

**BECOMING FULLY HUMAN IN  
COMMUNITY:  
A *CRITICAL* THEOLOGY OF  
*UBUNTU***

UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

**University of Birmingham Research Archive**

**e-theses repository**

This unpublished thesis/dissertation is copyright of the author and/or third parties. The intellectual property rights of the author or third parties in respect of this work are as defined by The Copyright Designs and Patents Act 1988 or as modified by any successor legislation.

Any use made of information contained in this thesis/dissertation must be in accordance with that legislation and must be properly acknowledged. Further distribution or reproduction in any format is prohibited without the permission of the copyright holder.

*To the memory of John Hess, a fine priest and a loving father.*

## Contents

### *Section One: What is the Theology of Ubuntu?*

- Chapter One Introduction: The Need for a Critical Theology of *Ubuntu*..... p. 6
- Chapter Two A Narrative of Return: *Ubuntu* in the Context of African Thought.....p. 18
- Chapter Three Defining *Ubuntu*: Three Approaches.....p. 61
- Chapter Four ‘A Delicate Network of Interdependence’: An Overview of the Theology of  
*Ubuntu*.....p. 91
- Chapter Five A Critique of *Ubuntu*: Four Crucial Challenges.....p.109

### Section Two: The Theology of *Ubuntu* in Dialogue with the West

- Chapter Six The Theology of *Ubuntu* and the Platonic Tradition..... p. 136
- Chapter Seven Subjectivity: The Theology of *Ubuntu* and Existentialism.....p. 167
- Chapter Eight The Theology of *Ubuntu* and Western Relational Approaches.....p. 199

### Section Three – The Theology of *Ubuntu* Applied: Some Key Issues

- Chapter Nine The Theology of *Ubuntu*, Gender and Sexuality .....p. 218
- Chapter Ten The Theology of *Ubuntu* and White African Identity.....p. 257

### Section Four: Conclusions

- Chapter Eleven A Framework for a Reformulated Theology of *Ubuntu*.....p. 285

## Abstract

This thesis argues that it is time for a *critical* theology of *Ubuntu*. The basic contours of the theology of *Ubuntu* represent a now well-worn path in Black and African theologies. It starts with a critique of the western conception of the human being, which is held to be fundamentally flawed, because of its emphasis on an individualism premised on Cartesian dualism and rationalism. A more authentic understanding of the human being is to be found in the African world-view, which stresses that persons are constituted through community. This is given particular expression through *Ubuntu*, which – according to the definition popularised by Desmond Tutu – means ‘a person is a person through other persons’. The contention of this thesis is that – while many elements of this analysis remain valid and are substantially true - *Ubuntu* has up to now been placed beyond critical gaze, with potentially damaging consequences.

In particular, when reflecting on it theologically, we need to be cognisant of the following dangers within *Ubuntu*, as it has traditionally been defined: 1) *Ubuntu* equates community with moral virtue, 2) *Ubuntu* is premised on idealised notions of community and consensus, 3) the problem of personhood is unresolved in *Ubuntu*, and 4) *Ubuntu* can legitimise patriarchy and homophobia in the name of African culture.

Furthermore, this thesis argues that it is neither epistemologically possible, nor theologically desirable, to attempt to construct an ‘essentially’ African conception of the human being. Moreover, claiming an idea as ‘African’ does not in and of itself constitute theological or

moral legitimacy, any more than labelling it as ‘western’ makes it illegitimate *per se*. We must also recognise that western theological and philosophical anthropologies are far more complex and nuanced than the Cartesian straw man which is often deployed to represent them. For example, there are many voices within the western canon which converge in important respects with the theology of *Ubuntu*’s critique of Descartes. Other western traditions – and the thesis pays particular attention to existentialism in this regard – provide a necessary critique of *Ubuntu* in their emphasis on the freedom and agency of the human subject.

Thus, our argument is that if it is understood as ‘a person is a person through other persons’, *Ubuntu* becomes open to the distortion of collectivism. Instead, it is better defined as ‘becoming fully human in community’, a definition which will enable us to develop a theology of *Ubuntu* that retains the relationality at its core, while giving expression to the agency and freedom at the heart of personhood. This will facilitate a theology of *Ubuntu* which is in continuity with the best traditions of African humanism. Such a theology of *Ubuntu* expresses the truth that personhood is characterised by subjectivity, as well as a way of being that is developed and fulfilled in community; it allows for a vision of communities characterised and indeed strengthened by difference, dissent, protest and challenge, rather than Community characterised by conformity and homogeneity. Such a reformulated theology of *Ubuntu* has much to offer Africa, and indeed the wider world.

# Section One: What is the Theology of *Ubuntu*?

## Chapter One

### Introduction: The Need for a *Critical* Theology of *Ubuntu*

It is time for a *critical* theology of *Ubuntu*. The central contention of this thesis is that, while the theology of *Ubuntu* continues to make a crucial contribution in underlining the significance of relationality within theological anthropology, its value has been undermined by a lack of critical perspective. As a communitarian theology, it carries with it the dangers of restricting personal freedom and agency, and of suppressing dissenting voices. It is only a rigorously interrogated theology of *Ubuntu* that can transcend the individualism which characterises a great deal of Western thought about the human being, without falling prey to the dangers of collectivism. It is precisely that process of interrogation in which we seek to engage here.

At the heart of this thesis, then, is a constructive but critical engagement with the current theological understanding of *Ubuntu*. Our primary goal is thus to evaluate the attempts by theologians and other Christians to reflect on *Ubuntu*, rather than attempting any thoroughgoing analysis of *Ubuntu* per se as a lived experience, political philosophy or government policy. Those manifestations of *Ubuntu* must necessarily form part of our discussion, but they are not our primary subjects of investigation.

The current theological understanding of *Ubuntu* to which we refer became popularised, and to a large extent, defined, by the thought and ministry of Archbishop Desmond Tutu during the 1980s and 1990s. The word itself is the plural form of the African word *bantu*, which

was used to refer to certain groups within sub-Saharan Africa who share a linguistic bond. *Ubuntu* means ‘humanity’, but Tutu’s particular sense of the term derives from the Xhosa proverb ‘*ubuntu ungamntu ngabanye abantu*’ which roughly translated means that ‘a person is a person because of other persons’.<sup>1</sup> Tutu further explicates it thus:

In the African *Weltanschauung*, a person is not basically an independent solitary entity. A person is human precisely in being enveloped in the community of other human beings... To be is to participate.<sup>2</sup>

At the heart of Tutu’s understanding of *Ubuntu*, then, is relationality, and, consequent to that, a critique of western theological and philosophical anthropology, with its perceived emphasis on individualism.

### **Locating this Thesis**

Before turning to our analysis of this theology of *Ubuntu*, it might be helpful to provide some intellectual, theological and biographical context to the study which follows. This thesis is primarily a work of philosophical theology, which scrutinises the intellectual foundations of the theology of *Ubuntu*. I have sought to evaluate the formative influences which have helped to shape the theological understanding of the *Ubuntu* tradition. Yet my intention here is not simply to present a ‘history of ideas’ survey, or attempt an objective analysis of the key concepts. Rather, this work is broadly located within the tradition of the theologies of liberation, and consequently takes as its point of departure the struggle for freedom of the marginalised and oppressed peoples of the world. My theological premise is that, inherent in the concept of *imago dei* is the notion that every human being is imbued with dignity, and is created for freedom. On this basis, the theology of *Ubuntu* must be evaluated on the extent to

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland, The Pilgrim Press: 1997), p. 39.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, p. 39

which it champions and protects that dignity and freedom. Our argument will be that there is danger in an *Ubuntu* which becomes a hegemonic and homogenising narrative which suppresses freedom for many, while at the same time we want to affirm its potential to embody that essential human mutuality which is very much an expression of freedom.

It is also important to emphasise that this work seeks to position itself in the interface between African and western theologies. We will argue that it is neither epistemologically possible, nor theologically desirable, to attempt to construct an ‘essentially’ African conception of the human being. We will argue that notion of essential Africanness is part of a mythology which places elements of African theology seemingly beyond criticism. Claiming an idea as ‘African’ does not in and of itself constitute theological or moral legitimacy any more than labelling it as ‘western’ makes it illegitimate *per se*. This is not to deny the reality that ideas are contested within the context of power relations and that the re-establishment, and indeed privileging, of African thought is a necessary corrective to centuries of western intellectual hegemony. Yet, to assert that African theology must be unshackled from centuries of western oppression, and that previously silenced African voices must be heard, is not to suggest that there is a hermetically sealed, discrete, body of knowledge which constitutes African theology, which is untainted by western influences, and against which we may not raise a critical voice for fear of perpetuating imperialism. It should further be noted that western theological and philosophical anthropologies are far more complex and nuanced than the Cartesian straw man which is often deployed to represent them. For example, there are many voices within the western canon which converge in important respects with the theology of *Ubuntu*’s critique of the Cartesian tradition. Other western traditions – and we shall pay particular attention to existentialism in this regard –

provide a necessary critique of *Ubuntu* in their emphasis on the freedom and agency of the human subject.

Thus, the freedom of the human subject within *Ubuntu*, and the dialogue regarding that freedom between *Ubuntu* and the elements of the western tradition, provide the main focal points of this study. I am aware that delineating the parameters of the thesis inevitably means that there are limitations to it. For example - while there is certainly reference to it in this work - the role of *Ubuntu* within the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and indeed within the theology of reconciliation as a whole, could have received much greater attention. It might well be said, too, that this thesis is entirely anthropocentric, and pays scant attention to pressing ecological concerns, as well as to how *Ubuntu* must involve an understanding of our right relationship to the *whole* created order, not just other human beings. One might also have analysed the relationship between *Ubuntu* and other forms of Christian communitarianism (such as, say, the Benedictine model), or between *Ubuntu* and spirituality (the intersection between *Ubuntu* and Eucharistic theology would be potentially be a fruitful area of study, for example).

Furthermore, while certainly placing *Ubuntu* very firmly in the context of African humanism as a whole, this thesis is *mainly* a reflection on *Ubuntu* in the South African context (see biographical note below). However, where I refer to *Ubuntu* as a South African theology or philosophy in the pages which follow, that should in no way be read as saying that it is *exclusively* South African. I am cognisant of the fact that there are very close equivalents to *Ubuntu* amongst, for example, the Ndebele of Zimbabwe and the Swahili of east Africa, and that it is John Mbiti – who is from Kenya – whose critique of Descartes laid the foundations for later formulations of *Ubuntu* (see below).

## **Some Reflections on *Ubuntu* from my own Life**

Born in 1967 in Cape Town, I was categorised as ‘coloured’ within the racial terminology of apartheid. The ‘coloured’ people in South Africa are a very mixed group, whose ancestry can be traced to European settlers, Malay slaves brought to the Cape by the Dutch East India Company, and the indigenous Khoisan people. The term ‘coloured’ was, and remains, highly contested: it was rejected by more politically conscious mixed-race people, who identified as black, whereas those of a more conservative persuasion were happier to accept it, and certainly actively eschewed any black identity. This in itself was a powerful signifier of the self-hatred induced by racism within people of colour. Many so-called ‘coloured’ people were unable to embrace the blackness which was so evidently part of their heritage, and aspired to whiteness, because the latter had been entrenched in their consciousness as being superior. This mental enslavement is, as we shall see, fundamentally challenged by the theology of *Ubuntu* because of its emphasis on selfhood, agency and subjectivity.

One of my earliest memories, as a young child of about five or six, is of driving around the breathtakingly beautiful coastline of Cape Town with my parents. I remember begging my father to stop so that we could go on to the beach; I remember his awkwardness, his embarrassment, his struggle to explain to his young son that we could not go onto that beach. In the early 1970s, as for the majority of the time in the apartheid era, South Africa’s best beaches were very definitely ‘whites only’, and – like the trains, the restaurants, the toilets and many other facilities - bore signs warning of prosecution if the law was contravened. I did not fully comprehend the situation because I was too young, but I can certainly remember the feeling of anger and my deep sense of injustice. Other children played happily on the beach, and I was prevented from doing so by the colour of my skin. More than

anything else, I can remember feeling humiliated and belittled. It was an early lesson in the pernicious effects of discrimination – that it *reduces* its victims, it makes them feel like less than human. Of course, apartheid in South Africa was about much more than keeping black people off the beaches – on one level beach apartheid was rather trivial. Yet like all forms of discrimination, its psychological effects were far-reaching.

The lesson was further reinforced by another childhood memory from some years later. We were returning to South Africa in 1978, having spent some years in the UK. Aged 11, I could sense my parents' deep anxiety and fearfulness about returning to their native land at a time when the apartheid regime was at the very height of its powers. Landing at Jan Smuts Airport (O. R. Tambo Airport today), I recall being aghast at the signs on the separate public toilets, which gave graphic expression to the realities of apartheid – 'Whites' and 'non-Whites'. My 11-year old consciousness, politically naïve and undeveloped as it was, told me that this represented a significant negation of my humanity.

In the terminology of apartheid, Indians and so-called 'coloureds', although treated differently in some respects (such as having separate areas for housing and separate departments of education), were grouped together with black people of African descent under the category 'non-white.' Apart from the blatantly discriminatory aspect of this terminology, it also caused significant psychological damage. It spoke of 'nonbeing', of the attempted destruction of the black sense of self. As I have alluded to above, the term 'non-white' caused many people categorised thus to see white as normative and, as a consequence, often show disdain for those they considered to be 'more black' than they were. Such is the insidious nature of racism. The negation of humanity which is the very essence of apartheid, encapsulated in notion of 'non-whites' made all the more urgent the development of a

theology which affirmed (particularly black) humanity, and which restored freedom and dignity – which indeed are at the heart of the theology of *Ubuntu*.

During my teenage years, I enthusiastically embraced an evangelical Christianity which put me at odds with those seeking to ground their faith within the socio-political realities of South Africa and the struggle against apartheid. My vision of the Church's mission centred around the need to bring individuals to the point of a personal encounter with Christ, which seemed to be an imperative disconnected from the political questions of the day. However, my dichotomized worldview was profoundly challenged by the explosion of revolutionary fervour, which characterised South Africa in the mid- to late-eighties. As a student at University of Cape Town, surrounded by the political turbulence of the time, and increasingly influenced by my reading of Marxist theory, I began to ask the question: 'Of what relevance is Christian faith while the country burns?'

The answer to that question was very much embodied in the person of Desmond Tutu. In him, I saw a profound and deep spirituality, which, far from making him detached from the realities of South Africa, was the very springboard for his prophetic social witness. Rather than the dualistic approach, which seemed to constrain much of the South African church at that time, in Tutu's theology there was a seamless integration between the spiritual and material realms. At the very heart of that nexus, was Tutu's core message, that each human being is made *imago dei*, and is of infinite worth and value as a consequence. Apartheid was iniquitous precisely because, through its dehumanisation of black people, it violated that divine spark within them.

The Church's mission, then, was to restore humanity of the oppressed, to stand up for the dignity of those who had been demeaned. In his sermon on the occasion of his enthronement as Archbishop of Cape Town in 1986, he spoke of a faith which compelled Christians into action in the face of the apartheid government's brutal treatment of black South Africans:

If we take the incarnation seriously, we must be concerned about where people live, how they live, whether they have justice, whether they are uprooted and dumped as rubbish in resettlement camps, whether they are detained without trial, whether they receive an inferior education, whether they have a say in the decisions that affect their lives most deeply... Friends, we do this not because of our politics, because of our religion.<sup>3</sup>

This reverence for the human being shaped and informed Tutu's theology of *Ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* for Tutu expressed our status as persons, and the fact that our personhood was constituted by relationship – relationship with God, as well as relationship with other people. In opposing the evil of apartheid with the relational personhood of *Ubuntu*, Tutu offered a deeply attractive African Christian humanism, and an inspiring vision both of the mission of the Church, and of a new South Africa, in which all were free and imbued with dignity and value. Tutu's *Ubuntu* had a profound personal effect on me, signalling as it did that theology could play a vital role in restoring worth and dignity to the oppressed, and the creation of a just and humane society.

It was a theological outlook which was very influential in my decision to seek ordination. I was eventually appointed to a curacy in Elsie's River, a largely impoverished 'coloured' suburb on the Cape Flats, in 1992. The Cape Flats comprise of a vast area in far-flung

---

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in John de Gruchy, 'The Transfiguration of Politics' in Leonard Hulley, Louise Kretschmar and Luke Lungile Pato (eds.), *Archbishop Tutu: Prophetic Witness in South Africa* (Cape Town: Human and Rosseau, 1996), 53-54

regions to the east of central Cape Town, and were constituted by the Group Areas Act of 1950. This apartheid legislation forced thousands of ‘coloured’ people to leave their homes in places such as District Six, which were closer to the city, but had been declared ‘white’ by the government. ‘Coloured’ people were thus displaced, removed from their established social networks, and discarded on what was essentially a wasteland, with little infrastructure or economic prospects. These forced removals thus resulted in the fragmentation of families and communities. The Cape Flats became notorious for being beset by innumerable socio-economic problems, including unemployment, violence and drug and alcohol addiction. They also became a fertile breeding ground for gangs, which provided dislocated and disaffected ‘coloured’ youth with the sense of identity and belonging which they craved. (Indeed, at the very time of writing, the South African army has been deployed on the Cape Flats, after months of the most horrendous violence, which the police have been unable to quell.) Such a place was Elsie’s River. However, in the midst of all of these socio-economic ills, I discovered further manifestations of *Ubuntu* – in particular, how people transcended the limitations of poverty through the strength of community. Despite the hardship and suffering, Elsie’s River was a place of laughter, hope and faith, all arising out of people’s capacity to stand in solidarity with one another. This is very much the heart of *Ubuntu* – the affirmation of personhood, constituted in relationship, which enables people to overcome oppression.

‘Coloured’ theologian, Nadine Bowers Du Toit, similarly reflects on how, on the Cape Flats, in the midst of the most acute deprivation, ‘collective strategies for reclaiming our story are increasing.’<sup>4</sup> She recalls how the congregation pastored by her father during the apartheid era

---

<sup>4</sup> Nadine Bowers Du Toit, “‘Ma se kind’: Rediscovering personhood in addressing socio-economic challenges in the Cape Flats” in Dreyer, Jaco and Dreyer, Yolanda and Foley, Edward and Nel, Malan (eds.) *Practicing [sic] Ubuntu: Practical Theological Perspectives on Injustice, Personhood and Human Dignity* (Zurich: Lit Verlag, 2017), 62

contributed to building social capital in the community.<sup>5</sup> While its members were uneducated and economically disadvantaged, their sense of identity was affirmed in the church. They were thus able to play leadership roles in the community, encouraging others and sharing what they had with those struggling. They were able to reframe the experience of the wasteland of the Cape Flats into a horizon of hope. Bowers Du Toit goes on to make reference to the colloquial term in the ‘coloured’ community, ‘*ma se kind*’ (mother’s child), which is a reference to anyone regarded as being family, whether biologically related or not. She argues that this phrase reflects a sisterhood and brotherhood within the ‘coloured’ community, forged in the furnace of adversity, and which represents a form of *Ubuntu*.<sup>6</sup> Bower Du Toit’s insights certainly resonate with my own experience.

However, I should add that that my life’s work has also embraced opposite ends of the socio-economic spectrum – from Elsie’s River, to my current position teaching theology at Eton College, an institution which very much embodies privilege in the UK. My belief is that the theology of *Ubuntu* is relevant to both contexts – it speaks to the oppressed and challenges the affluent. This work is rooted in the South African context, and its aim is the understanding of the *Ubuntu* that developed there, but it is framed by the belief that *Ubuntu* must both challenge and be challenged by the world beyond South Africa. In short, we seek to outline here a theology of *Ubuntu* which is rooted in South Africa, but which can speak to people everywhere.

---

<sup>5</sup> Bowers Du Toit, “‘Ma se kind’”, 63

<sup>6</sup> Bowers Du Toit, “‘Ma se kind’”, 61-62

## Outline of Chapters

In seeking to do precisely that, the first section of this thesis will need to address the question, ‘**What is the theology of *Ubuntu*?**’ In chapter two, we will seek to place *Ubuntu* in its intellectual, philosophical and historical context as an African system of thought. In chapter three, differing definitions of *Ubuntu* are presented and critiqued. In chapter four, the focus becomes more explicitly theological as we analyse the current state of the theology of *Ubuntu* - with particular reference to Michael Battle’s work on Tutu - before turning to the critical questions which face that theology in chapter five.

The second section addresses the question of ‘***Ubuntu*’s Dialogue with the West.**’ Its rationale is that the theology of *Ubuntu* provides a substantive and necessary challenge to western philosophical and theological anthropologies. This is explored in chapter, six, which examines how a theology of *Ubuntu* interrogates the Platonic/Cartesian tradition. At the same time, my argument is that existentialism, with its emphasis on personal agency and freedom, presents a significant and substantive critique of *Ubuntu*, which is evaluated in chapter seven. Chapter eight goes on to challenge simplistic dichotomies between African and western thinking, and attempts to outline important areas of convergence between the theology of *Ubuntu* and communitarian theology in the west, which will facilitate the development of an authentically intersubjective theological anthropology.

Having developed a theoretical framework, the fourth section of the thesis goes on to look at ‘**The Theology of *Ubuntu* Applied**’. In chapter nine, we will examine *Ubuntu* in relation to patriarchy and homophobia, and will argue that a reformulated theology of *Ubuntu* can

indeed be the basis of a liberative theology for women and gay people. In chapter ten, we shall reflect on two analyses of white identity in South Africa, with a view to demonstrating how the theology of *Ubuntu* challenges the anthropology of privilege and status.

The final chapter, **Conclusions**, will outline a new definition of *Ubuntu* – ‘Becoming Fully Human in Community’. I shall argue that this definition addresses the weaknesses we have analysed in the previous conceptions of *Ubuntu*, without undermining the relationality which were fundamental to them. ‘Becoming Fully Human in Community’ is the basis for a theology of *Ubuntu* which has a vision of the human being as flourishing *in* community, rather than being entirely constituted *by* community.

## Chapter Two:

### A Narrative of Return: *Ubuntu* in the Context of African Thought

Before we can turn to our central task of the reformulation of the theology of *Ubuntu*, it is necessary to have some understanding of the historical and philosophical context in which the concept of *Ubuntu* developed. A key element of our argument here is that *Ubuntu* is in fact a constructed tradition. Without recognising this, we are left with an essentialist reading of *Ubuntu*, which views it as a pure expression of African values, in an unbroken line of continuity with an African golden age. It is this latter understanding of *Ubuntu* which can position it – dangerously - beyond criticism, thus precluding a constructively critical theological engagement with it.

The essentialist reading of *Ubuntu* also rests on problematic epistemological foundations. While proponents of this *Ubuntu* are evidently exhorting Africans to return to more authentically African values, it is not entirely clear what those African values are, or how they are decided upon. However, while our argument here is that *Ubuntu* is constructed, rather than an expression of an untainted and timeless set of intrinsically African values, this is by no means to undermine its significance or value. The central argument of this chapter is that its value and significance should be gauged not by the criterion of African essentialism, but rather by *Ubuntu's* capacity to contribute to the creation of compassionate, caring and just communities.

## ***Ubuntu* as a Narrative of Return in African Philosophy**

Integral to the construction of the *Ubuntu* tradition is an appeal to the past. In a very helpful article, which traces the historical development of *Ubuntu*<sup>1</sup>, Christian Gade argues that *Ubuntu* is a ‘narrative of return’,<sup>2</sup> and that such narratives have been a significant feature of postcolonial Africa. He suggests that these postcolonial narratives of return have been typically characterised by the idea that social transformation can only happen on the basis of a return to something authentically African, rooted in pre-colonial times and thus untouched by external western influence. Thus, these narratives tend to divide history into three phases:

*first*, the pre-colonial phase which, often but not always, is perceived as a ‘golden age’ characterised by harmony; *second*, a period of decline, which is understood to have been brought about by intruders who attempted to deprive the Africans of their resources, dignity, and culture; and *third*, a phase of recovery, where Africans, after having gained sufficient political power, attempt to restore their dignity and culture by returning to (what are claimed to be) traditional, humanist, or socialist values.<sup>3</sup>

Prominent examples of narratives of return in post-independence Africa have included Kwame Nkrumah’s *conscientism* in Ghana, which he held to be convergent with the original humanist principles of pre-colonial Africa; Leopold Senghor’s promulgation of Senegalese socialism inspired by the notion of *negritude*, by which he meant the traditional civilising values of the Negro world, which stood in contrast to the European ideals of the colonialists<sup>4</sup>; and Julius Nyerere’s *ujamaa*, the notion of extended familyhood, which became the basis for

---

<sup>1</sup> Christian B.N. Gade, ‘The Historical Development of the Written Discourses on *Ubuntu*’ in *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 2011, 30(3), 303-329

<sup>2</sup> Gade, ‘Written Discourses on *Ubuntu*’, 304ff

<sup>3</sup> Gade, ‘Written Discourses on *Ubuntu*’ 304-305

<sup>4</sup> Gade, ‘Written Discourses on *Ubuntu*’, 306

a blueprint for development in post-independence Tanzania.<sup>5</sup> We examine each of these concepts below and will seek to highlight the clear line of continuity between them and *Ubuntu*. It is this continuity, based on the foundation of African humanism, which makes an analysis of *conscientism*, *negritude* and *ujamaa* highly instructive when it comes to developing a critical theology of *Ubuntu*.

### **Marxism and African Humanism: Fanon**

Before turning to look at each of these political philosophies in turn, we shall examine another crucial element which was common to all them - the influence of Marxism. The postcolonial period saw African leaders looking for alternative political and economic models to those imposed on them by colonialism. Given that they perceived colonialism as being responsible for undermining African traditions and values, and that colonialism and capitalism were inextricably linked, and given also the obviously more communitarian thrust within socialism (which meant that it had a much greater affinity with African culture), it was inevitable that these leaders turned to Marx for inspiration.<sup>6</sup>

Richard Bell sums up the post-World War II situation as follows:

It became clear to many African leaders that sustaining Western colonialism was seriously undermining, if not destroying, the African social infrastructure based on traditional humanistic values.

---

<sup>5</sup> Clearly there are other very significant postcolonial African political narratives, also drawing on humanist and socialist ideas, which reflected and influenced the three we have chosen – such as Kaunda’s ‘African Humanism’, Obote’s ‘Common Man’s Charter’ and Kenyatta’s ‘African Socialism.’ However, the limits of space prevent a broader historical analysis, and we take conscientism, negritude and ujamaa to be the most significant of these postcolonial narratives.

<sup>6</sup> Although clearly they differed from Marx in their emphasis on race rather than class.

It was thought by Nkrumah, Senghor and Nyerere that 'capitalism' was incompatible with African culture and that the colonial heritage was equated with capitalism. It was at this time that the growing appeal of Marxism or revolutionary socialism was being exported and seemed to 'dovetail' with notions of African humanism.<sup>7</sup>

Mudimbe concurs when he says

Marxism appeared to be the inspiration for the renewal of the continent...[it] appeared to be the exemplary weapon and idea with which to go beyond the colonialism incarnated and ordained in the name of capital.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the most incisive and provocative application of Marx's ideas to the African context came via the pen of Franz Fanon, who was certainly a powerful influence within the forms of African socialism developed by Nkrumah, Senghor and Nyerere. For both Marx and Fanon, the central dynamic within society, the motor of history, is conflict – but whereas for Marx this conflict was constituted by class struggle, for Fanon it was located in the relationship between the coloniser and colonised. At the heart of the material dialectic, as described by Marx, is the commodification of the proletariat, a process by which the value of exploited human beings is reduced to their economic value within the capitalist mode of production; in colonialism, says Fanon, value was assigned according to skin colour. The colonies lacked the infrastructure of modern capitalism, and therefore did not have the exchange relations between the bourgeoisie and an industrialised proletariat present within it; instead, social relations within colonial society were seen through the lens of skin colour, which became the basis for the ideological justification of exploitation within those social relations. Fanon outlined how, in the colonies, whiteness converged with wealth as a symbol of value.

