

Exploring the role of religion in participatory governance: An evaluation of religion's public engagement in Africa

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Religion and religious communities are deeply embedded in African societies, functioning as key social and cultural institutions that foster communal connectedness and engagement. This communal orientation aligns closely with the principles of participatory governance, which emphasises the active involvement of diverse societal groups in shaping decisions that affect their lives. Despite this alignment, the role of religion in participatory governance remains underexplored in scholarly discourse. This article seeks to examine how religion and religious groups can contribute to advancing participatory governance in Africa. The study adopts a literature review methodology, critically analysing existing scholarship on religion's public role, governance and civic participation in the African context. Key findings indicate that religious institutions often serve as trusted intermediaries between the state and citizens, possess significant moral authority and can mobilise grassroots participation. The article concludes that when appropriately engaged, faith-based communities can serve as valuable partners in promoting ethical and participatory governance in Africa. Greater collaboration between religious institutions and governance structures can enhance social accountability, inclusivity and community resilience.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This study is interdisciplinary, drawing on theology, political science and development studies. It examines the intersection of religion and governance in Africa, highlighting religion's public role in fostering culturally relevant and participatory governance structures.

Keywords: faith; religion; governance; participatory governance; evaluation; Africa; religion's public role.

Introduction

Religion has undeniably played a transformative role in African communities, shaping moral values and cultural practices and serving as a platform for social cohesion and public engagement (Magezi 2017:1; Nanthambwe & Magezi 2022, 2024). In the context of religion's impact on the world, Etzelmüller (2017) posits the following:

Religious traditions have had an immensely formative impact on the present-day world. They are the result of long historical processes, and even in the future they will remain a determining factor both for individuals and societies. This assertion is borne out by the political upheavals of 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe, when it became evident what a crucial role religious convictions can play in fostering greater awareness of the imperative necessity for freedom, democratic thinking and political action geared towards peaceful ends. (p. 107)

Scholars such as John Mbiti (1990) and Agbiji and Swart (2015) emphasise how religious institutions often act as vital cultural pillars, nurturing communal identity and collective participation. The spiritual and social functions of religion in Africa extend beyond worship, positioning religious communities as agents of social stability and public welfare. Forster and Marchinkowski (2024:1) highlight the importance of religion in public circles, where they acknowledge its necessity in promoting ethics in society, shaping socio-ethos and establishing political foundations to obtain a consensus. Religious groups frequently provide critical services such as education, healthcare and humanitarian aid, thereby contributing to societal well-being (Nanthambwe & Magezi 2024). While the argument of religion promoting ethics in society is valid, caution needs to be taken regarding whose ethical framework is being advanced. Given the diversity of religious traditions, the values promoted in public

life are often rooted in particular theological and cultural perspectives, which may not be universally shared. Therefore, ethical engagement by religious institutions must be inclusive and dialogical to avoid marginalising other viewpoints in a pluralistic society. However, despite their significant social presence, the influence of these institutions on governance, particularly in promoting civic participation and accountability, still needs to be explored.

While much has been written about the political role of religion in Africa, particularly in post-colonial governance structures and social movements, more attention needs to be given to how religious institutions directly or indirectly foster participatory governance. For example, Gustafson and Hertting (2017:538) mention that the participants for participatory government are well documented; it is strange that religion or religious groups are not exclusively mentioned as assets contributing to participatory governance. This was also noted earlier by Clarke and Jennings (2008:1), who lament that religious organisations have often been influential in addressing poverty and development. Yet, their potential to advocate for more transparent, inclusive and accountable governance has received less scholarly attention. This gap in research is particularly pertinent as many African nations grapple with governance challenges such as corruption, exclusion and weak civic engagement.

This article explores the role of religion in participatory governance to highlight how religious groups can mediate between the state and civil society. Through advocacy, moral teachings and community mobilisation, religious communities may contribute to shaping democratic values, promoting civic responsibility and ensuring greater public accountability. Understanding the broader implications of religion in this governance context may offer new perspectives on how African societies can build more robust and inclusive political systems.

This study employed a literature review and analysed existing scholarly work to explore religion's role in participatory governance in Africa.

Conceptualising participatory governance: Understanding the concept and the debates

Dubuc (2023) and Hadley and Belfiore (2018) note a resurgence in cultural democracy within cultural policy over the past decades. Originating in the 1970s, cultural democracy emphasises each person's and community's right to respect and participation in decisions shaping their cultural experiences (Dubuc 2023). This approach led to governance models favouring deliberative, democratic and participatory structures, which address community, inclusion and equality. This evolution ultimately shaped what is now referred to as *participatory governance*.

What is participatory governance? According to Fischer (2010:2), it is 'a variant or subset of governance theory that emphasizes democratic engagement, mainly through deliberative practices'. Fischer's (2010) definition highlights two main things. Firstly, participatory government includes democratic engagement. The involvement of citizens in participatory government is underscored by Wampler and McNulty's (2011) definition, where they state:

Participatory governance consists of state-sanctioned institutional processes that allow citizens to exercise voice and vote, which then results in the implementation of public policies that produce some sort of changes in citizens' lives. Citizens are engaged in public venues at a variety of times throughout the year, thus allowing them to be involved in policy formation, selection and oversight. The inclusion of citizens in state-sanctioned venues means that they are now in constant contact with government officials. These institutions thus generate new forms of interactions among citizens as well as between citizens and government officials (p. 6). The emphasis on democratic engagement underscores the principle that governance should not be a top-down process driven solely by political elites or bureaucratic institutions (Bussu et al. 2022; World Bank 2016:4). Instead, it encourages the inclusion of diverse voices from the public, particularly those who are often marginalised or excluded from traditional decision-making processes. The idea is to create a more inclusive and equitable governance structure by incorporating citizen input in forming policies that affect their communities (Bussu et al. 2022:133). By doing so, participatory governance seeks to enhance the legitimacy of governmental decisions and foster a more profound sense of civic responsibility among citizens (Galukande 2019; Wampler & McNulty 2016).

