates our cultural nature in the image of God, it lays out a plan for global engagement; and demonstrates how all of our cultural lives – social organisation, politics, economics, aesthetics are interconnected and grounded in the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28 and 2:15'.[16] Nehrbass aptly admits that the Bible gives a complex answer to the Christian's response to the state and that God grants power to earthly powers (John 19:11; Rom. 13:1-7). He nevertheless points out that, with respect to civil obedience, Christians answer to a higher power (Acts 4:19). He interprets Romans 13 as holding that governments are subordinate to God and do not possess absolute dictatorial authority.[17]

Nehrbass argues that the church's or Christian's role in social action, economics, and politics is to fulfil and subdue the world.[18] He implies that Christians should understand the cosmos and all cultural life under God's rule. He concurs with Karl Barth's view, 'The Kingdom of Christ and the kingdoms of this world, or the Church and the State, formerly stood side by side in the Reformation confession, and that by 'worship in spirit and truth' the Reformers understood a life in both these realms'.[19]

Nehrbass, nevertheless, cautions that the Christian faith malfunctions when it is too coercive or insular.[20] He perceives the Christian faith as an active faith that should engage the world non-coercively, offering comfort and moral guidance in a complex world. Along similar lines, Volf argues for a holistic view of the cosmos and de-emphasises the dichotomy between the secular and the sacred. He maintains that an all-embracing worldview envisions and motivates Christians to view any job as a service to God and done for God's glory. A Christian engaged in politics is serving God and loving their neighbour.[21]

Mvula writing from the Global South perspectives complements this view and argues, 'The message of Jesus was not politically neutral. Evidently, Jesus' message and actions were not apolitical….we (Christians) shy away from such (political) involvement because it might move us in the direction of what we have identified as the social gospel as if the gospel is not social'.[22] He articulates the point by citing the church's response to Hitler when he told the church to stay away from politics, 'I will protect the German people, you take care of the

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[12] J. Skillen and R. McCarthy (eds.), *Political Order and the Plural Structure of Society*, Atlanta, Emory University Press, 1991, p. 37.

[13] K. Nehrbass, *God's Image and Global Cultures: Integrating Faith and Culture in the Twenty-First Century*, Eugene, Oregon, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016, p. 148.

[14] Nehrbass, *God's Image and Global Cultures*, p. xv.

[15] Nehrbass, *God's Image and Global Cultures,* p. xx.

[16] Nehrbass, *God's Image and Global Cultures,* p. xx.

[17] Nehrbass, *God's Image and Global Cultures,* p. 148.

[18] Nehrbass, *God's Image and Global Cultures,* p. 136.

[19] K. Barth, *Community, State and Church*, Gloucester, Massachusetts, Peter Smith, 1968, p.105.

[20] Nehrbass*, God's Image and Global Cultures,* p. 134.

[21] M. Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good,* Grand Rapids, Michigan, Brazos, 2013.

[22] H.Y. Mvula, *Christians in Active Politics: 'The Why and How' of Christians' Active Participation in the Secular Political Affairs*, Kechere Series, Malawi, 2022, preface.

church. You pastors should worry about getting people to heaven and leave this world to me'.[23] The church responded, 'A moment ago, Herr Hitler, you told us that you would take care of the German people. But as Christians and men of the church, we too have a responsibility for the German people, laid upon us by God. Neither you nor anyone else can take that away from us'.[24] Mvula provides a cogent, convincing case for Christian engagement in politics. He does so with depth and surgical precision, arguing for the role of Christians in active politics from a biblical perspective. He also gives a robust literature review on church and state.[25] Mvula's assertion, 'that love and justice are at the heart of the Christians' social vocation in the world, and they (love and justice) should direct our active participation in the secular political arena',[26] more or less sums up the central argument of his book from a biblical perspective. From a social perspective, he categorically states,

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[23]Herr Adolf Hitler, speaking to the German Church bishops on 25 January 1934, when they assembled in the Reich Chancellery. Quoted by C. Colson in *Kingdoms in Conflict: An Insider's Challenging View of Politics, Power and the Pulpit*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan Publishing House, 1987, p. 140.

[24] Bishop Martin Niemoller (one of Germany's most powerful and outspoken bishops and a critic of the Nazi regime) answered Herr Adolf Hitler without fear on 25 January 1934, in the Reich Chancellery.

[25] Mvula reviews, among others, the following regarding Church and State and Separation of Church and Politics: Bright, J., *The Kingdom of God: The Biblical Concept and its Meaning for the Church*, New York, Abingdon Press, 1953; Clapp, R., *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in Post-Christian Society*, Downers Grove, Illinois, Inter Varsity Press, 1996; Clapp, R. and R.E. Webber, *People of the Truth: A Christian Challenge to Contemporary Culture*, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Phorehouse Publishing, 1993; Colson, C., *The Role of the Church in Society: Responding to a Watching World*, Wheaton, Illinois, Victor Books, 1986; Colson, C., *Kingdoms in Conflict: An Insider's Challenging View of Politics, Power, and the Pulpit,* Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan Publishing House, 1987; De Wolf, H.L., *Responsible Freedom: Guidelines to Christian Action,* London, Harper and Row Publishers, 1971; Estep, W.R., *The Anabaptist Story,* Grand Rapids, Michigan, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963; Gamba, P. (ed.), *The Lamp: Christians, Politics, and Culture*; Hauerwas, S., *After Christendom?: How The Church is to Behave if Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation are Bad Ideas*, Nashville, Tennessee, Abingdon Press, 1991; Haynes, J., *Religion and Politics in Africa*, Nairobi, Kenya, East African Educational Publishers, 1996; Henry, O., *Church and Politics in East Africa,* Nairobi, Kenya, Uzuma Publishing House, 1974; Okullu, H., *Church and State in Nation Building and Human Development*, Nairobi, Kenya, Uzima Publishing House, 2003; Hinchliff, P., *Holiness and Politics*. Grand Rapids, Michigan, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982; Holmes, A.F. *All Truth is God's Truth,* Leicester, England, Inter-Varsity Press, 197; Kegley, C.W. and R.W. Bretall (eds.), *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought,* New York, The Macmillan Company, 1956; Kinoti, G., *Hope for Africa and What the Christian Can Do,* Nairobi, Kenya, Institute for Scientific Research and Development, 1994; Ladd, G.E. *Crucial Questions About The Kingdom of God,* Grand Rapids, Michigan, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1952; Kirk, M.J. *Church and State in the New Testamen*t, Grand Rapids. Michigan, Baker Book House, 1962; Monsma, S.V., *Pursuing Justice in A Sinful World,* Grand Rapids, Michigan, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984; Niebuhr, R., *Christ and Culture,* New York, Harper and Row, Publishers, 1951; Phiri, I., K. Ross, and J. Cox (eds.), *The Role of Christianity in Development, Peace and Reconstruction*, Nairobi, Kenya, All Africa Conference of Churches, 1996; Ryan, P., (ed.) *The Role of Christians in Politics in Africa Today,* Nairobi, Kenya, Pauline Publications Africa, 2002; Sherratt, T.R. and R.P. Mahurin, *Saints as Citizens: A Guide to Public Responsibility for Christians,* Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker Book House Company, 1995; Skillen, J.W., *The Scattered Voice: Christians at Odds in the Public Square*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan Publishing House, 1990; Snyder, H.A. *A Kingdom Manifesto: Calling The Church to Live Under God's Reign.* Downers Grove, Illinois, Inter Varsity Press, 1985; Snyder, H.A., *Kingdom Lifestyles: Calling the Church to Love Under God's Reign,* Downers Grove, Illinois, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, 1985; St. Augustine. *The City of God,* New York, Garden City, Image/Doubleday, 1958; Stackhouse, M.L. *Public Theology and Political Economy: A Christian Stewardship in Modern Society*. Grand Rapids, Michigan, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987; Tutu, D., *The Voice of One Crying in the Wilderness,* London, 1982; Waruta D.M., *In Moral and Ethical Issues in African Christianity: A Challenge for African Christianity,* J.N.K. Mugambi and Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike (eds.), Nairobi, Kenya, Acton Publishers, 1999; Webber, R.E. *The Church in the World: Opposition, Tension or Transformation?,* Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan Publishing House, 1980; Yoder, J.H., *The Politics of Jesus,* Grand Rapids, Michigan, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972.

