

# THE CHURCH AS AN AGENT OF POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION: A CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGICAL APPROACH IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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## Abstract

This paper examines the role of the church as an agent of political transformation through a contextual theological approach in contemporary society. Politics is not merely understood as a struggle for power but as an ethical means to realize justice, welfare, and the common good. From the perspective of Christian theology, the church's involvement in politics is part of its faith calling to manifest the signs of the Kingdom of God in the world. The church should not be trapped in pragmatic political practices but is called to play a prophetic role of rebuking injustice, defending the oppressed, and serving as the moral conscience of the nation. Through a contextual theological approach, the church can read the signs of the times and respond to socio-political realities with Gospel values such as love, justice, and peace. The political transformation promoted by the church focuses on shifting the paradigm from politics of power to politics of service. The church is called to build a political ethic rooted in faith, strengthen Christian participation in the public sphere, and cultivate awareness that faith must be embodied in social praxis. In the context of a modern, pluralistic, and complex democracy, the church is expected to be a space for dialogue, a defender of justice, and a critical partner to the government in pursuing the common good. Thus, the church is not merely a spiritual entity but a transformative public force that brings the values of the Kingdom of God into national life in a concrete, prophetic, and civilized manner.

**Keywords:** *Agent, Church, Transformation, Politics, Society*

## I. Introduction

Politics is essentially the art and practice of managing power in society to achieve order, prosperity, and shared goals. Broadly speaking, politics also encompasses the decision-making process concerning public life and the relationships between individuals and groups within a social order. In general, politics has been an inevitable social phenomenon in human life. Since the classical era, philosophers such as Aristotle viewed humans as *zoon politikon*, creatures inseparable from community life and the governance of power.<sup>1</sup> In modern developments, politics is understood not only as a struggle for power, but also as an instrument for organizing communal life based on the principles of justice, participation, and shared interests. However, politics is often perceived ambiguously, on the one hand as a means of striving for the common good, while on the other hand, it is often seen as fraught with intrigue, domination, and pragmatic interests.<sup>2</sup> In a broader context, politics concerns not only the realm of state and government, but also the dynamics of civil society, including religious institutions. Religious life often intersects with politics, both through the direct involvement of believers in the public arena and through the moral and ethical values that religion offers for socio-political governance.<sup>3</sup> This has given rise to a long debate about the extent to which religion can or should be involved in politics, and how politics can provide a healthy space for religious freedom and a prophetic voice. In the Christian theological tradition, the relationship between the church and politics has been a complex and dynamic theme. Since the early church, its relationship with political power has never been static.

<sup>1</sup>Iman Pasrah Zai and Malik Bambangan, "The Church in Facing Social, Political, and Cultural Challenges from Century to Century," *Journal of Christian and Catholic Religious Character Education* 3, no. 1 (2025), 51-66.

<sup>2</sup>Gerli Safira Petonangan, "A Theological Study of Church and Politics: An Analysis of the Transformation of Contemporary Relationships and Engagement," *THEOSEBIA: Journal of Theology* 1, no. 1 (August 2024), 43-57.

<sup>3</sup>PD Latuhamallo, *Rooted in Him and Built on Him*, ed. Robert P. Borrong (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1998), 78.

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Encounters with the Roman Empire, the Reformation of the church in the 16th century, and the church's involvement in social justice struggles in the 20th century demonstrate that Christian faith cannot be separated from political dynamics. Christian theology views politics not merely as a worldly matter, but as part of the call of faith to bring signs of the Kingdom of God to the world. Jesus himself, though not a politician, spoke of justice, peace, and liberation for the oppressed—values that have powerful political implications. However, the church's involvement in politics is never free from challenges. The church is required to be prophetic, speaking up for truth and justice, while simultaneously avoiding the temptation to become entangled in practical politics that could diminish its spiritual mission. Contextual theology helps bridge this tension by emphasizing the importance of reading the signs of the times and responding to socio-political realities based on the Gospel. This means that the church is called not to isolate itself from politics but to be present critically, creatively, and transformatively.<sup>4</sup>

