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From Zerfass to Osmer and the Missing Black African Voice in Search of a Relevant Practical Theology Approach in Contemporary Decolonisation Conversations in South Africa: An Emic Reflection from North-West University (NWU)

Vhumani Magezi 

Faculty of Theology, URT, North-West University, Potchefstroom 2531, South Africa; vhumani.magezi@nwu.ac.za

Abstract: Rolf Zerfass's operational scientific model for correcting Christian-ecclesiological praxis has been utilised in practical theological research for a considerable time at the North-West University. However, this situation changed with the adoption of Richard Osmer's four practical theology tasks of descriptive, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic as the guiding practical theology approach. The question is this: to what extent does the Osmer approach and its application in research at NWU address African contextual issues? To progress beyond being 'reactive' and 'pushing back' on Western practical theology approaches, the NWU practical theology approach is evaluated, followed by proposing an approach that attempts to incorporate African contextual realities anchoring by the principles of 'listening, observing, weaving, and offering'.

Keywords: practical theology; practical theology in Africa; decolonisation; North-West University theology; contextual theology



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1. Introduction

The period starting in 2015 saw a rise in decolonisation discussion in institutions of higher education across South Africa, which amplified the call for transforming university curricula. The inevitable question that has emerged in the discipline of practical theology is this: what does a decolonised practical theology and content look like? What form should this decolonised content and curriculum take? Efforts to identify and incorporate approaches that are deemed African have been slow. Dreyer (2017) advised that participating in and embracing other approaches require openness to different epistemologies and ontologies, as well as a critical reflection on the adequacy of our research methods. Looking through the decolonial or post-colonial lens entails embracing the hermeneutical principle of belonging, which challenges us to pay specific attention to the notion of privilege (Dreyer 2017). Considering the situation of NWU, particularly the changes over the last two decades, my focus is on the period when Zerfass's approach was the *de facto* model, followed by the current emphasis on Osmer. I intend to discuss issues that help some practical theologians in South Africa, such as myself, to develop contextually relevant approaches to doing practical theology in South Africa and Africa. Some scholars have criticised the use of the term 'Africa' as an analysis category or construct because of the heterogeneity across Africa. However, the generally maintained position that has been usefully argued by Igboin (2021, p. 1) in his instructive article, 'I am an African,' is that 'African religious resource; community or communalism' are key African distinctive features. He maintains that

[d]espite the multiple identities an African could possess, the unique experience of African community in its fullness, defines the African. This argument is predicated on the fact that most discursive, political, and cultural definitions of Africans and Africa do not countenance the locale of African community as

underscored here as perhaps the most resilient value that wrests with those contentious notions of Africa and being an African. (Igboin 2021, p. 1)

Igboin (2021) rightly demonstrates that these features are shared across Black African communities, including South Africa. Because of the shared African features, the African pastoral theologian Masamba ma Mpolo (2013) argued that there are some distinctive homo-africanus features of which community and associated religious practices are a central part.¹

2. About North-West University Practical Theology

North-West University (NWU) is one of the public universities offering theology in South Africa. NWU was formed from a merger between Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education (abbreviated PU for CHE) in Potchefstroom and the University of North-West in Mafikeng in 2004. PU for CHE developed out of the Theological School of the Reformed Churches in South Africa (Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid—Afrika in Afrikaans), founded in 1869. The university has three campuses: in Potchefstroom, Mafikeng, and Vanderbijlpark. The university has an arrangement whereby it trains GKSA Christian workers, particularly pastors (Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika—GKSA 2022). The Faculty of Theology has two schools. The School of Ministry Training is where individuals intending to enter GKSA and AFM ministries are trained, including other Christian ministries and academic theology (NWU Minister Training 2022). The School of Ancient Languages and Text Studies is ‘concerned with research relating to the Ancient World, its languages and its material culture’ (NWU Ancient Languages and Text Studies 2022, n.p.). Faculty of Theology research is conducted under two research entities, namely the Ancient Texts (NWU Ancient Texts 2022) and the Unit for Reformational Theology and the Development of the South African Society (URT) (NWU URT 2022). Practical theology courses are taught under the School of Ministry Training while research is conducted under two related URT research sub-programmes: Practical-Theological Perspectives (NWU Practical-Theological Perspectives 2022) and Public Practical Theology and Civil Society (NWU Public Practical Theology and Civil Society 2022).