> Christians (in Africa) must actively participate; they cannot, or rather they must not opt out of politics. Africa's maladies are their problems and they must be their concern too. They shouldn't be disinterested with or in them. As Christians we must show our concern for these problems by taking active roles to relieve Africa from such problems.[27]

Mvula sums up his argument, citing St. Augustine, 'Christians must not use their citizenship in the city of God as an excuse for refusing to accept political responsibilities in the city or state of which they are citizens'.[28]

Borthwick also advocates a holistic worldview in which God is in control and at the centre.[29] The thrust of the argument in his book is that the purpose of God in the world is for Christians to heed the challenge: 'There is a YOU–shaped hole in God's kingdom – find it and fill it'. Borthwick's argument resonates with the Great Commission and appraises the purpose of the church in society.[30] God is holy and desires justice for all humankind (Micah 6:8). For justice to flourish in society and the political arena, Christians cannot afford to huddle together in a holy brotherhood club of mutual admiration and shy away from engagement with society and how it is governed. The Anabaptist holds a contrary view, that Richard Kyle juxtaposes: 'A true Christian cannot occupy a governmental office. No responsible Christian can be without concern for civil government'.[31] Kyle's statement summarises the tension between the Anabaptist position of withdrawal and non-participation in church-state relations and the rest of the church. The Anabaptist view has been held since the Early Church, in contrast to the majority of the church. This article aligns with the view of the majority church that 'the church has a responsibility for society and the state and thus must express its ethical concerns in the political arena'.[32] It maintains that Christians cannot separate God and the church from politics. God belongs in politics if politics entails the governance of people in the world God created in His image. God is both transcendent and immanent, contrary to deism's belief in a perfect God who does not intervene. A God who, according to Catherine Beyer, 'after the motions of the universe were set in place, God retreated and had no further interaction with the created universe or the beings within it'. [33] Stanley Hauerwas assesses the relationship between church and politics using wit and philosophical humour. Its main purpose is to 'challenge liberal intellectual and political presuppositions by providing an account of the power and truthfulness of Christian convictions'.[34]

His views on church and state set Karl Barth apart. In his review of K. L. Schmidt's Basle inaugural lecture of 2 December 1936, *The Conflict of Church and State in the New Testament Community*, he finds a positive connection between church and state:

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[27] Mvula, *Christians in Active Politics,* p. 213.

[28] As quoted in Mvula, *Christians in Active Politics*, p. 334.

[29] P. Borthwick, *How to Be a World-Christian: Becoming a Part of God's Global Kingdom*, Downers Grove, Illinois, IVP, 2009. See the summary of his book in https://archive.org/details/howtobeworldclas0000paul/page/152/mode/2up?view=theater (accessed 8 February, 2025).

[30] Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:15-20; John 20:21.

[31] R. Kyle, 'Anabaptist and Reformed Attitudes Toward Civil Government: A Factor in Political Involvement', *Direction: A Mennonite Brethren Forum*, Spring 1985, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 27-33, https://directionjournal.org/14/1/index.html, (accessed 8 February 2025).

[32] See T.G. Sanders, *Protestant Concepts of Church and State*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964, pp. 20-21; R. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, New York, Harper and Row, 1951, pp. 40-1, 45-82, 191-229.

[33] C. Beyer, 'Deism: Belief in a Perfect God Who Does Not Intervene', *Learn Religions* [website], 26 March 2018, https://www.learnreligions.com/deism-95703, (accessed 29 February 2024).

[34] S. Hauerwas, *After Christendom?: How The Church is to Behave if Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation are Bad Ideas*, Nashville, Tennessee, Abingdon Press, 1991, p. 15.

> The church prefers to suffer persecution at the hands of the state, rather than take part in the deification of Caesar; it still knows that it is responsible for the state and for Caesar, and it finally manifests this responsibility, the prophetic service of the Church as Watchman, in its highest form by praying for the state and its officials in all circumstances.[35]

Barth evaluates some New Testament passages and concludes that 'the contrast between Church and State…should not be sought in the present age but in the age which is to come, not on earth but in heaven',[36] implying that its engagement with the state is inseparable. He takes issue with the architects of the Reformation and asserts, 'It is not true, as many reformers taught, that the secular kingdom (the State) is off limits to Christians, a thing apart from the sacred realm'.[37] Barth interprets 1 Peter 2:13-15 and Romans 13:1 to mean that God ordains both realms. They are not irreconcilable antagonists but are, as Barth put it, an outer circle (the state) and an inner circle (the church) sharing a common origin and a common centre. The gist of Rock's book concurs with Barth's views and underscores the interrelatedness between church and state.[38]

Barth further examines in context the teaching of Romans 13 regarding the role of the church and the state, and points out that: 'The State would deny its existence if it wished to become a Church. And the church on its side, for its own sake, or rather, for the sake of its mission, can never wish that the state should cease to be the state'.[39] Although Barth advocates the interrelatedness of church and state, he nevertheless spells out a distinction between the two as follows: 'It is clear that in this very close relationship between the existence of the church and that of the state, the church cannot itself become a State, and the state, on the other hand, cannot become a Church'.[40]

Separation of Church and State

Discussions on the church and state tend to be divisive and polarised, especially in the USA, where views on church and state are as partisan as its politics, either Republican or Democrat. In the USA, those opposed to church involvement in politics see themselves as preserving religious freedom for all Americans, as guaranteed by the Constitution. They argue that the Separation of Church and State is established in the First Amendment to the Constitution.[41] The rationale is to ensure that the government does not interfere in the support or suppression of any religion. It states, 'Separation of Church and State ensures that all people, whether religious or not, are treated the same…..This separation is a pillar of our democracy. That's why religious leaders have backed church-state separation from the earliest days of the American colonies'.[42] In 1960, John F Kennedy articulated the separation of Church and State as follows: 'I believe in an America where the separation of Church and State is absolute….where no church or

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[35] Barth, K., *Community, State and Church*, Gloucester, Massachusetts, Peter Smith, 1968, p.107.