The democratic engagement involved in participatory governance extends beyond mere voting; it requires ongoing dialogue and collaboration between government authorities and the public (Gouche 2020:44). Citizens are encouraged to actively contribute to policy discussions, present their views on societal issues and offer solutions to problems (Gouche 2020). This process of democratic participation can occur at multiple levels, local, national or even international and often involves various platforms such as public forums, citizen assemblies and online consultations. The central aim is to enable citizens to influence decisions that directly impact their well-being, fostering a government that is both responsive and accountable to the people (Fischer 2010; Galukande 2019; Gouche 2020; Wampler & McNulty 2016).

Secondly, participatory governance involves deliberative practices. Fischer (2010) notes that deliberative practices are another defining feature of participatory governance. These practices revolve around structured dialogues where citizens, experts and policymakers collaboratively discuss and weigh different viewpoints before making decisions. Deliberation emphasises rational discourse, where participants are expected to engage with one another's ideas, challenge

assumptions and arrive at reasoned conclusions. It moves beyond the mere aggregation of preferences and seeks to promote informed decision-making through critical engagement and consensus-building. It is centred on ensuring citizens have a say in shaping and implementing policies that affect or influence them. It stresses the importance of deliberation, where dialogue and discussion among stakeholders are central to the governance process, allowing for collaborative decision-making. Roy (2022) calls participatory governance a management approach in which decision-makers, whether primary or delegated, are committed to satisfactorily involving concerned stakeholders in governance.

This deliberative element is vital for addressing complex, multifaceted policy issues that require a deep understanding of societal needs and trade-offs (OECD 2020; Vince et al. 2024:381). For example, in environmental governance, participatory approaches may involve discussions with local communities to weigh the pros and cons of proposed projects and assess their long-term sustainability. Similarly, deliberative engagement with affected communities in health policy may lead to more equitable and culturally sensitive healthcare solutions. In both cases, deliberative governance enhances the quality of decisions by incorporating diverse perspectives, experiences and knowledge systems (Fischer 2010; Malena 2009). Malena (2009) explains:

Citizen participation in agenda-setting and policymaking sometimes takes the form of public consultation or deliberative processes, where citizens/CSOs are invited to contribute information and ideas to decision makers, for example, through public hearings or legislative committee work. More frequently, citizens and CSOs themselves take a lead in raising public and government awareness of priority concerns, reviewing or critiquing proposed policies, or advocating for new policies or programs. (p. 10)

Malena's statement (2009) underscores participatory governance as a model that promotes shared responsibility and influence in policymaking, making it a collaborative process that strengthens democratic engagement.

Thus, in this article, participatory governance is defined as the active engagement of all citizens in the policymaking process to improve their quality of life. How does this definition link with religion and religious groups? Enhancing *the quality of life* reflects a natural attachment to religion, as many religious traditions emphasise enhancing human welfare, promoting justice and fostering communal well-being (Forster & Marchinkowski 2024; Nanthambwe & Magezi 2024). Religion often encourages its followers to contribute positively to society, advocating for ethical principles and protecting human dignity. While it is true that various associations, movements or social clubs can also perform these roles, religious communities bring a distinctive contribution rooted in their spiritual, moral and transcendent values, which shape not only ethical conduct but also the vision of what constitutes human flourishing. Rather than merely acting as service providers or community

representatives, religious groups often invoke a deeper sense of accountability, meaning and purpose that informs their public engagement. This aligns with participatory governance's goal of involving citizens in shaping policies that uplift the collective quality of life. The connection between religion and participatory governance is therefore not simply functional, but normative and moral, grounded in a shared objective of building more compassionate, just and equitable communities where policies reflect the needs and values of all people.

Given the above understanding of participatory governance, some recent debates have concerned its effectiveness. One issue that has been raised is its inclusivity and equity. Critics argue that while participatory governance aims to include all voices, certain groups – such as minorities, marginalised communities or people with lower socio-economic status – are still often underrepresented. Gianpaolo Baiocchi and Ganuza (2016), in their book *Popular democracy: The paradox of participation*, have questioned the possibility of democratic participation when the space for democracy is being constrained. Similarly, Garcia-Espin's (2024) study has shown the ambivalence of democratic inclusion. She highlights research showing that individuals with advanced education and professional backgrounds continue to dominate participatory institutions in Western nations. This concern resonates with Piper and Von Lieres (2016:324), who, in the South African context, note that fragile participatory institutions, the limited influence of civil society outside major formal sectors and the overshadowing presence of political parties over civil society – especially in a socio-economic environment where the poor rely heavily on state welfare – have created conditions for informal participation with varied results. These dynamics prompt critical inquiries into achieving genuinely inclusive participatory processes that equitably incorporate all voices in decision-making.