NWU Faculty of Theology embraced Rolf Zerfass’s (1934–2022) approach as a guiding model for doing practical theology at the institution for over a decade until around 2010, then shifted to Richard Osmer’s (2008) approach. Zerfass’s model is summarised in the diagram below (Figure 1).

Zerfass’s model is used to analyse a concrete church situation where [1] represents a present, real-life problem in the church requiring action (Zerfass 1974, p. 167). The church possesses doctrines, church laws, behaviour, and patterns, including other traditions (4) that guide (2) the way a problem (1) is addressed. Trying to address church problems using tradition may not yield positive results; thus, empirical methods (3) are employed to understand the situation clearly (6) to develop a more informed response to the situation (10). The response, however, is not just pragmatic but critically correlated with the church’s theological traditions to ensure a response is faithful to the church’s theological foundations and missional purpose (5). The gathered empirical data challenges the tradition, and in turn, the tradition challenges the empirical data. This mutual questioning and challenging results in the construction of a practical theological theory of action (9) (Zerfass 1974, p. 168). The theory of action is a response to both the theological tradition and the situation analysis, which is implemented (10) to result in revised praxis (11). The revised practice can further examine the situation (12), resulting in an enhanced understanding of traditions (13).

The late NWU Practical Theology professor De Wet (2006, p. 68) observed that

[t]he reason why Zerfass’s model is used in the methodological approach of several practical theological studies is probably located in the framework it provides for the investigation of different levels of hermeneutic interaction between theological tradition and current situation, norm and practice, the ideal and real, theology and other humanities. Defining and integrating hermeneutic interaction into theory formation ensures that basic theory does not remain suspended in the

air, practice theory does not float around without an anchor and metatheory is not left unaccounted for.

The model usefully helps to address the tensions that exist between discrepancies in the current praxis against the realities where the church is located. In evaluating Zerfass’s approach, De Wet (2006, p. 68) questioned whether the model properly satisfied the Reformed theological perspective and found that it does not. De Wet (2006, p. 68) observed that practical theological thinking informed Zerfass’s approach in the 1960s where ‘questions were asked about the relevance of the Christian faith for the present’ (De Wet 2006, p. 69). De Wet’s (2006) most insightful critique of Zerfass’s model is his comment on the context of its development, which is Bastian’s theology questions. However, De Wet’s evaluation is limited to the model’s Reformed theological application utility. Thus, considering Zerfass’s model being somewhat outdated and an NWU leading Practical Theologian at the institution like De Wet critical of the model, another approach was embraced, i.e., Richard Osmer’s (2008) four-step model of practical theological reflection.

Osmer’s (2008) approach focuses on four tasks, each guided by a question. The first task is descriptive, an empirical task that seeks to answer the question: what is going on here? This question entails exploring the episodes, situations, and contexts that require interpretation. The second task is interpretive, which seeks to answer the question: why is it going on? This task involves using arts and social sciences theories to interpret phenomena as observed and described. The third task is normative and asks the question: what ought to be going on? This task seeks to discern God’s will for the present situation by re-examining theological traditions to discern God’s will for the current situation. The fourth is a strategic task that seeks to answer the question: how might we respond? This question focuses on how the church should respond to the situation it is experiencing. In doing so, strategic leadership is required to plan and implement appropriate changes. However, these four tasks should not be followed strictly one after the other; one needs to creatively move from one task to the others and back again to gain clarity and ensure relevant interventions are implemented.