[36] Barth*, Community, State and Church*, p. 122. He examines the following passages: Phil. 3:20; Heb. 11:10, 13-16; 12:22; 13:14 and Rev. 21.

[37] Barth*, Community, State and Church*, p.156.

[38] C. B. Rock, 'The Church and Society', *Biblical Research Institute* [website], https://adventistbiblicalresearch.org/articles/the-church-and-society, (accessed 28 March 2024).

[39] Barth*, Community, State and Church*, p. 132.

[40] Barth*, Community, State and Church*, p. 131.

[41] 'Freedom without Favor, Equality without Exception,' *Americans for Separation of Church and State* [website], https://www.au.org/, (accessed 28 March 2024).

[42] 'Church-State Separation: What It Is, What It Isn't, and Why You Should Care', *Americans for Separation of Church and State* [website], (accessed 29 March 2024).

church school is granted any public funds or political preference….where no religious body seeks to impose its will directly or indirectly upon the general populace or the public acts of its officials'.[43] The context of his statement is worth noting: he was the first US Catholic president, and many Americans feared he would be a puppet of the Pope and would make Catholic schools across the US receive taxpayer support. The statement, therefore, might have been made to assure voters that he was not a puppet of the Catholic Church.

While his speech is laudable, it fails to address the mandate in Jesus's manifesto of His Kingdom in Matthew 5:13-14, where Jesus describes his followers as "the salt and the light" of the world, implying that just as salt and light influence by infiltration, so do the Christians, his followers. The situation in Africa is more complex. Most African countries are secular states and tend to promote the separation of church and state, a principle with roots in Saint Augustine, whose central teaching was that earthly political systems could not be relied upon to satisfy the gnawing, deeply seated human need, which is spiritual rather than material. Augustine attacks the false teachings of pagans, as expressed by their poets, politicians, and philosophers.[44] He presents the two cities: the earthly city of man, represented by Babylon, is rooted in vice and sin, governed by selfish love and destined for conflict, destruction, and eternal death. The heavenly city, represented by Jerusalem, is rooted in grace and virtue, governed by the love of God and destined for peace, salvation and eternal life. Augustine became the chief architect of Western theology and ecclesiology.

The African view of church and state is heavily influenced by Western missionaries who established churches in Africa. Most Christians in Africa subscribe to Augustine's view of polarisation and separation of church and state, and to a great extent, of the church and politics. Whenever people extrapolate Augustine's views to extremes, they create a dichotomy in which politics and religion are parallel lines that should never meet or coexist. Nevertheless, church and politics are not many miles apart. Politics comes from the Greek word *politika,* meaning of or relating to citizens. Politics is a social activity that involves all citizens of a given society and concerns governance, law, justice, and social and economic welfare. In that sense, it is mutually inclusive of all members of a given society rather than exclusive. Eisenhower pointed out,

> Politics ought to be the part-time profession of every citizen who would protect the rights and privileges of free people and preserve what is good and fruitful in our national heritage. Politics must be the concern of every citizen who wants to see our national well-being increased and our international leadership strengthened. In that combined sense, politics is the noblest of professions.[45]

Biblical Perspectives on Separation of Church and State

According to Anabaptists, 'The world is essentially evil and diametrically opposed to the Kingdom of Christ. The true Christian, therefore, does not have anything to do with the world

[43] Kennedy, J. F., 'September 12, 1960: Address to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association', *UVA Miller Center* [website], http://millercenter.org/president/kennedy/speeches/speech-3363, (accessed 8 February 2025).

[44] Augustine, Saint. *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, The Floating Press, 2009, https://www.perlego.com/book/1302577/confessions-of-st-augustine-, (accessed 29 February 2024).

[45] D. Eisenhower, 'Address Recorded for the Republican Lincoln Day Dinners, January 28, 1954', *The American Presidency Project*, G. Peters and J.T. Woolley (eds.), https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-recorded-for-the-republican-lincoln-day-dinners, (accessed 30 March 2024).

except through missionary effort, as required by the Great Commission'.[46] Such a view needs to be balanced with logic and a holistic interpretation of Scripture. In answer to the question, 'What does it mean to say that Jesus is Lord of the political realm?', Paul Marshall stated, 'Political authority is not an area apart from the gospel, but can be an area of ministry just as much as any office in the church…. The state is what God, through Jesus Christ, has established to maintain justice. Its officers are as much ministers of God as are prophets and priests'.[47]

Although contemporary politics is often associated with sleaze, deception, and dishonesty, this article argues that such realities do not justify Christian withdrawal from public life. On the contrary, it contends that the church should engage with the political realm with truth, justice, and integrity. This could be achieved through Christians' active involvement in politics.[48] The Bible teaches that abundant grace brings us to a life of overcoming sin: 'Where sin abounded, grace abounded much more' (Romans 5:20).[49] In the Great Commission, Jesus commands Christians to go to where people are and transform them with the gospel (Matthew 28:19-20). It is essentially a clarion call to social engagement. The church must penetrate society, including political life, and season it with God's kingdom values. It is a call to shine light into the social-political darkness of sleaze, denial, deflection, and rejection of the truth of moral life. The Great Commission, thus understood, means the church's role is to inject God's kingdom values into the fibre of society. Some Bible scholars interpret Abraham's call to leave Ur (Genesis 12:1ff; Hebrews 11:8) as a mandate for Christians to follow his example by abandoning the world. However, such an interpretation misconstrues the biblical text. Abraham was called out from one social community to another to establish a covenant with God for all humanity. While his obedience to God is an example for all Christians, the interpretation of his leaving misconstrues the passage's biblical exegetical context. Sherratt and Mahurin contend that Abraham's true sons uphold and maintain Abraham's call not for their own sake but for doing God's will, hallowing His name and bringing God's Kingdom upon all humanity.[50]

The call of the church away from society entails a covenant with God and an engagement in transforming society to espouse godliness and to promote God's immutable character of love, holiness, equity, righteousness, and justice. To achieve this, the church must wrap its shoulder with society. Christians (church) are the salt and the light of the world (Matthew 5:13-14), meaning the church must season society and just as salt becomes valuable when it comes into contact and dissolves in whatever it means to season, and just as light needs darkness to shine, so does the Christian need to come into contact with society to make a difference. This contact encompasses involvement in social and political transformation. Fleming points out, 'Christians are a community of holy exiles fully engaged in a social world'.[51] The Bible refers to Christians as ambassadors for Christ (2 Cor. 5:20). Monsma and

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[46] R. Kyle, 'Anabaptist and Reformed Attitudes Toward Civil Government: A Factor in Political Involvement', Direction: A Mennonite Brethren Forum, Spring 1985, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 27-33, https://directionjournal.org/14/1/index.html, (accessed 11 February 2026). See also, H.J. Hillerbrand, 'The Anabaptist View of the State', *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, vol. 32, no. 2, April 1958, pp. 84-87.