---

<sup>7</sup> Richard H. Bell, *Understanding African Philosophy: A Cross-Cultural Approach to Classical and Contemporary Issues* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 37

<sup>8</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 42

Whiteness became synonymous with ‘beauty and virtue, which have never been black.’<sup>9</sup> He goes on to argue that whiteness was both the cause and the consequence of wealth: ‘you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich.’<sup>10</sup>

Fanon further explains why there was a greater need for the visible distinctions of skin colour in colonial society than there was in western capitalist society. In the latter there are many forms of ideological mediation and intervention (what Fanon calls a “multitude of sermonizers, counsellors, and ‘confusion-mongers’”<sup>11</sup>), leading the workers to believe that they are getting a fair exchange for their labour. In contrast, the more direct and more violent systems of exploitation which were the hallmark of colonial societies (the ‘frequent, direct intervention by the police and the military’<sup>12</sup>) required a more explicit demarcation between the coloniser and the colonised. In his preface to Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*, Sartre explains that, given that the moral principles of the coloniser dictate that ‘none may enslave, rob or kill his fellow-man without committing a crime,’ the colonisers must establish a ‘principle that the native is not one of our fellow-men.’<sup>13</sup> Absolutely central to the process of colonisation, then, was the dehumanisation of black people.

Yet perhaps the real power of Fanon’s work lay in his explication of the psychological effects of racism on oppressed people themselves, how it became the lens through which black people view themselves. So overwhelmingly all-pervasive was the notion of white

---

<sup>9</sup> Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 45

<sup>10</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 5

<sup>11</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 4

<sup>12</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 4

<sup>13</sup> Sartre, Preface in Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, xlix - 1

superiority in colonial society, that the only response possible for black people seemed to be collusion with it:

Because no other solution is left it, the racialised social group tries to imitate the oppressor and thereby deracialise itself. The ‘inferior race’ denies itself as a different race. It shares with the ‘superior race’ the convictions, doctrines and other attitudes concerning it.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, we see here a process of self-negation within black people. Colonialism dominates not only through repressive political and economic structures, but also within the psyche of the colonised, in a way which makes them undermine their sense of worth:

The oppressor, through the inclusive and frightening character of his authority, manages to impose on the native new ways of seeing, and in particular a pejorative judgement with respect to his original forms of existing.<sup>15</sup>

It follows that if this process of colonisation is so deeply imbedded in the psyche of the oppressed, the process of decolonisation must be focused on the minds of the oppressed as much as on the outwardly manifested aspects of their oppression. For Fanon, the liberation of the oppressed from colonial rule could only be deemed complete when formerly colonised individuals have thrown off the shackles of mental subservience. Thus, he writes that

the liberation of the individual does not follow national liberation. An authentic national liberation exists only to the precise degree to which the individual has irreversibly begun his own liberation. It is not possible to take one’s distance with respect to colonialism without at the same time taking it with respect to the idea that the colonized holds of himself through the filter of colonialist culture.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Franz Fanon, ‘Decolonization and Independence’ in, Franz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution: Political Essays*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 38

<sup>15</sup> Franz Fanon, ‘‘Racism and Culture’ in Fred L. Hord and Jonathan Scott Lee (eds.), *I Am Because We are: Readings in Black Philosophy* (Amherm: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 177

<sup>16</sup> Franz Fanon, ‘Decolonization and Independence’ in, Franz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution: Political Essays*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 103

Therefore, for Fanon – crucially – ‘[a]fter the conflict there is not only the disappearance of colonialism but also the disappearance of the colonized man.’<sup>17</sup> As we have seen above, the chief distinguishing characteristic of this ‘colonized man’ is the sense of seeing oneself through the lens of the oppressor, and of thus negating one’s own worth as a human being. What we see in Fanon, then, in this call for ‘the disappearance of the colonized man’, is precisely the call to subjectivity which we are arguing for in this thesis. The person who has thrown off the shackles of colonialism is characterised by agency and freedom - the very qualities which need to be reflected in a reformulated theology of *Ubuntu*, if it is to avoid the dangers of collectivism.

### **Nkrumah’s Conscientism**

The influences of Marxism and African humanism, so clearly influential in Fanon’s work, were also abundantly in evidence in what Kwame Nkrumah called his ‘philosophical conscientism.’ Indeed, he described it as an attempt to develop a new type of socialism, which was in tune with African values and, in particular, ‘the original humanist principles underlying African society.’<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, because this form of socialism was in such continuity with traditional African anthropology, the transition to socialism could be effected without the recourse to revolution:

Revolution is ... an indispensable avenue to socialism, where the antecedent social-political structure is animated by principles which are a negation of socialism, as in a capitalist structure...[But] because of

---

<sup>17</sup> Franz Fanon, ‘On National Culture’ in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (eds.), *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 51

<sup>18</sup> Kwame Nkrumah, *Consciencism: Philosophy and Ideology for Decolonization and Development with Particular Reference to the African Revolution* (London: Heinemann, 1964),70

the continuity of communalism with socialism, in communalistic societies, socialism is not a revolutionary creed, but a restatement in contemporary terms of the principles underlying communalism.<sup>19</sup>

This ‘ideology of continuity’, as Hountondji calls it<sup>20</sup>, is a crucial characteristic of all the narratives of return under discussion here. These post-independent African ideologies, as with *Ubuntu*, saw a golden thread connecting traditional, present and future African values and culture. Indeed, according to the logic of consciencism, African revolutionaries were traditionalists in the truest sense, because they wanted to re-establish the original African social order.

Also integral to philosophical consciencism was what Nkrumah called ‘positive action.’ Positive action was consciencism expressed in political resistance – which resistance, at least in Nkrumah’s early thought, was to be legal and non-violent.<sup>21</sup> In this regard, Nkrumah was very much influenced by Gandhi. Positive action was also to overthrow the consequences of ‘negative action’, which were the actions of the colonialist designed to perpetuate the subjugation of Africans. It was a means of asserting agency and subjectivity, of rejecting the African passivity that was an integral part of the colonial mindset (as per the work of Fanon examined above):

What we all want is Self-government so that we can govern ourselves in our own country. We have the natural, legitimate and inalienable right to decide for ourselves the sort of government we want and we

---

<sup>19</sup> Nkrumah, *Conscientism*, 74

<sup>20</sup> Paulin J. Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1983),136

<sup>21</sup> See copy of a speech entitled ‘What I mean by Positive Action’ given by Kwame Nkrumah to party members and supporters in 1949, found at [http://www.democraticunderground.com/discuss/duboard.php?az=view\\_all&address=277x471](http://www.democraticunderground.com/discuss/duboard.php?az=view_all&address=277x471)

cannot be forced against our will in accepting or perpetuating anything that will be detrimental to the true interests of the people of this country and their chiefs.<sup>22</sup>

Positive action was also very much a means of political education, a means to *self-awareness*. Self-awareness meant that Africans had insight into the true nature of colonialism and the aims of the colonial enterprise, which were to ‘treat their colonies as producers of raw materials, and at the same time as the dumping-ground of the manufactured goods of foreign industrialists and foreign capitalists.’<sup>23</sup> A related feature of positive action was what Nkrumah called *self-reference*, by which he means the full assertion of African personhood at every level of society. He thought that the dialectical tension realised in the struggle of ‘positive action’ to overcome ‘negative action’ would allow African subjectivity to be fully expressed.

The pedagogical element, as well the emphasis of the agency of the oppressed in Nkrumah’s work, seems to reflect that consciencism had many areas of convergence with Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire’s notion of conscientisation. Richard Bell points out that the similarities are hardly coincidental - they were contemporaries and were both fighting forms of colonial domination.<sup>24</sup> In Freire’s highly influential *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he argues that liberatory education is as much about methodology as content. Freire argues that within the process of the political education of the oppressed, in order to bring about praxis (for the aim of authentic education is transformation), the educator must *trust* those she or he is

---

<sup>22</sup> Nkrumah, “What I mean by Positive Action”

<sup>23</sup> Nkrumah, *Consciencism*, 98

<sup>24</sup> Bell, *Understanding African Philosophy*, 150 (footnote 22)

teaching.<sup>25</sup> By this he means that any teacher must recognise that the oppressed have a capacity to reason and also have experiences from which to draw on in the process of their own education. The teacher is not a banker who simply deposits knowledge in the minds of his or her students. In this analogy (which is used by Freire himself), the student is entirely passive and the teacher ‘issues communiques’ rather than ‘communicating’.<sup>26</sup>

Freire is instead advocating a pedagogical method wherein the learner is active and engaged, in which they are subjects rather than objects:

Only insofar as learners become thinking subjects, and recognize that they are as much thinking subjects as are the teachers, is it possible for the learners to become productive subjects of the meaning or knowledge of the object. It is in this dialectical movement that teaching and learning become knowing and re-knowing. The learners gradually know what they did not yet know, and the educators re-know what they knew before.<sup>27</sup>

Both Nkrumah’s consciencism and Freire’s conscientization, then, have at their core the notion of increased understanding and awareness, but also, crucially, of *agency*. Within this approach, the oppressed acting as Subject is integral to liberation. This emphasis on the agency of the oppressed also encompasses the existential and psychological elements of liberation – because they are now no longer the passive objects within a colonialist paradigm, Africans (or, in Freire’s case, the oppressed peoples of South America) are able to view themselves as strong and self-reliant.

---

<sup>25</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: The Seabury Press, 1968), 66

<sup>26</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 72

<sup>27</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 90

Yet this notion of agency points to a contradiction which is at the heart of African humanism – that it is premised on a notion of African homogeneity, yet simultaneously seeks to uphold the freedom of the human subject. If human agency and the freedom of the subject are to be respected in any society, it would seem to follow that pluralism and diversity would be hallmarks of that society. Yet, for Nkrumah, it is as if pluralism was itself the cause of what he saw as being the African crisis. Nkrumah believed that Africa was suffering from a ‘malignant schizophrenia’,<sup>28</sup> because it had lost its identity and was buffeted by the Euro-Christian influences. This schizophrenia could only be cured if there was a return to the unified African consciousness, which had existed in pre-colonial times. As Hountondji points out, this is a dangerously simplistic analysis: pre-colonial Africa, like any other society in the world, had its competing ideologies. Instead, in seeking to impose ‘an artificial unity upon what is really irreducibly diverse,’<sup>29</sup> there was an ultimately fruitless search for a ‘collective African personality’ or ‘*the African philosophy*.’<sup>30</sup>

As the plurality, social cleavages and contradictions of *pre-colonial* Africa rendered any attempt to enforce homogeneity problematic, so too with *neo-colonial* Africa. Nkrumah himself had to acknowledge that the reality of neo-colonialism meant that he had to reformulate his ideology of continuity. As we have noted, Nkrumah believed that there was continuity between traditional African culture and the value system which was to be re-established in post-colonial Africa. However, in an author’s note to the 1970 edition of *Consciencism*, Nkrumah writes:

---

<sup>28</sup> Nkrumah, *Consciencism*, 78

<sup>29</sup> Hountodji, *African Philosophy*, 148

<sup>30</sup> Bell, *Understanding African Philosophy*, 43

Since the publication of the first edition of *Consciencism* in 1964, the African Revolution has entered a decisively new phase of... armed struggle. In every part of our continent, African revolutionaries are either preparing for armed struggle, or actively engaged in military operations against the forces of reaction and counter-revolution ... The succession of military coups which in recent years have taken place in Africa, have exposed the close links between the interests of neo-colonialism and the indigenous bourgeoisie. These coups have brought into sharp relief the nature and extent of the class struggle in Africa.<sup>31</sup>

This represents a significant retreat from Nkrumah's earlier position in an important way – he is now accepting the reality of an Africa, which, far from being homogeneous, is profoundly divided along class lines. To be sure, he apportions the blame for these divisions to the forces of neo-colonialism, but he has had to recognise that his previous conception of African societies had been romanticised, and that a simple, and indeed peaceful, reversion to a supposedly idyllic pre-colonial Africa would not be possible. In *consciencism*, then, we have a political philosophy which emphasised continuity between African tradition and communitarian ideals, and which also placed a high premium of self-reliance and the agency of the oppressed; but it was not easily adapted when it was confronted by the *realpolitik* of a fragmented postcolonial Africa. There is no doubt that a similar challenge faces *Ubuntu*, which might be said to be premised on a precolonial Africa which no longer exists. Thus, the question of whether a theology of *Ubuntu* is relevant to a plural and modern Africa is one that we shall need to address.

## Senhor's Negritude

---

<sup>31</sup> 'Author's Note' in Kwame Nkrumah, *Consciencism: Philosophy and Ideology for Decolonization*, 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition (London: Heinemann, 1970), iv

Senghor's account of African values was also influenced by Marxism – but he was very clear about how African socialism was linked with, but also differed from, the Marxist form of socialism. In particular, Senghor critiqued the rigid materialism at the heart of Marxist theory, which he saw as being at odds with the *spiritual* humanism which he understood to be the basis of African socialism. He was clear that a radical restructuring of the means of production in any given society did not in itself constitute human liberation. The material dialectic was reductionist and gave no account of the spiritual dimension of human existence – and therefore Marxism, as indeed with other Western worldviews, could not offer a vision of authentically human community:

The satisfaction of the spiritual needs which transcend our natural needs has to be achieved. This has not happened in any European or American form of civilization; neither in the west nor the east. For this reason we are forced to seek our own original mode, a Negro-African mode...paying special attention to...economic democracy and spiritual freedom...This is a community-based society, *communal*, not collectivist.<sup>32</sup>

This distinction between communitarianism - or 'communalism' in his terms - and collectivism, is integral to Senghor's worldview and is very much at the heart of this thesis. 'Communitarianism' suggests a vision of society where, although certain personal freedoms may be curtailed for the good of the community, individual personhood still flourishes in the context of, and indeed *because of*, that community. 'Collectivism' suggests a constrictive society wherein personal freedom is suppressed and individuals are silenced for the sake of the community – or more accurately, for the sake of a hierarchical elite within that community. Our contention is that all forms of communitarianism, including *Ubuntu*, are

---

<sup>32</sup> Leopold Senghor, 'Negritude and African Humanism' in P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J. Roux (eds.), *The African Philosophy Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 442

susceptible to this collectivist distortion. However Senghor is here making the significant point that recognising the spiritual nature of the human being is a significant element in transcending collectivism. This is because such acknowledgement of a person's spiritual nature - which could be expressed in terms of Christian theology as the recognition of the *imago dei* - means that that person cannot be used instrumentally as a means to a collectively defined end.

Without such a moderating and restraining influence, the collectivist distortion of communitarianism can lead to the same problems as are inherent within utilitarian ethical theory. The notion of 'the good of the community' could very easily become a legitimising ideological tool – a constructed collective 'ideal' might be used to justify all manner of excesses and abuses. Indeed, this is very much the pattern of totalitarian regimes. The repression of those agitators who deviate from the state's collectivist vision, is deemed to be legitimate - indeed necessary - precisely because they threaten harmony and coherence of society. Infamously, in the case of the South African apartheid government, the minister responsible for the suppression of political opposition had the portfolio of 'Law and Order' – a perfect example of the pretence of the pursuit of social harmony being used as a veil for brutal oppression. Quite clearly, the notion of 'the good of the community' can be abused if not moderated by external moral constraints.

The spiritual element within Senghor's thinking also reflected the influence of Teilhard de Chardin's mystical evolutionary humanism. In particular, he was attracted to de Chardin's cosmic Christ who seemed to sanctify all of created matter:

Christ invests himself organically with the very majesty of his creation. And it is in no way metaphorical to say that man finds himself capable of experiencing and discovering his God in the whole length, breadth and depth of the world in movement.<sup>33</sup>

For Senghor, this sense of spiritual energy within the created world, and the concomitant sense of the holiness of the matter which he saw in de Chardin's writings, echoed what he saw as the 'Negro-African' view.<sup>34</sup> The rejection of dualism – both cosmic and within the human person – and the intimate connection between the human being and the natural world are significant elements in the development of African humanism.

Negritude also had significant cultural and aesthetic elements. Senghor argued for a *particular* sense of African racial and cultural consciousness, which is brought out in this account of his time in Paris:

It was 1936...in the middle of the Latin Quarter in Paris. We had no lack of arguments with which to attract our fellow Africans and Negroes of the Diaspora to the Renaissance of Black Culture. There were jazz, blues and dance, but above all there was Negro art, the expressive force of which had struck Picasso and artists from the Paris School...like an illumination.<sup>35</sup>

This is what Senghor refers to as the 'Negro-African aesthetic.' He envisages Negritude as an artistic and poetic expression of black identity, a spiritual energy, a life force based on passion and intuition, in contrast to the cold, sterile rationalism which characterised Western culture.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper Collins, 1975), 297

<sup>34</sup> Senghor, 'Negritude and African Humanism', 446

<sup>35</sup> Leopold Senghor, 'The Revolution of 1889 and Leo Frobenius' in Isaac James Mowoe and Richard Bjornson (eds) and Bjornson (trans), *Africa and the West: The Legacies of Empire* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 77

<sup>36</sup> See Bell's discussion of this in *Understanding African Philosophy*, 25-26

This notion of a particular black cultural expression, which emerges from black experience, is certainly prominent too in James Cone's work:

The power of black experience cannot be overestimated...It is the sound of James Brown singing, 'I'm Black and I'm Proud' and Aretha Franklin demanding 'respect.' The black experience is catching the spirit of blackness and loving it...Whites do not understand it; they can only catch glimpses of it in sociological reports and historical studies. The black experience is only possible for black persons.<sup>37</sup>

This cultural-aesthetic element of Senghor's Negritude and Cone's Black Consciousness clearly speaks powerfully to black people within the context of racism. It gave content to the notion of black self-worth and dignity and validated black cultural expressions in a white world, which deemed them to be inferior.

However, the problem for negritude, as with Black Consciousness, is that it seemed to rest on essentialist notions of race and culture, and thus unwittingly replicated the very categories of discrimination which it sought to transcend. To construct a dichotomy between the white western worldview as based on rationalism and that of the black African as based on creative passion ('soul' in colloquial parlance), runs the danger of treating black culture as homogenous and attributing to it stereotypical ideas about blackness. Wole Soyinka has criticised Negritude for precisely this reason – that it gave Africans such a radically different identity from Europeans that it played into the hands of those who sought to portray Africans as being characterised by a savage and barbaric otherness:

In attempting to achieve [its] laudable goal, Negritude proceeded along the route of over-simplification...Its reference points took far too much colouring from European ideas even while its Messiahs pronounced themselves fanatically African<sup>38</sup>...Negritude trapped itself in what was primarily

---

<sup>37</sup> James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1990), 25

<sup>38</sup> Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge University Press, 1976), 126-1,27

a defensive role, even though its accent was strident, its syntax hyperbolic and its strategy aggressive. It accepted one of the most commonplace blasphemies of racism, that the black man has nothing between his ears<sup>39</sup>...

Thus, we see a dilemma which is central to this thesis: that philosophies and traditional value systems which lay claim to *distinctively* African origins can give rise to reductionist and stereotyped views of Africa. To retain Senghor's emphasis on the dangers of collectivism, and to assimilate the spiritual humanism which characterised Negritude into our theology of *Ubuntu*, without giving way to a simplistic African essentialism – this is a significant part of the challenge which lies ahead in this study.

### **Nyerere's *Ujamaa***

Gade also cites Julius Nyerere's notion of *ujamaa* as an African narrative of return, which has many parallels with *Ubuntu*.<sup>40</sup> Nyerere argued that the primary task for a post-independence Africa was Africanisation. He maintained that in Tanzania this should take the form of a return to *ujamaa*, which he described as a traditional form of African socialism. In similar vein to Nkrumah's early thought, Nyerere's African socialism differed fundamentally from its European counterpart in its attitude to class war.<sup>41</sup> According to Nyerere, European socialism emerged out of agrarian and industrial revolutions, which created landed classes and modern capitalism on the one hand, and the landless classes and industrial proletariat on the other. Thus, at the very core of European socialism, was the notion of class conflict;

---

<sup>39</sup> Soyinka, *Myth*, 129

<sup>40</sup> Gade, 'Written Discourses on *Ubuntu*' 305f

<sup>41</sup> Gade, 'Written Discourses on *Ubuntu*' 305-306

furthermore, says Nyerere, the conflict was ideologically legitimised as being necessary to the ultimate goal of revolution.

In contrast, African socialism did not view one class of human beings as the enemy, but rather regarded all human beings as being part of an extended family. Nyerere went on to explain,

*'Ujamaa'*, then, or 'familyhood' describes our socialism... It is opposed to capitalism, which seeks to build a happy society on the basis of the exploitation of man by man; and it is equally opposed to the doctrinaire socialism which seeks to build its happy society on the basis of a philosophy of inevitable conflict between man and man. We, in Africa, have no more need of being 'converted' than we have of being 'taught' democracy. Both are rooted in our past – in the traditional society which produced us.<sup>42</sup>

Thus, Nyerere sought to return to the traditional African society in which he believed the values of 'familyhood' were embodied – this was the thrust of the Arusha Declaration in 1967. Nyerere argued that the cleavages within colonial societies had been introduced by capitalism and had not existed in traditional Africa. For example, one of the primary divisions in capitalist society - that of 'employer' and 'employee' - were based on notions which, according to Nyerere, reflected a 'capitalist attitude of mind which was introduced to Africa with the coming of colonialism and is totally foreign to our way of thinking.'<sup>43</sup> According to Nyerere, traditional African society had never been known to have people aspiring to accumulate capital and personal wealth through the exploitation of others. These

---

<sup>42</sup> Julius Nyerere, 'Ujamaa – The Basis of African Socialism' in Free Lee Hord and Jonathan Scott Lee (eds) *I Am Because We Are: Readings in Black Philosophy* (University of Massachusetts, 1995), 72

<sup>43</sup> Julius Kambarage Nyerere, *Ujamaa: Essays on Socialism* (Oxford University Press, 1968), 6

tendencies had been introduced to Africa by foreigners, and now needed to be purged from postcolonial Africa through a process of re-education.<sup>44</sup>

Beyond education, Nyerere believed that the country had to revert to traditional communal living arrangements – and thus began his programme of establishing *ujamaa* villages.

*Ujamaa* villages were to be based on three basic principles<sup>45</sup>: first, there was to be ‘mutual involvement in one another’, which spoke of interdependence and respect, not only between family members, but *all* members of the community. Second, there was to be no form of individualism – both in terms of production and property. One person’s possessions could not become disproportionate to those of another. Third, the burden of work was to be spread evenly and everyone had a duty to share in the work.

Clearly, there is much which is laudable in Nyerere’s vision of a humane and just society, and indeed there is much in it which converges with *Ubuntu*. However, ultimately, his programme of *ujamaa* villages was to prove a failure – and the reasons for this failure are also instructive with respect to our analysis of *Ubuntu*. After Nyerere outlined his plans in the Arusha Declaration in 1967, he thought he would be able to persuade the rural population of the benefits of ‘villagization’ – but in fact many people were resistant and, by the end of the 1960s, there were only approximately eight hundred collective settlements. The result was that the 1970s saw rural people being coerced into moving into the villages – which was clearly at odds with Nyerere’s belief that *ujamaa* was entirely in continuity with traditional

---

<sup>44</sup> See Kjell Havnevik, ‘A Historical Framework for Analysing Current Tanzanian Transitions’ in Havnevik and Aida C. Isinika (eds), *Tanzania in Transition: Nyerere to Mkapa* (Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota Publishers Ltd, 2010), 34

<sup>45</sup> See Nyerere, *Ujamaa*, 107

African society (there are echoes here of Senghor). Tanzania's productivity fell dramatically and by the time he stepped down from the presidency in 1985, Nyerere had to concede that the *ujamaa* had failed, although he retained his socialist convictions.<sup>46</sup>

A significant part of the problem was Nyerere's romanticised view of pre-colonial African society. While *ujamaa* certainly had some resonance for rural Tanzanians, critics have noted that traditionally it was a principle practised within each household.<sup>47</sup> For broader mutual responsibilities *between* households, the term *ujima* was used – but this referred only to help given at seasonal times (e.g. planting or harvesting) or during an emergency.<sup>48</sup> *Ujima* certainly represented mutual aid, and was used to ensure the right of subsistence to all members of the community – but this was quite some distance away for the formal and structured programme of communal ownership and cooperation required by *ujamaa*.

*Ujamaa* thus reveals significant weaknesses which are pertinent to any form of African communitarianism, including *Ubuntu*. The presentation of an idealised Africa is not only highly problematic in epistemological terms, but it also becomes a legitimising ideology for coercive political practice and the suppression of dissenting voices. If one particular social vision is elevated as being pure, untainted and homogenous, by definition any opposition to it is rendered morally illegitimate. This is seen even in debates and discourses in Africa today wherein opposition voices are labelled as being 'un-African' (see, for example, the way those

---

<sup>46</sup> See Simeon Mesaki and Mrisho Malipula, 'Julius Nyerere's influence and legacy: From proponent of Familyhood to a candidate for sainthood' in *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, Vol 3(3), March 2011, 95

<sup>47</sup> See for example Goran Hyden's discussion, *Beyond Ujamaa in Tanzania: Underdevelopment and an Uncaptured Peasantry* (University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1980), 99

<sup>48</sup> Hyden, *Beyond Ujamaa*, 99

supporting gay rights have been labelled as such in recent times in countries such as Uganda and Zimbabwe). The notion of the idealised and homogenous Africa thus can serve to suppress plurality and divergent expressions of African identity.

Many of these problems also stem from the conception – very much at the heart of all the African humanisms we have looked at here – that conflict and community are essentially contradictory notions. Yet fundamentally constituent of liberative theologies and progressive political philosophies is an understanding that any society contains cleavages and reactionary elements, which must be overcome if the goal of freedom is to be attained. The very notion of struggle necessarily implies conflict. The authentic community is one that emerges out of a constructive process of conflict. Indeed the absence of conflict, rather than being an expression of harmony, can often reflect the suppression of difference and dissent - which was certainly the case in Nyerere's Tanzania. It follows that one of the key challenges facing a theology of *Ubuntu* for today is that of welcoming and indeed valuing constructive dissent, as an expression of commitment to, rather than betrayal of, the community.

### ***Ubuntu* and Ethnophilosophy**

Up to this point, we have concentrated on the attempt to express the essential Africa in terms of significant political ideologies. Our attention turns now to the very much related search for a *uniquely* African philosophy. Leonhard Praeg has incisively analysed the attempt of African philosophy to redefine or *re-present* (to use his term) Africa and to articulate an

autonomous African voice in the post-colonial age.<sup>49</sup> Praeg's analysis begins with the invention of the African subject<sup>50</sup>, by missionaries and colonialists, in terms of binary oppositions such as savage v civilised, heathen v Christian, prelogical v logical, oral v written, etc. (Although it should be noted that this narrative about Africa is as old as western civilisation itself: Herodotus, writing in *Histories*, relates a story wherein five Nasamonians,

‘enterprising youths of the highest rank’ – were off exploring southern Libya. While there they found some fruit trees and started helping themselves. Then, several ‘men of small stature, all of them skilled in magic’, seized and captured them, taking them for mysterious and wicked magic-dwarf purposes.<sup>51</sup>

The inference is clear – there was a dangerous, threatening, ‘otherness’ about Africa, which contrasted with the norms of Greek civilisation).