Another crucial debate on participatory governance has been on its efficiency versus deliberation. Participatory governance is sometimes seen as slow and resource intensive because of the time needed for broad-based consultation and deliberation. For example, Patsika's study (2021:2), in the context of South Africa, alludes to the study of Civic Action for Public Participation (CAPP), which shows that participatory processes were 'problematic, unproductive, and to kenist engagements' leading to loss of trust in public participation. This has led to debates on balancing efficiency with inclusivity, particularly in situations requiring timely decision-making, such as public health emergencies or urgent environmental issues.

These critiques, among others, show that participatory governance is a paradox. While it is intended to foster inclusivity and democratic engagement, it has, at times, reinforced socio-economic divisions and hindered timely decision-making. The 'Participatory governance in Africa: A brief outlook' explores the evolution of participatory

governance in Africa, examining how governance structures and practices have transformed from the pre-colonial era through the colonial period into the post-colonial context. This analysis will trace the shifts in governance frameworks, highlighting how traditional, imposed and modern participatory practices have shaped and continue to shape the governance landscape across the continent.

Participatory governance in Africa: A brief outlook

Participatory governance has recently gained increasing prominence in African governance discussions. While the participatory system of governance is framed as a modern governance innovation, the practices have their deep roots in African political traditions in the pre-colonial era. This section provides a concise overview of the evolution of participatory governance.

Hordijk (2005:7) observes that participatory governance gained prominence in the 1990s, driven by a surge in diverse participatory mechanisms, particularly in Latin America. This paradigm has since gained global traction, proving applicable in both developed and developing contexts and is acknowledged as an innovative strategy for social and economic progress. It manifests through citizen-led initiatives that complement the efforts of civil society organisations (Galukande 2019:2).

In Africa, the history of participatory governance is deeply rooted in both pre-colonial community practices and post-independence political reforms (Galukande 2019:2). Pre-colonial African societies often employed consensus-driven governance practices, where decisions were made through assemblies, councils or elder gatherings (Eldredge 2018:137). Examples include the *indaba* in South Africa, the *jirga* in Somalia and the *baraza* in East Africa. These systems valued community participation and collective decision-making (Eldredge 2018:137). In many communities, leaders were accountable to their people and could be replaced if they failed to meet community expectations. These systems reflected core aspects of what is now recognised as participatory governance: inclusivity, transparency and accountability.

During colonisation, colonial governments disrupted indigenous governance structures, replacing them with centralised, authoritarian systems that prioritised control over participation (Asimeng-Boahene 2017:1). Traditional authorities were often co-opted or marginalised, and local governance structures were subordinated to colonial administrators (Asimeng-Boahene 2017:1). The colonial approach to governance included the establishment of 'native authorities' meant to govern on behalf of colonial powers (Wane et al. 2022:151). However, these bodies lacked genuine community engagement and were often seen as instruments of colonial rule, eroding trust in governance structures (Wane et al. 2022:151).

The post-independence period saw African countries attempting to re-establish inclusive governance systems. Leaders such as Julius Nyerere in Tanzania and Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana promoted 'African socialism' and sought to create participatory governance models that reflected local traditions (Ayelazuno & Mawuko-Yevugah 2020). Nyerere's (1962) *ujamaa* (familyhood) in Tanzania is an example of an effort to foster community-based development. Despite these aspirations, many African states quickly adopted centralised one-party systems that marginalised local participation (Ayelazuno & Mawuko-Yevugah 2020). This trend was often justified as a means to ensure national unity but ultimately limited genuine citizen engagement.

The economic challenges of the 1980s and 1990s led to structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) sponsored by international financial institutions. These programmes encouraged political decentralisation to foster economic stability. While often economically restrictive, SAPs increased the pressure on African governments to adopt more participatory, transparent governance models (Cheru 1995).

In the 1990s, African countries increasingly embraced political liberalisation and decentralisation, leading to a wave of democratisation (Wane et al. 2022). This involved establishing local government structures and engaging civil society in governance. For instance, South Africa's post-apartheid government institutionalised participatory mechanisms through ward committees and municipal councils (Mhlari 2014). By the 2000s, participatory governance was incorporated into national policies in countries such as Kenya, Ghana and Uganda, often supported by international organisations promoting 'good governance'. Participatory budgeting, community-led development initiatives and decentralised governance frameworks have become more common in African countries (Arkorful et al. 2022).

Building on the momentum of democratisation and decentralised governance in Africa, the public role of religion has emerged as an increasingly prominent aspect of governance. As African nations established participatory mechanisms, they also faced questions about the influence of religious institutions and values within these frameworks. While political liberalisation encouraged civil society engagement, it also opened space for debates on the role of religion in public life. Next, 'Religion in governance? The public aspect of religion' examines how religion intersects with governance and explores the public aspect of religion.