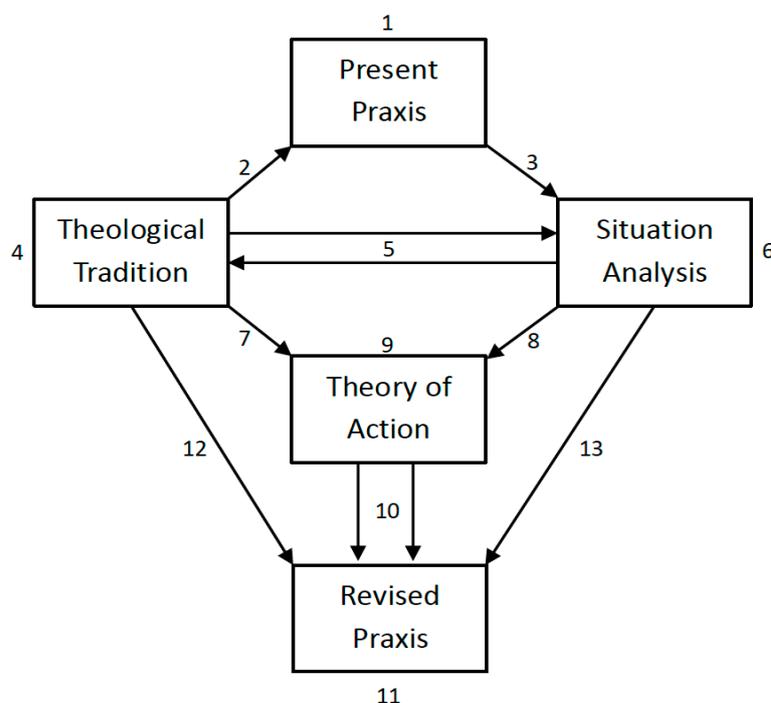


Figure 1. Zerfass model (adopted from Smith 2013, p. 73).

Osmer’s approach provides a simplified schema for doing practical theology. It underlines the four areas to be addressed during practical theological research. However,

Osmer's approach is sometimes confused as a methodology, yet it outlines the elements a practical theology study should address. It guides a practical theologian to be alert and sensitive and track the extent to which a study addresses the four critical questions. Within NWU's reformational theological approach, because of its emphasis on the scriptural text, Osmer's approach is sometimes employed in a reductionistic way to suit the institution's approach. For instance, Osmer's normative task focuses on engaging in theological interpretation, ethical reflection, and studying models of good practice. However, in the NWU application, this task only focuses on the exegesis of scriptures. This emphasis on a single normative dimension seems to arise from the approach to theology at NWU.

The Faculty of Theology of the North-West University practises the science of Theology on a Reformational foundation. This implies recognition that the Word of God, the Bible, originated through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and that the Bible is, therefore, inspired and authoritative . . . In its practice of Theology, the aim of the Faculty, within the unique nature of Theology, is to serve the church and society, both nationally and internationally, through the enhancement of the Christian faith, the reformation of the church, and the moral renewal of society (NWU Theology 2022, n.p.).

The NWU's approach to practical theology confirms Dreyer's (2012, p. 511) statement that practical theology in South Africa focuses on the church and Christian religion. However, is this approach right or wrong? The answer is that there is no right or wrong approach. Ganzevoort (2009, p. 4) stated that:

Many different versions of practical theology have been developed based on the different choices of four parameters, namely (1) the object, running the gamut from religious clergy through the faith community and the religious traditions to culture and society; (2) the method, approaching praxis empirically, phenomenologically, critically, constructively, or dialogically; (3) the role of the researcher as participant, consultant, referee, or observer; and (4) the audience, being primarily the academy, the church, or society.

Because of the diversity in practical theology and praxis examined, Miller-McLemore (2012) maintained that often when practical theologians talk of practical theology, they often do not mean the same thing. Miller-McLemore (2012, p. 20) described Practical Theology as referring to four distinct enterprises with different audiences or objectives:

Practical Theology is (1) an activity of believers seeking to sustain a life of reflective faith in everyday life, (2) a method or way of analysing theology in practice used by religious leaders and by teachers and students across the theological curriculum, (3) a curricular area in theological education focused on ministerial practice and sub-specialities, and (4) an academic discipline pursued by a smaller subset of scholars to support and sustain these first three enterprises.

However, while there is nothing wrong with any approach to doing practical theology, the critical question is the relevance of the approach employed. Ganzevoort and Roeland (2014, p. 98) noted that practical theology

has evolved out of three historically different styles of theology with differing concepts of and methodological approaches toward praxis: pastoral, empirical, and public theology. These three styles correlate with the three audiences Tracy described. Pastoral theology is closest to the audience of the church, empirical theology to the audience of the academy, public theology to the audience of society.

Despite the different approaches, the defining matrix in practical theology seems to be the context. Weyel et al. (2022, p. 1), in the recently published *International Handbook of Practical Theology*, observed that 'over the last decade, the self-reflection of practical theology has focused on plurality and diversity, but that is still very much only the beginning'. Certainly, context is critical within the context of plurality and diversity where views, ideas,

and perspectives differ and are contested. This should arguably be the case at a public university like NWU. Miller-McLemore (2012, p. 12) added that ‘a range of literature across the academy supports the early 1980s intuition in practical theology about the need for more nuanced comprehension of practice’.