Perhaps the most famous example of this within the context of modern philosophy was Placide Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy*.<sup>52</sup> While it is clear Tempels was trying to expose the racism of thinkers such as Lucien Levy-Bruhl and wanted to demonstrate that the ‘Bantu’ had a distinct and coherent philosophy of their own, in fact his work powerfully reinforced the notion of African ‘otherness’. Based on his experiences with the Luba in the Belgian Congo, he ascribed to African people a collective philosophy based on the notion of ‘vital force’:

I believe that we should most faithfully render Bantu thought in the European language by saying that the Bantu speak, act, live as if, for them, beings are forces. Force is not for them an adventitious

---

<sup>49</sup> Leonhard Praeg, *African Philosophy and the Quest for Autonomy: A Philosophical Investigation* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001)

<sup>50</sup> Praeg, *African Philosophy*, 16ff

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in Robert Bates, ‘Africa Through Western Eyes: The World's Dark Continent or Capitalism's Shining Light?’, *Think Africa Press*, available at <http://thinkafricapress.com/culture/africa-through-western-eyes-worlds-dark-continent-or-capitalisms-shining-light> 12 October 2012

<sup>52</sup> Placide Tempels, *La Philosophie bantoue*, translated by A. Rubbens (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1959)

accidental reality. Force is even more than a necessary attribute of beings: Force is the nature of being, force is being, being is force.<sup>53</sup>

Tempels thus portrays Bantu philosophy as being dominated by a traditional spiritual worldview, suffused with ideas of magic and animism. The similarities between the notions of spiritual energy which characterised Senghor's Negritude (influenced by de Chardin) and Tempels' 'vital force' are readily apparent – and both were challenged on similar grounds. Tempels was criticised for making sweeping generalisations about all African people, and for the fact that his obsession with finding the African difference in terms of 'force' meant that he failed to acknowledge African reason.<sup>54</sup> A somewhat infamous example of his dismissal of African rationality, and indeed of his paternalism, is the way in which he qualifies his project:

We do not claim, of course, that the Bantu are capable of formulating a philosophical treatise, complete with adequate vocabulary. It is our job to proceed to such systematic development. It is we who will be able to tell them, in precise terms, what their inmost concept of being is.<sup>55</sup>

Tempels' work expresses the contradiction inherent in ethnophilosophy (of which he is one of the chief proponents), namely that while it seeks to reassert the value and autonomy of Africans and African thought, it reinforces the stereotypes and dualisms upon which African 'othering' has been constructed. In the words of Karp and Masolo, ethnophilosophy

'is a critical discourse that defines itself in opposition to colonialism, yet it begins by accepting the colonial categories of 'traditional' and 'modern'.<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> Tempels, *La Philosophie bantoue*, 35

<sup>54</sup> See Bernard Matolino, 'Tempels' Philosophical Racialism' in *South African Journal of Philosophy* 2011, 30(3), 330-342

<sup>55</sup> Tempels, *La Philosophie bantoue*, 36

<sup>56</sup> Ivan Karp and D. A. Masolo, 'Introduction: African Philosophy as Cultural Inquiry' in Karp and Masolo (eds), *African Philosophy as Cultural Inquiry* (Indiana University Press, 2000), 6

Thus, this contradiction is not simply present in western ‘disfigurements’ of Africa, but is present in the work of African intellectuals influenced by ethnophilosophy. They have, ironically, perpetuated the notion of the African as ‘other’. So, say Karp and Masolo, ostensibly ethnophilosophy seems to be vigorously anti-colonial, yet

it still accepts the basic categories in terms of which colonial culture defines other peoples and cultures. It attempts to revalorize them instead of seeking to criticize the grounds out of which colonial discourse emerges...<sup>57</sup>

This sense of irony is further reinforced when it becomes clear that it is, in any event, epistemologically impossible to recover the essential Africa to which ethnophilosophy is appealing – as we have already seen in our analysis of Nkrumah, Senghor and Nyerere.

This epistemological problem is distilled by Praeg when he categorises ethnophilosophy, as well as African philosophy more broadly, in terms of three closely-related functions: intervention, re-invention and invention.<sup>58</sup> These philosophies sought to make a decisive *intervention* in the discourse on Africa, of which *re-invention* (based on a narrative of oppression and liberation) was the vital constituent part. The final end of these other functions is the *invention* of a new order and of re-established autonomy.<sup>59</sup> Praeg’s point is that these processes involve so much construction and deconstruction that there is no hope of defining what is autonomously and essentially African – what he calls ‘undecidability’:

If we admit, as I think we should, to the fundamental undecidability of the debate on African philosophy then we admit, too, that there is no answer. That we have been deluded by the *re-* and the *de-* into thinking that there is a final liberation at which we will know *what it is*, the point at which,

---

<sup>57</sup> Karp and Masolo, ‘African Philosophy’, 6

<sup>58</sup> Praeg, *African Philosophy*, 135

<sup>59</sup> Praeg, *African Philosophy*, 135

finally, knowledge about Africa will once again coincide with itself; a point at which it will be possible to enter 'the beyond.'<sup>60</sup>

In order to transcend this issue of 'undecidability', Praeg seeks to reframe the question. For him the crucial issue is not one of epistemology, but rather of ethics. He argues that the fundamental question is not whether the autonomy of African philosophy is possible, but rather what it is that African philosophy *attests* to. He says:

This ethical dimension, this respect for the *other* demands that in addition to the transcendental question 'What is African philosophy?' we also ask the ethical question 'Where is African philosophy?', 'Where do we situate it?', and 'why do we ask the question 'What is African philosophy?'.<sup>61</sup>

Praeg's intervention is particularly helpful because it puts the epistemological question firmly into perspective. Not only are our attempts to answer this question plagued by the problem of 'undecidability', but moral imperatives lead us to conclude that it is not even the correct question to ask. The crucial question is not whether *Ubuntu* is a unique expression of traditional African values, but whether it contributes to the struggle for freedom and justice.

In Enslin and Hortshemke's critique of *Ubuntu*, they question the notion of the supposed 'uniqueness' of *Ubuntu*. *Ubuntu*, they argue, stands alongside western humanist traditions which have also emphasised caring, compassion and mutuality. They approvingly quote Mamphela Ramphele:

---

<sup>60</sup> Praeg, *African Philosophy*, 213

<sup>61</sup> Praeg, *African Philosophy*, 213

*Ubuntu* as a philosophical approach to social relationships must stand alongside other approaches and be judged on the value it can add to better human relations in our complex society... The refusal to acknowledge the similarity between *Ubuntu* and other humanistic philosophical approaches is in part a reflection of the parochialism of South Africa and a refusal to learn from others.<sup>62</sup>

Enslin and Hortshemke are certainly correct to point out the fallacy of *Ubuntu*'s uniqueness. For one thing, it is an argument premised on an entirely simplistic view of western thought about personhood. This is seen in the tendency within Black and African theologies and philosophies to set up a Cartesian straw man, one which stands wholly in contradiction to African views, upon which they posit their critique of western ideas. Even if one concedes that the Plato-Descartes individualist axis has been dominant in western thinking about the human being, one must acknowledge there are many other philosophical and theological strands which are far more communitarian in orientation – e.g. Aristotle's notion of friendship, Virtue Ethics, Marxism, relational Trinitarian theology, to name but a few. Any broader study of western canon, then, would lead one to the conclusion that there are large areas of convergence between *Ubuntu* and many western thinkers.

Enslin and Horsthemke go on to point to what they see as a further contradiction within the school of thought which holds that *Ubuntu* provides a distinctive underpinning for South African communal life: the South African constitution itself bears all the hallmarks of a western liberal democracy. Certainly, this is evident in its emphasis on the separation of the powers between legislature, executive and judiciary, as well as the fact that the rule of law, and the fact that the Constitution itself is upheld by a Constitutional Court. In addition, South

---

<sup>62</sup> Mamphela Ramphele, '*Ubuntu* doesn't mean a friendly greeting to your gardener. What it does mean is another question...' in (South African) *Sunday Independent*, 24 September 1994, 15 quoted in Penny Enslin and Kai Horsthemke, 'Can Ubuntu Provide a Model for Citizenship Education in African Democracies?' in *Comparative Education*, Vol. 40, no.4, Nov. 2004, 548

Africa's Constitution is widely admired for protecting a range of rights, including privacy, freedom of religion, belief and opinion, expression, assembly and association, as well as freedom and security of the person, children's rights and the right to basic education. It confers a universal adult franchise on adults, who are also protected by it against violations of their rights by the state.<sup>63</sup> Insofar as these elements of the Constitution uphold the dignity of the human being and protect personal and communal freedoms, they must surely be said to be expressing *Ubuntu* – but they are certainly not uniquely African.

### ***Ubuntu* and 'The Invention of Africa'**

Our review of the attempts to locate a uniquely African philosophy brings to mind Mudimbe's influential analysis of the discourses about Africa, *The Invention of Africa*.<sup>64</sup> Rather than speaking about African knowledge or African philosophy, Mudimbe uses the word *gnosis*, which, while deriving from the ancient Greek *gnosko*, meaning 'to know', also carries with it the connotations of a higher and esoteric knowledge.<sup>65</sup> Thus, *gnosis* conveys the sense in which knowledge about Africa is not easily accessible, but instead is rather a form of knowledge which is 'strictly under the control of specific procedures for its use as well as its transmission'.<sup>66</sup> For Mudimbe, then, *gnosis* expresses the way in which discourse about Africa has been subject to Foucauldian processes of mystification – and it is these processes which he critically scrutinises.

---

<sup>63</sup> Enslin and Horsthemke, 'Can Ubuntu Provide a Model for Citizenship Education?', 552

<sup>64</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988).

<sup>65</sup> Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, ix

<sup>66</sup> Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, ix

Integral to this European discourse about Africa was the notion of alterity; Mudimbe, in the words of Ali A. Mazrui is a ‘whistle-blower against the ideology of Otherness’.<sup>67</sup> Mudimbe uses the example of European artistic depictions of Africa which demonstrate that, in Western thought and imagination, it represented not just alterity, but alterity as a negative category of the Same.<sup>68</sup> In other words, these stereotypes of alterity also reinforced the normative European understanding of the human being. Accentuating the abnormality of the African served to confirm that European standards and values were the ideal. Commenting on the *African Allegory* within Cesare Ripa’s culturally significant *Iconologia*, which features powerful symbols of otherness – a dark, horned woman and a grotesque animal with a human face surrounded by serpents and strange birds – Mudimbe says:

The African has become not only the Other who is everyone else except me, but rather the key which, in its abnormal differences, specifies the identity of the Same.<sup>69</sup>

Mudimbe also points to Andreas Schluter’s painting *Africa* (1700) as an instance of the depiction of Africa as exotic, savage and incomprehensible. The work centres on the complex relation between a nude black woman and a very threatening lion, and thus plays on notions of base desire and danger which would have been at heart of European stereotypes of Africa at the time. Mudimbe also traces this narrative of Otherness back to Herodotus but it is in the Enlightenment that we see fully crystallized the

essential paradigm of the European invention of Africa: Us/Them. Often [it expresses] the belief that the African is a negation of all human experience, or at least is an exemplary exception in terms of evolution.<sup>70</sup>

---

<sup>67</sup> Ali A. Mazrui ‘The Re-invention of Africa: Edward Said, V. Y. Mudimbe and beyond’ in *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 36, no3, Autumn 2005, 69

<sup>68</sup> Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, 12

<sup>69</sup> Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, 12

<sup>70</sup> Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, 71

In Enlightenment philosophers in particular we see this paradigm expounded through a more detailed and specific analysis of African savagery. Thus, Mudimbe cites the examples of Voltaire's explanation of human inequality premised on a discussion of the inequality of trees in the forest and the way in which an elaborate diachronic hierarchy of cultures emerges from Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* and his *The Origin of Language*. Crucially, however, as with Praeg, it is not only the Enlightenment discourse about Africa which is the object of Mudimbe's criticism – he is also arguing that Africanists are themselves guilty of perpetuating the Enlightenment model of African alterity because of their commitment to essentialist notions of Africa. Mudimbe argues that the idea of 'Africa' is an invention of Western epistemology, and that therefore any attempt to utilise it as a category will unwittingly reproduce the paradigm of alterity that it is seeking to critique. For Mudimbe, in their promotion and affirmation of African philosophy, the Africanists, and in particular the ethnophilosophers, are articulating an argument which

in its demonstration, runs parallel to primitivism theories on African backwardness and savagery. If there is a dividing line between the two [i.e. Africanism and primitivism], it is a blurred one and established primarily as signifier of sympathy or antipathy.<sup>71</sup>

In *In My Father's House*<sup>72</sup>, Kwame Anthony Appiah concurs with Mudimbe's rejection of African essentialism, but seeks to refine the argument in significant ways. Appiah's position is that while the notion of African identity is fluid and is constructed rather than essential (on which points he agrees with Mudimbe), it can still be utilised as a constructive existentialist response to demands of specific socio-historical contexts (on which point he differs from

---

<sup>71</sup> Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, 151

<sup>72</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1992)

Mudimbe). Appiah argues that the ‘political meanings of identities are historically and geographically relative.’<sup>73</sup> Thus while a narrowly racialised conception of one’s identity, as in apartheid South Africa, is clearly retrogressive,

constructing identities *across* states – and especially in the Third-World – which allows African-Americans, Afro-Caribbeans and Afro-Latins to ally with continental Africans, drawing on the cultural resources of the black Atlantic world, may well serve useful purposes.<sup>74</sup>

Appiah is thus saying that if it is stripped of essentialist rigidity, we can retain a notion of African identity which is sufficiently flexible and malleable to be adopted, adapted or deconstructed as the context demands:

African solidarity can surely be a vital and enabling rallying cry; but in this world of genders, ethnicities and classes, of families, religions and nations, it is as well to remember that sometimes Africa is not the banner we need.<sup>75</sup>

At the same time, there are some scholars who contend that there remains a moral problem even with this more flexible understanding of group identity. If a person has any strong sense of group identity, is there not a danger that that such an identity will override the moral duty to do the right thing? Nussbaum, for example, argues that in the case of the United States patriotism is incompatible with cosmopolitanism, and that one must forego national identity to have a real commitment to justice and human rights of *all* people.<sup>76</sup> Elsewhere she critiques the version of moral relativism which suggests that morality is cultural – her argument that we cannot accept female genital mutilation (as one example) as being

---

<sup>73</sup> Appiah, *In My Father’s House*, 180

<sup>74</sup> Appiah, *In My Father’s House*, 180

<sup>75</sup> Appiah, *In My Father’s House*, 180

<sup>76</sup> See Martha C. Nussbaum ‘Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism’ in Joshua Coehn (ed.), *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism*, Martha C. Nussbaum with Respondents (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996)

acceptable because some people might view it as an expression of their culture, is indeed a very powerful one.<sup>77</sup> The FGM issue certainly highlights that the potential conflict between group identity and justice.

Clearly, Nussbaum's fears are both pertinent and well-grounded. However, Masolo, in expressing his agreement with Appiah, suggests a helpful way of resolving the dilemma posed by Nussbaum.<sup>78</sup> Masolo suggests that Nussbaum's concerns relate primarily to an *ontological* understanding of community. Masolo suggests that once

we think of ourselves as ontologically committed, there is little doubt that our canons of moral judgment and aspirations will put what we identify as our primary group interests above the interests of all others, regardless of the reason. In fact, just being in our group's interests is often regarded as enough reason for them.<sup>79</sup>

However, says Masolo, if we regard group identity as how we express our humanity, *but do not regard that identity as being ontologically determined*, then we are able to keep our social self-identity 'separate from our canons of moral thinking.'<sup>80</sup> Masolo appears to be saying that while group identity can be a powerful and creative expression of our humanity, we must not allow ourselves fall prey to the idea that it constitutes the *essence* of our humanity – because that is when it clouds our moral vision.<sup>81</sup>

---

<sup>77</sup> See Martha C. Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, (Oxford University Press, 1999) 118-129

<sup>78</sup> See D.A. Masolo 'Western and African Communitarianism' in Kwasi Wiredu (ed), *A Companion to African Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 496

<sup>79</sup> Masolo 'Communitarianism', 496

<sup>80</sup> Masolo 'Communitarianism', 496

<sup>81</sup> There are clear parallels here between Masolo's thought and Spivak's notion, highly influential in postcolonial thought, of 'strategic essentialism.' Spivak argues that pragmatically, it is important for political mobilisation of oppressed and minority groups to temporarily essentialise their identities. See for example Stephen Morton, *Gayatri Spivak: Ethics, Subalternity and the Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 126ff

Our analysis of the work of Gade, Praeg, Mudimbe and Appiah leads us to the conclusion that *Ubuntu*, as a narrative of return, embodies a vision of African values based on a process of reconstruction and reinvention. It is neither epistemologically possible nor politically desirable to lay claim to an essential, untainted and unique African narrative. On the contrary, understanding it as a *constructed* rather than *essential* African value enables us to utilise it as a means by which to lay the foundations for a compassionate and humane society, but still subject it to the necessary critical gaze and thus prevent it from becoming an oppressive metanarrative.

### **The Narrative of Return within Religious and Theological Discourse**

African narratives of return demonstrate great similarities with religious mythologies which associate the Sacred with the beginning of time. In Mircea Eliade's influential work, *The Myth of Eternal Return*,<sup>82</sup> he explores the deep connection between the Sacred and what he terms 'the mythical age'. For, 'traditional man' (as Eliade terms it), the Sacred established the natural order at the beginning of time, during the time recorded in myth (an example of which would be the creation story in Genesis). Eliade thus argues that, within traditional societies, the Sacred is inextricably bound up with the beginning of time. In myth and ritual, human beings seek to reconnect themselves with the beginning of time, because this is how they are able to perceive value and purpose within their lives.

---

<sup>82</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of Eternal Return: Cosmos and History* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005)

The power of the ritual lies in its capacity to evoke what Eliade calls ‘archetypes’, which is his word for the mythical models established by the Sacred. He argues that ontology within traditional societies rest on the idea that

an object or an act only becomes real insofar as it imitates or repeats an archetype. Thus reality is acquired solely through repetition or participation; everything which lacks an exemplary model is ‘meaningless’, i.e. it lacks reality.<sup>83</sup>

The essence of religious ritual is thus not simply to commemorate sacred events, but to *participate* in them, to be able to enter into those events in the present day. Through ritual re-enactment, through imitating the exemplary foundational acts of gods or mythical heroes, people in archaic societies are able to re-enter Sacred Time.<sup>84</sup> For Eliade, it is this deep and profound yearning for the mythical time which most obviously distinguishes traditional societies:

In studying these traditional societies, one characteristic has especially struck us: it is their revolt against concrete, historical time, their nostalgia for a periodical return to the mythical time of the beginning of things, to the ‘Great Time’. The meaning and function of what we have called ‘archetypes and repetition’ disclosed themselves to us only after we had perceived these societies’ will to refuse concrete time, their hostility toward every type of autonomous history, that is history not regulated by stereotypes.<sup>85</sup>

Although he was primarily a historian of religion, Eliade’s thinking was undoubtedly shaped by strong theological convictions.<sup>86</sup> For example, his conception of the origins of religion is deeply influenced by his understanding of The Fall. The religious impulse is essentially one

---

<sup>83</sup> Eliade, *The Myth of Eternal Return*, 34

<sup>84</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, trans Philip Mairet (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 23

<sup>85</sup> Eliade, *The Myth of Eternal Return*, xxiii

<sup>86</sup> See Carl Olson, ‘Theology of Nostalgia: Reflections on the Theological Aspects of Eliade’s Work’ in *Numen*, Vol. 36, Fasc. 1 (June, 1989), 98-112

driven by the need to recover the sense of the holy and of meaning which has been lost through human sin:<sup>87</sup>

Religion is indeed the result of “the fall,” “the forgetting,” the loss of the state of primordial perfection.

In paradise, Adam knew nothing of religious experience, nor of theology, that is, the doctrine of God.

Before “sin,” there was no religion.<sup>88</sup>

Eliade’s understanding of religion as a means of recovering that which has been lost has a deep resonance with the notion of *anamnesis* – the active remembrance and making present of key primordial events which represent God’s intervention in history, such as Creation, the Exodus and the Incarnation – which is so central to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Eucharistic theology in particular rests on the notion of the participatory remembrance of the defining events of faith history – the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Through the liturgy of the Eucharist, salvation history is made present for Christians:

If the memory of God within Judaism is about making the past active within the present and if human memory is about being faithful to the solidarity that exists between past and present generations, then the celebration of the Eucharist can become that event which makes the eschatological work of Christ available in the present.<sup>89</sup>

This theology of remembrance is integrally linked to another element of the return narrative – homecoming. The return is as much to a place as it is to a time. The emotionally powerful symbolism of homecoming appears to be deeply rooted within the human psyche. Human beings seem to have two inbuilt seemingly paradoxical impulses: on the one hand the drive to explore, to push beyond the boundaries of our world as we know it, and, on the other hand,

---

<sup>87</sup> Olson, ‘Theology of Nostalgia’, 99

<sup>88</sup> Mircea Eliade, *No Souvenirs: Journal, 1957-1969*, trans. Fred H. Johnson, Jr. (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 74

<sup>89</sup> Dermot A. Lane, ‘The Eucharist as Sacrament of the Eschaton’ in *The Furrow*, vol. 47, no. 9. Sept., 1996, 468

there seems to be the yearning to come home, to find a place of belonging and familiarity, of protection and nurture. It is a dichotomy explored in the parable of the Prodigal Son, which is indeed the reason, we would argue, that the story is so compelling. Crucially, the beginning point of the prodigal's salvation is the moment in which he realises he must return home:

When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father...'<sup>90</sup>

Clearly, for the prodigal, his father's house – home – was not simply a physical place, but a place of spiritual and emotional belonging, a place of forgiveness, love and redemption. The prodigal's journey to his father's house becomes what mystical theology calls the journey into God.<sup>91</sup> Thus, as a place of restoration of relationship with God and with others, we would contend that the father's house becomes a powerful symbol of *Ubuntu*. In that sense, the theology of *Ubuntu* speaks of human homecoming.

Although home is such a powerful metaphor in Christian theology, in slave spirituality there was certainly a literal dimension to it as well. Perhaps the most acute of all the afflictions of slavery, with its countless privations, was the profound sense of alienation which stemmed from being strangers in a foreign land. Deeply embedded within the slave experience was the plaintive cry of the exiled soul which was given voice by the psalmist: 'How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?' (Psalm 137:4). Thus, for all its physical cruelties, it may well be argued that slavery's most damaging blow was spiritual and psychological: it brutally ripped from Africans their sense their sense of belonging and of place.

---

<sup>90</sup> Luke 15: 17-18

<sup>91</sup> See for example Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey into God* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1978), edited by Ewert Cousins

Yolanda Pierce highlights the significance what she calls the ‘captivity narrative’ in shaping the identity of African Americans. She identifies the key elements of the captivity narrative as being abduction from home and the suffering imposed on the victims by abductors, *particularly* as they were forced into conforming to the beliefs and behaviours of a vastly different culture. She goes on:

Captivity narratives usually feature two completely unfamiliar peoples and two cultures so foreign that the very act of being forced into life with the ‘other’ is itself a type of imprisonment... Captivity narratives often document the deprivation of all that is familiar to the subject and the forcible acceptance of a new way of life.<sup>92</sup>

Thus, we see that the narrative of return is a response to the captivity narrative. Longing and yearning for home became a fundamental constituent part of the being and identity of slaves. In slave Christianity, the theme of Christians being an alien people in this world, journeying to true heavenly home, took on a particular resonance because of their deep sense of displacement. Slave Christianity saw the Jewish longing for Zion, a safe homeland for a persecuted and wandering people, and also saw the exile and captivity narratives of the Old Testament, as metaphors for their own experiences. These themes are reflected in many of the Spirituals, such as *Going Home*, *Gospel Train* and *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*, which are ostensibly about going to Heaven, but in reality reflect the yearning to live in a free land and being transported to a place of acceptance and belonging.

### **Conclusions: The Theology of *Ubuntu* as a Homecoming**

---

<sup>92</sup> Yolanda Pierce in ‘Redeeming bondage: the captivity narrative and the spiritual autobiography in the African American slave narrative tradition’ in Audrey Fisch (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative* (Cambridge University press, 2007), 84

*Ubuntu* can thus be seen to be in continuity with African and Christian narratives of return. Like conscientism, *negritude* and *ujamaa*, it expresses – against the backdrop of the alienation experienced through white oppression – the longing of African people to return. For Africans of the diaspora today and for the descendants of those physically uprooted by slavery, that longing might be for a literal return. However, for many other Africans who have remained within the continent, the longing is existential. It is a longing to return to that relational mode of being, characterised by a deep connection with self and other, which existed before it was fundamentally disrupted by the forces of colonialism and racism.

Certainly, *Ubuntu* fits in to Gade's three-stage categorisation of narratives of return (see above) - golden age, decline and recovery. The golden age is represented in *Ubuntu* through a depiction of an Africa, which - prior to its corruption by western individualism - was constituted by communities based on care and compassion. We can also see how Tutu's theology of *Ubuntu* consciously evokes the creation myth when he says of human beings that 'we are made for togetherness, we are made for family, for fellowship, to exist in a tender network of interdependence.'<sup>93</sup> Tutu thus looks back to God's creation of human beings to find a rationale and a template for the paradigm of human mutuality.

The period of decline within this framework is, in the theology of *Ubuntu*, defined not just in terms of colonialism but, in the case of South Africa, the policy of apartheid. If *Ubuntu* embodies the truth of human mutuality, apartheid did precisely the opposite, for it was based on the lie that human beings are essentially different and need to be separated. Tutu's

---

<sup>93</sup> Tutu quoted in Michael Battle, *Ubuntu: I in You*, 54

objections to apartheid are grounded not in politics but in theology; apartheid was heretical because it undermined God's natural order of mutuality and the dignity of the human person.

Thus it was that he condemned apartheid as

intrinsically and irredeemably evil. For my part, its most vicious, indeed, its most blasphemous aspect, is not the great suffering it causes its victims, but that it can make a child of God doubt that he is a child of God. For that alone, it deserves to be condemned as a heresy.<sup>94</sup>

Finally, *Ubuntu* expresses the phase of recovery through an eschatological vision of a new way of being human, based on the values of care and compassion, with the emphasis on sharing and reconciliation. Tutu describes this vision in the following terms:

In our African understanding, part of *Ubuntu*...is the rare gift of sharing. This concept of sharing is exemplified at African feasts even to this day, when people eat together from a common dish, rather than from individual dishes. So, I would look for a social-economic system that places the emphasis on sharing and giving rather than on self-aggrandisement and getting. My vision includes a society that is more compassionate and caring...<sup>95</sup>

Integral to the process of recovery from the damage inflicted by apartheid and indeed woven into the fabric of Tutu's theology of *Ubuntu* is the paradigm of reconciliation. Tutu's *Ubuntu* community is above all else a reconciled community, which offers to both oppressor and oppressor an opportunity to rediscover their humanity:

The end of apartheid, I knew, would put *Ubuntu* to the test. Yet I never doubted its power of reconciliation. This forgiveness was not about altruism; it was about regaining dignity and humanity

---

<sup>94</sup> Desmond Tutu, 'Apartheid and Christianity' in John De Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio (eds.), *Apartheid is a Heresy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 46

<sup>95</sup> Desmond Tutu, *Crying in The Wilderness*, (London: Fount Collins, 1982), 100

and granting these too to the former oppressors... This expression of *Ubuntu* showed that the only way we can ever be human is together. The only way we can be free is together.<sup>96</sup>

The theology of *Ubuntu* gives expression to the deep human need to *return*, to go back to the beginning, to a time of innocence and love. St. John attests to this need when he consciously evokes Genesis at the very start of his Gospel, framing the mission of Jesus within the motif of re-creation: ‘In the beginning...’<sup>97</sup> This element of re-creation and restoration is central to *Ubuntu*. Yet a liberative theology of *Ubuntu* must beware lest, within this journey of return, a mythical ‘essentialised’ Africa displaces what should be the true locus of the return – God’s kingdom of justice, truth and freedom. The theology of *Ubuntu* must recognise that ‘Africa’ is a constructed tradition, and far from being beyond criticism, must be the subject of rigorous critique and interrogation.

In an insightful article about precisely how *Ubuntu* gives expression to our longing for a mythical past, Julian Muller has argued for a distinction between restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia.<sup>98</sup> He contends that the former ‘tends to confuse itself with truth and tradition’<sup>99</sup> and is characterised by the type of essentialist thinking that we have critiqued above. Within this approach, *Ubuntu* is an absolute and fixed truth, and is also a reachable goal. Restorative nostalgia further expresses itself in the form of a simplistic, single narrative wherein battle lines are starkly drawn between the forces of good and a mythical enemy.