Religion in governance? The public aspect of religion

The period of Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries was characterised by anthropocentrism, materialism, positivism and secular rationalism (Fretheim 2016:23). In describing the effects of Enlightenment, Zafirovski (2011) explains:

First, the Enlightenment originates and operates as the intellectual, cultural challenge to and eventually the act of destruction of medievalist theocratic culture in which all cultural forms and subjects were literally reduced to the servants of theology, religion, and church, thus subordinated and eventually sacrificed (heretics, libertines, etc.) to theocracy. Alternatively, it arises and functions as the creation or reinvention of a new secular or nonreligious, rationalistic, and what Weber calls sensuous, emotional type of human culture and civilization, including art. In artistic terms, the Enlightenment continues and expands the Renaissance that was, if Pareto is correct, 'halted too soon' by the Protestant Reformation, notably antiartistic strict Calvinism in Europe and its evermore extreme offspring in antagonism toward art and humanism, Puritanism in England and America. (p. 8)

The Enlightenment period profoundly impacted religion and its place in public life (Zafirovski 2011). Benne (1995) argues that secularisation became a cornerstone of modernity, influenced mainly by the European religious wars, which drove religion to the fringes of public affairs. Enlightenment advancements in science and rational knowledge further diminished the credibility of religious explanations and authorities. In reaction to these effects, Benne (1995:17) and Kohrsen (2012) observe that many religious leaders, particularly in Christianity, lost confidence in their worldview's ability to influence public discourse. As a result, they withdrew from theological perspectives, instead turning to more socially acceptable fields like psychology, sociology, philosophy and politics to maintain relevance among those critical of religion. Dreyer and Pieterse (2010) explain the Christian faith response to be relevant in this manner:

The role of religion in the public sphere also causes problems for theologians. It is possible, for example, to summarise broad patterns in Protestant theology in reaction to the Enlightenment and the loss of a religious worldview. Generally speaking, orthodoxy clings to its traditional theological positions; Pietism flees from rational criticism of religion to the safe harbour of the subjective religious experiences of the individual; liberal theology tries to reconcile the Christian message with the views of the Enlightenment by digging out the core message of Christianity from the Bible and building hermeneutical bridges for the understanding of the message by modern minds; and political theology accepts the principles of the Enlightenment and tries to show that the Christian faith is in line with this thinking if we understand it as realising the ideals of modern people: liberation from oppressive structures and political oppression, eradication of poverty and restoration of human dignity ... There are mixed models of these extreme positions in Protestant theology, but a brief overview of the theological reactions shows the intensity of the theological debate in its efforts to digest the radical cultural changes that have taken place in the church in the past three hundred years. (p. 1)

Dreyer and Pieterse (2010:1) highlight two critical aspects concerning the public nature of religion, particularly within Protestant theology. Firstly, they show that religion cannot remain isolated from broader cultural and intellectual shifts. Protestant theology has consistently

responded to the challenges posed by Enlightenment rationality and the erosion of a traditional religious worldview, adapting its theological frameworks to maintain relevance in the public sphere. These responses – ranging from orthodoxy and pietism to liberal and political theology – reflect an ongoing negotiation between faith and public reason. Secondly, the authors emphasise that there is no singular model for how religion engages in public life. Different theological traditions shape distinct modes of public engagement, whether through resistance to secularism, retreat into personal spirituality or active pursuit of social justice. In particular, political theology demonstrates how religion can function as a transformative force by aligning with modern ideals such as liberation, the eradication of poverty and the restoration of human dignity. Together, these perspectives reveal that religion plays a dynamic and contested role in shaping public discourse and societal values.

The question of whether religion should occupy a role in the public sphere, particularly within public administration and governance, has been widely debated. Ongaro and Tantardin (2023) bring this debate into focus, exploring the complex interactions between religious belief and the structures of governance. Charles Taylor (2007) describes a significant historical shift: the retreat of religious worldviews from the public arena and the emergence of what he terms a 'secular age', where public life and religious perspectives are largely separated. This aligns with the predictions of Dekker, Luidens and Rice (eds. 1997), who anticipated that religion would gradually vanish from public life, persisting solely as a private matter for a small number of individuals.

Further expanding on this concept, Luckmann (2000) and Dalferth (2010) observe that while religion's social expression in modern societies had changed substantially, it had remained the same. Instead, religion was evolving into a form that, although still present, was often less recognisable as a traditional religious practice. Luckmann (2000) argues that rather than declining, religion was transforming, becoming more individualised and private. This transformation suggests a shift from institutionalised religion to personal, diverse forms of spirituality and belief systems that may not manifest publicly and have no public bearing in the political arena (Dalferth 2010; Kohrsen 2012).

Ongaro and Tantardin (2023) note the absence of enough literature in public administration regarding religion when they write:

The influence of religion has so far been overlooked in PA research. It is worth examining why religion has been overlooked in PA, at least the English-language literature, for a better understanding of the contribution that can derive from encompassing religious factors into theory and empirical research about PA. One reason lies in narrow interpretations of secularisation, which has at times been seen in the West as an irreversible trend in history. This consideration may have driven away the attention of PA scholars to religious factors. (p. 1)

Critics of public religion have responded to the views expressed by Ongaro and Tantardian (2023) for several reasons. One of the primary concerns is that incorporating religious beliefs into public policy could violate the principle of separation of church and state, potentially favouring one religion over another in a pluralistic society and marginalising non-believers (Rawls 1997). Rawls (1997) argues that public discourse should rely on 'public reason' rather than religious or personal beliefs to ensure neutrality and inclusiveness in a pluralistic society. Therefore, religion should be a private matter. Jatau and Maza (2023) and Van Rooyen (2019) echo these concerns, particularly highlighting the risks associated with politicising religion. Van Rooyen (2019) warns that when religion is co-opted for political purposes, it can lead to community polarisation, undermine secular governance structures and prioritise sectarian interests at the expense of broader public welfare. These concerns are valid and must be taken seriously, especially in contexts where religion holds significant influence. However, acknowledging these risks does not necessitate excluding religion from the public sphere. Instead, it calls for a more nuanced approach – one that distinguishes between religion as a political tool and religion as a moral and ethical resource that can contribute to the common good without dominating it. Proper frameworks, such as deliberative democracy and inclusive participatory governance, can allow religious voices to participate responsibly in public discourse while safeguarding against sectarianism and exclusion.