[47] P. Marshall, *Thine is the Kingdom. A Biblical Perspective on the Nature of Government and Politics Today*, Basingstoke, Hants, Marshall Morgan Scott, 1984, pp. 46,47. See also, J.H. Redekop, 'The Christian in Politics: Some Basic Problems', *Direction: A Mennonite Brethren Forum*, vol. 14, no. 1, Spring 1985, pp. 27-33, https://directionjournal.org/14/1/index.html, (accessed 11 February 2025).

[48] See Mvula, *Christians in Active Politics.*

[49] *Holy Bible, New King James Version*, Nashville, Tennessee, 1982, Romans 5:20. Hereafter, all scripture references will employ this version of the Bible with an in-text citation, indicating this version as NKJV, unless otherwise indicated.

[50] T.R. Sherratt and R.P. Mahurin, *Saints as Citizens: A Guide to Public Responsibilities for Christians*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker Books, 1995, p. 16.

[51] D.E. Flemming, *Recovering the Full Mission of God: A Biblical Perspective on Being, Doing, and Telling*, Downers Grove, Illinois, IVP Academic, 2013, p. 230.

Baldock state, 'Politics rightly understood and practised, deal with concepts of righteousness and justice'.[52] Christians engage with the darkness in society as agents of change. Such an understanding of church and society calls into question those who embrace extremism and advocate the separation of church and state by arguing, 'the Church's mission is religious, not political, economic or social', as expressed in Vatican Council II.[53]

Niebuhr maintained a balanced, inclusive view, as advocated in this article, that the church's mission is both evangelism and social action. Its mission is not limited to spreading the gospel per se. Still, it encompasses the renewal, transformation, and improvement of the whole world and its political systems.[54] Pope Paul VI echoed this sentiment when he pointed out that the church's religious mission also involves political activity, as 'the source of commitment, direction, and vigour is to establish and consolidate the community of men according to the law of God'.[55] The Pope called into question the separation of the church from politics: 'To forbid citizens to express and act upon their beliefs in politics is a plain impossibility. To forbid only religious believers to express and act upon their beliefs in politics is plain bigotry'.[56] In summary, the separation of church and state upheld by some Christians appears to rest on shaky, largely flawed interpretations of biblical passages, taken out of context and used as pretexts.

The Wesleyan Perspectives on Church and Society

Karl Barth addressed the issue of Church and Society vis–à–vis the Church and State, as highlighted above. John Wesley advanced it by encouraging the church's involvement in society, the state, and the local community. John Wesley bathed most of his views in Scripture. The objective of his movement was to spread the scriptural holiness. In this sense, an appraisal of Wesleyan perspectives concomitates evaluating scriptural perspectives. The Wesleyan Revival spread through the Holiness Movement, and Wesley's legacy encouraged the church to promote and engage in social transformation and community development. Wesley's most notable offspring denominations, the Methodist Church, the Salvation Army, and the Church of the Nazarene, carry on his vision. Compassion ministries are paramount in these denominations, and they express concern about legislative measures that adversely affect society. This paper presents the salient points of Wesley's position on church and society. Community engagement is a distinctive characteristic of Wesley's teaching and almost defines its identity. Writing from a Wesleyan perspective, Justine Tegen articulates it as follows: 'When we hesitate or downplay our need for community, we downplay the image of God in us. God himself is a community…and lives constantly in community. When we function in healthy communities, we collectively create a living, breathing example of the Trinity'.[57]

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[52] S. V. Monsma and L. Baldock, *Pursuing Justice in a Sinful World*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984, p. 16.

[53] Vatican Council II, 'Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium et Spes, Promulgated by His Holiness, Pope Paul VI on December 7, 1965', *The Holy See* [website], https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html, (accessed 30 March 2024).

[54] R. Niebuhr, *Discerning the Signs of the Times: Sermons for Today and Tomorrow*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946, p. 46.

[55] Pope Paul VI, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: Lumen Gentium*, Boston, Massachusetts, Pauline Books & Media, 1965, p. 46.

[56] Pope Paul VI, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, p. 46.

[57] Tegen, J., 'Why Community is Important', *The Wesleyan Church* [website], 1 May 2019, https://www.wesleyan.org/why-community-is-, (accessed 8 February 2025). The article is also published in her blog https://alivewesleyan.com/blog/why-community-is-important/.

For John Wesley, 'Christianity is essentially a social religion', and 'to turn it into a solitary religion is indeed to destroy it'.[58] Such conviction led Wesley to address social issues of his time. He realised the nexus between the church and society and became an exponent of practical Christianity. John McMaster's article broadly analyses John Wesley's perspectives on church and society and observes, 'Secular or religious, sacred or profane, no department of human affairs was exempt from the word and command of God'.[59] Wesley also 'rejected the common notion that religion could be kept separate from business, for unless it was permeated with Christian values and dedicated to Christian goals, business could not help but be turned to diabolical ends.'[60] Wesleyan perspectives also advocate, "Social holiness needs to be extended beyond ecclesial koinonia. Within the socio-economic and political community, the holiness of life is to be realised'.[61] Wesley's 'horizon of holiness was the whole world, created and recreated'.[62] The spreading of scriptural holiness entailed 'the transformation of the economic and political order, the establishment of Pentecostal commun(al)ism and the abolition of war.'[63] McMaster evaluates what Wesley's legacy means in the twenty-first century and concludes, 'This will mean engaging with the principalities and powers of racism, poverty, nationalism, ethnocentrism and the systemic violence which they express with such devastation and destruction of the human and environmental community. This also includes the violence of sexism and the personal and structural domination of women'.[64]

Wesleyan perspectives on society would address issues arising from modern excesses of capitalism, dividing society into two categories: the haves and the have-nots, attributing poverty to laziness to sanitise structural oppression. John Wesley took issue with such an attitude that people experiencing poverty were poor only because they were idle and described such an attitude as 'wickedly, devilishly false'.[65] Wesley empowered the poor and the marginalised in society. He condemned injustice and the slave trade unequivocally, and he condemned it with the most potent words possible. A week before his death, Wesley wrote to Wilberforce in support of his endeavour to abolish the slave trade: 'Go on, in the name of God and in the power of His might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it'.[66]

Role of the Church in Society

Having established the meaning and historical context of church, society, and politics, this article now appraises the church's specific role in modern society and politics. The hypothesis guiding this study is that if the church functions as Jesus intended, its influence will be palpable. The church's influence and impact on society have been noticeable throughout history. Nevertheless, this is no longer the case in the twenty-first century, where, in African

[58] 'A Social, Not a Solitary, Religion—John Wesley, 1743', in J.W. Bready, *England: Before and After Wesley: The Evangelical Revival and Social Reform*, New York, Harper and Brothers Publishers, 2008, p. 202.