The NWU approach to practical theology seems to align with practical theology as applied theology. The NWU School of Ministry training describes the NWU approach to practical theology as follows: ‘Practical theology, as its name implies, is the study of theology in a way that is intended to make it useful or applicable. Another way of saying it is that it is the study of theology so that it can be used and is relevant to everyday concerns’ (NWU Practical Theology 2022, n.p.). The school’s position seems not very different from NWU’s practical theology research conception. The practical theological perspectives sub-programme described its focus as ‘the indication of normative markers for renewal of the praxis in church and kingdom acts in the South African society. The objective is to provide practical-theological perspectives on meta-theoretical points of departure in a reformed approach’ (NWU Practical-Theological Perspectives 2022, n.p.). The application approach to doing practical theology is considered an inappropriate way of conceiving, rendering, and doing practical theology. Graham (2017b, p. 173) clarified:

Theology is practical, therefore, but the practice is also ‘theological’—‘practice is taken to be theologically significant.’ Theology is not simply a body of knowledge and understanding that is tested or ‘applied’ in practice or as it translates into action. In this respect, practical theology opts for a dialogical model of theory and practice. Practical Theologians are congenitally more comfortable with two-way rather than one-way streets. Practical Theologians will hold that people’s practice is informed, shaped, perhaps, by doctrine—or even dictated by it. But Practical Theologians want to keep asserting that doctrine is informed, shaped, and even dictated by practice.

This dialogical model of theory and practice in practical theology is shared by other practical theologians, including Stoddart (2014) and Beaudoin (2016), among many others. It is more than just stating ‘theory and praxis’ on paper as somehow indicated at NWU but a truly engaged dialogical process and ‘[t]heory and praxis of homiletic, liturgical, pastoral, catechism, and operator actions within the changing context of the South African society, as execution of the descriptive, interpretive, normative and strategic tasks of Practical Theology.’ It calls for a genuine dialogue and conversation of theory and practice. Thus, to address the question of the appropriateness of practical theology at NWU, the answer seems to lie in determining the approach’s relevance. As Weyel et al. (2022) noted, ‘the question of what Practical Theology means and for what purpose it is practised finds different answers depending on local, institutional, cultural, and religious environments’ (Weyel et al. 2022, p. 2). Roest’s (2020) recent survey of practical theology, like other practical theologians’ surveys (Christian 2016; Heitink 1999; Farley 1983), reveals that practical theology scholars have been influenced by their contexts over the years.

3. Context of Practical Theology in South Africa

There are several contextual realities to consider in doing practical theology. They include African theology, African religion, understanding of the multiple publics and audiences for targeting, practical theology church focus, the existence of majority Christians, decolonisation and post-colonial realities, public theology, and contemporary African reflection gaps.

African theology aims to ensure that Christianity and the Bible constructively dialogue with African culture to develop authentic African Christianity. This theological approach ‘derives from the interplay between Scripture, Christian tradition and African cosmology’ (Magezi and Igba 2018, p. 1). There is no single African theology but a variety of them with different foci, which Maluleke (2022, pp. 112–13) aptly sums up:

Germane to the business of African Theology are questions of African spiritual, economic, religious and theological agency, which business is to reflect theologically on religion in the world, especially religion and Christianity in Africa. Accordingly, contemporary African Theology tackles several themes that speak to the problems and promises of religion in Africa and the rest of the world.

Linked to African theology is the notion of lived religion, which ‘refers to what people—alone or together—experience, do, and construe in their relationship with the sacred’ (Ganzevoort 2022, p. 636). Gräß (2022, p. 170) added that ‘religion has become synonymous with interpretations of life-related to one’s subjectivity.’ However, this conception of lived religion in the West differs from Africa. The community shares religion. It is not an individual’s decision. The whole family and community share it. Religion and culture influence every aspect of people’s lives in Africa. In Africa, ‘[a]ll of life pulsates with the rhythms of the spiritual realm’ (Lartey 2013, p. 26). Practical theology approaches vary depending on the audience. Three approaches correlate with the three publics suggested by Tracy, namely church, academy, and society (Ganzevoort and Roeland 2014, p. 98). Because of African culture and religion, where traditional religious people play a key role, Magezi (2022, p. 11) proposed another public of “Africa traditional forums”. These forums are religiously pluralistic, where Christianity and traditional African religions co-exist in ways that complement and sometimes conflict with one another.