Another reason for excluding public religion is the demotion of rational decision-making. Secularists argue that policy and governance should be grounded in reason, empirical evidence and universally applicable ethics. Including religion, they argue, risks introducing subjective beliefs and values that may not be universally applicable, potentially undermining fair and reasoned decision-making. Two notable atheists, Richard Dawkins (2008) and Christopher Hitchens (2007), in their respective books *The God delusion* and *God is not great: How religion poisons everything* have argued for a clear boundary between religion and public decision-making, advocating for science and reason as the foundation for public policies. They contend that religious influence in public policy compromises rational and empirical decision-making standards.

Despite the anti-public religion stance, the strong presence of religion in public spaces contradicts the expectation that secularism would push religious expressions entirely into private life. This persistent visibility of religion suggests that rather than disappearing, religious beliefs and practices continue to influence public life, policy discussions and social values. This resilience challenges secularist assumptions that religion is incompatible with the public sphere, demonstrating instead that religion can adapt and remain relevant in various forms, even in secular societies. Dreyer and Pieterse (2010) observe:

Religion and religious issues still form part of the fabric of modern societies. The role of religion, religious themes and religious institutions in recent election campaigns, both in the United States of America (USA) and in South Africa, bear testimony to this continuing presence of religion. There even seems to be a renewal of the traditional bond between religion and nationalism in certain societies, and an increase in the kind of religious expression associated with fundamentalist and national religious expansion through religious communities catering for different racial, ethnic and social identities [...] Established democracies seem to struggle with this religious plurality in multicultural societies, as multiculturalism and religious diversity often go hand in hand. It is thus commonly accepted that religion has not disappeared from the public sphere. (p. 1)

The resurgence of religion in public life is widely recognised, including by major institutions like the World Bank (Öhlmann et al. 2022). Haynes (2024) comments:

In recent years, a burgeoning body of literature on the relationship between peace, politics and religion has emerged. Generally, this reflects how religion has made a remarkable return to prominence in the literature on sociology, political science and international relations. Confounding the expectations of secularisation theorists and secularists, religion is a core source of identity for billions of people around the world. (p. 1)

This shift reflects the growing relevance of religion in areas traditionally dominated by secular perspectives, especially in social and economic development (Haynes 2024). Recent studies indicate that religious and spiritual considerations are becoming central in public discourse, as seen in both policy and grassroots activities (Dreyer & Pieterse 2010; Forster & Marchinkowski 2024; Kim 2024). Institutions increasingly acknowledge the contributions of religious values and organisations to areas such as human well-being, ethical business and sustainable development, marking a significant re-evaluation from the secular focus of the 20th century (Casanova 2011).

But why this resurgence of religion in public space now? The Pew Research Center (2006) explains that the resurgence is linked to the need to address ethical and existential issues in a globalised context, where religion offers an enduring structure of values and community for many societies. Furthermore, the Pew Research Center (2006) data illustrate that while traditional forms of religion may decline in some regions, spirituality and faith-based ethical frameworks are becoming more prominent in addressing broader societal issues, including public health, social justice and cultural identity. This dynamic interplay is reshaping development practices and policies in regions worldwide, mainly where religious institutions play active roles in community support and social services. It is through this perspective that religion becomes a significant factor in governance. In areas where traditional governance struggles to address complex social challenges, religious frameworks and institutions often step in to fill the gaps.

How does this public nature of religion play out in Africa? This will be addressed in 'The place of religion in Africa'.

The place of religion in Africa

Clarke and Jennings (2008) argue that secular modernism in the West has primarily separated religion from public spheres such as social, economic and political life. This separation is less entrenched in African societies, where religion remains a vital influence across all aspects of life. Scholars such as Mbiti (1990) famously observe that 'Africans are notoriously religious', highlighting that, unlike the often private role of religion in the West, African public and private life are inseparable from religious beliefs. Religion shapes individual practices, community ethics and cultural identity to such an extent that it cannot easily be isolated from daily life. Mbiti (1990:1) explains that in Africa, religion 'permeates into all departments of life' and provides a foundation for understanding existence itself.

Religion's influence in Africa extends beyond personal spirituality to community cohesion and social structure. According to Magesa (1997), religion in Africa offers a moral framework, guiding social norms and reinforcing ethical standards, and plays a critical role in fostering communal values. The active participation of traditional African religions, Christianity and Islam in decision-making and conflict resolution further underscores the deeply rooted influence of religious values on societal well-being and political life. For example, in South Africa, Van Rooyen (2019) notes that these religious traditions bring meaning to life's milestones – birth, marriage and death – and inform views on justice and governance.

The African worldview is built on a religious framework that influences individual and collective identity, as seen in the symbolic nature of language, rituals, festivals and even work and philosophical outlooks (Kalu 2010; Mbiti 1990). Mbiti (1990) describes African life as a 'constant participation in a religious drama', where existence is synonymous with religious engagement, making life without religion inconceivable. This intrinsic link to religion is also evident among Africans in the diaspora, as Chitando, Adogame and Bateye (2013) highlight, showing a persistent religious consciousness as central to African identity, even outside Africa.