The issue of "church and politics" is relevant in understanding the role of Christian faith in the public sphere. The church is not an entity standing outside of history, but rather a part of society involved in social and political processes. The church is called to be a prophetic voice that rebukes injustice, defends the weak, and builds solidarity across differences for the common good. In the context of modern democracy, this involvement can be realized through the active participation of Christians in politics, both as citizens and as leaders, without losing the integrity of their faith.<sup>5</sup> Politics, though often perceived as a domain of vested interests, is actually an ethical space where the church can present Gospel values. Christian theology teaches that faith cannot be relegated to the private sphere but must be embodied in socio-political practices that defend life. Therefore, the church is challenged to reflect on its role in politics theologically, critically, and contextually. Through such reflection, it is hoped that a deeper understanding of the relevance of Christian faith to building a democratic, inclusive society grounded in the values of truth and God's love will emerge.

## II. Research Methods

This research uses a qualitative method, namely an approach that emphasizes understanding the meaning of social phenomena through interactions, experiences, and perspectives of participants.<sup>6</sup> The primary goal is to holistically understand the meaning, dynamics, and theological implications of church involvement in the public sphere. The first step in qualitative research is data collection through literature review, interviews, or observation, depending on the focus of the study. Data reduction is then performed, namely the process of filtering, summarizing, and focusing data relevant to the research question. This reduction is not simply about reducing the amount of data, but also sharpening the research focus by sorting out important information, categorizing themes, and eliminating irrelevant ones. The next stage is presenting the data in the form of narratives or thematic descriptions, which are then critically analyzed to identify patterns, relationships, and underlying theological meanings. Qualitative methods enable this research to produce in-depth, contextual, and reflective understanding.

## III. Theoretical Basis

### 3.1. Definition of Politics and Political Transformation

Etymologically, the word "politics" comes from the Greek words "polis," meaning city or city-state, and "politike," meaning the art of governing national life. In a general sense, politics encompasses the activities of managing power, making decisions, and organizing communal life in society.<sup>7</sup> Politics is not only interpreted as a struggle for power, but also as a collective effort to create order and the common good.<sup>8</sup> However, in practice, politics is often perceived ambiguously. On the one hand, it serves as a means for citizens to participate in the fight for rights and justice. On the other hand, politics is often tainted by pragmatic interests, corruption, and the dominance of certain groups. Political transformation is needed so that politics does not stop at the struggle for power, but truly becomes an instrument of social change. This transformation demands an ethical orientation, justice, and openness to the participation of all elements of society. From a theological perspective, political transformation has a deeper meaning. Politics is seen as a space where the values of faith can be lived out. The Church, through its members, is called not to distance itself from politics but to contribute to the transformation toward a more just, democratic, and humane

<sup>4</sup>Binsar Jonathan Pakpahan, "Building Public Theology in the Context of an Island Society: The Case Example of the Evangelical Christian Church in Timor," *Journal of Theology* 12, no. 1 (2023), 1-20.

<sup>5</sup>John W. de Gruchy, *Christianity and Democracy* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2004), 9.

<sup>6</sup>Lexy J. Moleong, *Qualitative Research Methodology* (Bandung: PT Remaja Rosdakarya, 2017), 2-3.

<sup>7</sup>Ignatius Adiwidjaja, *State Politics* (Yogyakarta: Zahir Publishing, 2018), 33.

<sup>8</sup>Franz Magnis-Suseno, *Political Ethics: Basic Moral Principles of Modern Statehood* (Jakarta: PT Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 1999), 11-12.

way of life. Politics is not inherently corrupt; rather, it can be restored through ethical and moral engagement that sides with truth. Within the framework of contextual theology, political transformation means bringing Gospel values such as justice, love, peace, and solidarity into the public sphere. Political transformation involves not only structural change but also awareness. Politics transformed by Christian ethical values presupposes leaders with integrity, a critical public, and active public participation. In this context, politics is no longer viewed merely as an arena for power struggles, but as a form of service for the common good. Politics becomes a means to fight for human dignity, especially for the weak and oppressed.<sup>9</sup> Politics linked to transformation demands a paradigm shift: from the politics of power to the politics of service. Politics must not be limited to group interests, but rather oriented toward universal values that inform shared life. The Church, as a community of faith, has a moral responsibility to engage in this process, not to dominate, but to bear witness to the values of the Kingdom of God that transform human life.