There is little room within this worldview for complexity and nuance. Furthermore,

---

<sup>96</sup> Desmond Tutu, *Believe: The Words and Inspiration of Desmond Tutu* (Boulder, Colorado: Blue Mountain Press), 5-7

<sup>97</sup> John 1:1

<sup>98</sup> Julian Muller, ‘Exploring ‘nostalgia’ and ‘imagination’ for *ubuntu*-research: A postfoundational perspective’, *Verbum et Ecclesia* 36(2), article 1432, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ve.v36i2.1432>, 2-3

<sup>99</sup> Muller, ‘Exploring ‘Nostalgia’ for *ubuntu*-research’, 2

restorative nostalgia is based on what Muller calls a ‘transhistorical plot’ – by which he means that is disconnected from real contexts. Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, interprets the past with a greater degree of hermeneutical sophistication. It is, says Muller,

more in harmony with the paradoxes of human longing and belonging...with reflective nostalgia, *ubuntu* needs to be problematised and called into doubt in terms of its usability and effect on modern communities. It remains in the realm of nostalgia and therefore is not questioned in totality and disregarded, but the reflective type of nostalgia asks for a critical engagement.<sup>100</sup>

Such a critical engagement means that reflective nostalgia avoids reducing *Ubuntu* to a single narrative. Rather, it opens the way for exploration of a multiplicity of modes of being in a variety of contexts. Muller – correctly - critiques Tutu’s *Ubuntu* for being an example of the over-simplified narrative of restorative nostalgia:

My impression is that Desmond Tutu, in his book *God is not a Christian* (2013) is working with restorative nostalgia when he writes his chapter on *ubuntu* (chapter 2). He contradicts, in a very stereotypical way, *ubuntu* with the western way of life. His remark that ‘the West’s emphasis on individualism has often meant that people are lonely in a crowd, shattered by their anonymity’, is put against an even more oversimplified concept of *ubuntu* as a way of life that ‘speaks of spiritual attributes such as generosity, hospitality, compassion, caring, sharing’. His discussion of *ubuntu* lacks the critical reflection of reflective nostalgia and therefore does not speak of the ambivalence, the complexity and variety to be found in both African and Western communities.<sup>101</sup>

The distinction made by Muller between restorative and reflective nostalgia is of crucial significance importance in shaping a theology of *Ubuntu* which is forward-looking and

---

<sup>100</sup> Muller, “Exploring ‘Nostalgia’ for *ubuntu*-research”, 2

<sup>101</sup> Muller, “Exploring ‘Nostalgia’ for *ubuntu*-research”, 2

progressive, rather than one which is fixated on an idealised past. The concept of reflective nostalgia also underlines the hermeneutical process involved in the way we perceive the past. The notion of the golden age within narratives of return often rests on the simplistic epistemological premise that we can have direct access to the past. This is akin to the biblical literalism, which proclaims absolute and objective understanding of the text, without acknowledging the relative and subjective factors which influence one's reading of it.

Making clear this distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia will make it possible for the theology of *Ubuntu* to valorise the past, without being captive to it. Places to which one returns are always changed from their original state – and therefore a theology of return must offer a vision of future renewal, as well as continuity with the past. After the release of Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners and the unbanning of political organisations in the early 1990s, Charles Villa-Vicencio argued that the time had come for a new theological paradigm in South Africa, to reflect the transition from liberation to reconstruction. Villa-Vicencio contended that, in the changing political milieu, theology needed to move from saying 'no' to apartheid to saying 'yes' to the restoration of justice and the affirmation of human dignity. This theology of reconstruction is a further manifestation of the phase of recovery. This shift from liberation to restoration, viewed in terms of the biblical models upon which they are premised, is one from the Exodus to post-exilic theology.<sup>102</sup>

---

<sup>102</sup> Charles Villa-Vicencio, *A Theology of Reconstruction: Nation-Building and Human Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992)

There are those liberation theologians who have critiqued Villa-Vicencio because they feel he presents his theology of reconstruction as a decisive break from liberation tradition rather than (as should be) in continuity with it<sup>103</sup>. While a detailed analysis of this debate is beyond the scope of this work, we would contend that Villa-Vicencio is correct to argue that a liberative theology is located within the interlocking paradigms of the Exodus (looking back to the primordial event) and the post-exilic realm (the eschatological hope). The theology of *Ubuntu* needs to have both a past and a future dimension.

In conclusion, we are advocating a theology of *Ubuntu* built on the recognition that *Ubuntu* is in fact a constructed tradition. In recognising it as such, we can shift the emphasis away from *Ubuntu* as part of the quest within African theology and philosophy for the holy grail of autonomy, to an emphasis on *Ubuntu* as the part of a broader, liberating humanist tradition, which has found expression both in the west and in Africa. Furthermore, the African forms of humanism we have evaluated here, as much as western humanism, have been characterised by an emphasis on the freedom and agency of the human subject. The stress on subjectivity for which we are arguing, far from being antagonistic to *Ubuntu*, ensures that it remains in continuity with the best traditions of African humanism. Our study of consciencism, negritude and *ujamaa* demonstrate that it was precisely when they lost sight of the human subject that they gave way to collectivism.

In addition, *Ubuntu* remains a representation of what it means to be African, a category which although not ontological, is still a significant expression of identity. However,

---

<sup>103</sup> See for example V. S. Vellem, 'Ideology and Spirituality: a Critique of Villa-Vicencio's Project of Reconstruction' in *Scriptura* 105 (2010), 547-558

crucially, the central question becomes not ‘is *Ubuntu* uniquely and essentially African?’ but rather ‘how does it help to construct a more humane and liberated society?’ This is the basis for the theology of *Ubuntu* that we must seek to define and give shape to in the chapters which follow.

## Chapter Three:

### Defining *Ubuntu* - Three Approaches

Having sought to develop some understanding of *Ubuntu* within historical and philosophical context in which it developed, we turn now to the task of defining it more fully.<sup>1</sup> Our central critique of *Ubuntu*, to which we made reference at that start of this thesis, and which is developed in detail in the next chapter, focusses on its potential for distortion through collectivism. This critique is premised on what has become the commonly accepted definition of the word - Tutu's 'a person is a person through other persons'. This definition purports to express essentially African values and assert the primacy of the community, viewing individual persons in terms of the collective. However, the central contention of this chapter is that the tendency to perceive *Ubuntu* solely in terms of this definition represents an over-simplification, which can lead precisely to the repression of personal freedom we are seeking to avoid.

This is primarily because 'a person is a person through other persons' fails to give expression to the freedom of the human subject, which – as we argued in the last chapter – is integral to the best traditions of African humanism. Defining *Ubuntu* in terms of this proverb is, as we shall see, only a recent phenomenon, which developed within a specific socio-political context. Our argument will be that it would be a mistake to reify that definition and not

---

<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, the general focus is on cultural, political, philosophical and popular expressions of *Ubuntu* – as opposed to looking more explicitly at the *theology* of *Ubuntu*, which will be examined in the next chapter. At the same time, particularly given that much African thinking eschews any dichotomy between the material and spiritual, there will be many areas of convergence when discussing secular and theological approaches

recognise that there are others which have validity, and which offer valuable critical perspective and balance in developing a full understanding of *Ubuntu*. To this end, we outline below three definitions of *Ubuntu* – the one already cited and two further alternatives. Clearly, it is not possible to provide an exhaustive list of possible definitions. However, we believe the definitions below broadly reflect the differing potential categorisations of *Ubuntu*, and are thus worthy of closer analysis. We would contend that *Ubuntu* might be defined as: i) ‘A person is a person is person through other persons’, ii) a moral quality defining personhood, or iii) an ethic or philosophy. In explicating and analysing these definitions we will attempt to draw on the strengths of each of them with a view to developing a fourth definition - ‘becoming fully human in community’ in the final chapter.

#### **i) *Ubuntu* as ‘a person is a person because of other persons’**

We have argued that *Ubuntu* must be seen within the broader context of postcolonial political philosophy in Africa as a whole. However, *Ubuntu* is most frequently associated with *Southern* Africa. In his wide-ranging research on the history of the discourse of *Ubuntu*, to which we have already referred, Gade outlines the development of the word in the context of the struggle for liberation in Zimbabwe and, in particular, the struggle against apartheid and the transition to democracy in South Africa. He argues that *Ubuntu* gave impetus to the processes of struggle and reconstruction, but also that those processes shaped the meaning of *Ubuntu* in a very particular way.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Gade, ‘Written Discourses on *Ubuntu*’, 311ff

He points out that the first book written specifically on *Ubuntu* was *Hunhuism or Ubuntu: A Zimbabwe Indigenous Political Philosophy*, written by Samkange and Samkange in 1980<sup>3</sup>.

‘Hunhu’ in the Shona languages is the equivalent of *Ubuntu* in the Nguni languages, and expresses ‘the attention one human being gives to another: the kindness, courtesy, consideration and friendliness in the relationship between people’.<sup>4</sup> For the Samkanges, it also had an explicitly political dimension, which was apparent in the transition from minority to majority rule in Zimbabwe:

What political philosophy should inspire the new Zimbabweans in this new era?...Is there a philosophy indigenous to this country that can serve its people just as well, if not better, than foreign ideologies?...This philosophy, the authors endeavour to show, exists and can be described as *Hunhuism* or *Ubuntuism*.<sup>5</sup>

Gade notes that *Hunhuism* does not appear to have exercised any direct influence on the new Zimbabwe or its constitution. However, we nevertheless see in this Zimbabwean expression of *Ubuntu* another example of the narrative of return integrally linked to the notion of indigenisation.

In the case of South Africa, *Ubuntu* emerged as a significant factor in the multi-party negotiation process in the early 1990s, which led to the ratification of the Interim Constitution on 18 November 1993. In the Epilogue of that constitution, it was stated that, in addressing the divisions of the past in South Africa,

---

<sup>3</sup> Cited by Gade, ‘Written Discourses on *Ubuntu*’, 309ff

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Gade, ‘Written Discourses on *Ubuntu*’, 309

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Gade, ‘Written Discourses on *Ubuntu*’, 309-310

there is a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not retaliation, a need for *Ubuntu* but not victimization.<sup>6</sup>

The South African Constitutional Court, which was established by the Interim Constitution to decide on constitutional matters, has, in many of its judgements, made it clear that the inclusion of *Ubuntu* in the Epilogue was not incidental, but of fundamental importance. Indeed, in the next sentence after the one quoted above, the Epilogue goes on to decree that Parliament should adopt a law which would enable the country to promote reconciliation and reparation, which decree was the basis for the Act which led to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, chaired by Desmond Tutu. In his leadership of the TRC, Tutu gave prominence to *Ubuntu* as an instrument of reconciliation. Thus within the Interim Constitution and, consequently, the Constitutional Court and the TRC, *Ubuntu* played a pivotal role in the newly emerging democratic South Africa.

Despite this acknowledged significance of the term, however, it is not all clear how *Ubuntu* came to be incorporated in the Interim Constitution in the first place.<sup>7</sup> Nor does the Interim Constitution define what it means. Gade's hypothesis is that it was in this context – i.e. the need to give it meaning and content - that *Ubuntu* became associated with the proverb 'a person is a person through other persons' between 1993 and 1995.<sup>8</sup> Gade also pinpoints Augustine Shutte's *Philosophy for Africa*<sup>9</sup> as an important factor in the connection between *Ubuntu* and the proverb. He argues that a comparison between the South African edition of the book, published in 1993, and the American edition, published in 1995, gives further

---

<sup>6</sup> *Interim Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, Act 200 of 1993: Epilogue after Section 251, quoted in Gade, 'Written Discourses on *Ubuntu*', 311

<sup>7</sup> See Gade, 'Written Discourses on *Ubuntu*', 312-313

<sup>8</sup> Gade, 'Written Discourses on *Ubuntu*', 313

<sup>9</sup> Augustine Shutte, *Philosophy for Africa* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1995)

weight to his thesis that this connection between word and proverb was developed in the period from 1993 to 1995.<sup>10</sup> While it has subsequently been frequently quoted in the *Ubuntu* literature, in the first edition of the book in 1993, *the word was not even mentioned in the index*. There is only one sentence in that book that mentions *Ubuntu* – and in that instance it is not associated with the proverb.<sup>11</sup> However, in the American edition of the book, Shutte wrote a new foreword in which *Ubuntu* is portrayed as being the central theme of the book:

Because of apartheid...another feature of South African life has been hidden from the world for all that time. But now the apartheid era has ended and our recent treasure has been revealed to the world...It is called *ubuntu* (which means “humanity”). We feel it is something of great value we can offer to the rest of the world. This is what this book is about.<sup>12</sup>

It is clearly noteworthy that *Ubuntu* went from being mentioned only briefly in the 1993 edition of the book to being the book’s central theme in the 1995 edition. Furthermore, Shutte’s foreword in the 1995 edition also argues for a close connection between *Ubuntu* and the proverb referred to above:

The emphasis on the interpersonal quality of humanity – embodied in the expression *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* [a person is a person through other persons] – is at the heart of *ubuntu* and the source of many of its distinctive insights and values.<sup>13</sup>

Thus Gade’s argument runs as follows: in 1993 Shutte’s *Philosophy for Africa* increased awareness of the proverb, while at the same time the Epilogue of the Interim Constitution was

---

<sup>10</sup> See Gade, 313-31 Gade, ‘Written Discourses on *Ubuntu*’, 313-315

<sup>11</sup> The sentence referred to is: ‘The traditional African idea of the extended family as something that includes far more than parents and children is perhaps the most common and the most powerful protection of the value of *Ubuntu*.’ Quoted in Gade, ‘Written Discourses on *Ubuntu*’, 313

<sup>12</sup> Shutte, *Philosophy for Africa*, v

<sup>13</sup> Shutte, *Philosophy for Africa*, v

provoking discussion about the nature of *Ubuntu*. During the period between 1993 and 1995, Shutte developed the idea that the proverb itself constituted a definition of *Ubuntu*.<sup>14</sup>

All of this raises the issue of how context gives meaning to words. Given that narratives of return often develop in periods of social transition, it is hardly surprising that *Ubuntu* rose to prominence when it did in Zimbabwe and South Africa. More than that, however, *Ubuntu* took on particular forms in the light of the political demands of the specific contexts of those countries at that time. Prior to the publication of his book, Samkange was an influential nationalist politician in what was Southern Rhodesia, and his notion of *Hunhuism* or *Ubuntuism* would have given his nationalism a neat ideological underpinning. Further, as a professor of African history, Samkange would have been fully aware of how ideas understood to be ‘traditionally African’ were very popular in the context of decolonisation.<sup>15</sup> In the case of South Africa, *Ubuntu* provided a framework for the national project of reconciliation, and gave that project legitimacy amongst black people. Its emphasis on human interconnectedness provided an intellectual counterpoint to the segregation at the heart of apartheid.

None of this is to suggest that the way in which *Ubuntu* was used in these contexts was illegitimate. Indeed, it may well be the case that this particular definition of *Ubuntu*, with its emphasis on communal solidarity, was most the most appropriate as a tool in the struggle against apartheid. However, what *is* being argued is that *Ubuntu*, as a word which represents the terrain on which social and political conflicts take place, does not have a fixed meaning.

---

<sup>14</sup> Gade, ‘Written Discourses on *Ubuntu*’. 315

<sup>15</sup> Gade, ‘Written Discourses on *Ubuntu*’, 321

Acknowledging that *Ubuntu*'s meaning is constructed, rather than essential, enables us to see the legitimacy of other interpretations, particularly those which are less open to collectivist distortion.

## ii) *Ubuntu* as a Moral Quality

In his research amongst South Africans of African Descent (SAADs), Gade has found that it is possible to make a distinction between two broad categories when it comes to defining *Ubuntu*. He uncovered two clusters of answers to the question 'what is *Ubuntu*?' - those which depicted *Ubuntu* as a moral quality of a person, and those which explained it as a phenomenon (e.g. a philosophy, an ethic, African humanism or a worldview).<sup>16</sup> In the early written sources, in texts published to 1980, *Ubuntu* appears, almost exclusively, to refer to a human moral quality. This understanding continues to be the dominant one for some authors. So, for example, according to Kolini and Holmes, *Ubuntu* is

an African word that speaks of humanity and its goodness. The word has the meaning of being human, of being generous and gracious. You still find this in African society, and this concept is shared with the West when people come to visit. It is the sense of human grace and honour that prevailed in Africa even prior to the arrival of the Missionaries.<sup>17</sup>

For a number of SAADs, then, *Ubuntu* refers to the moral potentiality of the person, to their ability to show compassion, empathy and forgiveness. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, who was

---

<sup>16</sup> Christian B.N. Gade, 'What is Ubuntu? Different Interpretations Amongst South Africans of African Descent' in *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 2012 31(3), 487f

<sup>17</sup> E.M. Kiloni and P.R. Holmes, *Rethinking Life: What the Church Can Learn from Africa* (Colorado Springs: Authentic Publishing, 2010), 70

a member of the Human Rights Violation Committee of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC) in South Africa, explains *Ubuntu* it thus:

Its essence is the about the capacity for empathy with another person...that capacity which I think we ought to have as human beings, and which is present in all of us, that capacity to connect with another human being, to be touched, to be moved by another human being.<sup>18</sup>

This moral capacity, which characterises *Ubuntu*, is particularly expressed in forgiveness. Most dramatically, South Africans' ability to forgive was demonstrated during of the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee. Right from its conception, the *modus operandi* of the TRC was posited on the notion of forgiveness – and of a sense of *Ubuntu* that would make such forgiveness possible. In their analysis of the work of the TRC, Asmal, Asmal and Suresh Roberts suggest that *Ubuntu* provided the necessary alternative to criminal prosecution as means of dealing with the apartheid past:

In South Africa, the interim constitution...contained an explicit coda...warning the country against the risks of pursuing the strategies of vengeance or victimization at the expense of the new country's flourishing (captured in the constitution by the African word *Ubuntu* implying both 'compassion' and 'recognition of the humanity of the other'). Those who insist upon automatic trials as the only legitimate manner in which to mete out justice generally ignore this novel constitutional concept of *Ubuntu*.<sup>19</sup>

Linked to the idea of *Ubuntu* as a moral quality, is the idea that such a moral quality defines personhood. Gade's research demonstrates that the concept of personhood is of central

---

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Christian B.N. Gade, 27 August 2008, quoted in Gade, 'What is Ubuntu?', 489-490

<sup>19</sup> Kader Asmal, Louise Asmal, Ronald Suresh, *Reconciliation Through Truth: A Reckoning of Apartheid's Criminal Governance* (Cape Town and Johannesburg: David Philip Publishers, 1996), 21

importance to how SAADs understand *Ubuntu*. He discovered two schools of thought amongst SAADs – those who see *all* human beings as persons and those who believe that only *some* human beings are persons - generally because they are African or because they behave in a morally acceptable manner. In his book, *Ubuntu: The Essence of Democracy*, Mfuniselwa John Bhengu argues that inclusiveness is integral to the African worldview:

A primary characteristic of African ‘being’ is its inclusiveness. African theology declares that *umuntu* [personhood] is a dynamic concept: it means *all* humans not only African humans.<sup>20</sup>

In contrast, other SAADs have argued for a much more exclusive notion of *Ubuntu*. In the first instance, this restricted conception of *Ubuntu* is often based on race. Prominent South African journalist Fred Khumalo writes as follows about growing up in KwaZulu Natal:

My worldview revolved around *abantu* (human beings, meaning black people) and *abelungu* (whites). There was no rancour in our attitude towards whites, but they were simply not *abantu*. My worldview – and I suppose I speak on behalf of many of my peers – was that narrow.<sup>21</sup>

Yet while Khumalo casts a negative judgement on his youthful self for a lack of inclusivity, many other black people argue that the reason that white people were excluded from the category of personhood was their own lack of compassion and humanity. Thus, white people’s exclusion is not racially motivated *per se*, but rather the consequence of their failure to act with humanity and compassion. One of Gade’s interviewees puts it thus:

---

<sup>20</sup> M.J. Bhengu, *Ubuntu: The Essence of Democracy* (Cape Town: Novalis Press, 1996), 50, quoted in Gade, ‘What is Ubuntu?’, 495

<sup>21</sup> F. Khumalo, *Drawing Inspiration From The Proud Legacy of Nelson Mandela*. Speech delivered to a symposium organized by the Department of Education, Port Elizabeth, September 13, 2008 quoted in Gade, ‘What is Ubuntu?’, 496

The reason Africans were saying ‘*makgoa ga se batho*’ (whites are not human) is recorded in our history of oppression as South Africans and Africans in general. We (as Africans) could just not believe that human beings were capable of treating others in the manner that Africans were treated.<sup>22</sup>

This idea that whites have lost their personhood through their history of practising racial oppression is very much at the heart of Black Theology. Indeed, in his typically forthright way, James Cone, wholly rejected any notions of common humanity between black and white people and instead identified white people with evil:

The demonic forces of racism are real for the black man. Theologically, Malcolm X was not far wrong when he called the white man ‘the devil.’ The white structure of this American society, personified in every racist, must be at least be part of what the New Testament meant by the demonic forces.<sup>23</sup>

However, a problem with an exclusive view of *Ubuntu*, which places those who have acted without compassion and humanity beyond the category of personhood, is that it potentially *closes off redemptive possibilities for those human beings*. If the evil or immoral human being is construed to be without personhood, does that not deny the personal freedom and moral potential within them, which is characteristic of personhood? Furthermore, such an approach seems to reinforce a very clear demarcation between the Righteous and the Outcast – a distinction Jesus seems to be at pains to undermine in his dealings with both groups (for example, in the story of Zacchaeus – see the discussion on pp. 131-132 below ).

---

<sup>22</sup> Thabo Sebogodi, from the Gauteng Department of Sports, Arts, Culture and Recreation, email of 2 September 2009, quoted in Gade, ‘What is Ubuntu?’, 496

<sup>23</sup> James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Orbis Books, 1969), 40

One of Gade's interviewees described this process of demarcation in the following terms:

The moment you go outside the boundaries of *ubuntu*, you actually begin to be labelled as an animal [by the community] – *kintu* [animal] as opposed to *ubuntu*. Once you are at this level, even your community, they just reject and repel you.<sup>24</sup>

This labelling of someone being beyond personhood and therefore the bounds of *Ubuntu* can lend itself to a punitive or judgemental attitude to the wrongdoer, rather than a restorative one. For example, another of Gade's interviewees, Bhekithemba Mchunu, an *induna* (chief or king) talks about how the community deals with serious criminals in KwaZulu Natal in a way which seems distinctly at odds with the conception of *Ubuntu* as fostering compassion and forgiveness (as previously discussed in the context of the TRC):

He [the murderer or rapist] is not considered to be a human being *at all* by the way he is behaving towards other people...[T]he community will say: You are not a human being. They can go to the extent where they kill a person...for the sake of protecting *ubuntu* because that person has lost humanity. He is regarded as an animal because what he is doing is not accepted.<sup>25</sup>

Gade goes on to conclude that amongst SAADs it is possible to find both inclusive and exclusive ideas about the nature of personhood and *Ubuntu*.<sup>26</sup> In the former, *Ubuntu* is understood either as a moral quality that is - at least in potential form – possessed by *all* human beings, or as a phenomenon which connects *all* human beings. In the latter, it is understood that *Ubuntu*, as a moral quality which defines personhood, may either be lost or not present (and that there therefore only *some* human beings are persons) or that *Ubuntu* is a phenomenon which only connects *some* human beings.

---

<sup>24</sup> M.J. Bhengu, interview with C.N. Gade, 17 December 2009, quoted in Gade, 'What is Ubuntu?', 498

<sup>25</sup> Interview with C.N. Gade, 13 December 2009, quoted in Gade, 'What is Ubuntu', 498

<sup>26</sup> C.N. Gade, 'What is Ubuntu', 498

We would argue that an authentic theology of *Ubuntu* is not compatible with this exclusivist approach. Exclusivist conceptions of *Ubuntu* must necessarily lead to emphasis on the group over any conception of the common humanity of all, and, as such, fatally undermine any moral obligation to the Other, as a person of intrinsic worth, no matter what their background or circumstances, and irrespective of their behaviour. The division created by the exclusivist approach serves not only to distinguish between two groups of people – those who have *Ubuntu* and those who do not - but also to undermine the value of those in the group who are outside the community of persons. Gade further argues that, deontological principles aside, a purely utilitarian approach also leads to questions about the ethical legitimacy of the exclusive views about *Ubuntu* in the context of South Africa, because such an approach would hamper the project of national reconciliation. It is *inclusive Ubuntu* which emphasised that even the worst apartheid offenders had some potential within them for expressing humanity, and that all South Africans, irrespective of colour or past actions, are part of the interconnectedness between persons.<sup>27</sup>

At the core of Desmond Tutu's theology of *Ubuntu* was the idea that liberation could only be achieved when whites and blacks understood and acknowledged this interconnectedness. His essential message was that even though whites in apartheid South Africa had constructed an elaborate system to separate themselves from blacks, and blacks were legitimately struggling against whites as the oppressor, the destinies of both groups were inextricably bound together. This famous quotation exemplifies this theme in his writings and ministry:

---

<sup>27</sup> C.N. Gade, 'What is Ubuntu', 498

The only way we can survive is together, black and white; the only way we can be truly human is together, black and white.<sup>28</sup>

While this thesis critiques other aspects of Tutu's conception of *Ubuntu*, we are arguing that one of its great strengths is its intrinsically inclusive nature. For Tutu, it is through the recognition of the personhood of *all* human beings, that our personhood is fulfilled. In his theology, this recognition of personhood also extends to the oppressor because 'when we see others as enemies, we risk becoming what we hate'.<sup>29</sup> To fail to recognise personhood in others is thus to diminish our own personhood.

In this respect, of seeing the humanity of the oppressor, Tutu is very much following on in the tradition of Martin Luther King. King understands the humanity of the oppressor or enemy in terms of the *imago dei*. This was a common theme in his public addresses and sermons:

The person who hates you the most has some good in him; even the nation that hates you the most has some good in it. And when you come to the point that you look in the face of every man and see deep down within him what religion calls 'the image of God,' you begin to love him in spite of. No matter what he does, you see God's image there.<sup>30</sup>

King is not seeking to minimize the evil perpetrated by the oppressor, but is saying that no matter what the extent of that evil, he or she does not lose that which distinguishes them as a human being, i.e. the *imago dei*. Put differently, it would seem that King is arguing that no human beings are closed off from redemptive possibilities. Evil committed does not cancel out the human being's moral potentiality. King's theological anthropology is characterised

---

<sup>28</sup> Desmond Tutu, *The Words of Desmond Tutu* (New York: Newmarket Press, 1989), 72

<sup>29</sup> Desmond Tutu, *God Has A Dream* (London: Random House, 2005), 49

<sup>30</sup> Clayborne Carson and Peter Holloran (eds), *A Knock at Midnight: The Great Sermons of Martin Luther King* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1999), 46

by a thoroughgoing optimism - he believes that there is innate good, to which he can appeal, within the oppressor.<sup>31</sup>

One could certainly argue that the Tutu / King inclusivist position is more coherent than the exclusivist one and speaks more directly to the ongoing process of reconciliation in South Africa and other regions of the world. Furthermore, the exclusivist approach to *Ubuntu* – because it perpetuates an understanding that certain groups will never be able to possess the moral quality of *Ubuntu*, which is characteristic of personhood, and therefore that they will never be part of the mutuality that characterises persons in community – will inevitably exacerbate and deepen the lines of conflict and separation. Group cohesion can often be negative: an element which powerfully binds a group together very often simultaneously serves to distance members of the group from those outside it. Group identity is further strengthened by the notion of a *unique* bond of interconnectedness, shared by the members of the group, to which outsiders are not party. Thus, if viewed exclusively, *Ubuntu* may very well have the effect of strengthening *particular* communities, but at the same time deepening divisions *between* communities.