Religion in Africa is more than a set of beliefs; it is a lens through which the world is understood and experienced, influencing every dimension of life and infusing personal and societal domains with religious significance. In African societies, where religious institutions and communities are deeply interwoven into the social framework, religion's influence naturally extends into areas traditionally governed by secular systems, such as governance, economics and social welfare (Agbiji & Swart 2015; Magesa 1997; Mbiti 1990; Nanthambwe & Magezi 2024). This dynamic is evident in Nigeria, where Yesufu (2016) examines the blurred boundary

between state and religion. Although Nigeria officially separates state institutions from religious doctrines, religion remains entrenched in public life: religious holidays such as Christian and Muslim celebrations are recognised, and state functions often incorporate Christian and Muslim prayers (Omilusi 2015; Sampson 2015). This makes religion in Africa generally viewed not as a private matter but as a public one.

Nexus between public theology and governance in Africa

Examining the mechanisms through which religion can impact governance is essential to further exploring how this influence is exerted. How do religious principles and debates enter the governance arena? A comprehensive answer to this question involves understanding public theology, a field that explores how religious ideas contribute to public life and inform governance, social justice and policy.

What is public theology? Duncan Forrester (2004) defines public theology in the following way:

Public theology, as I understand it, is not primarily and directly evangelical theology which addresses the Gospel to the world in the hope of repentance and conversion. Rather, it is theology which seeks the welfare of the city before protecting the interests of the church, or its proper liberty to preach the Gospel and celebrate the sacraments. Accordingly, public theology often takes 'the world's agenda', or parts of it, as its own agenda, and seeks to offer distinctive and constructive insights from the treasury of faith to help in the building of a decent society, the restraint of evil, the curbing of violence, nation-building, and reconciliation in the public arena, and so forth. (p. 6)

Forrester's definition highlights three important aspects. Firstly, public theology is committed to the common good over religious institutional interests. This aspect is also reflected in Dreyer's (2004:919) definition, which defines public theology as a critical reflection on Christian tradition and social and political issues. Secondly, public theology adopts public concerns. Rather than dealing with doctrines and dogmas of the church, public theology engages with issues that affect communities (Kim 2024; Resane 2019). Thirdly, public theology engages in constructive contributions from faith to society. Nanthambwe (2024:6) explains that public theology embodies a dynamic, bidirectional engagement that mutually enriches theological discourse and societal frameworks. It posits that theological insights can catalyse societal transformation, while societal challenges reciprocally inform and enhance theological inquiry. This dialectical interplay is fundamental to public theology's mission of fostering transformative change within both ecclesiastical and societal spheres, ultimately advancing the common good.

While these elements may resemble the 'social gospel', particularly in their concern for justice and societal reform, public theology differs in both scope and methodology.

The social gospel, historically, focused largely on addressing social ills through the ethical teachings of Jesus, often minimising theological depth and ecclesiological concerns. In contrast, public theology maintains a critical engagement with tradition and theological reflection while intentionally dialoguing with diverse public spheres including politics, economics and culture. It does not simply advocate for social reform but does so through a theologically grounded, interdisciplinary and dialogical process aimed at contributing responsibly to public discourse in pluralistic societies. Thus, while sharing a concern for the common good, public theology goes beyond the social gospel by offering a more robust and contextually engaged theological framework.

Public theology provides a platform where religious values engage with civic issues, promoting dialogue between faith communities and governing institutions. This engagement occurs in various forms: through religious advocacy, contributions to ethical discourse on human rights and participation in community-led welfare initiatives. Scholars such as Forrester (1988, 2004) and De Gruchy (2007) argue that public theology emphasises a socially engaged faith that addresses pressing public concerns, such as economic inequalities, health crises and peace-building efforts, often in collaboration with state or secular organisations.

In the African context, public theology reflects the close integration of religion and societal structures, where faith leaders and organisations actively address issues of justice, social welfare and community empowerment (Agbiji & Swart 2015; Magezi 2024). Religious organisations, thus, serve as both advocates and providers, shaping not only public opinion but also influencing policy frameworks and resource allocation in ways that align with ethical principles deeply rooted in the community's values.

Kim (2017:40) and Smit (2017:75) expand on public theology by showing how it intersects with political and economic life and extends into civil society and other public arenas. As described, public theology breaks away from church-centred discourse by engaging directly with issues in the broader public sphere. This shift means that public theology is not limited to church walls or academic spaces but operates within society, reaching into various facets of daily life and welcoming broad participation. It takes on a 'ground-level' presence, moving into public places – whether streets, markets or forums – where it becomes accessible to people from all walks of life, addressing diverse issues affecting the whole community (Kim 2017; Smit 2017). In the African context, public theology reflects the close integration of religion and societal structures, where faith leaders and organisations actively address issues of justice, social welfare and community empowerment (Agbiji & Swart 2015; Magezi 2024). Religious organisations, thus, serve as both advocates and providers, shaping not only public opinion but also influencing policy frameworks and resource

allocation in ways that align with ethical principles deeply rooted in the community's values.