### 3.2. Biblical Foundations of Politics and Prophetic Voice

Politics, in the sense of organizing life together, cannot be separated from God's plan for creation. In the Old Testament, Israel was called to live as God's people who practiced justice and steadfast love. The Torah is not just a ritual rule, but also a socio-political guideline that emphasizes the protection of the poor, orphans, widows and immigrants (Deut. 10:18-19). Politics in a biblical perspective is rooted in the values of social justice and concern for the weak. The prophetic voice becomes one of the most real forms. The prophets in the Old Testament not only conveyed God's word ritually, but also spoke out against injustice, corruption, oppression and abuse of power.<sup>10</sup> The prophet Amos, for example, strongly condemned the exploitation of the poor and called for justice to roll down like waters (Amos 5:24). The prophet Isaiah emphasized that true worship is not just liturgy, but also the act of defending the rights of the oppressed (Isaiah 1:17). The prophetic voice is a moral call that connects faith with socio-political responsibility.

In the New Testament, Jesus Christ himself exemplifies a transformative prophetic voice. While he did not establish a political system, Jesus articulated the Kingdom of God, challenging oppressive power structures. He championed human dignity, criticized the hypocrisy of religious leaders, and brought God's love to the marginalized. Jesus' teachings on love, forgiveness, and justice provide the ethical foundation for Christian engagement in politics. The apostle Paul also reminded us that governments are God's servants for good (Rom. 13:4), while emphasizing that obedience to God is paramount in conflicts with oppressive political powers (Acts 5:29).<sup>11</sup> The prophetic voice in the context of modern politics means the church is called to bear witness and speak out against injustice, oppression, and human rights violations. The church cannot remain silent or neutral when Gospel values are violated. This biblical foundation affirms that politics is not merely a worldly matter, but part of the calling of faith to bring about the sign of God's Kingdom. Politics, from a biblical perspective and a prophetic voice, is not synonymous with a pragmatic power struggle, but with service and defense of life. The church is challenged to live out this prophetic tradition, rebuking tyrannical rulers, defending the weak, and establishing social justice. In this way, the prophetic voice becomes a bridge connecting Christian faith with political practice, enabling politics to become a space of witness and transformation rooted in God's word.

### 3.2. Definition of Church

Etymologically, the word "church" in Indonesian comes from the Portuguese *igreja*, which is rooted in the Greek *ekklesia*, meaning "called out." This term originally referred to a public gathering or a townspeople's meeting.<sup>12</sup> Then, in the New Testament, the term was used specifically by the apostles to refer to the community of believers called out from the world to live in fellowship with Christ. Theologically, the church is understood not primarily as a building, but as the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27) and the people of God called to bear witness in the world (1 Peter 2:9). The church has three vocational tasks: *koinonia* (fellowship), *marturia* (witness), and *diakonia* (service). Through these dimensions, the church becomes a sign of the presence of the Kingdom of God, not only in liturgical worship but also in social practice.

<sup>9</sup>T. Krispurwana Cahyadi, *The Church and the Service of Love: Encyclical Deus Caritas Est and Commentary* (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2009), 232.

<sup>10</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 13.

<sup>11</sup>Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011), 55.

<sup>12</sup>Carolus Putranto, SJ, *Believe! Your Life Has Meaning: A Short Introduction to the Creed – A Tool for Catechumenate and Mystagogy Companions* (Yogyakarta: Kanisius Publishers, 2013), 146.

#### IV. Discussion

##### 4.1. Church Involvement in the Public Space (presenting signs of the Kingdom of God)

The church's involvement in the public sphere stems from a theological understanding that Christian faith is never confined to the private sphere but has broad social implications. The Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus is not merely a future spiritual reality but also a sign that can be experienced in history. The church, as the body of Christ, is called to manifest this sign through concrete involvement in community life. The public sphere can be understood as an arena where diverse identities, interests, and narratives converge. Within it, political, social, and economic issues are debated and decided. The church must not be merely a spectator, but rather a witness, voicing the values of love, justice, and peace. This presence does not mean the church is a practical political force, but rather a moral force that helps society organize its life together.<sup>13</sup>