That said, there are undoubtedly dangers within an inclusivist approach to *Ubuntu*. One could criticise the emphasis on reconciliation in inclusivist *Ubuntu* because it has a pacifying effect on those who are oppressed. If the oppressed feel a moral obligation to treat *all* human

---

<sup>31</sup> MLK's inclusivity is, of course, precisely what drew fierce criticism from those within the Black Consciousness movement, and also from black theologians. In James Cones' book, *Malcolm, Martin and America: A Dream or a Nightmare?* (New York: Orbis, 2001), Cone invokes the incendiary bombast of Malcolm X in order to critique King, asserting that the Black in Black Theology comes not from King but from Malcolm. See below for further discussion about the tension between inclusive and exclusive approaches within Black Theology and within *Ubuntu*.

beings as brothers and sisters, including their oppressors, it might militate against strident action to overthrow those oppressors. This would certainly be Cone's position. He argues that white people manipulate inclusive, generalised and universal notions of humanity in order to obfuscate the reality of oppression which is *particular* to blacks:

Black Theology is suspicious of those who appeal to a universal, idealized humanity. Oppressors are ardent lovers of humanity. They can love all persons in general, even black persons, because intellectually they can put people in the category called Humanity. But when it comes to dealing with particular blacks, statistics transformed into black encounter, they are at a loss...The basic mistake of our white opponents is their failure to see that God did not become a universal human being, but an oppressed Jew...<sup>32</sup>

For Cone, then, Jesus encapsulates true humanity precisely because *he was oppressed*. Humanity (or personhood as we have referred to it above) is thus a characteristic only of black people. Cone is prepared to consider the possibility of whites (in *rare* cases) recovering their humanity through 'becoming black',<sup>33</sup> but there is certainly no sense in which he envisions a humanity common to both whites and blacks.

Certainly, within Black Theology in general, the central orientation has been towards a theology of liberation which confronts injustice, rather than a theology of reconciliation which stresses our common humanity. Indeed, a common theme within Black Theology has been to warn against superficial theologies of reconciliation. In the context of the struggle against apartheid, Allan Boesak highlighted the dangers of a reconciliation which takes place

---

<sup>32</sup> James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 2010), 90-91

<sup>33</sup> James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 221

without confrontation – what he calls (appropriating Bonhoeffer’s phrase) ‘cheap grace’.<sup>34</sup>

Thus he says:

Reconciliation is not feeling good; it is coming to grips with evil. In order to reconcile, Christ had to die. We must not deceive ourselves. Reconciliation does not mean holding hands and singing: “black and white together.” It means, rather, death and suffering, giving up one’s life for the sake of the other.<sup>35</sup>

Cone further develops this theme, taking issue with other black theologians’ interpretations of reconciliation. In *God of the Oppressed*, he is particularly scathing about J. Deotis Roberts, who, he says, has contradicted his own argument.<sup>36</sup> On the one hand, Roberts states (quite rightly in Cone’s view) that ‘*liberation* is a proper precondition for reconciliation in the area of race relations’, but on the other hand he insists that blacks ‘must hold up at all times the possibility for black-white interracial fellowship and cooperation.’<sup>37</sup> Cone’s argument is that blacks cannot hold liberation to be a precondition for reconciliation, yet simultaneously assure whites that they are ready to be reconciled, because there is no guarantee that that precondition will be fulfilled. However, our argument would be that Cone is presenting a false dichotomy between liberation and reconciliation. While he is right to highlight the dangers of superficial notions of reconciliation, we would argue that the struggle for liberation and the process of reconciliation are complementary rather than contradictory.

---

<sup>34</sup> Allan Boesak, *Black and Reformed* (New York: Orbis Books, 1984), 29

<sup>35</sup> Boesak, *Black and Reformed*, 29

<sup>36</sup> Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 219

<sup>37</sup> J. Deotis Roberts, *Black Theology and Liberation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), quoted in Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 219

One might well support this contention by pointing to the life of Tutu's fellow veteran of the struggle against apartheid, and the man whom it may well be argued embodies the *Ubuntu* paradigm more than any other – Nelson Mandela. On the one hand, Mandela's policy of reconciliation and forgiveness towards white South Africans upon his release from prison raised him to the status of a global moral icon. The narrative of Mandela as the man of forgiveness is indeed a compelling one; there were the stories that emerged of him befriending his racist prison guards, winning them over them over with kindness and compassion. There was the powerful and very profound symbolism of his great conciliatory gestures, which sought to touch the very core of the Afrikaner psyche – meeting the widow of Hendrik Verwoed, the infamous architect of apartheid, and wearing the Springbok rugby jersey (very much the quintessential expression of Afrikaner nationalism) at the rugby world cup final in 1995. All of this served to reinforce the view of a Mandela as man with an extraordinary capacity to transcend the divisions which had so forcefully defined South Africans.

Yet if one looks at the famous photographs of him emerging from prison on 11 February 1990, while we see the smile, the dignity of his demeanour and warm humanity, we also see the clenched fist of struggle and the refusal to acquiesce to oppression. Here is a revolutionary leader, one who emerges from the captivity of the oppressor unbowed, and on his terms. To be sure, there have been critics who have argued the Mandela-led negotiations with the Nationalist regime while they were still in power, and the subsequent policy of reconciliation, represented a compromise of the radical ideals of the apartheid struggle. Such a critique, however, fails to take account of both the pressing need for pragmatism at the time of the negotiations (given the national and global political and economic context, and most importantly the need to avoid a bloody civil war), and of the humanism which must underpin

any revolutionary struggle. We would indeed argue that Mandela's is the face of *Ubuntu* – for in him we see a bold and uncompromising proclamation of one's own humanity in the faces of adversity and oppression, and yet an undimmed capacity to see humanity in others.

One can struggle against the oppressor and hold that he has lost his humanity – *but at the same time* recognise his moral capacity and human potential. To assert one's own personhood is a process inextricably linked with recognising the humanity of others. One could further argue that without the *telos* of future reconciliation – even if it is not a present possibility - liberation theology lacks eschatological vision. The theology of *Ubuntu* must thus encompass both the struggle for justice and the hope for reconciliation that justice will make possible. *Ubuntu* is undoubtedly expressed in the moral qualities of compassion and solidarity with the oppressed, but it also the recognition that the *capacity* for demonstrating those qualities also lies with the oppressor. Certainly, the notion of *Ubuntu* as a moral quality moves the discussion forward, for it goes far beyond defining *Ubuntu* simply in terms of one's relationship with the community – and hence it lays the foundation for transcending narrowly collectivist conceptions of *Ubuntu*.

### **3) *Ubuntu* as a philosophy or an ethic**

The consideration we have given to the moral aspects of *Ubuntu* lead us naturally into a discussion of *Ubuntu* not simply as *personal* quality, but as a *system* of ethics. After 1980, and particularly during the period of transition in South Africa during the 1990s, expressions such as '*Ubuntu* philosophy' and 'ethic of *Ubuntu*' became increasingly common. Thaddeus

Metz is a prominent example of a philosopher working in South Africa who has attempted to give expression to *Ubuntu* as a systematic moral theory. In an important article published in the *Journal of Political Philosophy* in 2007, entitled ‘Toward an African Moral Theory’,<sup>38</sup> he developed the notion of *Ubuntu* as an ethical theory, one by which actions were judged on the extent to which they developed community, and which is also distinct from the western traditions.

Metz argues that African ethics, by which he means values associated with the largely black and Bantu-speaking peoples living in sub-Saharan Africa,

lacks a well-defined general principle grounding particular duties that is informed by such values and could be compared to the dominant Western theories.<sup>39</sup>

He contends that, while some scholars have approximated this project on occasion, no one has ‘has made it a primary aim that has been pursued in a systematic, analytic way.’<sup>40</sup> He suggests that previous attempts to provide this ‘grounding principle’ for African ethics have failed on two grounds. The proposed principle is either ‘too western’ and therefore does not reflect elements which are central to African values on the one hand, or it is too vague or restricted in its scope on the other hand.<sup>41</sup> Metz’s aim is thus to

present an ethical principle that not only grows out of African soil and differs from what is widespread in the West, but also is specific and complete.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Thaddeus Metz, ‘Towards an African Moral Theory’ in *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, vol. 15. no.3, 2007, 321-341

<sup>39</sup> Metz, ‘Towards an African Moral Theory’, 321

<sup>40</sup> Metz, ‘Towards an African Moral Theory’, 321

<sup>41</sup> Metz, ‘Towards an African Moral Theory’, 322

<sup>42</sup> Metz, ‘Towards an African Moral Theory’, 322

Metz identifies *Ubuntu* as the point of focus in his search for this principle because it comes closest to his project, and because it and related terms are so pervasive in sub-Saharan Africa. In order to pinpoint the values which are at the heart of *Ubuntu*, Metz outlines two groups of moral intuitions:<sup>43</sup> Firstly, he outlines those moral judgements which he would consider to uncontroversial to both most Westerners and most Africans. Both groups would consider it immoral to a) to kill innocent people for money, b) have sex with someone without their consent, c) deceive people, at least when it is not done in self- or other-defence, d) steal unnecessary goods, e) violate trust for marginal personal gain and f) discriminate on a racial basis when allocating opportunities.<sup>44</sup>

Secondly, Metz describes a set of intuitions which are more common among Africans than Europeans. These he takes to be that Africans, more often than Westerners, find it immoral g) to make policy decisions in the face of dissent, as opposed to seeking consensus, h) to make retribution a central aim of criminal justice, as opposed to reconciliation, i) to create wealth largely on a competitive basis, as opposed to a cooperative one, j) to distribute wealth largely on the basis of individual rights rather than need, k) to ignore others and violate communal norms and l) to fail to marry and procreate.<sup>45</sup> Clearly Metz is not saying that this second set of intuitions is absent from western thought. Rather he is identifying broad orientations which characterise African moral thought, which are likely to be found more often in Africa than in the West.

---

<sup>43</sup> Metz, 'Towards an African Moral Theory', 323ff

<sup>44</sup> Metz, 'Towards an African Moral Theory', 324

<sup>45</sup> Metz, 'Towards an African Moral Theory', 324ff

If Metz is to succeed in developing a moral theory which is different from those found in Western philosophy, he needs to find a principle which explains the first set of shared intuitions, as well the second set of intuitions which are more specifically African.

Furthermore, such a theory should account for the emphasis on community in African thinking, but yet protect personal liberty. Metz considers six principles as possibilities for fulfilling this task,<sup>46</sup> but favours the following one because it alone expresses the idea that moral value lies not in the individual, but rather in the *relationship* between individuals:

An action is right and just insofar as it produces harmony and reduces discord; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to develop community.<sup>47</sup>

Metz considers this to be the most complete formulation of an African ethic found in the literature because it reflects what he understands to be the intrinsically relational nature of African moral thinking. He states that this formulation of *Ubuntu* conceives of positive relationships as constitutive of moral good – as opposed to any kind of self-realisation on the part of the agent. That which connects people is right while that which separates people is wrong.<sup>48</sup> He substantiates his argument by quoting one of Tutu's characterisations of

*Ubuntu*:

Harmony, friendliness, community are great goods. Social harmony is for us the *summum bonum*—the greatest good. Anything that subverts or undermines this sought-after good is to be avoided like the plague. Anger, resentment, lust for revenge, even success through aggressive competitiveness, are corrosive of this good.<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> Metz, 'Towards an African Moral Theory', 328ff

<sup>47</sup> Metz, 'Towards an African Moral Theory', 333

<sup>48</sup> Metz, 'Towards an African Moral Theory', 334

<sup>49</sup> Tutu, No Future Without Forgiveness, 35 quoted in Metz, 'Towards an African Moral Theory', 334

Metz is aware that there are a number of problems associated with his notion of harmony and poses a list of questions that still need to be clarified in the conclusion to his article.

Examples of these questions are ‘must harmony be realized in order to do right?’, ‘may one ever promote harmony globally at the expense of the local?’ or ‘what, if any, constraints are there on the way one may promote harmony?’ These questions notwithstanding (he believes that they can be effectively answered, although he has not done so within the scope of his essay), Metz believes that his formulation is the most promising way to construct an African moral theory because it has developed Tutu’s understanding in terms of fundamental duties towards others.

We would argue that Metz’s project is laudable in that it attempts to give moral content to *Ubuntu* as opposed to ‘a person is a person through other persons’, which, as discussed below, could be read as essentially simply an empirical observation. However, we would suggest that there are a number of problems with Metz’s project of providing a grounding principle for *Ubuntu*. In the first place, we must question whether Metz is correct to postulate that an action is morally right insofar as it produces harmony. As we shall go to argue in chapter five, to suggest that consensus – closely related to harmony – is *necessarily* morally good is highly problematic. One could easily envisage actions which are morally right, particularly actions involving standing up for the rights of the voiceless and marginalised, as causing great *disharmony* in any given community. Nyasha Mboti rightly questions this presumed equivalence between harmony and right action when he rejects an *Ubuntu* which is seen

solely in rectilinear terms of shared goodwill. Instead, I [have] argued, there is renewed scope to see *ubuntu* as referencing a messier, undisciplined relationship between persons. Relationships between persons that are broken and fractious, or harmonious and pleasing, are neither better nor worse than the

other. That is, I posited an isotropic equivalence which would allow us to imagine instances where broken relationships are as authentically human and humanizing as much as harmonious relationships, broken relationships as ethically desirable as harmonious ones, and harmonious relations as potentially oppressive and false as disharmonious ones.<sup>50</sup>

Beyond simply his understanding of the notion of harmony, we would further question whether Metz's analytical approach, in which he attempts to establish a normative principle to underpin *Ubuntu*, in any way reflects the natural consequence of the relationality integral to *Ubuntu*, i.e. a human response of compassion to the Other, and in particular the Other who is suffering. Metz's principle, cited above, is too functional and formulaic to convey a sense of one human being overwhelmed by the affliction of another, and being moved to action. The formulation that 'an action is right just insofar as it produces harmony and reduces discord' does nothing to enlighten us about the motivations of the agent performing that action. For example, one could envisage a scenario wherein someone gives money to the poor because he or she feels that that will produce greater social harmony and it is therefore the right thing to do, but they do so deeply resentful about the money that they have given away. This grudging generosity fulfils the criteria of Metz's principle, but hardly represents *Ubuntu* precisely because it eliminates the emotional and spiritual human response to the suffering of another human being.

In this regard, it is important to place *Ubuntu* in the context of *African* suffering in particular. There can be little doubt that Africa has been the site of the greatest suffering and conflict in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century worlds. Numerous, seemingly intractable wars, drought, famine and

---

<sup>50</sup> Nyasha Mboti, 'May the Real Ubuntu Please Stand Up?' in *Journal of Media Ethics*, 30:125–147, 2015, 141

disease have characterised the recent history of the continent. This catalogue of recent horrors also represents a tragic continuum with those experienced by Africans in their colonial past. In the words of Wole Soyinka:

The crimes that the African continent commits against her kind are of a dimension and, unfortunately, of a nature that appears to constantly provoke memories of the historic wrongs inflicted upon the continent by others. There are moments when it almost appears as if there is a diabolical continuity (and inevitability?) to it all - that the conduct of latter-day slave-runners is merely the stubborn precipitate of a yet unexpiated past.<sup>51</sup>

This sense of the weight of centuries of history as being the cause for Africa's present woes adds a sense of despair to the sufferings of Africans – there seems to be little prospect of an 'unexpiated past' giving way to a hopeful future.

Richard Bell has argued, insightfully in our view, that the suffering of Africa must be seen as being of a different order to that of other places. He argues that the level of suffering and scale of violence is such in Africa that

[a]ll human spiritual striving is thwarted, and sustained harmdoing clouds the capacity for humans to hope for some good. A sense of tragedy and evil grips the most ordinary levels of life. This theme, of course, cuts across cultures and continents...it surfaces like a natural spring wherever evil and suffering are a commonplace experience...Nowhere, however, is this more apparent now than in Africa, and it has been this way for a very long time.<sup>52</sup>

The intensity and prevalence of suffering in Africa must necessarily shape theologies which seek to be relevant to the continent. Such is the scale of that suffering in Africa that we

---

<sup>51</sup> Wole Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory*, cited in Bell, *Understanding African Philosophy*, 73

<sup>52</sup> Bell, *Understanding African Philosophy*, 73-74

would argue that any credible African theology must be particularly characterised by solidarity with, and compassion for, those who suffer.

The theology of *Ubuntu* is thus much more than the normative ethical system which Metz is attempting to construct. By virtue of the relationality on which it is premised, the theology of *Ubuntu* calls for a response of compassion to the afflicted. The distinction between a normative ethical system on the one hand and *Ubuntu* as a human response to human suffering is well illustrated by Gyeke's enlightening discussion of western ethics and supererogationism. The basis of his critique is the definition of a supererogatory act (*super* in Latin means 'above') as one 'that is beyond the call of duty, that is over and above what a moral agent is required to do'.<sup>53</sup> Having outlined what he sees as this western definition of supererogatory acts, Gyeke questions the validity of the central assumption made within it. It is an assumption which he deems to be characteristic of western ethics, namely that there are limits to the legitimate obligations that can be imposed on moral agents.<sup>54</sup> For example, we may wish to help someone in need, but find it impossible to do so because of constraints such as distance or our own lack of financial resources. We may feel that the constraints preventing us from performing the act of assistance – which renders it a supererogatory act - remove any moral obligation from us in this instance.

However Gyeke argues – significantly and correctly in our view - that supererogatory acts *should* be required of the moral agent. This is because the creation of communal welfare

---

<sup>53</sup> Kwame Gyeke, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 71

<sup>54</sup> See his discussion of supererogationism in Gyeke, *Tradition and Modernity*, 70-73

demands that we fight against anything which seeks to circumscribe the responsibilities which people have with regards to other people<sup>55</sup>:

The moral life, which essentially involves paying regard to the needs, interests, and well-being of *others*, already implies self-sacrifice and loss, that is loss of something – one’s time, money, strength and so on. There is, in my view, no need, therefore, to place limits on the form of the self-sacrifice and, hence, the extent of our moral responsibilities.<sup>56</sup>

The key elements of Gyeke’s approach to the moral life here seem to be qualities which reflect self-giving – such as compassion and generosity – which go beyond the expectations expressed in normative ethical principles. The cornerstone of Metz’s principle, that ‘an action is right just insofar as it produces harmony and reduces discord’ simply does not go far enough in expressing the self-sacrifice at the heart of authentic community. Metz’s principle has the connotations of a rational calculation about the right action, and cannot capture the spiritual and emotional force of *Ubuntu* as a compassionate personal response to, and act of solidarity with, other human beings, and *afflicted* human beings in particular.

Mogobe Ramose has also taken issue with Metz’s contention that African ethics should be premised on a normative principle.<sup>57</sup> For Ramose, Metz’s attempt to find a ‘comprehensive basic norm’ is a failure to appreciate the distinctiveness of African ethical thinking from that found within western thinking. In particular, he criticises Metz’s normative principle for being constructed upon three elements dismissed by African ethics – immutability, essentiality and eternity; instead, he sees African morality as premised on a multiplicity of ethical principles. Ramose argues that *Ubuntu* is consistent with the African philosophical

---

<sup>55</sup> Gyeke, *Tradition and Modernity*, 72

<sup>56</sup> Gyeke, *Tradition and Modernity*, 73

<sup>57</sup> See Mogobe B. Ramose, ‘But Hans Kelsen was not born in Africa: a reply to Thaddeus Metz’, *South African Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 26, Issue 4, 2007, 347-355

understanding that motion is the principle of *be-ing*. Ramose argues that *Ubuntu* is a gerund – it is something which can only be experienced in the context of doing, of activity.

Therefore it may not be rendered as an –ism, because it always a –ness (and he therefore takes issue with Samkange’s notion of *Hunhuism* or *Ubuntuism* which we referred to above).<sup>58</sup> It is on the basis of his understanding of activity or motion as the premise of the principle of *be-ing* that Ramose makes an important distinction between ‘humanity’ and ‘human-ness’:

The former is the inhabitant of Plato’s world of Ideas in which the ideas are stagnant, immutable and eternal. But the universe of –ness is characterized by dynamism, change and temporality. It is therefore problematical to accept the meaning of *ubuntu* as consistent with the philosophic perspective from which the concept [of humanity] proceeds.<sup>59</sup>

Thus while he agrees that *Ubuntu* has a strong philosophical basis, Ramose takes issue with those philosophers who attempt to reduce it to one essence. He charges that Augustine Shutte is guilty of this when he attempts to reduce *Ubuntu* to ‘the community’. In the passage with which Ramose takes issue, Shutte writes as follows:

In this book, I am going to use two ideas about human nature, one European, the other African, as a foundation for an ethic of *UBUNTU* for a new South Africa...The European idea is the idea of freedom, that individuals have the power of free choice. The African idea is the idea of community, that persons depend on other persons to be persons. I will use these two ideas to construct an ethic of *UBUNTU* that is true to the African tradition but which can be applied to the new world that European science and technology is in the process of creating.<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> Mogobe B. Ramose, ‘The ethics of *ubuntu*’ in P.H. Coetzee and A.P. Roux (eds.), *Philosophy from Africa* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 2003), 381-382

<sup>59</sup> Ramose, ‘The ethics of *ubuntu*’, 384

<sup>60</sup> Augustine Shutte, *UBUNTU: An Ethic for a New South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001), 10

With reference to his methodology, Ramose finds it problematic that Shutte – as a white South African – is interpreting *Ubuntu* from a European perspective. (Interestingly in Gade’s research about the understandings of *Ubuntu* amongst South Africans of African descent, which was cited in the previous chapter, he explained that the reason he felt it necessary to restrict his research to people of African descent was that academic discussion about *Ubuntu* has been deeply influenced by scholars who are *not* of African descent. Gade points out that of the twenty-two articles about *Ubuntu* which at his time of writing had appeared in the *South African Journal of Philosophy*, only four have been authored by Africans.<sup>61</sup> He saw his research as an important corrective to this imbalance.) For his part, Shutte freely acknowledges that his perspective is a western one when he says:

I have done my best to be true to the different traditions, the African and the European. Because I myself have been brought up and educated in the European tradition, I have been especially careful to test what I have written on African colleagues and friends.<sup>62</sup>

Having acknowledged his European background, Shutte states that his intention is a creative integration of European and African thought:

... my ultimate aim is creative, rather than critical. I want to create and apply an ethic of *UBUNTU* that is based on the genuinely universal insights of European and African thought, which, because these insights themselves can be reconciled, will be able to reconcile the different elements of a new South African culture.<sup>63</sup>

Ramose notes that Shutte admits to looking at *Ubuntu* from a European perspective - yet, he says, Shutte does not explain why it is necessary to metamorphose *Ubuntu* in this way.

---

<sup>61</sup> Gade, ‘What is Ubuntu’, 486

<sup>62</sup> Shutte, *UBUNTU: An Ethic for a New South Africa*, 10

<sup>63</sup> Shutte, *UBUNTU: An Ethic for a New South Africa*, 11

Ramose clearly feels that strongly that it is not appropriate for a ‘stranger’ standing ‘at least one remove from *Ubuntu* to embark on this project of changing it in order to achieve the creative integration of European and African thought. For Ramose, Shutte’s claims that, firstly, the insights of *Ubuntu* ethics are universal rather than African and, secondly, that it is not his intention to give an exposition of *Ubuntu*, but to use its insights creatively, are

at best to deny the best to conceal the philosophic character of *ubuntu*, at worst to deny that *ubuntu* has any philosophic character at all. To dissolve the specificity of *ubuntu* into abstract ‘universality’ is to deny its right to be different.<sup>64</sup>

We would disagree with Ramose’s contention that Shutte’s attempt to achieve a creative integration between European and African thought is an illegitimate enterprise (no doubt it is a criticism he would equally make of this present study!). The notion that African ethics or philosophy can only be authentic if untainted by European influence rests on the premise that such ideological purity is possible to achieve – which we called into question on ethical and epistemological grounds in the previous chapter. Ramose seems to be in the contradictory position of arguing that African ethics transcends essentialist categorisations and is dynamic and constantly evolving, yet asserting that by definition it cannot have any points of convergence with European thought. Positing such a stark dualism between the two seems precisely to lead us into the essentialism which Ramose is seeking to avoid.

That said, we would very much concur with Ramose’s understanding of *Ubuntu* as *be-ing*. This emphasis on motion and agency within *Ubuntu* is very much consistent with the theme at the heart of this thesis: the recovery of the subject and its agency. *Ubuntu* must be

---

<sup>64</sup> Ramose, *The ethics of ubuntu*, 383

understood as a process of becoming in community, as active and compassionate solidarity with the afflicted, rather than a rigidly rational system of normative principles.

## **Conclusion**

We have argued that the most prominent current definition of *Ubuntu*, ‘a person is a person throughout the persons’, is crucial to understanding relationality as constitutive of personhood, but is flawed in that it conflates morality with community, and can potentially lead to collectivism. This definition of *Ubuntu* is challenged and enriched by other conceptions of it. Understanding *Ubuntu* as a moral quality which defines personhood is central to developing an inclusive vision of the human community. It is also a moral quality, to which the oppressed appeal within the oppressors, even as the struggle against them continues. To conceive of *Ubuntu* as a philosophical or ethical system functions as a necessary corrective to the lack of ethical content in the first definition. However, we have argued that *Ubuntu* is far more than an intellectually coherent ethical system – it is a response of compassion to the Other, with whom we are in relationship. This is very much the starting point of the theology of *Ubuntu*, to which we now turn our attention in greater detail

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ‘A DELICATE NETWORK OF INTERDEPENDENCE’ – AN OVERVIEW OF THE THEOLOGY OF *UBUNTU*

In turning more specifically to an appraisal of the theology of *Ubuntu* itself, our focus will be on its most well-known exponent, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and Michael Battle’s presentation of his thought. That said, the *Ubuntu* paradigm has been developed by many other thinkers beyond Tutu, and represents a now a well-worn path in Black and African theologies (see the references which follow). Essentially, it centres on the view that the western understanding of the human being is fundamentally flawed because of its emphasis on an individualism premised on Cartesian dualism and rationalism, and a more authentic conception of the human being is to be found in the African worldview, which stresses that persons are constituted through community. Perhaps its most well-known expression in African theology, prior to Tutu, was John Mbiti’s *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1969). In it, in oft-quoted words, he deliberately evoked Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum* when he summarised African philosophical anthropology as follows:

The individual can only say: ‘I am because we are: and since we are, therefore I am. This is the cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man’<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1969), 106

As with Battle, other theologians who deal with Tutu and *Ubuntu* offer very little by the way of *critical perspectives*<sup>2</sup>, which is where this thesis seeks to make a particular contribution. For example, in a recent collection of South African conference papers, *Practicing [sic] Ubuntu: Practical Theological Perspectives on Injustice, Personhood and Human Dignity*<sup>3</sup>, the emphasis is on the practical application of *Ubuntu*, but there is little attempt to explore alternative definitions or to adopt a rigorously critical approach. There were a couple of exceptions. In his essay in this volume<sup>4</sup>, Vhumani Magezi called for what he describes as a ‘liminal ubuntu’ (which is inclusive and emphasizes service to all humanity) to replace ‘traditional African ubuntu’ (which is exclusive and emphasizes only the local geographical community and close family and friends). In their contribution, Tucker and Masango give limited and very brief expression to some of the critiques of *Ubuntu* outlined below – such as its potential stifling of personal development, its repression of individual conscience and opinion, and the danger of *Ubuntu*’s emphasis on social harmony defeating justice and accountability.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Works which offer an analysis of *Ubuntu* without a substantive critical edge include, Samuel A. Paul, *The Ubuntu God: Deconstructing a South African Narrative of Oppression* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2009); Julius Gathogo, ‘African Philosophy as Expressed in the Concepts of Hospitality and Ubuntu’ in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 130 (March 2008), 39-53; Nwamilorho Joseph Tshwane, ‘The Rainbow Nation: a critical analysis of the notions of community in the thinking of Desmond Tutu’, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, UNISA, 2009 – despite the title there is very little criticism of Tutu’s theology!; the same might be said of John Klaasen, ‘The interplay between The Christian story and The Public story: In search of commonalities for moral formation under democratic rule’, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Stellenbosch, 2008, which focuses on Tutu and Ubuntu in Chapter 6, 181-211;

<sup>3</sup> Dreyer, Jaco and Dreyer, Yolanda and Foley, Edward and Nel, Malan (eds.) *Practicing [sic] Ubuntu: Practical Theological Perspectives on Injustice, Personhood and Human Dignity* (Zurich: Lit Verlag, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Vhumani Magezi, ‘*Ubuntu* in flames – injustice and disillusionment in post-colonial Africa: A Practical Theology for new ‘liminal’ *Ubuntu* and personhood’ in Dreyer, Dreyer, Foley and Nel (eds.), *Practicing [sic] Ubuntu: Practical Theological Perspectives on Injustice, Personhood and Human Dignity* (Zurich: Lit Verlag, 2017), 111-122

<sup>5</sup> A. Roger Tucker and Maake J. Masango, ‘Stew, smelting or crucible? – Harnessing the spirit of *Ubuntu* in South Africa’, in Dreyer, Dreyer, Foley and Nel (eds.), *Practicing [sic] Ubuntu: Practical Theological Perspectives on Injustice, Personhood and Human Dignity* (Zurich: Lit Verlag, 2017), 145-157, with 150-153 of particular relevance, highlighting weaknesses within *Ubuntu*

In his latest book, *Pharaohs on Both Sides of the Blood-Red Waters*<sup>6</sup>, South African theologian, Allan Boesak, also offers some insightful critical perspectives on *Ubuntu* (see chapter 4). However, his analysis of the problem centres on situations where *Ubuntu* has, to use his term, ‘taken flight’, rather than on the thesis put forward here – which is that there are problems intrinsic to the very definition of *Ubuntu*. Boesak also focuses very specifically on problematic role of *Ubuntu* within the Truth and Reconciliation Commission – which is certainly crucial, and to which we shall return below - rather the broader approach adopted here. It should also be noted that there has much more critical discourse within philosophy regarding *Ubuntu*, than has been the case with theology. This is reflected, for example, in the volume of essays edited by Praeg and Magadla, *Ubuntu: Curating the Archive*<sup>7</sup>, many of which explore the critical questions raised below.