How, then, does public theology address governance issues in Africa? The public theology intersection with governance is well captured by Chung (2024) when he asserts:

In a nutshell, public theology (*theologia publica*) is concerned with public affairs or institutions of society (*res publica*) to promote the common good in society. Civil society etymologically originates in a political community (Aristotle) or Greek polis (city-state) in which free citizens live as political subjects on equal footing by participating in the formation of public opinion and in the decision-making of public and political affairs under the rule of law. (p. 8)

In Africa, public theology actively engages with governance by influencing ethical leadership and shaping public policies across multiple sectors of society. For example, in South Africa, Koopman (2003:9) identifies four critical spheres – political, economic, civil society and public opinion – that theology should engage. This approach demonstrates that public theology extends beyond religious institutions to influence broader social structures. Public theology seeks to encourage just governance, promote ethical political practices and support policies aligned with the common good by addressing these spheres. In Africa, where issues such as corruption, inequality and social justice are pressing, public theology facilitates essential dialogue between faith communities and political frameworks that shape citizens' lives. This dialogue emphasises ethical standards in public life, encouraging governance that responds to the needs and well-being of society as a whole.

However, the challenge within multi-religious contexts is significant: which religion should be permitted to influence public policy? Moreover, even within Christian communities, interpretations of ethics may differ. Public theology addresses these challenges not by advocating for the dominance of a particular faith tradition or dogma, but by contributing to inclusive public reasoning grounded in widely shared moral and human values, such as justice, dignity and the common good (Kim 2024:4–5). Its role is not to impose religious laws, but to offer critical, morally informed perspectives that can coexist and engage with other voices in a democratic society. Differences, whether interreligious or intra-Christian, are seen as opportunities for deliberative engagement, where ethical principles are debated in the public square and refined through dialogue. In this way, public theology functions within the framework of pluralism and democratic accountability, allowing religion to contribute meaningfully without claiming privileged status.

How, then, does public theology address governance issues in Africa? Public theology in Africa actively engages with governance by influencing ethical leadership and shaping public policies across multiple sectors of society. For example, in South Africa, Koopman (2003:9) identifies four critical spheres – political, economic, civil society and public opinion – that theology should engage. This approach

shows that public theology reaches beyond religious institutions to impact broader social structures. Public theology seeks to encourage just governance, promote ethical and political practices and support policies aligned with the common good by addressing these spheres. In Africa, where issues such as corruption, inequality and social justice are pressing, public theology facilitates essential dialogue between faith communities and political frameworks that shape citizens' lives. This dialogue emphasises ethical standards in public life, encouraging governance that responds to the needs and well-being of society as a whole. Haynes (2024:1) cogently argues that religion must not be considered in isolation, as the issues necessitating religious engagement are generally linked to 'good governance' concerns – namely, strategies to improve individuals' political, economic and social well-being.

Religion's contribution to participatory governance in Africa

Participatory governance involves various societal groups influencing government decisions that directly affect their lives. In this framework, religion offers several contributions that enhance the effectiveness and inclusiveness of governance.

Fostering social cohesion

Religion often fosters social cohesion and unity within communities, helping bridge divides between different groups. The philosophy of *Ubuntu* in Africa resonates deeply with religious teachings that emphasise interconnectedness, compassion and shared responsibility (Gathogo 2022). Such religious teachings reinforce values such as community care, trust and mutual support – core elements of *Ubuntu*. This shared identity and purpose encourage individuals to engage in civic processes and advocate for the greater good. Religious communities often provide moral guidance, addressing governance issues through ethical frameworks that resonate with their followers. By upholding values such as justice, compassion and honesty, religion motivates community members to support governance systems that embody these principles. However, it is essential to clarify that these ethical commitments are not intended to apply only to those within a specific faith tradition. While religious ethics may originate within particular communities, they often express universal moral imperatives that emphasise the dignity and well-being of all people, regardless of their religious affiliation. Public theology, in particular, emphasises an inclusive orientation – one that challenges faith communities to expand their moral concern beyond their immediate circles and to promote the common good in pluralistic societies actively (Kim 2024:1–2). When practised rightly, religion does not encourage exclusivism but instead cultivates solidarity, hospitality and justice that transcend religious and social divides.

However, it must be acknowledged that religion can also contribute to division in communities, particularly when it is used to justify exclusion, assert dominance or politicise identity. Religious intolerance, sectarianism and doctrinal

disputes have at times been sources of social conflict and fragmentation. Yet, it is precisely because of this potential for division that public theology must remain critically reflective, calling faith communities to transcend parochial interests and engage the public square in ways that foster inclusion, dialogue and reconciliation. Religion's influence is particularly evident in both conflict and peacebuilding contexts (Haynes 2024). Studies indicate that religious leaders and faith-based organisations (FBOs) play a crucial role in mitigating violence and promoting peace through early warning systems, proactive conflict interventions and sustained efforts in advocacy, mediation and reconciliation (Haynes 2024). The impactful contributions of Desmond Tutu to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) exemplify how religion, when harnessed ethically and inclusively, can contribute powerfully to social healing and cohesion across Africa (Nanthambwe 2024).

Offering critical ethical guidance

Religion offers critical ethical guidance, fostering virtues such as honesty, integrity, transparency, accountability and tolerance (Agbiji & Swart 2015). These principles are vital for building resilient economic frameworks and democratic political systems. Yet, in numerous African countries, political structures remain susceptible to corruption. The absence of transparency and integrity in political and economic institutions, as well as among leaders, frequently obstructs social advancement, perpetuating corruption and hindering the development of a robust civil society.