[59] J. McMaster, 'Wesley on Social Holiness', The Methodist Church [website], January 2002, https://media.methodist.org.uk/media/documents/wc_Eur_John_Mcmaster_Wesley_on_Social_Holiness.pdf, (accessed 30 January 2024).

[60] Mcmaster, 'Wesley on Social Holiness'.

[61] Mcmaster, 'Wesley on Social Holiness'.

[62] See T.W. Jennings, Jr., *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics*, Nashville, Tennessee, Abingdon Press, 1990, p. 152.

[63] Jennings, *Good News to the Poor*, p. 153.

[64] Mcmaster, 'Wesley on Social Holiness'.

[65] As cited in T. Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today*, Nashville, Tennessee, Abingdon Press, 1998, p. 190.

[66] J. Wesley,'Letter to William Wilberforce, February 24, 1791', in Telford, John. (ed.), *The Letters of The Rev John Wesley*, vol. 8, London, Epworth Press, 1931, p. 86.

Christianity, despite the church's burgeoning numbers, its influence is lacking, coupled with the Westerns' lacklustre decline. This article highlights several reasons.

Church's Influence in Society

Historical overview

This article agrees with Carey and Gasgoine's summary that traces Christians' involvement in society from the Council of Nicaea (AD 325) through the time of Constantine, the Middle Ages in Europe, the Byzantine Empire, the Reformation, to Christianity's arrival on the shores of the USA, whose founding proclaimed 'one nation under God'.[67] Nevertheless, Carey and Gasgoine overstate the case in their argument, citing Warburton (1736) that 'the true end for which religion is established is not to provide true faith but for civil utility'.[68] The review of Coleridge's landmark 1829 publication on church and state further strengthens their review.

Morris traces the new world of Spanish expansion in Latin America to New Zealand and Australia.[69] His survey locates the origins and epicentre of the USA's current debate on the separation of church and state in the establishment of the Church of England in the USA, which can be traced to the great European revival and to the migration of evangelicals to Virginia in 1776. It shows that, when the colony of Virginia demanded independence from Britain, it also sparked evangelical Christians' demand for the separation of church and state. Carey and Gasgoine further highlight that the latter found support from eminent politicians, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, who, influenced by Enlightenment ideology, were suspicious of the intermingling of church and state. Carey and Gasgoine cite Morris to illustrate the controversies that ensued when the state supported a particular Church denomination, laying the foundation for church and state to begin moving apart in the wake of the Age of Revolutions.[70] The French Revolution consummated the cleavage and enshrined it in the French Separation Law of 1905.

Biblical Perspectives on the Church's Influence on Society

In the Old Testament, the concept of theocracy is more pronounced.[71] In contrast, in the New Testament, the secular government is more prominent, making biblical teaching about the church and state a matter of biblical interpretation. Most passages concerning church and state are in the Pauline corpus and tend to provoke heated debate. The first is, 'make petitions, prayers, intercessions…. for rulers, and for everyone who has authority over us' (1 Timothy 2:1-2). Some scholars interpret this text as stating that the church's primary role is to support the state through prayers and thanksgiving for its existence. Second, it acknowledges God's supremacy and sovereignty in appointing or allowing the formation of the state to govern and

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[67] H.M. Carey and J. Gasgoine, *Church and State in Old and New World*, Boston, Massachusetts, Brill, 2011, p.14.

[68] Carey and Gasgoine, *Church and State in Old and New World*, p.11.

[69] R.M. Morris, *Church and State in Twenty-First Century Britain: The Future of Church Establishment*, London, Macmillan, Palgrave, 2009.

[70] Carey and Gasgoine, *Church and State in Old and New World*, 2011, p.16, citing Morris, *Church and State in Twenty-First Century Britain, 2009,* p. 66-67.

[71] According to *Merriam Webster English Dictionary*, 'Theocracy is government of a state by immediate divine guidance or by officials who are regarded as divinely guided' 'theocracy', *Merriam Webster English Dictionary* [website], https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/theocracy, (accessed 8 February 2025). Encylopedia Britannica defines theocracy as 'Government by divine guidance or by officials who are regarded as divinely guided'. See 'theocracy'. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* [website], Adam Augustyn (ed.), https://www.britannica.com/topic/theocracy, (accessed 9 February 2025).

maintain law and order for the good of society's existence. Third, any form of government is preferable to chaos and anarchy, which would prevail in its absence. Fourth, it implies there is no perfect government or state so long as it is governed by fallen humanity with a propensity to sin, selfishness, and greed. Barth supports this view.

> This intercession is necessary because, from God alone, rulers can receive and maintain that power, which is salutary for the church and, for the sake of the preaching of justification, so indispensable to all men. Far from being the object of worship, the state and its representatives need prayer. In principle, and speaking comprehensively, this is the essential service which the church owes to the state.[72]

A nexus of interdependence between church and state is established in the scriptures as follows: for the church to fulfil its primary role of preaching the gospel, it needs the peace and protection of the state. A plausible interpretation of the text 'But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son' (Galatians 4:4, NKJV) is that it refers to the historical preparation orchestrated by God's providence before Jesus' first advent and the birth of the church. It testifies to God's sovereignty over earthly politics. The Greek empire during the time of Alexander the Great provided the Greek Language, the lingua franca of the time, with its exactitude in expressing biblical concepts in writing the New Testament. Secondly, the rule of the Roman Empire, which brought peace (*Pax Romana*) and facilitated transport along its road network across much of Europe, helped spread the gospel in the first century. The well-known phrase 'All roads lead to Rome' bears this out: therefore, praying and interceding for the state is not a call for the *status quo* but for active political and social engagement. What people pray for concerns them. The alternative is isolation, withdrawal, detachment, and a lack of concern for what happens in society and the state, of which, when the church has taken that stance in history, it has often been accused of being too heavenly-minded to be of any earthly good. Pope Paul VI seemed to acknowledge the nexus when he advocated for the church and the political community to serve the common good and 'embrace the total of all those conditions of social life which enable individuals, families, and organisations to achieve complete and efficacious fulfilment…Christians should set an example by their sense of responsibility and dedication in this work'.[73]

The supremacy of Christ entails his Lordship over creation, church and state, 'whether they are kings or lords, rulers or powers – everything has been created through him and for him' (Colossians 1:16).[74] When the Church proclaims the Lordship of God and Jesus Christ, that includes Lordship over the affairs of the state, not only Lordship of the church. It is, therefore, the role of the church to keep reminding the state that it rules people on behalf of their creator God, who is the Lord of all the Earth. The Love of God and the desire for justice and equity are for all society, not only for the church.