Common to much of the theology of *Ubuntu*, as we have already made reference to, is a critique of Cartesianism. In our analysis of *Ubuntu*, therefore, it is necessary for us to develop some understanding of this Cartesian tradition, a task to which we will turn at greater length in later chapters. At present, it is enough to note that, whereas for Mbiti, in the quote above, his selfhood is defined by, and manifested in, the context of community, for Descartes it is a property internal to himself, bound up with his rationality. The Cartesian ‘I’ is affirmed as being independent not only from the external world beyond, but from the body itself. Descartes concluded that he

was a substance, of which the whole essence or nature consists in thinking, and which in order to exist, needs no place and depends on no material thing; so this *I*, that is to say, the mind... is entirely distinct from the body, and that even if the body were not, it would not cease to be all that it is.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Alan Aubrey Boesak, *Pharaohs on Both Sides of the Blood-Red Waters* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2017)

<sup>7</sup> Praeg, Leonard and Magadla, Siphokazi, *Ubuntu: Curating the Archive* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Kwazulu-Natal, 2014)

<sup>8</sup> Rene Descartes, *A Discourse on Method*, trans. J. Veitch (London: Dent, 1637), 53-54

Ifeanyi Menkiti takes issue with what he sees as Descartes' attempt to define personhood in terms of a particular characteristic which is distinct from the community:

As far as Africans are concerned, the reality of the communal world takes precedence over the reality of individual life histories...It is the community which defines the person as a person, *not some isolated static quality of rationality, will or memory*<sup>9</sup> (italics mine).

In contrast to the Cartesian emphasis on an epistemological foundation for personhood, then, the African emphasis is relational.

### **The Theology of *Ubuntu* and the African Worldview**

The theological critique of Cartesianism was a significant element within the Africanisation of Christianity within the continent, which started in the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, having been given some momentum by the process of decolonisation. The theology of *Ubuntu* must thus be seen in the context of other African spiritual and cosmological ideas, which were incorporated into African Christianity. Njongonkulu Winston Ndugane<sup>10</sup>, the former Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, identifies two aspects of the African worldview, apart from *Ubuntu* itself, which have been particularly relevant to the development of indigenous Christianity, and also directly challenge the Cartesian conception of the autonomous human being.

In the first instance, Ndugane speaks of one of the Zulu words for God, which is *Nkulunkulu*, meaning 'the greatest of the greatest'.<sup>11</sup> This is a god which is unknowable, above all things, and which does not have any anthropomorphic quality; the word is more a reference to a

---

<sup>9</sup> I. A. Menkiti, 'Person and Community in African traditional thought', in R. A Wright (ed.), *African Philosophy: An Introduction* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1984), 172

<sup>10</sup> Njongonkulu Winston Ndugane, '*UTutu: Ngumntu lowo*' [Tutu: The one in whom full personhood is manifested] in Hulley, Kretzschmar and Pato (eds.), *Archbishop Tutu: Prophetic Witness in South Africa*, 71-79

<sup>11</sup> Ndugane, '*UTutu: Ngumntu lowo*', 77

creative force than a personal God. Importantly, because this God is integrated within creation rather than sitting outside of it, there is no separation between the material and the spiritual. It is a form of African cosmology which could not countenance any form of dualism, Cartesian or otherwise. In the words of Ejeh:

... the visible and the invisible, these are not two separate and independent entities. They are aspects of one and the same reality comprising basically, the heavens and heavenly bodies of the invisible world and creatures of the visible world down below. The basis of interconnection and interrelation between these two realms is their participation in the Supreme Vital Force of the creator in which every creature shares according to their kind, thereby forming a dynamic and ontological relationship among creatures-inter-being.<sup>12</sup>

The second significant aspect of the African worldview is the relationship between the living and the dead, premised on understanding of life as one continuum, with different phases. Thus the *Abaphantsi*, the living dead, are understood as having some form of heightened existence, but still the same people they were here on earth. Importantly, these ancestors are in communion with one another, and indeed with those still on earth. Ifefe summarizes it thus:

It [relationality] permeates all of African understanding of the natural world, humanity, the ecosystems, and life beyond the present life. Human life is connected to the ancestral world and linked with God, gods, divinities, spirits, and other forces in the universe. Without relationship of interaction among the various things, persons, and beings in the universe, there is no life. Life will be stagnant, immobile, and inert. No life or being exists without being related to other beings and realities.<sup>13</sup>

In sum, we might say that relationality is at the very foundation of African cosmology. We can further see how this worldview presents a radical challenge to Cartesianism, and is in

---

<sup>12</sup> Ameh Ejeh, cited in Mark Omorovie Ikeke, 'The Ecological Crisis and the Principle of Relationality in African Philosophy', *Philosophy Study*, April 2015, Vol. 5, No. 4, 182-183

<sup>13</sup> Ikeke, 'The Ecological Crisis', 182

continuity with the theology of *Ubuntu*, with its emphasis on interdependence. However, the critical question for our purposes is also whether such a worldview allows sufficiently for personal freedom and agency – it is a question we shall address throughout this study.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Theology of *Ubuntu* and Tutu’s Life: Some Vignettes**

Tutu’s understanding of the theology of *Ubuntu* has been very much exemplified by his own life and work, particularly in the context of apartheid in South Africa. An exhaustive biography of Tutu is beyond the scope of this thesis, but noting some key events from his life may give insight into the context in which his theology developed. Born in 1931, he was very much a ‘child of modern South Africa’,<sup>15</sup> in that he had parents from different cultural and language groupings. His father was a Xhosa and his mother was a Motswana; the young Tutu thus learned to speak both Xhosa and Tswana, as well as, later, English and Afrikaans. His own indeterminate ethnic identity became a source of humour, through which he ridiculed the apartheid government’s obsession with ethnicity.<sup>16</sup> Tutu made the point that if more South Africans were less sure of their racial identity, building a new, common, South African identity would become a good deal easier. Thus, we see in Tutu’s own family background the beginnings of a broad and inclusive humanism, which would inform his theology of *Ubuntu*.

---

<sup>14</sup> Ikeke, ‘The Ecological Crisis’, 182

<sup>15</sup> John Allen, *Rabble-Rouser for Peace: The Authorised Biography of Desmond Tutu* (London: Ebury Publishing, 2006), 10

<sup>16</sup> Charles Villa-Vicencio, ---“‘Tough and Compassionate’: Desmond Mpilo Tutu” in Leonard Hulley, Louise Kretzschmar and Luke Lungile Pato (eds.), *Archbishop Tutu: Prophetic Witness in South Africa* (Cape Town: Human and Rosseau, 1996), 46

Growing up in Klerksdorp, a conservative northern town in South Africa, Tutu was exposed to all the harsh realities of apartheid. He says of his childhood:

I just thought life was organised in such a way that white people lived in the nice part, you lived in the township, and that was how God organised it. You knew you had to enter the post office through a separate entrance, and generally get treated like dirt. You didn't question it.<sup>17</sup>

Yet one incident gave the young Tutu an important insight into how South African society might be differently ordered. In discussing the influence of Trevor Huddleston on his life, Tutu recalled the moment that the English priest showed a courtesy to his (Tutu's) mother, who was a domestic worker:

This white man in a big black hat and a white flowing cassock swept past... You could have knocked me down with a feather... He doffed his hat to my mother. Now that seemed perfectly normal thing I suppose for him, but for me, it was almost mind-boggling, that a white man could doff his hat to my mother, a black woman, really a nonentity in South Africa's terms.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, we see how, in the young Desmond's mind, the Church's affirmation of black personhood stood in stark contrast to the dehumanising and belittling effects of apartheid. Denouncing the latter, and standing resolutely for the former, were the cornerstones of Tutu's later public ministry. This recognition of the divinity within all people, especially those who were disregarded and marginalised in society, was also the foundation of his theology of *Ubuntu*.

---

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Allen, *Rabble-Rouser for Peace*, 23

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Allen, *Rabble-Rouser for Peace*, 26. Allen points out that Tutu's dating of the incident attributed to a period before Huddleston came to South Africa. The priest Tutu is recalling from his childhood might have been Huddleston's predecessor, also a white English priest, and of similar physique to Huddleston – but that does not alter the significance of the exchange.

It was a message he proclaimed boldly, as demonstrated in his famous confrontation with P. W. Botha, the then South African president, in 1988. Tutu had gone to see Botha to seek clemency for the Sharpeville Six - a group of political activists who were facing execution after being convicted of the killing of the deputy mayor of Sharpeville. Their convictions had generated an international outcry, not only because police investigators had assaulted witnesses and suspects, but also because most of the defendants were not accused of directly causing the deputy mayor's death, but simply being part of a crowd that was present at the time (the notorious 'common purpose' doctrine).<sup>19</sup>

The meeting between Tutu and Botha is described in some detail by Tutu's biographer.<sup>20</sup> Tutu's personal assistant, who had never met Botha, recalls being struck by the president's size (he was a tall man) in relation to the rather small Tutu – there was something of the David and Goliath about the encounter! The president quickly moved on from the matter of the Sharpeville Six to discuss a large-scale demonstration that had been led by Tutu and other church leaders in Cape Town the previous day. Wagging his finger in his trademark, belligerent style, Botha proceeded to aggressively berate Tutu for instigating an illegal march, for his support of the African National Congress, for advocating sanctions, and contacting foreign leaders with the aim of getting them to interfere in South Africa's domestic affairs. Botha's demeanour was not only very confrontational, it was also highly patronising.

As Botha continued his verbal assault without giving any opportunity for a response, the point came when Tutu had had enough:

---

<sup>19</sup> Allen, *Rabble-Rouser for Peace*, 3

<sup>20</sup> Allen, *Rabble-Rouser for Peace*, 1-7

... an anger born of decades of observing the consequences of apartheid stirred within. Tutu thought to himself: "Our people have suffered for so long. I might never get this chance again." Shaking a finger back at Botha he said: "Look here, I'm not a small boy. Don't think you're talking to a small boy. I'm not here as if you're my principal... I thought was talking to a civilised person and there are courtesies involved."<sup>21</sup>

The image of the diminutive Tutu standing up to the towering Botha, reciprocating his finger wagging, refusing to be treated with a lack of courtesy, is a powerful and significant one. On the one hand, it speaks of an important aspect of Tutu's personality; as well as being compassionate and a pastor par excellence, he could also be tough and resolute, and was given to displays of righteous anger. Yet there is a broader symbolism operating within this picture, which has to do with the refusal of black people to be subservient and passive in the face of whites' attempts to dominate and subjugate them.

When Tutu thought to himself, above, '*Our people have suffered for so long. I might never get this chance again*', it may refer to the fact that he needs to take the opportunity to highlight the hardships black people have endured. Yet there is also a strong sense in which he is saying that this white-black, master-servant mode of discourse has gone on for too long, that black people can no longer accept being spoken to in ways which reinforce their inferiority and subservience. In that moment, Tutu became an embodiment of *Ubuntu*. Central to this thesis is the idea that *Ubuntu*, as much as it is a recognition that a person is constituted through relationships, it is also the expression of the dignity, agency and autonomy of the self. It is precisely this selfhood which Tutu was asserting in his altercation with Botha.

---

<sup>21</sup> Allen, *Rabble-Rouser for Peace*, 1-7

Eight years later, Tutu, now chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and Botha, long since retired - having been forcibly removed from the presidency by his party - met once again in George, on the southern Cape coast.<sup>22</sup> In what was a much more cordial meeting, Tutu tried to persuade Botha to appear before the Amnesty committee of the TRC – which he was refusing to do – because of his involvement in the apartheid regime’s violations of human rights.<sup>23</sup> Botha promised to provide written answers to the TRC’s questions, but they were not forthcoming after the meeting with Tutu. With more questions emerging about Botha’s role in apartheid atrocities, the Human Rights Violations Committee decided to subpoena him to appear before the TRC. When Botha refused to attend, he was summoned to court.

At the trial, Tutu, reluctantly, appeared as a witness for the prosecution. After a long cross-examination by the lawyers for the defence, Tutu asked the magistrate for permission to make the final appeal to Botha:

Your worship... I want to appeal to him to take this chance... to say that he may not himself even [have] intended the suffering... He may not have given orders or authorised anything... I am just saying that the government that he headed caused many of our people deep, deep anguish and pain and suffering... If Mr Botha was able to say: I am sorry that the policies of my government caused you pain. Just that... That would be a tremendous thing and I appeal to him.<sup>24</sup>

Botha did not respond. However, Tutu’s emotionally-charged plea to his conscience reveals another very significant aspect of *Ubuntu* – the recognition of the humanity of the oppressor.

---

<sup>22</sup> Allen, *Rabble-Rouser for Peace*, 355-356

<sup>23</sup> The TRC’s goal was to promote reconciliation through offering amnesty to perpetrators of human rights violations on both sides of the struggle in South Africa, providing they made a full disclosure of their crimes. The work of the TRC is analysed in greater detail below.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Allen, *Rabble-Rouser for Peace*, 357

Tutu was always at great pains to emphasise that he was vehemently opposed to apartheid, not to white people in themselves. There was always an open invitation to whites to be part of a new and transformed South Africa, provided that they were willing to repent and to relinquish privilege. The theology of *Ubuntu* represents both the expression of selfhood of the oppressed, as well as the opportunity for the oppressors to rediscover their humanity; it thus points to a vision of a reconciled humanity, a vision to which Tutu gave prophetic voice.

### **Tutu's Theology of *Ubuntu***

Tutu's thinking was laid out in systematic form in Michael Battle's *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*.<sup>25</sup> It remains the most prominent text in the theology of *Ubuntu* literature, and we shall thus devote considerable attention to it below, as well as referencing other works by Tutu and Battle. At the core of Battle's explication of Tutu's theology is what he calls four 'vectors', the first of which is '*Ubuntu Builds Interdependent Community*'. He clarifies this by quoting from Tutu:

Apartheid says people are created for separation...people are created for alienation and division, disharmony and disunity; we say, the scripture says, people are made for togetherness, people are made for fellowship.<sup>26</sup>

For Tutu, *vulnerability* is crucial to the notion of interdependence. Vulnerability leads to an understanding of one's need for others, in contrast to social systems (characteristic of western society) which encourage a high degree of competitiveness and selfishness.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> See footnote 1, chapter 1

<sup>26</sup> Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, 40-41

<sup>27</sup> Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, 41

Battle's second vector in Tutu's theology is '*Ubuntu Theology Recognizes Persons as Distinctive*'. Here Battle refers to the way in which *Ubuntu* theology addresses the question of the fragmented relationships between black and white people in South African history.<sup>28</sup> This fragmentation was caused by the fact that apartheid interpreted difference as being the basis of one race's superiority over another; conversely, *Ubuntu* framed difference positively as *distinctiveness*. By its very nature, each person's distinctiveness is constituted by their connection with others; people are distinct *from* others and their distinctiveness is recognised *by* others. Recognising the distinctiveness of others through *Ubuntu* thus provides an alternative framework for racial relationships, hitherto defined by vengeance and rivalry.

He quotes Tutu:

When you look at someone with the eyes of love...you see a reality different from that of someone who looks at the same person without love, with hatred or just indifference.<sup>29</sup>

This celebration of distinctiveness, in contrast to way in which difference was framed by antagonism and hatred under apartheid, leads us to Battle's third vector – '*Ubuntu Theology Integrates Cultures*'.<sup>30</sup> Tutu's *Ubuntu*, argues Battle, is the means by which the other person's humanity is both recognised and transcended. This is illustrated by Battle's reference to Augustine Shutte's observations about the phenomenon of 'mutual gazing' within Zulu culture. Referring to the Zulu greeting *ndibona* ('I see you'), which is customarily met by the response *sawubona* ('yes'), Shutte notes:

In meeting your gaze, it is not the physical properties of your eyes that I fix on...What I pick up is the gaze, and in the gaze a person actively present to me. And the same is simultaneously true of you.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, 43

<sup>29</sup> Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, 44

<sup>30</sup> Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, 44

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, 45-46

Battle does not make it clear precisely and explicitly how this Zulu cultural expression is linked to Tutu, but he nevertheless takes it as evidence that

Tutu's theology guards against the Western propensity for racial classifications [Battle seems to conflate race and culture in this section of the book]. That is, Tutu's Ubuntu seeks to show that persons are more than either black or white; they are human.<sup>32</sup>

Battle is certainly correct to highlight the way in which, for Tutu, *Ubuntu* provided the blueprint for a vision of a unified South Africa, which stood in stark contrast to the contemporary reality of apartheid. It was a vision very much premised on Tutu's eucharistic theology and his ecclesiology, as is clear here in the way that he (Tutu) reflects on his time as the first black Dean of St Mary's Cathedral in Johannesburg:

And so it was exciting to follow in the footsteps of stalwarts such as Deans Palmer, Trandolph and French-Breytagh and others who had established a scintillating tradition of worship, music, preaching and social witness. I will always have a lump in my throat when I think of the children at St Mary's; pointers to what can be if our society would but become sane and normal. Here were children of all races playing, praying and learning and even fighting together, almost uniquely in South Africa... I knelt in the Dean's stall at the super 9:30 High Mass with incense, bells and everything watching a multicultural crowd file up to the altar rails to be communicated, the one bread and the one cup by a mixed team of clergy and lay ministers, with a multiracial choir, servers and sidemen - all this in apartheid mad South Africa.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, within Tutu's theology of *Ubuntu*, people are not defined by innate properties, but by the relationships between themselves and others. In this vision - wherein the distinctiveness of both individual persons and groups of people is celebrated, and seen as forming constituent

---

<sup>32</sup> Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, 46

<sup>33</sup> Tutu, *Hope and Suffering*, 34

parts a harmonious whole - one can see the basis of Tutu's famous 'rainbow nation' ideal. It is an ideal premised on the notion that relationality is the basis of personhood. Says Tutu:

A self-sufficient human being is sub-human. I have gifts that you do not have, so, consequently, I am unique – you have gifts that I do not have, so you are unique. God has made us so that we will need each other. We are made for a delicate network of interdependence.<sup>34</sup>

As *Ubuntu* is premised on integration and this notion of interdependence, so it directly challenged apartheid – Battle's fourth vector is '*Ubuntu Theology Can Overthrow Apartheid*'. In the first instance, this could be done through the capacity of *Ubuntu* to humanise whites in the eyes of black people, thus forming a sense of common humanity:

We will grow in the knowledge that they [white people] too are God's children, even though they may be our oppressors, though they may be our enemies. Paradoxically, and more truly, they are really our brothers and sisters, because we have dared, and have the privilege to call God 'Abba', Our Father. Therefore, they belong together with us in the family of God, and their humanity is caught up in our humanity, as ours is caught up in theirs.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, Tutu developed a vision of shared humanity in a country blighted by the separation that was apartheid. Battle argues that his theology of *Ubuntu* represented an alternative paradigm of community and reconciliation in a deeply divided South Africa:

Tutu's model seeks to restore the oppressor's humanity by releasing and enabling the oppressed to see their oppressors as peers under God. In this can be a mutual understanding, as Jesus teaches, through friendship (John 15:5). For Tutu, ubuntu expresses this mutuality. The relationship of oppressor and oppressed and the resulting definition of humanity are broken through ubuntu, an alternative way of being in a hostile world.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, 46

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, 47

<sup>36</sup> Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, 5

*Ubuntu* also challenged apartheid in its inherent concern for neighbour, in contrast to the fabricated racial hierarchy of South Africa at the time. Battle emphasises Tutu's description of the parable of the Good Samaritan<sup>37</sup>, which focuses on Jesus' radical reframing of the lawyer's original question, which had altogether the wrong focus. Rather than 'who is my neighbour?', the real question is 'how can I be a good neighbour?' Thus, says Tutu, what Jesus is actually saying to gathered crowd when he tells the parable is:

Who proved a neighbour to the man in need? You, gathered here, ... are meant to be asking, 'To whom am I going to be a neighbour, who is in need and whose need must I meet as a neighbour with this privilege and this responsibility?' You are the ones who are to be judged for failing to be a neighbour to those in need.<sup>38</sup>

The theology of *Ubuntu*, therefore, is characterised by the emphasis on relationship of dependence with both God and neighbour, 'in such a way that human identity is discovered therein.'<sup>39</sup> Tutu's life and ministry was based on a vision of a society which had moved beyond ethnicity as being constitutive of human identity – directly challenging the government of the day.

### **Some Critical Perspectives on Battle's Work**

Battle's analysis benefits from considerable clarity and coherence, but his account is largely descriptive and lacks an incisive critical edge; at times, he borders on the hagiographical in his treatment of Tutu. To be sure, this thesis does not seek to diminish the significance and

---

<sup>37</sup> Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, 49

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, 49

<sup>39</sup> Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, 49

value of Tutu's vision of *Ubuntu* within the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, and indeed on the global stage, as we have made clear above. Yet support for a theological idea must not mean a dropping of our intellectual guard or a suspension of the hermeneutic of suspicion. It is only through a process of critical questioning that Tutu's theology of *Ubuntu* can be developed and redefined to face the challenges which it faces (which we shall go on to fully outline below).

To be fair, Battle does acknowledge the potential problem of oppressive collectivism within African humanism. However, for him, it is through the person of Tutu himself, and particularly his sacramental Anglican spirituality, that the theology of *Ubuntu* is able to avoid the extremes of African collectivism and western individualism. He concludes that Tutu

...stresses the Christian definition of relationship, as opposed to other social forms of communalism, to define *Ubuntu*. Influenced deeply by Anglican spirituality, Tutu is able to overcome African philosophy's tendency to go to the opposite extreme of discounting individuals for the sake of community. For him, being properly related in a theological *Ubuntu* does not denigrate individuality. Instead, it builds an interdependent community.<sup>40</sup>

Battle thus explains that Tutu's theology is not simply communitarian, but has strong emphasis on the value of the individual. The following extract from one of his sermons demonstrates the extent to which the *imago dei* in each person was central to Tutu's Anglo-Catholic spirituality and theology:

Human beings must by rights not just be respected, but they must be held in awe and reverence. In our Anglican Church tradition often we have what is called the 'Reserved Sacrament' on an altar and a

---

<sup>40</sup> Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, 42

light always burns to alert the faithful that the sacrament is reserved in that part of the church. When we pass in front of the altar, we normally reverence the altar with a bow, but before the reserved sacrament we usually genuflect. It is not too fanciful to say that if we took our theology seriously, we should genuflect before each other.<sup>41</sup>

This emphasis on the value of each human person was indeed a recurring theme of Tutu's public ministry in apartheid South Africa. He preached passionately that those who had been dehumanised by oppression should have their dignity restored - a dignity that was intrinsic to every human being's status as a child of God.

Tutu's use of *Ubuntu* to give expression to a vision of a reconciled South Africa and to the notion of human mutuality is - of course - deeply attractive. Yet the articulation of a vision of a reconciled community *does not in itself give us a means of fulfilling it*. In being critical of Tutu's high ecclesiology, one might well ask – notwithstanding his remarks above about his experience of the mass at St Mary's Cathedral – where does this Church, which celebrates difference and practises generous inclusivity, actually exist? The Anglican Church, of which Tutu has been such a high profile representative, remains in the grip of homophobic and sexist theology and canon law in many parts of the Communion, and has in recent years imposed sanctions on the Episcopal Church of the USA for its progressive stance on gay marriage.<sup>42</sup> The Church in Africa – Anglican or otherwise - has, in particular, a poor record in regard to its treatment of women and homosexuals.

---

<sup>41</sup> Tutu quoted in Michael Battle, *Ubuntu: I in You*, 123 - 124

<sup>42</sup> See the 2016 statement by the Primates of the Anglican Communion, outlining the sanctions imposed on the Episcopal Church here <http://www.primates2016.org/articles/2016/01/14/statement-primates-2016/>

It may also be argued that the hierarchy which is at very heart of Tutu's Anglo-Catholic tradition militates against the kind of egalitarianism which his *Ubuntu* seems to espouse. To hold up a vision of a reconciled and inclusive church as evidence that the theology of *Ubuntu* is not oppressively collectivist is thus hardly convincing, given that it is so hard to produce evidence of such a church in practice. Instead, the Church is itself very often an example of the oppressive potential of certain forms of community, seeking to silence dissent in the name of unity and doctrinal orthodoxy.

Essentially, Battle's argument is that *Ubuntu* offers a coherent and liberative account of the human being – as long as its collectivist extremes are held in check by Christian theology and spirituality. Our counter-argument here is that this is an inadequate analysis of the weaknesses of *Ubuntu*, and Tutu's conception of it in particular. Rather than uncritically accepting it, there is a need for a thoroughgoing interrogation of *Ubuntu*, if it is to be the basis for a theology, in which human agency and subjectivity are nurtured rather than undermined. It is to that process of interrogation that we must now turn.

## Chapter Five

### A Critique of *Ubuntu* – Four Crucial Challenges

Our argument in the last chapter was that the uncritical treatment of *Ubuntu* has led to a theology of *Ubuntu* which does not lay enough emphasis on human agency and subjectivity. What, then, are the key challenges which must be addressed within *Ubuntu* if we are to develop a reformulated theology of *Ubuntu*? We believe there are four central critiques: 1) *Ubuntu* equates community with moral virtue, 2) *Ubuntu* is premised on idealised notions of community and consensus, 3) the problem of personhood is unresolved in *Ubuntu*, and 4) *Ubuntu* can legitimise patriarchy and homophobia in the name of African culture.