The African post-colonial is another important aspect to be addressed by practical theology. Fanon ([1961] 1990, p. 169) summarised the effects of colonialism on Africans thus: ‘Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it.’ Therefore, the post-colonial contexts of African people entail dealing with the shackles and residues of the effects of colonialism. The effects are felt and experienced in all dimensions of human beings, including psychological, emotional, cognitive, relational, and other areas. To illustrate the impact of colonialism, Lartey (2022, p. 666), citing Park (2014, pp. 3–14), referred to what he called ‘mimicry,’ which is the art of mimicking the coloniser. People who speak English with an accent that closely resembles the British way of speaking are positively viewed and preferred in public forums such as public radio presenters, among others. In South Africa, this tendency is common among middle class black people who attend or have attended former model C schools². The ability of one to pronounce words in the accent of the coloniser, despite bad grammar, is viewed as better than speaking with good grammar in a hard African accent. Mimicry is endemic in the so-called former Model C schools or former Group A schools that used to be exclusively for white people. Mimicry is a strategy for access and proximity to whiteness and the coloniser. Some African people have been conditioned to think and act in ways foreign to their contexts to be accepted and viewed as capable. Thinking in foreign ways is one way of being in proximity to the coloniser and is sometimes deemed critical, while thinking in indigenous ways is negatively viewed. Therefore, the post-colonial context and reflection need to deal with these issues. This issue is particularly important for practical theology since theology has been an accomplice to colonialism (Maluleke 2020). Therefore, post-colonial approaches, among other things, aim to address colonialism’s hegemonic residues. ‘The task “postcolonialising” activities seek to accomplish entails critique, validation, recovery, and construction. They aim to facilitate the formerly colonised person’s authentic participation in scholarly and pragmatic engagement” (Lartey 2022, p. 664).

Practical theology in Africa is practical Christian theology. The scholarly engagements and reflections must be cognisant of this reality. Christianity and churches constitute the biggest religion in Sub-Saharan Africa, where 62% of the population identifies as Christian (Statista 2022). Dreyer (2012) and Nwachuku (2012) correctly noted that practical theology in South Africa and other African countries focuses on Christian Religion, which is different to a broader and wider notion of lived religion in other parts of the world like Europe. Therefore, if practical theology is to address the needs of its African context, then it should

have a Christian thrust more than a general religious focus. Practical theology has to equip leaders to critically engage their context to yield the desired positive change. Practical theology focus should include equipping churches to develop public pastoral care strategies to help church communities engage in societal changes. African practical theology converges in ministerial formation (training church leaders for ministry) and church audience (equipping church communities with skills) to serve broader society. The task of practical theology is to build churches' capacities to contribute to society, as highlighted in post-colonial practical theology (Lartey 2013) and African public theology (Agang et al. 2020).

There is a growing shift in African Christianity. Pentecostal churches are the fastest-growing churches, and the majority of Pentecostal churches are in Africa. This shift happens in contexts where people are economically struggling. 'In the global South, where the majority of the world's Pentecostals live, countries in economic distress see surges in faith. For every one percent reduction in a country's GDP, Brazilian researchers found a 0.8 percent increase in the number of evangelicals.' (Hardy 2022, n.p.) Practical theology should develop approaches to reflect and engage with the global Christian shift to the South and a rapidly expanding Pentecostal Christianity. There is, however, a concerning trend in Faculties of Theology in South Africa where they are following the Western institution's pattern to become broad religious studies. The faculties of Theology at the University of the Free State and the University of Pretoria have recently changed from pure 'Theology Faculties' to 'Theology and Religious Studies.'