Barth aptly states, 'The Church honours the state even when this expectation is not fulfilled... States may rise and fall, political conceptions may change, and politics may interest or fail to interest men. Still, throughout all developments and changes, one factor remains as the preservation and basis of all states—the Christian Church."[75]

God is the custodian of peace, equity, human dignity, justice for the poor and the marginalised, and religious liberty. These are ideals enshrined in the Old Testament, and Jesus

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[72] Barth*, Community, State and Church*, p.136.

[73] Pope Paul VI, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,* pp. 74, 75.

[74] *Holy Bible, God's Word Translation,* God's Word to the Nations Bible Society, 1995, Colossians 1:16. Hereafter, all scripture references will employ this version of the Bible with an in-text citation, indicating this version as GWT, unless otherwise indicated.

[75] Barth*, Community, State and Church*, p. 140.

affirmed them (Luke 4:17-19, citing Isa. 61). The role of the church is to partner with the state to deliver these same godly desires for society. Wesley encouraged early Methodists to engage the government in social programs to tackle poverty and inequity, and also encouraged Wilberforce to lobby against the slave trade. The church could also partner with the government to deliver educational programs. The church, on its own, cannot provide these ideals, no matter how passionate it feels about them. It requires the state; hence the appeal in Scripture to pray and to partner with the state. In this sense, there are distinct roles between the church and the state. As Barth makes the caveat, 'The Church cannot, however, simply take the Kingdom of God itself into the political arena. The Church reminds the State of God's Kingdom'.[76] Church history is replete with pitfalls when the state makes religious law mandatory for all society, for example, the Crusades (1095-1291) and the religious wars and conflicts in Islamic states, leading to totalitarianism and untold human injustices and suffering. The church must learn to acknowledge and learn to live and espouse an unrealised eschatology - the yet and not yet of eschatology. God's Kingdom is partially on Earth, awaiting its full future heavenly consummation.

Church and Society in Africa

In the modern African context, a paradox arises. Although African Traditional religions did not practise a separation of the secular and the sacred, we find the same call to separate church and state and church and politics. The Western missionaries and colonialism imported such a separation, which currently pertains in most African countries. As Patrick Kalilombe, points out, 'There was no real dialogue whereby missionaries would want to build Christianity on what may have been valid in the people's traditional religion or find out what was out of order in it so that Christianity could supply and correct it'.[77] As regards separating the sacred and the secular, there is a plausible consensus of scholarly opinion that Western cultural imperialism imposed the separation of church and society and church and politics on African societies.[78] In traditional African contexts, most societies relied on local community governance by elders in village and clan settings. The community disdained anyone who did not comply with communal law. The communal government had no dichotomy between the secular and sacred. Communal law included the enforcement of religious taboos, whose violation brought retribution upon the entire community. The separation of the secular from the sacred has impacted African Christianity adversely, producing dichotomous Christians living double lives, lacking integrity and making no difference to the community.

In most African countries, a large proportion of the population professes to be Christian.[79] For example, 'according to the 2019 Population and Housing Census, 85.5% of

[76] Barth*, Community, State and Church*, p. 167.

[77] P. Kalilombe, P., 'Spirituality in Africa Today and Tomorrow', *Religion in Malawi*, vol 14, 2007, p. 10.

[78] See, Parrinder (1961), Mbiti (1970), Mbiti (1989), Dukor (1989) Sindima (1990); Birch, Eakin, McDaniel (eds.) (1990), Posey(ed.) (1999) discuss and point out how Western cultural views have influenced African worldview. Imposed Western culture destroyed the African belief that 'The physical and spiritual are but two dimensions of one and the same universe', (Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 73-74, 144; 'African Wholism' p. 371) also life centredness of which in African Worldview 'all of life is sacred', (Posey, *Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity*, pp. 97-98).

[79] According to Xia – Maria MacKay 'Around 70% of Christians in general, many of them evangelicals, live in Africa' (MacKay, M., '"The Future of Christianity is Already Here": Gospel Spreading at an Explosive Rate in Africa', Christian Today [website], 27 October 2025, https://www.christiantoday.com/news/the-future-of-christianity-is-already-here-gospel-spreading-at-an-explosive-rate-in-africa, (accessed 19 February 2026).

Kenyans identify as Christians'.[80] Such reflections make one wonder whether such countries should be declared Christian states. History warns that those who ignore history are bound to repeat it. The Reformation resulted from the Papacy's overbearing stance within the Roman Catholic Church. The authoritarian policies of the Roman Catholic Church sparked the split of the Anglican Church. Similarly, the Anglican Church's authoritarianism in England and apathy toward society sparked the Wesleyan revival, leading to the formation of Methodism and the associated Holiness Movement denominations. Religious authoritarianism results in what is happening in some Islamic states, where religious authoritarian extremism destroys peaceful governance. Therefore, the church must learn from history and maintain its supportive role rather than rush to prematurely declare God's Kingdom on Earth and unleash untold chaos. Barth cautions that if the church were to overstate its role and demand a Christian state, "The State is quite justified if it refuses to countenance all such Christian demands. It belongs to the very nature of the state that it is not and cannot become the Kingdom of God."[81] Along similar veins, Thiessen points out, "The purpose of the church is to glorify God, edify itself, purify itself, educate its constituency, evangelise the community and the world, and act as a restraining and enlightening force in the community and the world.[82]

The African Church is expanding rapidly, yet it remains young. The oldest denominations have just celebrated their centenaries. Pastors without formal biblical or theological training lead most churches, some of which are hardly a decade old. As such, they suffer from historical amnesia. They have no perception of church history and its lessons. In many parts of Africa, some pastors support political systems for personal gain, and politicians have responded in kind, using churches for their own ends. It is not uncommon for a politician to buy a prestigious car for a bishop or to make large donations to gain the church's support. Such is the moral miasma that accounts for the church's failure to positively influence social transformation, political reforms, and the eradication of corruption, poverty, and injustice in most parts of Africa. Like Esau (Genesis 25:29–34), the church has sold its birthright and lost its moral authority, compass and prophetic voice.

Summary

The discussion so far has established that the separation of church and state dates back to Saint Augustine, the architect of Western theology. We have established that the weight of biblical evidence against the church's involvement in society and politics is flimsy and based on flawed hermeneutics. On the other hand, the weight of evidence from Scripture supports Christian engagement with society and its political life for social transformation. We now turn to the focal question: How could the church contribute to society?

The Church's Contribution to Society

Emil Brunner is renowned for his famous quotation, 'The Church exists by mission, just as a fire exists by burning. Where there is no mission, there is no Church, and where there is neither church nor mission, there is no faith'.[83]

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[80] See Z. Dierks, 'Kenya Population 2019 by Religion', *Statista* [website], 26 January 2026, https://www.statista.com/statistics/1304207/population-of-kenya-by-religion/, (accessed 19 February 2026)..

[81] Barth*, Community, State and Church*, p.167-168.

[82] H.C. Thiessen, *Will the Church Pass through the Tribulation?*, New York, Loizeaux Bros, 1941, p. 56.