#### 1) *Ubuntu equates Community with Moral Virtue*

One of the central difficulties facing relational understandings of personhood is an apparent conflation of community with moral virtue. If personhood has a moral status – as is certainly the case in *Ubuntu* – and personhood can only be realised in through participation in the community, the implication would be that there is a morality innate in the concept of community. This is borne out in the way some African writers talk about morality. For example, Ekeopara defines it in the following terms:

Morality refers to the established and recognized social customs and tradition... which regulate the behaviour and conduct of individuals in society. Morality here will mean those customs and tradition, which were used to determine the rightness and wrongness of human. action in the society. These

customs and tradition were used to exercise strict control over the moral life of individuals in the society.<sup>1</sup>

Note here how Ekeopara perceives morality in terms of the regulatory norms of community, i.e. social customs and tradition. Adherence to the norms of the community by the individual is clearly equated with moral behaviour. This understanding of morality is underscored by Mojola when he says that ‘an act is right if and only if it also conforms to the rules and regulations established by the community.’<sup>2</sup> Other writers concur with this view, highlighting that morality in Africa is seen in terms of the balance and equilibrium of the community. Thus, Motlhabi asserts that ‘the central moral norms [in African society] were the maintenance of harmonious relationships within the community’<sup>3</sup> and Setiloane, in defining African morality, speaks of ‘the success of life [being] found in the ability to maintain a healthy relationship with all.’<sup>4</sup>

The question, however, is whether participation in, or ensuring the harmony of, the community can *in and of itself* be regarded as being morally virtuous. The problem can be thrown into relief if we reformulate Plato’s famous Euthyphro dilemma<sup>5</sup> by asking whether an action is good because the community approves of it, or whether the community approves

---

<sup>1</sup> Chike Augustine Ekeopara, *African Traditional Religion: An Introduction* (Calabar: Natos Affair, 2005), 72

<sup>2</sup> A. O. Mojola, *Introductory Ethics for College Students and Teachers* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1988), 31

<sup>3</sup> M. Motlhabi, ‘The Concept of Morality in African Tradition’ in B. Tlhagale and I. Mosala (eds.) *Hammering Swords into Ploughshares: Essays in Honour of Archbishop Desmond Tutu*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1986), 95

<sup>4</sup> Gabriel Setiloane, ‘Towards a Biocentric Theology and Ethic – via Africa’ in C. W. Du Toit (ed.), *Faith, Science and African Culture: African Cosmology and Africa’s Contribution to Science* (Pretoria: UNISA, 1998), 79

<sup>5</sup> Found in Plato’s dialogue *Euthyphro*, in which Socrates asks Euthyphro a question, the modified form of which has had a profound effect on religious approaches to ethics: ‘Is what is good commanded by God because it is good, or is it good because God commanded it?’ See <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/euthyphro.html>

of it because it is good? In the former instance, good is defined purely in terms of the community, whereas in the latter there are evidently criteria extrinsic to the community which make it good. That this first definition of good is highly problematic becomes clear when we cite an example of community formed around very negative moral framework, such as a criminal gang. The members of the gang may well have formed a highly cohesive and closely-knit community, characterised by strong bonds of friendship and deep, even sacrificial, commitment to each other – but clearly participating in this community or ensuring its continued harmony would be immoral rather moral actions. The gang may well deem as ‘good’ an action such as the murder of a member of a rival gang – but clearly this does not make the action any less immoral. This analogy also brings to the fore the question of negative group cohesion. Very often groups cohere and achieve unity, not on the basis of qualities intrinsic to that group, but rather on the basis of hostility towards those beyond the group. Strong social bonds may be created by close relationships within in a group, but may equally and indeed simultaneously be defined by the antagonism members of the (in) group feel towards other (out) groups.

In their critique of *Ubuntu*, to which we have already referred, Enslin and Horsthemke ask, pertinently, how the assertion that *Ubuntu* is a force ‘which unites Africans worldwide’ can be reconciled with his view that it is capable of uniting *all* cultures.<sup>6</sup> If *Ubuntu* is such a powerful force for uniting Africans, what view does it engender towards non-Africans? If *Ubuntu* promotes a strong sense of identity and belonging amongst members of the extended, family, clan or tribe, does that not carry with it at least the possibility that those beyond the bounds of those groups may be viewed as outsiders? In short, there is here the question of

---

<sup>6</sup> Enslin and Horsthemke, ‘Can Ubuntu Provide a Model for Citizenship Education in African Democracies?’, 548

whether *Ubuntu* is bound up with the tribalism which has blighted so much of Africa's recent history.

Thus, we see the potential problems of good being defined by the community. To return to the second definition within our reformulated 'Euthyphro' dilemma - that the community approves of something because it is good - we note here that 'good' is being defined by a measure external to the community. Indeed, given the dangers of the community defining good, as outlined above, we would argue that it is more coherent and constructive to acknowledge that the measure of moral virtue is extrinsic to community, rather than formed by it. However, one can immediately see that this raises a serious epistemological problem: if good is not defined by community, how can we know what it is?

A response to this problem might well take us into the realm of meta-ethics, and questions such as 'is there such a thing as good?' or 'how can we know what is good?' Clearly, a detailed theoretical answer to these questions lies beyond the scope of this thesis. However, one feels on secure theological ground, on the basis of human beings having been created *imago dei*, if we assume that freedom, justice, dignity and equality for all human beings are 'goods'. We must affirm that any theology of liberation is grounded in the belief that that which promotes human freedom, particularly the freedom of the oppressed and suffering, is integral to what constitutes Christian moral behaviour and praxis. It thus follows that, if a particular local community, bound by the constraints of a dominant culture of homophobia or sexism – as many are in some parts of Africa – held up as 'good' practices and beliefs which discriminate against gay people and women, the liberation theologian must be bound by that which is liberative, rather than by that which is being promoted by the community. It is the

belief that all human beings were created for freedom, rather than the dictates of a specific community, which must be the foundation of Christian moral orientation.

The conflation of virtue with community also means that there is a very real danger of human beings being used instrumentally within this traditional notion of *Ubuntu*, because one person's wellbeing may well be deemed a morally acceptable sacrifice for the good of the community. It is precisely this danger that Kant had in mind when he developed the second formulation of the Categorical Imperative. In giving an account of his deontological theory in *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, he outlines how we might know whether any given moral maxim should become universal law. In the first instance, he states we must be able to wish for our maxim to become universalisable without contradictions in logic or will. Secondly, and importantly for our purposes here, Kant states that one should be guided by the Formula of Humanity, which means that you should

act so that you use humanity as much in your own person as in the person of every other, always at the same time as end and never merely as means.<sup>7</sup>

Kant's ethical theory was underpinned by a strong sense of the dignity of all human beings, which he called *Achtung*<sup>8</sup> (Respect). He regarded human beings as the highest point in all of God's creation, and believed that all rational, intelligent human beings should be accorded the dignity due to them as free and rational agents. One could thus never use a human being instrumentally, even if it were for the perceived good of the community. Kant's notion of

---

<sup>7</sup> Immanuel Kant (ed and trans Allen W Wood), *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press: 2002), 46-47

<sup>8</sup> See Richard Dean, 'Humanity Formula' in Thomas E. Hill, Jr (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Kant's Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 95-97

*Achtung* has much in common with the notion of *imago dei*. While we would want to critique Kant for not developing the relational element of his anthropology, the profound sense of respect that he confers on the human being, warns us against assigning mere utilitarian value to human beings – and our contention is that is a real danger within *Ubuntu*.

In conclusion, we would argue that moral virtue is not innate to, or synonymous with, community. ‘A person is a person through other persons’ is, *per se*, not a moral statement – and to regard it as such is a *category mistake*. It thus becomes clear that this is not a definition which can adequately encapsulate *Ubuntu*. As contended in chapter three, we need a definition which has greater ethical content, one which avoids a simplistic conflation of the concept of community with moral virtue.

## 2) *Ubuntu is premised on Idealised Notions of Community and Consensus*

Linked to this first issue of community and moral virtue, is the question of whether African theology reflects a naively optimistic concept of community. The community which *Ubuntu* envisages appears to be one which by its very nature is harmonious, just and peaceful. However, the reality is that communities can be oppressive and authoritarian, and can stifle rather than enhance personhood. For many people, their identity is bound up not with accepting their place as defined by the community, but by actively engaging in a struggle to transcend the restrictions placed on them by their community.

In addition, *Ubuntu* is often presented as if it were a timeless and homogenous African concept, with a fixed definition. In fact, the reality is - as we have argued above – that *Ubuntu* is a highly contested word and its meanings have evolved according to time and context. Its meaning at any given point is as much constructed as it is rooted in African history. Indeed one could argue that in contemporary South Africa it has become a protean term: it has been promoted or invoked in such diverse fields as religion, education, ethics, jurisprudence and business management - one must wonder whether the concept does not in the process become devalued and indeed whether it can be manipulated. Christopher Marx, alarmed at the way in which the concept has been co-opted to serve the interests of a new cultural nationalism which promotes conformity and stifles dissent, argues that *Ubuntu* is in fact ‘an invented tradition’ that appeals to an ‘idealized Africa’ and attempts to paper over ‘historical chasms and fractures’.<sup>9</sup>

This ‘idealized Africa’ can be clearly identified in how the role of consensus is highlighted in *Ubuntu* philosophy and theology. According to this view, consensus is integral to the *Ubuntu* understanding of community, as the means whereby the common good is realised in African society. Ramose endorses

...the communal ethos of African culture [which] placed a great value on solidarity, which in turn necessitates the pursuit of unanimity or consensus not only in such important decisions as those taken by the highest political authority...but also by the lower assemblies such as those presided over by the heads of the clan, that is, the councillors.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Marx, ‘Ubu and Ubuntu: On the Dialectics of Apartheid and Nation Building’ *Politikon* 29(1), 59

<sup>10</sup> Ramose, *African Philosophy*, 139f

Dirk Louw, in similar vein, identifies consensus as being at the heart of *Ubuntu* and presents a vision of African communal politics wherein

everyone gets an equal chance to speak up until some kind of agreement, consensus or group cohesion is reached. The important aim is expressed by words like *simunye* ('we are one', i.e. unity is strength) and slogans like 'an injury to one is an injury to all'.<sup>11</sup>

However, in an important contribution to the debate, Michael Onyebuchi Eze has taken issue with this notion of consensus within *Ubuntu*. While he acknowledges that *Ubuntu* has an element of plurality - the view that personhood is constituted through other persons implies a recognition that 'other persons' are so called precisely because we can never quite see the world through their eyes - Onyebuchi Eze nevertheless disagrees with the view that one can sustain notions of alterity and autonomy while advocating consensus.<sup>12</sup> His argument is that advocates of *Ubuntu* cannot have it both ways: one cannot claim primacy for solidarity and consensus and at the same time hold on to alterity and autonomy as core values which constitute human identity. He points out that consensus is essentially formalistic: it does not in and of itself guarantee that the community is taking the morally right path, nor presupposes any commitment to good<sup>13</sup> (reference our argument about the notion of community and moral virtue above). Thus, a violent mob may reach consensus to kill a victim, but the consensus clearly does not make the action right. Onyebuchi Eze also argues that 'postmodernism charges consensus with conceptual terrorism insofar as difference or divergence is suspect while single meta-narratives are celebrated'.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Dirk Louw, 'Ubuntu and the Challenges of Multiculturalism in Post-Apartheid South Africa' in *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. XV, No. 1-2, 2001, 19

<sup>12</sup> Michael Onyebuchi Eze, 'What is African Communitarianism? Against Consensus as a Regulative Ideal' in *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 2008, 27 (4), 386-389

<sup>13</sup> Onyebuchi Eze, 'What is African Communitarianism?', 392

<sup>14</sup> Onyebuchi Eze, 'What is African Communitarianism?', 392

Onyebuchi Eze's critique is of crucial significance because it underscores the point that consensus is, by definition, unable to equally embrace and affirm a multiplicity of narratives. In concurring with Onyebuchi Eze, we would want to ask, in the scenario given above by Louw, whether it is realistic to suppose that *all* members of the community would get an *equal* chance to speak. Is this not an idealised notion of a community which fails to take into account the hierarchies and power relations which exist in actual communities? Such an uncritical notion of community cannot go unchallenged. In every community, no matter how harmonious, there are power relations - and an ideological framework which legitimises those power relations. In every community there will be divergences between individuals regarding how much they identify with that community, and differences – in nuanced terms at the very least – in how they articulate the goals, ethos and vision of the community. In most communities, there will be those who are disaffected and marginalised, who feel as if their voices are not heard. In other words, there will be many who would strongly resist the notion that their identity is constituted by their place in the community – and who continue to resist the consensus reached by the majority or by the dominant groups within the community.

In pointing to further consequences of the heavy emphasis on consensus in African thinking, other commentators have stressed the overwhelming emotional pressure to conform, which is highly constrictive. In addition, the community's customs and values, while parochial in origin, are presented as being universalising absolutes, thus further stifling the potential for dissent. Sono makes these points clear when he describes the role of the group in African consciousness as being

overwhelming, totalistic, even totalitarian...this [group] psychology is stronger on belief than on reason; on sameness than on difference. Discursive rationality is overwhelmed by emotional identity, by the obsession to identify with and the longing to conform. To agree is more important than to disagree; conformity is cherished more than tradition. Tradition is venerated, continuity revered, change feared and difference shunned.<sup>15</sup>

As can be deduced from our analysis above, the traditional notion of consensus has had profound implications for African politics, and in particular has been the basis for a critique of multi-party democracy. Thus, it was that leaders such as Senghor and Nyere, as we have already seen, invoked a romanticised African past to underpin the notion of consensus, which they argued would be an authentically African model of politics. These leaders described

how their forebears had traditionally met as communities, rather than as individual contestants, to make political decisions. Under a village tree, elders would talk over an idea until consensus was reached. Consensus was thus the key to African politics, not competition. It therefore followed that a one-party model was the best method of recreating this style of consensus politics within the inherited modern state.<sup>16</sup>

As Thompson has outlined in his *An Introduction to African Politics*, nationalist leaders in Africa were quick to point out that there was no tradition of multi-party democracy - and the adversarial political culture which went alongside it - in Africa.<sup>17</sup> These nationalist leaders considered it foolish to adopt political institutions that evolved out of Europe's need to manage inequalities and social cleavages which were simply not present in African society.

---

<sup>15</sup> Temba Sono, *Dilemmas of African intellectuals in South Africa*, (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 1994), 7

<sup>16</sup> Alex Thompson, *An Introduction to African Politics* (Oxford: Routledge, 2010), 113

<sup>17</sup> Thompson, *African Politics*, 113

This argument is developed by South African philosopher Joe Teffo in his assessment of the democratic tradition in the African context.<sup>18</sup> Teffo's view is that a major flaw in western democracy is that it is elitist rather than fully participatory. Teffo approvingly quotes Ramose, who emphasises that emancipation or liberation must be the 'regulative principle' by which Africa's experience of imported democracy and the prospects of political praxis beyond the 'elite politics of democracy' must be gauged.<sup>19</sup> Beyond the elitism inherent western democracy, Ramose also pinpoints its adversarial nature as being profoundly unsuited to Africa:

No doubt the protagonists of this system will retort that the aim of opposition is to accede to the position of political power by displacing the ruling party. Without denying this rather egoistic aim, I still argue that, understood in this way, adversarial politics undermines the principle of solidarity in traditional African political culture.<sup>20</sup>

Other commentators build on this notion about the unsuitability of western democracy for the African context by arguing that it (western democracy) was not designed for multiracialism or multiculturalism because it reinforces the power of the numerically dominant group. South African academic and political commentator, Malegapuru William Makgoba contends that the liberal philosophy on which western democracy is based has "ignored other groups' values and cultural systems."<sup>21</sup> The solution, he says, lies in the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*, which, he believes, will provide the humanity and cohesion so evidently lacking in western democracy:

*Ubuntu* is unique in the following respects: it respects the non-material order that exists in us and among us; it fosters man's respect for himself, for others and for the environment; it has spirituality; it

---

<sup>18</sup> Joe Teffo, 'Democracy, Kingship, and Consensus: A South African Perspective' in Kwasi Wiredu (ed.) *A Companion to African Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 443-449

<sup>19</sup> Teffo, 'Democracy', 444

<sup>20</sup> Ramose, *African Philosophy*, quoted in Teffo, 'Democracy', 444

<sup>21</sup> Malegapuru William Makgoba, 'In search of the ideal democratic model for SA' (South African) *Sunday Times*, 27 October 1996

has remained non-racial; it accommodates other cultures and is the invisible force uniting Africans worldwide.<sup>22</sup>

This focus on unity and consensus was at the heart of the ideological apparatus that underpinned one-party rule in Africa. While consensus politics clearly has the admirable goals of achieving unity and harmony, in the way it seeks to absorb multiple viewpoints, it is in grave danger of establishing a kind of ‘totalitarian uniformity’<sup>23</sup> - a charge borne out by the history of one-party rule in post-colonial Africa. The civil wars and conflicts which have plagued the continent seem to indicate that what Africa needs is an increased culture of tolerance of opposition, rather than enforced political homogeneity.

One would suggest that there is at best a certain naiveté, or at worst cynical political manipulation, amongst those who promote the view that the leadership within a one party state - or indeed within a party as dominant as the African National Congress in South Africa has been – is going to use consensus for the benefit of all in the country. Far more often such ‘consensus’ becomes an ideological tool to entrench their own power. Furthermore, one would take issue with Ramose’s contention that adversarial politics necessarily undermines the principle of solidarity. Rather one would argue that strong and principled opposition is precisely a means of demonstrating solidarity with the people of the country as a whole, if such opposition is premised on principles of justice. At its best, therefore, political opposition enhances solidarity rather than undermining it.

---

<sup>22</sup> Enslin and Horsthemke, ‘Can Ubuntu Provide a Model for Citizenship Education?’, 547

<sup>23</sup> Onyebuchi Eze, Onyebuchi Eze, ‘What is African Communitarianism?’, 388

It must also be pointed out that the argument that African approaches to governance stand in contradiction to democracy fails to take cognisance of alternative approaches to democracy, which challenge crude notions of aggregative democracy and which have much in common with the consensus-based African political traditions. Seyla Benhabib, for example, has argued that public deliberation is central to the legitimacy of a liberal democracy.<sup>24</sup> To be legitimate, she argues, deliberative democracy must be strongly egalitarian, allowing all affected by a decision to initiate and to influence the agenda. Benhabib emphasises that democracy attains its legitimacy through the access of all social actors to the processes of bargaining and discussion and she goes on to create a discourse model of ethics for such a deliberative democracy.

At the heart of this model of ethics is the principle that ‘all actors have the same opportunity in participating in this process which is governed by the norms of equality and symmetry.’<sup>25</sup> Such an egalitarian mode of deliberation will need to be able to accommodate a diversity of modes of communication (e.g. rhetoric and storytelling) and will thus enable participation by minorities in society. Thus, Benhabib uses communicative theory to supplement deliberative theory in order to widen deliberation beyond its traditional association with Enlightenment norms of reason. Benhabib’s work points to a more nuanced understanding of western democracy than is present in much of the *Ubuntu* critique thereof. Democracy is very evidently not homogenous and there clearly are models which seek to incorporate broader and active participation by all groups in society within the democratic system.

---

<sup>24</sup> Enslin and Horsthemke make reference to Benhabib’s work in this regard in ‘Can Ubuntu Provide a Model for Citizenship Education?’, 552

<sup>25</sup> Seyla Benhabib, ‘Toward a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy’ in Seyla Benhabib (ed.), *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political* (Princeton University Press, 1996), 70

We must therefore call into question the supposed dichotomy between consensus based *Ubuntu* and adversarial democracy, and highlight the danger of *Ubuntu* being used as ideological justification for suppressing basic democratic human freedoms – which are enshrined in the South African constitution. Instead, our argument here is that *Ubuntu* and democracy, far from being antagonists, should be viewed as complementary components of a just society. In fact, one could say they are contingent upon each other. Certainly western democracy in itself cannot be a guarantor of human freedom. While democracy is a system intended to protect certain freedoms, there can only be true freedom for all - and the vulnerable and marginalised in particular - in a society characterised by justice, compassion and caring. Those characteristics are not the product of a democratic political system, but rather a shared moral vision of community. It is, of course, at precisely this point that *Ubuntu* can make a powerful contribution in supplementing the democratic system with its emphasis on human relationality.

In his rigorous critique of *Ubuntu*, Wim van Binsbergen expands on this notion of how its emphasis on consensus can be used as a legitimising ideology for the maintenance of power of the dominant classes within society.<sup>26</sup> He contends that this is certainly the case in the context of the ongoing and indeed increasingly more acute class conflict in the Southern Africa of today.<sup>27</sup> He argues that in post-1980 Zimbabwe and post-1990 South Africa there was an overthrow of white supremacy, but in most other respects the fundamental relations of inequality – based on class, gender, education, geographical location and so forth – were left

---

<sup>26</sup> Wim van Binsbergen, 'Ubuntu and the globalisation of Southern African thought and society', available at <http://quest-journal.net/shikanda/general/ubuntu.htm>

<sup>27</sup> van Binsbergen, 'Ubuntu and the globalisation of Southern African thought and society'

largely untouched.<sup>28</sup> Van Winsbergen contends that it is those who benefit from this continued inequality who deploy *Ubuntu* as a means of justifying their enrichment:

...while *Ubuntu* may serve as a liberating transformative concept in the hands of those who wish to reconstruct the country... it can also be wielded as a mystifying concept in the hands of those who, after the post-apartheid reshuffle, were able to personally cross over to the privileged side of the huge class divide, without being over-sensitive to the wider social costs of their individual economic and status advancement.<sup>29</sup>

One must agree with van Winsbergen that this process is clearly discernible in South Africa today. An appeal to African heritage is often used as means of forestalling criticism; those using the concept of *Ubuntu* selectively for their own private gain, seem to be saying to their fellow citizens: ‘How could you possibly question the way in which this specific situation is being handled by us, whereas it is clear that we appeal to our most cherished common African ancestral heritage, to our *Ubuntu!*’<sup>30</sup> Van Winsbergen’s concern – wholly legitimate in our view – is that when such an appeal is made on the basis of an *Ubuntu* defined as being eminently ancestral and quintessentially African, it becomes very difficult to resist.

A further question raised by van Winsbergen’s paper, relevant to our critique of the idealised conception of community within *Ubuntu*, concerns whether it is at all possible to transpose the notion of consensus from a local village context (to which it seems much more suited) to the arena of national politics, with all its complexities and conflicts. *Ubuntu* has the problem of appearing to be premised on a concept of village life which in reality no longer exists for

---

<sup>28</sup> van Winsbergen, ‘*Ubuntu* and the globalisation of Southern African thought and society’

<sup>29</sup> van Winsbergen, ‘*Ubuntu* and the globalisation of Southern African thought and society’

<sup>30</sup> van Winsbergen, ‘*Ubuntu* and the globalisation of Southern African thought and society’

many people living in Africa today. This begs the question of which of *which* community *Ubuntu* theology is referring to – in the context of postmodernity it appears that most human beings belong to, and gain a sense of identity from, communities rather than ‘The Community.’

In his response to Ramose’s argument that globalisation is a phenomenon which is external to Africa, which needs to be countered by *Ubuntu*, van Winsbergen contends that for the majority of the population of Southern Africa, they cannot be said to know and live *Ubuntu* by virtue of any sustained connection with village life. Thus, he describes the modern black Southern African as perhaps someone who might be

...a smartly dressed office clerk pursuing a modern career during the day-time on weekdays, a patron of fashionable cocktail bars after work, and a prominent Christian church elder on most Sundays... only to return to the village (at a distance of up to a few hundred kilometres) once a month in order to engage there in ritual obligations imposed by the ancestral and High God cults.<sup>31</sup>

Van Winsbergen’s point is that not only does the modern black Southern African no longer live within the village and under the influence of its values, but that the only way that black person can have access to village values, such as *Ubuntu*, is if they are reformulated in way which has currency and legitimacy in a global and urban context. In other words, they no longer derive their values from the village elders, but from politicians, intellectuals and the media. Thus, what modern Southern Africans understand as *Ubuntu* is not an untainted set of values, kept seamlessly intact from a glorious pre-colonial past, but rather a modern reconstruction of those values in mythological form. This points us to the fact that *Ubuntu* –

---

<sup>31</sup> van Winsbergen, ‘Ubuntu and the globalisation of Southern African thought and society’

and the mythology of the idealised traditional village at its heart - has a profoundly ideological function.

It may well be argued that this idealisation of village life is also reflected in many of the biblical narratives. In many of those narratives, the city becomes associated with sin and corruption. For example, we are told that Cain was building a city shortly after he killed his brother (Genesis 4:17); the city built by the murderer stands in stark contrast to the sinless rural idyll that was Eden. God's judgement on Sodom and Gomorrah reinforces this picture of the cities as points of concentration of sin and rebellion against God. It is significant that John the Baptist's message of repentance is proclaimed in the wilderness (Matthew 3:1), as if to highlight the iniquity of the city of Jerusalem and implying that leaving the city behind is part of the journey back to God. Yet at the same time, while the biblical narratives begin with the rural perfection of Eden, they end with the notion of the redeemed city, the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21). On the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), Jerusalem becomes a microcosm of God's redemptive plan, the place where people are gathered from different places, in which the unity of all humankind is expressed. We would thus want to argue strongly that a theology of *Ubuntu* cannot be simply premised on a nostalgic return to a romanticised rural idyll – it must speak to the complexities and redemptive possibilities of 21<sup>st</sup> century urban life.

### *3) The Problem of Personhood is unresolved in Ubuntu*

The critiques explored above have focussed on difficulties within the conception of community within *Ubuntu*. Underpinning these critiques, however, is our contention that there are a number of significant issues regarding *individual* personhood which have not been resolved within the theology of *Ubuntu*. It is precisely because *Ubuntu* has an inadequate understanding of individual personhood that it can fall prey to the distortions of the communitarian ideal outlined above. If personhood is viewed as being entirely extrinsic to the human being (in relation to the other) as opposed to being intrinsic (in relation to self), crucial questions emerge about the status and autonomy of the individual. Chukwudum Okolo frames this crucial question in the terms ‘self as a problem’ in African philosophy. He argues that while there is some cognisance of the self

the truth remains that [within African thought] violence is done to its status as an individual, as an independent self-consciousness. Self remains dominantly opaque, seen from the ‘outside’, so to speak, and in relationships with others.<sup>32</sup>

Okolo goes on to spell out the consequences of such a view of the self:

[T]o ignore or treat inadequately values such as personal initiative, responsibility, subjectivity, independence, etc. – values clearly cherished by individuals in practically all cultures - is to undermine the very roots of human freedom and autonomy.<sup>33</sup>

Okolo’s critique is perceptive and incisive, and he is correct to point out how undermining subjectivity inevitably erodes human freedom. It is in the cause of that freedom that this study seeks to develop a more balanced view of the person as subject within the theology of *Ubuntu*.