Adejumo-Ayibiowu (2018:128) argues that the current marginalisation of spirituality may partly explain public officials' brazenness in misappropriating funds and exploiting citizens. Agbiji and Swart (2015:10) suggest that religious culture can play a transformative role by introducing religious values into the economic and political spheres, potentially strengthening Africa's institutions. African traditional religion has long embedded societal values through communal engagement and strongly emphasises community well-being. Traditional spirituality emphasises mutual responsibility and shared prosperity by encouraging participation in collective activities.

Additionally, religious teachings in Africa promote a sense of accountability, where individuals view their actions as interconnected with the broader community's welfare. This collective ethic aligns with participatory governance, as individuals inspired by these values are more likely to demand transparency and engage actively in civic life to support the public good. Through such contributions, religion aids in developing a social fabric that upholds ethical governance and advocates for systems resistant to corruption, thus enhancing political stability and economic growth across African societies.

Fostering shared purpose

Religion fosters a shared sense of purpose, which is crucial for participatory governance. By cultivating a collective

identity, religion encourages individuals to engage in civic duties and governance processes that affect their communities. This shared purpose, rooted in religious teachings, aligns with the goals of participatory governance by mobilising people to work together for the common good and holding leaders accountable. For example, in Kenya, religious institutions such as the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK) have been instrumental in nurturing a shared sense of purpose among diverse communities. During elections, the NCCCK has mobilised citizens to exercise their voting rights and actively participate in the democratic process, framing this involvement as a moral and civic duty. By fostering unity and a commitment to the public good, the NCCCK promotes a vision where governance is seen as a shared responsibility of the entire community (NCCCK 2021).

Encouraging participation that reinforces principles of participatory governance

Religion actively encourages participation in matters that impact the common good, reinforcing the core principles of participatory governance. Religious teachings frequently emphasise service to others, care for the vulnerable and the importance of collective welfare. In African societies, where communal values often hold significant importance, religion is a powerful motivator for individuals to engage in civic and community-oriented initiatives that contribute to overall societal well-being (Kumalo 2009). In the Christian context, Rogers (2009) states this:

Our faith vision is about stewardship whereby responsibility is placed in the hands of humanity. They are not just individuals but families and communities called to nurture and cultivate the goodness and integrity of creation as the fundamental principle of governance. It is about good order that flows from the goodness of God the creator. Those entrusted with the authority that comes from God have the legitimate power to enable the community of people to formulate policies and administer for their total well-being ... This is done by affecting the relations among individuals on the equitable exchange of goods and services and the promotion of responsibilities for the common good. (p. 85)

Religion encourages participation in matters concerning society's welfare by affirming that human beings, regardless of specific faith traditions, share a moral responsibility to contribute to governance that promotes the common good. While different religious communities may hold varying understandings of the divine, many affirm a shared belief in justice, human dignity and collective responsibility. Rather than privileging one particular image of God, this view draws on the converging moral imperatives found across multiple traditions, which encourage adherents to work towards social systems that uphold equity, peace and the flourishing of all. In this sense, religious motivation for civic participation is not confined to a single theology but emerges from a broader interfaith commitment to the ethical transformation of society.

A voice for marginalised groups

Numerous religious leaders champion the cause of marginalised groups, giving a voice to those who might otherwise be overlooked in participatory processes. By advocating for the rights and needs of vulnerable populations, these leaders help ensure that governance practices consider the interests of all societal members, not just the powerful or privileged. In Ethiopia, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has proactively advocated for the rights and welfare of the rural poor, who are frequently the most marginalised in society (Gelaw 2020). By mobilising resources and speaking out on their behalf, the Church raises awareness of rural communities' specific challenges, including issues related to healthcare access and fair political representation. The influence of religious leaders often reaches policymakers, ensuring that the needs of these marginalised groups are taken into account in governance decisions.

Although religion can enhance participatory governance, incorporating religious institutions into governance structures may also introduce challenges, including biases related to religion, exclusion and the potential politicisation of faith. Nevertheless, these obstacles can be addressed through intentional frameworks that promote inclusivity, transparency and mutual respect. One approach is to establish interfaith councils or forums that allow diverse religious voices to contribute to public dialogue without dominating policy decisions. These platforms encourage collaboration across traditions and prevent the privileging of one faith over others. Additionally, promoting civic education that emphasises pluralism and shared values can help religious actors engage constructively in public discourse while respecting secular principles. Governments and faith communities must also agree on clearly defined boundaries, ensuring that while religious perspectives are welcomed, they do not override constitutional mandates or democratic accountability. In this way, the potential tensions between secular governance and religious convictions can be navigated responsibly, allowing religion to contribute meaningfully to the common good without compromising inclusivity or democratic integrity.

Conclusion

This article has advanced the argument for the constructive role of religion in participatory governance in Africa. It began by engaging with the conceptual foundations of participatory governance, highlighting the ongoing debates around its definitions, scope and implementation. A brief outlook on participatory governance within the African context revealed that, while the concept has gained renewed attention in recent decades, its roots are deeply embedded in pre-colonial governance systems marked by communal deliberation, collective decision-making and social accountability. These indigenous practices challenge the notion that participatory governance is a purely modern or Western import.

The article further examined the potential of religion, particularly through the lens of public theology, as a significant contributor to participatory governance. It emphasised that religion, far from being a private or apolitical matter, possesses a public dimension that engages with societal issues, promotes moral accountability and fosters inclusive civic engagement. Public theology offers a framework through which religious institutions and leaders can meaningfully participate in shaping governance processes that are people centred, ethically grounded and socially responsive. Finally, the article outlined practical ways in which religion can effectively contribute to participatory governance.

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