[83] E. Brunner, *The Word and The World*, Charles Scribner's Sons Publishers, New York, 1931.

Brunner and Hottinger exhorted Christians to participate in politics within the confines and the standards of justice and law.[84] They urge Christians to introduce love into the social network's crevices to demonstrate mercy and compassion within institutional frameworks. Additionally, Christians should reform social structures to improve them. They say the church has a significant role in reducing evil in the state as dykes against sin to restrain the chaotic impulses of sinful, fallen humanity. The following suggestions show how the church could be pivotal in society by influencing social and political transformation.

The Personal Individual's Influence

The teaching on the *imago dei* implies that God's image in all humankind is marred by original sin. At conversion, this image is regenerated in Christians to reflect God's love, holiness, righteousness, and justice. According to Dunning, John Wesley believed and taught that the image of God also includes the political image.[85] Wesley encouraged Wilberforce in the abolition of the slave trade and stood against racism. Wesley urged early Methodists to participate in cooperative movements to alleviate injustice and poverty and to engage in compassionate ministries, thereby balancing evangelism and social action. Most early Methodists joined the Labour Party Movement in Britain, which championed social justice and political reform. Like Brunner, Wesley advocated practical and ethical Christianity. He set an example of how Christians should influence political reform through personal holiness, lobbying and peaceful demonstrations to address injustice, immoral behaviour, and political accountability. A Christian's armchair criticism of political systems is hypocritical; Christians should adopt the political mantra, 'If it is to be, it is up to me', in their political outlook, meaning they are ready to participate and influence the political agenda prayerfully. Such a motto translates into activism against the ills that exist in society and the political system. Christians have a part in bringing in the required reform.

There are two ways the church could influence social and political transformation. First, make sure Christians are politically informed. During the UK elections, Churches Together in England sponsors and organises neutral *hustings forums* - a meeting at which candidates in an election address potential voters and invite aspiring candidates to hold open debates in churches within the wards or constituencies, enabling Christians to question them and assess how the candidates will address social issues and bring the desired political change or reform. During the author's Christian ministry in Leeds, UK (2015 -2020), Christians from the Methodist, the United Reformed, and the Church of England Parish in the Liggett Park area to the northeast of the city of Leeds organised one such *hustings,* chaired by the area bishop. Christians benefited from meeting the candidates and asking them questions, rather than receiving snippets of their political manifestos in leaflets through the doors or on social media.

Secondly, the church can sensitise its members to engage with political issues and encourage them to vote. During the recent UK elections, the Central Methodist Church in Chesterfield encouraged its members to vote by displaying a billboard on the church noticeboard, a prominent location visible to all. It had the sign of the cross, and on the opposite side, it had the X used in voting and a text that read: 'A cross makes a difference. Think, Pray, Vote'. Sensitising Christians should be undertaken with integrity, demonstrating non-partisanship and restraint, avoiding engagement in campaigns for any political candidate, emphasising the principles and leaving the choice to the individual Christian conscience. The

[84] E. Brunner, *Justice and the Social Order*, trans. M. Hottinger, Ann Arbor, Michigan, University Microfilms, 1972, p. 3.

[85] H.R. Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness: A Wesleyan Systematic Theology*, Kansas City, Missouri, Beacon Hill Press, 1988, p. 134.

church could also educate members in preparation for political elections through sermons on biblical principles that inform good governance and political change. The sermons should highlight what the Bible teaches about corruption, expounding passages like Proverbs 17:23, which opposes corruption, and Micah 6:8, which promotes justice, God's love, mercy, and non-oppressive governance and Psalm 133 on communal cohesion and promotion of the Christian commonwealth to counter tribalism that bedevils African politics. The church could also do an exegetical exposition of Romans 13:1-7 on the limits of the government's authority. The church should encourage members to live out their faith in accordance with these principles and challenge and confront their local politicians with these biblical teachings to engender change and social transformation.

In Africa, the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, and Presbyterian Churches have played a leading role in challenging and influencing political reforms. Renowned clergy from these denominations have made giant strides in influencing national political agendas. Among them was Desmond Tutu of South Africa, who played a role in the abolition of apartheid. Archbishop Okullu, Archbishop Gitari, Bishop Ndingi, Bishop Muge, Rev. Musyimi, and Rev. Njoya, all from Kenya, made significant contributions by challenging government corruption and political malpractice. From Uganda, the Anglican Bishop Lowum paid the ultimate price with his own life for challenging the despotic dictator Idi Amin of Uganda. These Christian clerics demonstrated what the church could achieve when individual Christians stood up for truth and justice to influence society. They were well-read and aware of historical debates within the church and of past engagements among the Church, Society, State, and politics, which motivated their zealous convictions.

The situation in Africa, however, remains lamentable today. The pendulum of Christianity has indeed shifted to the Global South. Nevertheless, the churches are relatively young and led by pastors with minimal theological and biblical grounding. While these pastors are commendable for their zeal for evangelism, they are fragile in their leadership and moral clout. Despite the churches' growing numbers and prominence in society, the church at large has had little impact on social transformation or political reform. Africa claims the highest church attendance and Christian membership, yet the whole continent laments and languishes in corruption, poor governance, poverty and endless coup d'etats. The gap between the haves and have-nots is widening exponentially on a continent rich in mineral resources and once renowned for its social and communal care in the spirit of ubuntu. Instead of influencing society, the church in Africa is influenced by society, as Gilley puts it: 'Too many Christians, just like their unsaved counterparts, are impressed by appearances rather than structure, are seeking thrills and excitement rather than substance, are more apt to respond to emotional manipulation than rational discourse'.[86]

Although Gilley addresses the trend in the West, primarily the USA, a similar phenomenon is evident in the church in Africa, where most pulpits function as entertainment theatres and platforms for political rallies, especially during mourning at funerals! Pulpit preaching, once associated with expounding the Word of God and the gospel and with moving people to tears, has become a venue for preachers to exhibit their theatrical flair and for politicians in cahoots with bishops and pastors to advance their political agendas. Unlike Billy Graham, who spiritually influenced several USA presidents with godly counsel and who, according to Gibbs and Duffy, testified, 'My one thought was to be a spiritual blessing, to be a witness', he said meaning not just someone who dropped in and talked about faith but lived his

[86] G.E. Gilley, *This Little Church Went to Market: Is Modern Church Selling Out*, Darlington, United Kingdom, Evangelical Press, 2005, p. 31.

life in such a way that it set an example and offered a model.[87] On the contrary, African pastors have pandered to the wishes of politicians by accepting large donations and even motor cars, making the adage come true: *Whose meat you eat, his/her song you sing.* Most of the clergy from these young African churches seem to suffer from historical amnesia and end up repeating mistakes documented in church history. Such pastors are unlikely to nurture their congregations into mature Christians who can influence society into spiritual and social transformation.