While the criticism of privileging Christianity can be undertaken, a focus seems to be missing. The challenge seems to be a contextual Christianity that is genuinely in conversation with the context and engaging the rising Pentecostal influence. Nwachuku (2012, p. 522) argued that 'the greatest challenge in Africa today is no longer the referencing and importing of Western practices but how to bring personal theologies of daily life that are often informed by subjective experiences into a meaningful scholarly engagement.' Pentecostals seem to be making significant progress in this regard, but critical theological reflection is lacking. Therefore, practical theology should critically engage these African developments to identify and develop approaches that 'mine and sift' constructive social and theological practices that respond, complement, moderate, reject, and approve practices that advance the quality of people's lives. These approaches should be deeply rooted in the Christian heritage and tradition backed by Christian Scriptures. Notwithstanding this recommended practical theology task, there is a need to guard against viewing Christianity as a silver bullet that solves every social issue, a view that currently characterises African public theology discussions. This silver bullet approach was expressed by Agang (2020, pp. 7–8). Referring to the African continent, he stated, 'If Africa is rotten today, we should not lay all the blame on African society. Rather, we need to ask the church, "Where is the salt and the light?" Is something wrong with Africa's Christian theology?' Holistic theology can assist people in making positive economic decisions, avoid praying for success without hard work, and help people develop savings and investment schemes, among other things.

African practical theology must grapple with the public dimension of the Christian faith. It should develop approaches that address structures and processes that oppress people. Some of these structures were inherited from colonial rule but are not working for many people. For instance, democracy has been embraced as a panacea to address dictatorial leadership, among other things. Contrary to the promises of democracy in Africa, it is being manipulated by some community leaders to oppress citizens. Some political leaders collude with traditional structures to suppress people. Some customs and practices do not advance people's dignity, such as traditional practices of silencing youth and women, cultural dances where young girls dance almost naked, and commercialisation of marriage customs, such as bride prices, resulting in discouraging marriage, among other things. Practical theology praxis focusing on society should explore ways of challenging and overturning structures. It is critical to strengthen the watchdog on structures and develop mechanisms and strategies to disrupt and be critical. While this theology is likely to be driven by church leaders and not by ordinary church members, the power derived

from large church membership can bring change (Magezi 2019). Thus, there is a need for reflective theology to critically engage both traditional structures just as much as it engages the remnants of colonialism.

Perhaps one of the gaps in African Christian thinking is an overemphasis on Africa of the past while the current challenges are not being attended, resulting in a gap in the contemporary situation (Mucherera and Lartey 2017). For instance, whiteness in South Africa differs from white privilege in Western countries. Whiteness in South Africa has tensions and paradoxes. There is a historical privilege of whiteness that resulted in the accumulation of resources, and yet it is now characterised by disadvantage due to affirmative policies and the negative social label of being called oppressor and coloniser. The Black economic empowerment policies are causing anxiety and uncertainty about the future of White people. Despite this situation, White people are still positively viewed as capable compared to black people and still benefit from Western countries' possible empathy. Thus, the situation of White people is characterised by a struggle for relevance as they try to fit into and understand a Black African context, which many cannot relate to except by sharing a geographical location. Some White people seem more attached to and prouder of their Western heritage and history, yet they make little effort to relate to people next door or a few kilometres away in a nearby township. This disorientation and identity crisis is also evident among White people who have truly lost their connections with Europe, and all they have is Africa, resulting in much pain and disillusionment as they experience an unshakable and negative label as 'oppressor'.

The inverse of the dilemma of whiteness within Africa's geographical location is that of Black African people in Africa mimicking the Western lifestyle. Blackness and African-ness have greatly shifted, particularly among middle-class Africans. Some middle-class Black people have few connections with their historically communal relatives but are only accustomed to the Western lifestyle in big cities. It is not uncommon to have middle-class children who cannot speak African languages properly and, worse, despise them (Knighton 2004). This situation is similar to the notion of two souls of Black people coined by Sociologist Du Bois (2008) in *The Souls of Black Folk*, which he called 'double consciousness.' This term refers to an identity crisis of the two-ness of Black Americans whereby they have two warring ideals in one body. There is indeed tension and disorientation in living life as a Black African who has embraced a Western lifestyle (Magezi 2018). There are growing children who have fluid identities swinging between Western culture and African culture.

4. Considerations and Departure Points for Practical Theology at NWU and South Africa

The discussion above revealed that practical theology at NWU focuses on Christian ministry.