The church's presence in the public sphere can be manifested in three ways. First, social service, where the church demonstrates God's love by helping vulnerable groups. Hospitals, schools, orphanages, and diaconal programs are concrete manifestations of the church's presence with far-reaching impact. Second, social advocacy, namely the church's role in fighting for the rights of marginalized groups and challenging structures of injustice. Through its prophetic voice, the church can rebuke oppressive rulers or policies. Third, interfaith dialogue and cooperation, which reflect Christ's call for peace in a pluralistic society. The church's involvement must maintain its spiritual identity. This means the church must not lose its direction by becoming absorbed in worldly interests. The foundation of all its actions is loyalty to the Gospel. On the one hand, the church is critical of social realities that conflict with the values of the Kingdom of God.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, the church continues to provide hope by presenting ethical alternatives. Therefore, the church's involvement in the public sphere is not an optional choice, but rather a consequence of its faith. The church is called to be light and salt in the world, infusing social life with Gospel values and illuminating society with the love of Christ. Its presence is a tangible sign that the Kingdom of God is at work in the world, bringing about transformation that touches both the spiritual and social dimensions.<sup>15</sup>

##### 4.2. The Church as an Agent of Political Transformation in Contemporary Society

The church's role as an agent of political transformation demands an awareness that politics is not merely a struggle for power, but rather a means to achieve the common good. In contemporary society, politics is often mired in pragmatism, corruption, and narrow interests. The church has a prophetic calling to offer critique, correction, and alternatives that build a humane political life. Contextual theology provides a crucial framework in this regard. Through this approach, the church does not simply repeat doctrine but reads the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel. The church's involvement is not abstract, but rather a concrete response to the realities of injustice, poverty, and marginalization. The church reinterprets its role in the changing socio-political context, without losing its fidelity to the Word.<sup>16</sup>

The political transformation in question encompasses a paradigm shift from the politics of power to the politics of service. The church must teach that true leadership means serving, not dominating. Furthermore, transformation also means championing inclusive participation, where the vulnerable have a voice in decision-making. The principles of justice, peace, and solidarity taught by Jesus are the foundation for this transformation. The church's role can be realized through strengthening political ethics, public education, and involvement in building critical public awareness. The church's prophetic voice is crucial in rebuking policies that oppress or harm the common people. Furthermore, the church can serve as an alternative space that trains citizens to become leaders with integrity and a commitment to justice. The Church is expected to maintain its integrity, not getting caught up in narrow practical politics, but to remain consistent as an agent of transformation that embodies the values of the Kingdom of God. In this way, politics is no longer seen as a dirty area, but rather as a space for witnessing faith that can transform society.

##### 4.3. The Church in the Modern World: Christian Participation in Socio-Politics

The modern world is characterized by democracy, plurality, and technological developments that are transforming the way humans interact. In this context, Christians are called not only to practice personal faith but also to actively participate in socio-political life. This participation is crucial to ensure that Christian values are not

<sup>13</sup>Latuhamallo, Rooted in Him and Built on Him, 24-25.

<sup>14</sup>David J. Hesselgrave, Theology of Mission: An Introduction (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2004), 21.

<sup>15</sup>Andreas Anangguru Yewangoe, Religion and Harmony (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2001), 162.

<sup>16</sup>Robert McAfee Brown, Spirituality and Politics: The Call of the Church in the World (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2001), 112-113.

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marginalized but contribute to building a more just and humane society. Christian participation can take various forms. First, direct involvement in political institutions, whether as members of the legislature, the executive branch, or civil society organizations. The presence of Christians in the political sphere is expected to bring an ethical perspective and a moral commitment that upholds the truth.<sup>17</sup> Second, through political education of the congregation, the church can help the congregation understand their rights and responsibilities as citizens, while equipping them to be critical of public issues.

Furthermore, participation also encompasses social movements, such as human rights advocacy, environmental protection, and economic empowerment. These movements demonstrate that Christian faith touches all aspects of life, not just the spiritual realm. In a modern world steeped in pragmatic interests, Christians are called to maintain moral integrity, set an example of honesty, and prioritize the common good over personal interests. A major challenge for Christian participation is maintaining a balance between faith identity and public engagement. There is a risk that believers become immersed in practical politics, losing their spiritual values. However, with a mature theological understanding, this participation actually enriches the witness of faith. The presence of Christians in the socio-political sphere is a form of calling to be the salt and light of the world.<sup>18</sup> Christian participation is not only a democratic right but also a religious responsibility. Through this involvement, Christians demonstrate that the Christian faith is relevant to real life and can make a constructive contribution to the formation of a just, modern society.