Prophetic Role

As discussed earlier, the state or society comprises both Christians and non-Christians, as Augustine describes in *The City of God*.[88] Due to human frailty caused by original sin, which leads to a propensity to sin, we will always have people in society and in politics who do not represent or conform to God's ideals of love, equity, and justice. For that matter, Christians must speak truth to power prophetically as the society's conscience to call out malpractices and other evils associated with necessary social transformation and political reforms. The prophets in the Old Testament fulfilled this role, and the early Christians did as well (Acts 4, 7, 21-26). For example, Festo Kivengere, the Anglican bishop of Uganda, confronted the dictator Idi Amin for abusing his authority and warned him that 'God would judge him'.[89]

Today's Christians must do the same to create an equitable, just society and political governance. Rene Padilla summarises the prophetic role of the church as follows:

> The church is called to be here and now what God intends the whole of society to be. In its prophetic ministry it lays open the evils that frustrate the purpose of God in society; in its evangelization it seeks to integrate men into that purpose of God whose full realization is to take place in the Kingdom to come. Consequently; wherever the church fails as a prophet it also fails as an evangelist.[90]

Practical Christian Living

Jesus told the Parable of the Yeast (Matt. 13:33) to illustrate how the Church's Kingdom of God grows from small beginnings, like the yeast, and in time, rises until it transforms society. Detailed exegesis of the parable is outside the scope of this article. It is sufficient to point out the following salient points that most commentators agree with. First, Jesus used it as a metaphor to illustrate how the transformative power of God's Word works silently and persistently to bring about change from within a person and in society, reflecting the growth and spread of faith and God's influence on Earth. This parable speaks to the transformative power of the church in society when it adheres to its ethical teachings. Second, the parable also teaches that this is accomplished little by little, not by force. This transformative power requires the church to spread the gospel of just and righteous living, not only by word but also by deed. It teaches 'mixing the yeast (God's Word) into the flour (the World or Society) and causing the bread (Kingdom of Heaven) to rise'.[91]

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[87] N. Gibbs and M. Duffy, '"I Loved 'Em All": Inside Billy Graham's Powerful Relationship with US Presidents', *Time* [website], 21 February 2018, https://time.com/5168589/billy-graham-president-relationships/, (accessed 8 February 2025).

[88] Augustine, Saint, *The City of God*, New York: Garden City, Image/Doubleday, 1958.

[89] Borthwick, *How to Be a World-Christian,* p. 39.

[90] R. Padilla, 'Evangelism and the World', pp. 137-138, in *Lausanne 1974 Documents*, 25 July 1974, *Lausanne Movement* [website], https://lausanne.org/content/lausanne-1974-documents, (accessed 8 February 2025).

[91] See summary at 'Parable of the Yeast: Verse, Meaning and Lesson', *Biblevise* [website], https://biblevise.com/parable-of-the-yeast/, (accessed 10 February 2025).

Most African countries have had over six decades of independence from Colonialism (Ghana, 1957; Congo, 1960; Nigeria, 1960; Tanzania, 1961; Rwanda and Burundi, 1962; Kenya, 1963; Malawi, 1964; Zambia, 1964; Zimbabwe, 1980). Yet poor governance, injustices, and human rights abuses plague them. Are these countries' governments failing, or is the Christian church failing these governments? Does the parable of the yeast apply to these countries? I posit that, rather than asking why governments are failing in these countries, we should ask why the church is failing to exert its influence.

One of the most troubling scourges of African politics is corruption. Kenya is estimated to have 85.5% of its population as Christians.[92] Yet, corruption, rigging elections, impunity and abuse of power in office are so rampant that one wonders who is committing all these evils. Are all these evils attributable to the 20% of the non–Christian population? Most African countries replicate similar statistics. One way the church could influence social transformation is through practical Christian living. Supposing every Christian of the 80% in the nation lived the Christian principles as salt and light, refusing bribes, upholding the rule of law, and whistleblowing when they witness evil doing, no doubt would minimise social evils that plague most governments. As discussed earlier, practical Christian living calls every Christian to live exemplary lives. Thus, social transformation and political reforms would emerge from living out the gospel in word and deed.

The reality is that it sounds like a tantalising mirage: African governments are plagued by corruption, rigged elections, and theft of government and public resources by corrupt government officials and politicians. The intriguing question is: Why, with such a high percentage of Christians, is Africa struggling with poor governance and corruption? The Bible teaches against bribery (Exod. 23:8; Prov. 17:23; 29:4) and greed (Prov. 15:27). Suppose the alleged 80% of Christians in Kenya upheld and lived by biblical teaching. What effect would that have on the Kenyan Society? Supposing that the 80% of the Christians in Kenya who work for the government and its parastatals lived up to biblical teachings, what effect would that have on the Kenyan government? One could replicate these questions across all African countries that report higher percentages of Christians. Given these realities, is it preposterous to posit that the church contributes to the failure we see in society by not infiltrating society and lobbying for equitable political governance? This article, therefore, concludes that the church's failure to live up to Jesus' teaching in the Parable of the Yeast discussed above constitutes, and is partly to blame for, the social and political decay observed in Africa and across the world. The church and, for that matter, all those who profess to be Christians need to adopt the mantra: 'If society needs change for the better, it is up to me to shine the light of Christ and season it with the morality that comes from the Gospel of Christ'. African societies need to rediscover the non-separation of the secular and the sacred that existed before colonisation and the advent of Western missionaries. Also, the Ubuntu philosophy, 'I am because we are', promotes social transformation and communal care.

Conclusion

This article surveyed the historical understanding of church and society, the separation of church and state. It analysed and evaluated the two strongly held views: withdrawal from society, mainly held by the Anabaptists, and the view held by the rest of the Christian church. It weighed each view's strengths and weaknesses against the biblical evidence. It concludes that, on balance, the biblical evidence indicates that the church should play a significant role in society and matters of the state. The paper concludes by recommending ways in which the church could engage in social transformation and political reform. The paper exposed a parody

[92] Z. Dierks, 'Kenya Population 2019 by Religion', *Statista* [website], 26 January 2026, https://www.statista.com/statistics/1304207/population-of-kenya-by-religion/, (accessed 19 February 2026).

whereby Africa has a high percentage of Christians statistically, yet it is languishing in poor governance, rampant corruption and other social evils.

This paper recommends further study to find out the causes of the failure. The following question should guide such a study: If every African Christian confronted corruption and refused to engage in it, as the Bible teaches, what impact would that have on greed and inequity in African societies? If all Christians in African countries practised justice, mercy, and love for their neighbours, in line with the African Ubuntu philosophy, what impact would that have on eradicating greed and poverty in African societies? If every African Christian repudiated individualism imported from the West and instead practised social, communal care in the African spirit of ubuntu that was once the guiding principle of African forefathers and as echoed in the biblical teaching of koinonia and the church as the body of Christ, what impact would that have on nepotism and tribalism, and what type of governments would African countries have? Social change is a precursor to political reforms, and the church's biblically appropriate functioning is the primary agent of social transformation. That is why this article advocates the church-society nexus.

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