However, the weakness of the approach is viewing and doing practical theology as applied theology. From the perspective of practical theology in Africa, where the focus is on churches, the challenge is to develop a biblical basis to convince church members to engage in practical life activities (practice). Tiénou (1990, pp. 74–76) observed that the defining matrix of ministry in Africa, to which practical theology contributes, is church communities. Bowers (2009, pp. 94–100) warned that the intellectual preoccupations in Africa are often on a tangent to what is practically happening in the lives of people on the ground. The African intellectual projects do not reflect the needs and practicalities of the church. The question that arises from this African church-focused approach to practical theology is this: how inclusive and encompassing is a church-focused approach? Does not this approach reduce practical theology to one approach, such as the one we see at NWU? In her recent essay, 'Understanding Lived Theology-Is Qualitative Research the Best or Only Way?' Miller-McLemore (2022) discourages practical theology from focusing on one approach because it discourages or obscures other ways of knowing theology. For this reason, Ganzevoort (2009, p. 4) listed the different ways of doing practical theology, including being a participant, consultant, referee, or

observer. This approach makes practical theology complex as it can be pursued from multiple dimensions:

It should come as no surprise, therefore, given practical theology's complex location and aims, that scholars who profess expertise in the discipline encounter a variety of intellectual and practical conundrums as we do our work and live out our vocations. The challenges are not ours alone, however, but plague our scholarly peers and spill over into the lives of those who make their way from our schools into a diversity of professional roles that require practical embodiment of religious beliefs in concrete contexts. (Miller-McLemore and Ann Mercer 2016, p. 1)

Importantly, however, practical theologians 'do not only aim to understand but, in the best of all circumstances, to effect change, enhancing individual and communal life based on convictions and norms from religious traditions and communities' (Miller-McLemore and Ann Mercer 2016, p. 1). Thus, practical theology aims to effect change at the practice level. The change is conceived at multiple levels. There must be a conversation and mutual influence between African indigenous and Western cultures in shaping people. Church leaders are expected to exist to serve broader society through advocating for and modeling ethical values, among other things. Churches are also expected to perform a public pastoral role as part of their broad public practical theology role to change oppressive practices and assist people to live quality lives. The history of the church as complicit with colonialism implies that the church and the Christian religion need to be critically evaluated on an ongoing basis. Given these complexities, the conception of practical theology approaches should be nuanced. Practical theology takes its context seriously and seeks to address multi-layered issues. The question that emerges in our discussion is this: are Osmer's four practical theology tasks adequate and sufficient for the African context? While the predominant context and location of this article is the South African academy, the reflection applies to a broader African context.

Four principles are proposed as departure points for practical theology in Africa to complement Osmer's approach. These are listening, observing, weaving, and offering. These suggested departure points for practical theology do not imply developing a totally new model but are rather suggestions to supplement and complement what already exists. It should be noted that all practical theology models oscillate around the interaction of theory-praxis-theory. As Graham (2017a) and Stoddart (2014) have maintained, all practical theologians are comfortable that practical theology is bi-directional, a two-way rather than one-way approach. However, the rise of contextual theologies brings nuanced ways of analysing practical theology information without turning upside what currently exists. Contextual realities and reflexivity open new ways of 'looking at things.' For instance, Beaudoin and Turpin's (2014) exposition of White practical theology provided a nuanced perspective of viewing theological information and perspectives. These principles complement the work already being done by some African practical theologians like Emmanuel Lartey's (2013) work on postcolonialising God and raising the subaltern's voice through postcolonial practical theological reflection (Lartey 2022), as well as Esther Acolatse's (2014) critique of African Pastoral practices and reflection on *Powers, Principalities, and the Spirit* (Acolatse 2018).

Listening is a metaphor for being attentive to contextual realities and needs. It is akin to 'hearing' and being sensitive to what is happening around you. This practice involves considering different views and perspectives. As part of the hearing process, presuppositions underlying the held positions are questioned. Multi-layered perspectives on issues are explored. For instance, one's context may importantly indicate the location of a researcher, but this position can be used to silence other people and critical conversations. Invoking one's African context may also be used to defend substandard work under the guise of context specialty. Another common example is the prevalent practice of transformation in South Africa, where those strategically positioned to replace White people in institutions and businesses push for changes because they are next in line to benefit. On the surface, it appears the push is for transformation while the underlying

motive of the individual is to derive personal benefit. At the same time, the push for African indigenous religions can also easily be a way for individuals not to shift their spiritual frameworks to embrace Christian teachings fully. Therefore, listening is being attentive to diverse voices and perspectives, questioning uncritically embraced colonial patterns and indigenous beliefs, and questioning superficial statements to understand underlying motives. Therefore, practical theology must be critical, reflective, and reflexive in its listening process. This process is a double-edged sword in that it is externally focused on changing society, yet it also calls for the church to be critical, making the church structures uncomfortable.