### V. Contextualization: The Church is Critically Involved in Building Democracy, Peace, and Justice.

Contextualizing theology means connecting the Gospel to local socio-cultural realities, so that the message of faith remains relevant without losing its purity. In the context of a pluralistic, democratic, and multicultural society, the church is encouraged to speak not only doctrinally but also to critically engage in building a shared life. First, in terms of democracy, the church plays a role in instilling the values of participation, equality, and respect for human rights. The church must be a space that trains its members to speak up, engage in dialogue, and participate in democratic processes. Through political education and public ethics, the church contributes to strengthening a healthy and civilized democracy. Second, in building peace, the church is called to be a bridge in a society prone to conflict.<sup>19</sup> Interfaith dialogue, post-conflict reconciliation, and tolerance education are concrete manifestations of the church's role. Peace is not merely the absence of war, but the presence of justice and sustainable social harmony.

Third, in fighting for justice, the church must side with the poor, the weak, and the oppressed. The church's prophetic voice is needed to rebuke exploitative policies and promote more humane systems. This contextualization demands that the church adapt to the challenges of the times, such as globalization, digitalization, and the ecological crisis. However, this adaptation must not sacrifice the essence of the Gospel. Instead, the church must reinterpret the Gospel in language and actions that are understandable to contemporary society.<sup>20</sup> The church's critical involvement in democracy, peace, and justice is not an additional activity, but the very essence of the church's mission. The church is called to be a relevant witness, one that not only speaks of eternal salvation but also brings the signs of that salvation into the concrete lives of humanity.

### V. Conclusion

The Church cannot ignore the reality of politics as an integral part of human life. Politics, which is essentially related to the regulation of communal life, justice, and the general welfare, demands the presence of the church's prophetic voice to remain on the path of morality and humanity. The Church, grounded in the Gospel, is called not only to deal with liturgical and spiritual matters but also to present the signs of God's Kingdom in the public sphere, including through critical engagement in political dynamics. The church is called to reinterpret its role, not as an institution trapped in political pragmatism, but as an agent of transformation that advocates the values of love, justice, and peace. In this perspective, the church functions as the nation's *conscientia*, reminding those in power not to deviate from their responsibilities to the people. The political transformation in question is not merely structural change, but also a shift in paradigm, mentality, and values. The Church, through teaching, witness, and diaconal action, can instill the principles of solidarity, respect for human dignity, and a commitment to truth. The church's presence in the public sphere must reject corruption, discrimination, and violence, while encouraging the emergence of a transparent, participatory, and just political order. In this way, the church does not replace the role of the state, but rather guides

<sup>17</sup>Latuhamallo, *Rooted in Him and Built on Him*, 78-79.

<sup>18</sup>Yewangoe, *Religion and Harmony*, 78.

<sup>19</sup>Douglas J. Elwood, *Asian Christian Theology*, ed. Douglas J. Elwood (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1992), 92.

<sup>20</sup>John Stott, *Global Issues that Challenge Christians* (Jakarta: Bina Kasih Communication Foundation, 2004), 45-46.

the state so that it remains on the side of humanity and does not become trapped in narrow interests. In contemporary society marked by globalization, pluralism, and social complexity, the role of the church is increasingly significant. The church is called to be a bridge for interfaith dialogue, a space for advocacy for vulnerable groups, and a critical partner for the government in building a healthy democracy. The prophetic, contextual, and transformative presence of the church affirms that Christian faith is not merely a private reality, but a liberating public force. The church, as an agent of political transformation, must continue to live out its calling to bring the Kingdom of God to the world. Through contextual theology, the church is empowered not only to preach but also to take concrete action, defending the truth, and upholding justice in the life of the nation and state. This role demands prophetic courage, moral integrity, and a commitment to Gospel values so that the church can truly be light and salt to the world, as well as an agent of transformation that shapes a humane, theological, and civilized political landscape.

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