Listening and hearing include being conscious of the conundrums that we have in our faculties of theology in South Africa at institutions such as NWU. The majority of professors are White but are trying to listen, hear, and understand African issues. In doing so, they have baggage and are entrapped by whiteness. This dilemma is aptly described by the respected practical theologian Jaco Dreyer in his reflexive biographical description of himself as a White male, Afrikaans speaking, member of a Dutch Reformed church that belonged to a group of white settlers who colonised South Africa. He writes of himself as an individual who grew up with white privilege in the middle class and is now a professor at a public university (Dreyer 2016, pp. 95–96). In post-apartheid South Africa, Dreyer finds himself in a complex situation, questioning his professional identity as a scholar and researcher at a public university, where he is expected to contribute to the decolonisation of practical theology. These background layers confront and challenge him in his work as a practical theologian. On the other side, as discussed earlier, we have black practical theologians who have limitations to thinking creatively in engaging African challenges and needs, having learned from and been influenced by European and American frameworks. Therefore, listening entails engaging these different shades of who we are. This process certainly calls for approaches beyond Osmer's four questions.

Observing entails a mental process requiring both visual and mental engagement. It is a process of seeing deeper issues beyond the surface. In the context of our discussion, it involves being critical of practices and questioning to understand the underlying issues. Lartey (2022, p. 661) suggested adopting a post-colonial perspective, which entails critiquing, validating, recovering, and constructing within an African context: 'Validating, recovering subjugated knowledge and epistemology, and constructing the new realities, theories, and practices able to forge a new consciousness and new orientation to life for all in the future' (Lartey 2022, p. 661). Therefore, observing and analysing the praxis entails a hermeneutical process to understand the contextual situation (Ganzevoort 2022).

Weaving is a metaphor for considering different aspects in examining practical theology praxis, including context, selection of the most relevant methods to achieve the intended results, and clarity on the expected change of the praxis to be pursued. This process entails developing different strategies as per Osmer's (Osmer 2008) fourth task to address the different situations.

Offering is about constructing methodologies and approaches for doing practical theology that is context relevant, rigorous, and clear about both the audience and the changes to be achieved. An example of such an approach is the one utilised at Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission, and Culture (ACI), founded by Kwame Bediako, one of the African Theology Leaders. The methodology utilised entails doing theology through the lens of culture, historiography, and life in Ghanaian society (Walls 2008).

The above-proposed principles may not seem to be much different or unique from the already existing practical theology approaches. Introducing something different and unique is not the objective of this article but to add nuances on practical theology reflection in South Africa and Africa. This is an attempt to reflect on the African context by a scholar whose training and exposure have been entirely influenced by Western models. Hence, to think outside these practical theology modes is almost impossible, yet attempts should be made. This reflection and other subaltern voices to postcolonial practical theological reflection (Lartey 2022) constitute increasing momentum toward decolonial practical theology.

5. Conclusions

Practical theology in Africa calls for contextual relevance. This context is multifaceted; hence, a single practical theology approach such as that currently practised at NWU is inadequate. Other innovative approaches incorporating social, cultural, economic, and human capacity enhancement are required to ensure holistic, practical theological reflections that result in change. Post-colonial and decolonial approaches stand out as frameworks that provide an analytic lens to instill confidence and leveling the playing field in Africa. Thus, practical theology should constantly adopt nuanced approaches depending on contextual realities manifesting in the situation within the hybrid context of Africa.

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Notes

- ¹ I use the word Africa in this article to refer to Africa's geographical location (continent), however with particular reference to Black Africans who experienced exclusion and disadvantages due to colonialism. These people share the definition espoused by Igboin (2021), Masamba ma Mpolo (2013), and many others (see Igboin 2021, pp. 14–15). This notion of Africa is in line with the argument thread in this article. While the narrow context of this paper is South Africa, its related context is broader Africa.
- ² Model C school is "a state school in South Africa that used to be for white children only and is now mixed. Model C schools are generally considered better than township schools" (Macmillandictionary.com n.d.)

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