---

<sup>32</sup> Chukwudum B. Okolo, ‘Self as a problem in African philosophy’ in P. H. Coetzee and A. P. J. Roux (eds.), *Philosophy from Africa: A Text with Readings* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 2002), 214

<sup>33</sup> Okolo, ‘Self as a problem in African philosophy’, 215

Another significant question which arises from the notion that personhood is conferred through the community concerns that the possibility that a human being might not attain the status of a person. This becomes clear in Menkiti's highly communitarian anthropology in which he views personhood as 'some sort of ontological progression'.<sup>34</sup> He goes on to argue that

personhood is something which has to be achieved, and is not given simply because one is born of human seed...As far as African societies are concerned, personhood is something at which individuals could fail.<sup>35</sup>

Augustine Shutte echoes this view in his summary of African views of the self:

...because I depend on relationships with others for being the person I am, in the beginning, at the start of my life, I am not really a person at all...I only become fully human to the extent that I have relationships with others...My life is a progressive increase in vital force. At least it is if all goes well. But it could be a decrease, a disintegration.<sup>36</sup>

In the light of such an understanding of personhood, one of the chief problems which emerges concerns the question of babies or very young children. What status would we confer on them if personhood is a progression based on moral action and the quality of one's relationships, which would be as yet undeveloped in young children? Menkiti seeks to reinforce the notion that personhood is acquired, rather than innate, by pointing to

the natural tendency in many languages, English included, of referring to new-borns and infants as *It*. Consider the expression: 'We rushed the child to the hospital but before we arrived, *it* was dead.' We would never say this of a grown person. Of course with a child or a new-born, reference could also be made by use of a personal pronoun...[but] the important thing is that we have the choice of an *it* for

---

<sup>34</sup> Menkiti, 'Person and Community in African traditional thought', 173

<sup>35</sup> Menkiti, 'Person and Community in African traditional thought', 173

<sup>36</sup> Augustine Shutte, *Ubuntu: An Ethic for a New South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001), 24

referring to children and new-borns, but whereas we have no such choice in referring to older persons.<sup>37</sup>

However, it would appear that this line of reasoning does more to undermine Menkiti's thesis than sustain it. In the first place, many English speakers would say that while the neuter pronoun is sometimes used to refer to a baby, it is by no means commonplace and indeed is considered to be derogatory by most people. Even though it might be grammatically acceptable, most English speaking people would be reluctant to call a baby 'it' precisely because they have an instinctive sense that the infant's personhood renders the term ontologically incorrect. In developing this critique of Menkiti's use of the neuter pronoun, Kwame Gyekye's incisive analysis of the communal understanding of personhood within African philosophy begins by pointing out that Menkiti's inference is in fact incorrect for a number of African languages, and that certainly in the Akan language 'it' does not exist for animate things.<sup>38</sup> Gyekye goes on to argue that while Akan thought suggests a person is defined in terms of moral qualities or capacities, this does not mean that an infant, as yet incapable of being a moral agent, cannot be considered as a person. This is because although the infant 'is not morally capable in actuality, they are morally capable in potentiality'.<sup>39</sup>

This potentiality is profoundly expressed in the theology of infant baptism, where very young children are called, personally, by name, to develop that capacity for faith and moral agency that lies within them. To be sure, those capacities are to be *nurtured* by the community of

---

<sup>37</sup> Menkiti, 'Person and Community in African traditional thought', 173-174

<sup>38</sup> Kwame Gyekye, 'Person and Community in African Thought' in P. H. Coetzee and A. P. J. Roux (eds.), *Philosophy from Africa: A Text with Readings* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 2002), 302

<sup>39</sup> Gyekye, 'Person and Community in African Thought', 304

faith, but it is not the community of faith which *confers* those capacities. This is evident in the words of the baptism service, in the questions put to parents and godparents:

*In baptism these children begin their journey in faith. You speak for them today. Will you care for them, and help them to take their place within the life and worship of Christ's Church?*<sup>40</sup>

Thus in baptism it is the children who *themselves* begin their journey of faith in baptism in response to God's call, which is a recognition of personhood already present. At the same time the role to which parents, godparents and the wider Church are clearly called in the questions above, demonstrate that their spiritual and moral capacity are to be developed within community. The theology of baptism thus becomes a paradigm for personhood *in* community – rather than personhood *entirely constituted* by community.<sup>41</sup>

The notion that personhood is divinely conferred prior to it being acquired through moral engagement with the community is reinforced by the biblical narratives which emphasise young children as being part of the divine economy before they can exercise moral agency. This certainly seems to be the case with the two babies, Moses and Jesus, whose birth narratives are central to both testaments of the Bible. The themes of personhood through divine vocation and the moral and spiritual potentiality of children are powerfully expressed in the famous words at the beginning of the book of Jeremiah:

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations. <sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> Anglican baptism service <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-worship/worship/texts/newpatterns/sample-services/contents/npw7.aspx>

<sup>41</sup> Clearly, there are traditions with the Church who *don't* baptise infants – but this has more to do with a belief that personal faith requires a maturity, rather than any conviction that infants are have not yet attained personhood.

<sup>42</sup> Jeremiah 1:5 (NIV)

Furthermore, the notion that personhood is not innate, but is something which is acquired or which can be lost, is not consistent with the much of the Gospel, where we see Jesus at pains to recognise the personhood of social outcasts. These are the very people that, in their sinfulness and ruptured relationship with the community, might have been considered to have ‘no *Ubuntu*’. In Jesus’ encounter with Zacchaeus<sup>43</sup>, for example, we see a clear example of someone – a dishonest man and a traitor to his people – who is well and truly beyond the bounds of the community. Even the reference to his short stature in the Gospel reinforces the idea of his invisibility to respectable Jewish society – he was a nobody, a non-person in the eyes of the community.

Yet it is precisely this failure by the community to recognise his personhood which is implicitly criticised in the story, and which stands in stark contrast to the humane compassion of Jesus. All of Jesus’ actions in relation to Zacchaeus – looking up at him in the tree, calling him by name, telling him that he wanted to come to his house – are profoundly personal and convey a recognition of his humanity. It is Jesus’ recognition of his personhood, of the human potential within Zacchaeus, which is his ultimate salvation. Yet while it might be said that Zacchaeus goes on, after his subsequent repentance, to enhance and develop his personhood in relation to the community, Jesus’ recognition of his personhood, indeed his appeal to it, comes prior to Zacchaeus’ reintegration into the community. In other words, Zacchaeus’ personhood is *developed* by the community, but it is not *entirely constituted* by it. There is something about Zacchaeus’ moral and spiritual capacity and potentiality which defines his personhood as much as relationality. As we saw above, Menkiti has asserted that personhood is something ‘at which one could fail’. However we would contend that, on the

---

<sup>43</sup> Luke 19: 1-10

contrary, the Zaccheus narrative implies that failure is very much part of personhood. Indeed the Christian story of redemption – as is the case with so many who encounter Jesus in the Gospels – seems to begin with the recognition and acknowledgment of failure.

One could well argue that there is a problem of logic in the relational understanding of personhood, which appears to deduce that personhood is entirely defined by community from the premise that human beings are naturally social. To assert that essential sociality is a natural characteristic of personhood is hardly controversial, but it is clear that the human person is, by nature, other things as well. It is evident that human beings demonstrate other natural attributes which may be regarded as being essential to their nature – such as rationality, the capacity for virtue, the ability to make moral judgements and to make choices. These attributes may well be developed in community, but they are not *created* by community – which would indicate that personhood is not *fully* defined by social relationships.

The broad contours of an *Ubuntu* which gives expression to both individual personhood and personhood in community, we would suggest, lie within the parameters set by Onyebuchi Eze when he says that the ‘identity or subjectivity of the individual and community are mutually constitutive and hence none is supreme.’<sup>44</sup> It is for this reason, argues Onyebuchi Eze, that Dzobo has formulated a more complete version of African humanism when he states, ‘we are, therefore I am, and since I am, therefore we are.’<sup>45</sup> Onyebuchi Eze correctly takes issue with the view that it is the community which *entirely* catalyses and circumscribes what

---

<sup>44</sup> Onyebuchi Eze, ‘What is African Communitarianism? Against Consensus as a Regulative Ideal’, 388

<sup>45</sup> Onyebuchi Eze, ‘What is African Communitarianism? Against Consensus as a Regulative Ideal’, 388

personhood is. It is on the basis of our agreement with him that we are seeking, in the course of this thesis, to outline a theology of personhood that gives full expression to the contemporaneous and mutually contingent relationship between individual and community.

#### *4) Ubuntu Can Legitimise Patriarchy and Homophobia in the name of African Culture*

An extension of the discussion about African approaches to democracy is the debate about patriarchy and homophobia within the context of traditional African culture. Undoubtedly there are customary laws, and traditional values underpinning them, which bring into focus the conflict between the norms of some traditional African communities and progressive values. It is important to stress, with regard to *Ubuntu*, that our argument is certainly not it is *inherently* patriarchal or homophobic - on the contrary, we shall argue below in chapter nine that an authentic theology of *Ubuntu* is liberative for women and gay people. Rather our argument is that a misconceived, essentialist *Ubuntu* can be used as a legitimising ideology for oppressive expressions of traditional values.

Molly Manyonganise, expresses her serious reservations about *Ubuntu* from the perspective of a womanist in Zimbabwe. She argues that

most discourses on *ubuntu* have been done by men who conveniently ignored the implications of *ubuntu* on gender...I am therefore persuaded to say that the glorification of the concept without due

analysis of its implications for gender is being done mostly by those who are enjoying the patriarchal dividend.<sup>46</sup>

Manyonganise contends that the fact that ‘it is not *ubuntu* or *hunhu* [the Shona equivalent] for a man to live with a woman as husband and wife without paying *lobola* to the woman’s family’<sup>47</sup> is in a large measure responsible for the commodification of women. She goes on to specify how this traditional perception of a woman as property of her husband is perpetuated in a modern guise:

In Zimbabwe today, where women are officially employed, some of them are encountering challenges where their husbands demand that they surrender their salaries at the end of each month. These husbands may be interpreting a woman’s professional job as a symbol of the land where women would till and surrender the produce to the men. We see here that the philosophy of *ubuntu* is being used to curtail the economic freedom of women so that they remain under the control of men.<sup>48</sup>

The legitimisation of patriarchy through traditional values is very readily apparent in South Africa as well. In 2012, in a speech at the opening of the House of Traditional Leaders, then South African president, Jacob Zuma, known for his traditional views (e.g. he himself is a polygamist), urged that the leaders should ‘solve African problems the African way, not the white man’s way.’<sup>49</sup> Zuma’s comments were made in the context of his support for the proposed Traditional Courts Bill, which would in theory have offered access to justice to eighteen million people living in rural areas of South Africa, his argument being that the nature and value system of the traditional courts promoted social cohesion.<sup>50</sup> Yet women’s

---

<sup>46</sup> Molly Manyonganise, ‘Oppressive and liberative: A Zimbabwean woman's reflections on *ubuntu*’, *Verbum et Ecclesia* 36(2), Art. #1438, 2015 but cited here from <http://www.ve.org.za/index.php/VE/article/view/1438/html>

<sup>47</sup> Manyongise, ‘A Zimbabwean woman's reflections on *ubuntu*’

<sup>48</sup> Manyongise, ‘A Zimbabwean woman's reflections on *ubuntu*’

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in article by Denise Williams, ‘White Man’s Justice is not the only way – Zuma’ in *Sowetan*, 2 November 2012 (online edition), available at <http://www.sowetanlive.co.za/news/2012/11/02/white-man-s-justice-is-not-the-only-way---zuma>

<sup>50</sup> Williams, ‘White Man’s Justice is not the only way.’

groups expressed grave concern that the Bill would give enormous powers to the very conservative and patriarchal traditional courts which could erode women's constitutional rights. Furthermore lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender groups shared the same fears about the Bill. The National House of Traditional Leaders as well as the Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa (CONTRALESAs) have both consistently rejected LGBT people as 'un-African' and recommended that 'sexual orientation' be removed from the South African bill of rights.<sup>51</sup>

We shall return to a more detailed analysis of *Ubuntu* and sexism and homophobia below, but we note here how these issues go to the very heart of our critique of *Ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* theory sometimes seems to be predicated on an assumption that traditional African values, and the institutions and customs which embody them, are intrinsically good. In fact, the notion of tradition can evidently serve an ideological purpose, legitimising practices and views which many would consider highly questionable, and placing them beyond the bounds of critical analysis. To say that something is 'traditional' in an African context can thus be a way of simply trying to close the debate. Furthermore, the plight of women and gay people in some traditional African societies gives credence to our critique of consensus as a means of enforcing conformity, and denying the agency and freedom of those who are vulnerable and discriminated against within the community.

---

<sup>51</sup> Graeme Reid, 'The traditional courts bill threatens LGBT South Africans' in *The Guardian* 26 May 2012 (online edition), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/may/26/south-africa-gay-lgbt-traditional>

## Conclusions

Our argument here is that many exponents of *Ubuntu* have not been alert enough to the potential dangers of personhood as entirely defined by community, and that the theology of *Ubuntu* has not been subject to anything approaching rigorous critical analysis. Of particular concern is the way in which *Ubuntu* is premised on an idealised notion of community and has been interpreted in a manner which compromises human agency and freedom. This study is driven forward by the conviction that a theology of *Ubuntu* must express the truth that personhood is an ontological reality intrinsic to each human being, characterised by subjectivity *as well as* a way of being that is developed and fulfilled in community. It must allow for a vision of *communities*, characterised and indeed strengthened by difference, dissent, protest and challenge - rather than *Community* characterised by conformity and homogeneity. Such a theology of *Ubuntu* still has much to offer Africa, and indeed the world beyond.

## Section Two: The Theology of *Ubuntu* in Dialogue with the West

### Chapter Six

#### The Theology of *Ubuntu* and Platonic Tradition

*Why act justly?* Central to this chapter is the contention that the answer to this crucial, Platonic question lies not within the paradigm of rationality but in the relationality which is fundamental to a theology of *Ubuntu*. As we develop our critique of the theology of *Ubuntu*, we also want to develop our critique by the theology of *Ubuntu* of western theological and philosophical anthropology.

In all of this, we shall be careful not to treat that Western tradition as monolithic and homogeneous. It has often been the case that writers on *Ubuntu* have premised their arguments on the view that that the tradition of the Cartesian rational, autonomous Self has been the *only* model of western theological and philosophical anthropology. While this may indeed have been the dominant European model for some time, the reality is that western understandings of the human being are much more varied and nuanced than that. Our aim is to establish a critical but constructive dialogue between *Ubuntu* and relevant strands of western thought with the aim of establishing a reformulated and liberative *Ubuntu*.

This chapter, then, explores the western idea of the rational self famously outlined by Descartes, but which is in fact rooted in Platonic dualism, which also gave shape to

Augustine's highly influential theological anthropology.<sup>1</sup> Thus while we shall consider Descartes and Augustine in some depth, our contention that Plato is responsible for the foundation of the western rational self leads us to consider his thought at greater length. This Platonic rationalism, we shall argue, led to a veneration of reason as the primary human virtue, which can be traced all the way to the modernist period in western intellectual history. This overemphasis on reason led to the neglect of relationality within western theology and philosophical anthropology. More than that, the valorisation of reason was reinforced by a very strong sense of dualism between mind and body, which in turn became the basis for rigid social hierarchies - because those perceived to have greater powers of rationality were deemed to be superior to those deemed to be dominated by bodily appetites.

### **Plato's World of Forms**

It is in Plato, then, that the groundwork is laid for some of the key themes which were so central to Descartes' thinking, such as rationality and the relationship between the body and soul. At the heart of Plato's thinking is the analogy of *The Cave*.<sup>2</sup> Plato asks us to imagine a group of prisoners whose heads are fixed in such a way that they can only face the far wall of the cave in which they are chained and imprisoned. Behind them is a fire and between their backs and the fire is a road. As various people and objects walk along this road, shadows are cast on the cave wall; inevitably, the prisoners, having experienced nothing else, will take the shadows to be real. One day, one of the prisoners escapes and, after struggling to adjust to

---

<sup>1</sup> For the links between Descartes and Plato see, for example, Stephen Buckle, 'Descartes, Plato and the Cave' in *Philosophy* 82(02), April 2007, 301-337; Perhaps the most important recent account of the influence of Platonism on Augustine is John Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994)

<sup>2</sup> Plato, 'The Allegory of the Cave' in *Republic*, VII 514 a, 2 to 517 a, 7, trans. by Thomas Sheehan, available at <https://web.stanford.edu/class/ihum40/cave.pdf>

the light, he starts to realise that his former perceptions of reality were severely limited and that in fact the world of shadows is a poor imitation of the real world beyond the cave. When he returns to the cave, however, and tries to explain his experience to his fellow prisoners, he finds that they violently resist his new insights. They are content with the superficial appearances of their given reality, and would not leave the cave even if they could.

The parable of the cave provides a memorable visual image of Plato's theory of Forms. In Plato's account of reality, this world corresponds to the shadowy world of the cave. Reality here is only a partial reflection of the World of Forms – to which only philosophers have access, because of their more developed powers of reason. Thus, while Platonic epistemology does cast considerable scepticism regarding the external world, there is a very clearly defined self which can ultimately, through the power of reason, come to the truth about the nature of reality.

This rational self is only fully realised within a particular intellectual elite – Plato's Philosopher Kings. Plato conceives of a tripartite soul, which corresponds to the hierarchy within his ideal society. Thus within the soul there is the element of desire – for food, drink or sex, etc – which is found most abundantly in the group Plato refers to as Workers. Secondly, the soul consists of spirit, which refers to the qualities of courage needed by soldiers – 'Auxiliaries' in Plato's terminology. At the top of the apex of both of the soul and society comes reason, which is to be found within the Philosophers. According to Plato, reason is in conflict with desire and this is why society must be ruled autocratically by the Philosophers, who are the only ones capable of distinguishing between what they want and what is right.

Thus in Plato we have a hierarchical relationship between the body and soul (according to the dialogue in *Timaeus*, the immortal soul is housed in a perishable, earthly body), as well as a hierarchy *within* both the body and soul (which corresponds to the further hierarchy within society outlined above).<sup>3</sup> Therefore it is actually only the rational part of the soul which is immortal, and it is located in the head. The appetitive and emotional elements of the soul are located in the belly and heart respectively. Furthermore, this dualistic view of the human being within Plato was also reinforced by a dualistic cosmology, to which we have already made reference. The immortality of the soul corresponds to its eternal union with the World of Forms. On the other hand, the body was identified with the impermanent and imperfect world of Being, which is the world we inhabit in this life. When Plato speaks of the two worlds in a dialogue from *Timaeus*, he says

First, then, in my judgment, we must make a distinction and ask, What is that which always is and has no becoming, and what is that which is always becoming and never is? That which is apprehended by intelligence and reason is always in the same state, but that which is conceived by opinion with the help of sensation and without reason is always in the process of becoming and perishing and never really is.<sup>4</sup>

It is thus through reason that we are able to apprehend eternal truth and as such - and as is reflected in his parallel social hierarchy - the proper functioning of all the parts requires the supremacy of reason. It is this proper ordering of the soul, with reason in control, which, according to Plato, unlocks the secret of immortality and enables true human flourishing:

...if a man has seriously devoted himself to the love of learning and true wisdom, if he has exercised these aspects of himself, then there is absolutely no way his thoughts can fail to be immortal and divine, should truth come within his grasp. And to the extent that human nature can partake of

---

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of these Platonic hierarchies and the elevation of reason, see David West, *Reason and Sexuality in Western Thought* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 15ff

<sup>4</sup> Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (eds.), *Timaeus in Plato: The Collected Dialogues* (Princeton University Press 1961), 1161

immortality, he can in no way fail to achieve this: constantly caring for his divine part, as he does, keeping well-ordered the guiding spirit that lives within him, he must indeed be supremely happy.<sup>5</sup>

Here we see that Platonic dualism is not simply premised on a *separation* of two spheres, but a *privileging* of one of those spheres, because its perceived permanence is associated with immortality and divinity. Within the human being then, Platonism not only conceived of a distinction between the rational / spiritual and the material, but also led to an elevation of the former. One can see here how Plato's understanding of the human being had far-reaching implications for the development of western theological anthropology. It very clearly entrenched the notion that rationality – rather than any type of relationality - was the primary distinguishing characteristic of the virtuous person. This was in sharp contrast to lower categories of persons of human beings who were distinguished by the extent to which they were dominated by bodily desires. Furthermore, in Plato's schema rationality is not only allied to moral virtue, it also appears to be *some kind of moral virtue in itself*. Reason for Plato is the noble counterpoint to base desire and there seems little acknowledgement of the possibility that reason itself might be a means of wrongdoing or evil.

### **The Consequences of the Platonic Elevation of Reason**

One can see here how Platonism laid the foundation for the emphasis on, and veneration of, reason in Western thought which was to culminate in the Enlightenment and in modernism. The uncritically optimistic lens through which reason has been perceived, and its elevation to the cost of other more relational and ethical human virtues, meant that at times there was an inability in the West to come to terms with the way in which evil could be conceived

---

<sup>5</sup> Plato, *Timaeus*, quoted in West, *Reason and Sexuality*, 9

of and executed within the framework of rationality. This was demonstrated most starkly in the Holocaust: it was the result of a *reasoned* analysis of the problems besetting contemporary Germany and indeed the world and it could only be made a ghastly reality on the basis of an efficient, systematic bureaucracy, firmly grounded on principles of rationality. This is precisely the point made by Zygmunt Bauman in *Modernity and the Holocaust*. As implied by the title of his book, Bauman argues that the Holocaust was not simply a Jewish tragedy, but a profound indictment of the modernist project and its emphasis on rationality as the zenith of human achievement. In Bauman's view the Holocaust was not a horrific deviation from the norms of modernism, but a manifestation of them:

The unspoken terror permeating our collective memory of the Holocaust (and more than contingently related to the overwhelming desire not to look the memory in its face) is the gnawing suspicion that the Holocaust could be more than an aberration, more than a deviation from an otherwise straight path of progress, more than a cancerous growth on the otherwise healthy body of the civilized society; that, in short, the Holocaust was not an antithesis of modern civilization and everything (or so we like to think) it stands for. We suspect (even if we refuse to admit it) that the Holocaust could merely have uncovered another face of the same modern society whose other, more familiar, face we so admire.<sup>6</sup>

Bauman argues that the in reality every element of the Holocaust was 'normal' – not in the sense that it was one more example of a very ordinary type of phenomenon, but in the sense of

being fully in keeping with everything we know about our civilization, its guiding spirit, its priorities, its immanent vision of the world - and of the proper ways to pursue human happiness together with a perfect society.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1989), 7

<sup>7</sup> Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 8

We read Bauman here as saying that if success and the creation of a 'perfect world order' are premised on the technology of the mass production line, on bureaucratic efficiency and on materialism - rather a cogent moral vision - evil becomes an inevitable result.

The notion of the Holocaust as 'normal' brings to mind Hannah Arendt's famous phrase to describe the Nazi enterprise, 'the banality of evil.'<sup>8</sup> In her study of Adolf Eichmann, Arendt also focussed on Eichmann's normality and the fact that he presented as a distinctly unremarkable person:

The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic...<sup>9</sup>

Instead Arendt posits that National Socialism had made possible a new kind of human being – an historical subject 'who commits his crimes under circumstances that it make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or feel that he is doing wrong.'<sup>10</sup> Eichmann's striking quality, according to Arendt was not any particular form of moral depravity, but rather his thoughtlessness, the fact that he was 'genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché.'<sup>11</sup> This inability to articulate any individual viewpoint reflected not only the loss of his own identity but also – crucially – on his ability to reflect on his life as it related to those of others.

Eichmann could only conceive of himself as part of the bureaucratic and administrative machinery of the Nazi state. According to what Arendt could observe, Eichmann was not a ferocious anti-Semitic ideologue - rather he was a loyal, unthinking functionary who viewed the extermination of the Jews in terms of a huge feat organisation and administration. Thus,

---

<sup>8</sup> See Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report On The Banality of Evil* (New York: The Viking Press, 1963)

<sup>9</sup> Arendt, *The Banality of Evil*, 276

<sup>10</sup> Arendt, *The Banality of Evil*, 276

<sup>11</sup> Arendt, *The Banality of Evil*, 49

we see that what Arendt means by ‘banality’ is not that what the Nazis did was not unexceptionably evil – rather she is making the point that the implementation of that evil was made possible through conceiving the Holocaust in terms of mundane routines and systems. All of this seems to make clear the dangers of rationality without relationality, of reason isolated from moral reflection. The modernist systems of production and technology can induce a mindset of conformity, in which collectivity triumphs over morality, which undermines our ability to reflect on our lives as deeply interconnected with others.

In his own reflections on the Holocaust, Thomas Merton makes a similar point when he underlines the ‘sanity’ of Eichmann. He argues that a person can be sane

in the limited sense that he is not impeded by his disordered emotions from acting in a cool, orderly manner according to the needs and dictates of the social situation in which he finds himself.<sup>12</sup>

The problem with ‘sanity’ for Merton, then, is that it is evaluated in terms of obedience to social norms, but

excludes love, considers it irrelevant, and destroys our capacity to love other human beings, to respond to their needs and sufferings, to recognize them also as persons, to apprehend their pain as one’s own.<sup>13</sup>

This conception of sanity – an adjunct of rationality - thus makes no provision for the moral imperatives of love and compassion. It is a further expression of the rationalisation and consequent normalisation of evil.

### **The Discourse of Rationality as the basis for the Negation of African Bodies**

The western discourse on reason, shaped as it was by Plato, also formed the ideological basis upon which social and racial hierarchies were legitimised. In the context of slavery for

---

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Merton, *Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2010), 99

<sup>13</sup> Merton, *Essential Writings*, 100

example, the bodies of Africans pointed to the fact that they fulfilled the characteristics of the Workers in Plato's hierarchical society. Their souls were dominated by bodily desire – a source of energy which could be usefully harnessed as labour, but needed regulation by the Philosopher-Kings, in whose souls reason predominated. The elevation of reason as superior to the body, and concomitant conception of Africans as less rational and more dominated by bodily desire than whites, was a feature of Enlightenment thinking.

Kelly Brown Douglas has presented a persuasive and thoroughgoing analysis of how 'Platonized Christianity' created the theological environment in which it became possible for white Christians in America to disfigure and objectify black bodies within slavery. She contends this was the case because

Platonic thought joined together with Christian thinking in such a way as to exploit the dualistic vulnerability of Christianity's theological core... This particular Christian tradition routinely divinized the soul and demonized the body.<sup>14</sup>

Within such a theological worldview, the material world is portrayed as being full of sin and in any case of only passing significance. Thus, the body can be subjected to pain and brutality without consequence – what matters is the salvation of the eternal soul. Indeed slaveholding Christians could argue that the pain inflicted upon the bodies of slaves increased the likelihood of the redemption of their souls because it promoted moral virtue (i.e. dutiful obedience).

In stark contrast, we would argue that theological anthropology should be grounded in a response of compassion to the reality of bodily suffering. This is given full expression in Eucharistic theology. In recalling the words and actions of Jesus at actions at the Last

---

<sup>14</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, *What's Faith Got to Do with It? Black bodies/Christian Souls* (New York: Orbis Books, 2005), 28

Supper, the breaking of the bread plays a central role in the liturgical rite – a signifier of the Body of Christ, which is *broken* for us. Breaking of bread speaks of course speaks of sharing, the interdependence at the heart of the Eucharistic community. Yet in another sense the breaking of the bread also points us back to the body of the historical Jesus. His is not the body of pampered comfort; his is a body which bears scars of violence, torture and abuse and ultimately of a cruel death, a body which is *broken*. It in this *broken* body that we see reflected the suffering of the bodies of the poor and oppressed, of black bodies throughout history. M. Shawn Copeland develops this connection between the body of Jesus and the body of black victims in the context of her own Eucharistic theology:

To place maimed and lynched bodies beside the maimed body of Jesus of Nazareth is the condition for a theological anthropology that reinforces the sacramentality of the body, contests objectification of the body and honors the body as the self-manifestation and self-expression of the free human subject.<sup>15</sup>

Emerging as it does from a continent where so many suffer acute physical privations, a theology of *Ubuntu* must be *embodied*. It must take cognisance of one of the profound and tragic ironies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century world - many bodies in the West are afflicted because they have too much (diseases of affluence are amongst the highest killers in western countries) while the bodies of countless millions in many other places on earth bear the scars of having too little. At the heart of such an embodied *Ubuntu* theology is the body of Jesus, in which is reflected the sufferings of the world. In it we see reflected the withered bodies of the sick and dying, the malnourished bodies of the starving, the scarred bodies of the tortured, the battered and bruised bodies of those women and children who are victims of abuse. The body of Jesus on the cross is thus excruciating to behold – for in it we see not only his suffering but we also see reflected the pain and scars of our world. Herein, however, lies the

---

<sup>15</sup> M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race and Being* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2010), p.124

paradox of salvation – in the broken body of Jesus resides hope and salvation for that world. In the midst of all the violence and suffering and evil of this world the cross proclaims, with supreme eloquence, the victory of love.

In a significant contribution to this discussion, South African theologian, Jacob Meiring has proposed a model for theological anthropology as ‘embodied sensing’, which he defines as

- a contemporary theological anthropology with a sentiment of the flesh and a sensitivity to the textures of life. This is a contemporary theological anthropology that takes the body and the experiences of the body seriously as a site of knowledge and as a guiding principle within theological anthropology. Such a theological anthropology functions within the intricate and complex connection of the living body, language and experiencing in a concrete life-world with an openness to the ‘more than’.<sup>16</sup>

Meiring uses the word ‘sensing’ in an effort to move away from the subject-object distinction to a more participatory approach and, away from a purely cognitive, objective approach to sensing, derived from the Latin word *sensus*, which gives expression to the capacity for the faculty of thought, feeling and meaning.<sup>17</sup> Meiring is thus pointing to the importance of the body’s role in the theological process – a point of crucial significance in the light of the Platonic Christianity’s elevation of reason and undermining of the body.

### **The Discourse of Rationality as the basis of Racial Hierarchy**

This negation of the sufferings of the body was also accompanied by the *racialisation* of Platonic dualism in western thinking – which is very evident within Enlightenment Europe.

In an infamous passage from his essay *Of National Characteristics*, Kant allows his racism to

---

<sup>16</sup> Jacob S Meiring, ‘Theology in the flesh – a model for theological anthropology as embodied sensing’, available at [https://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/50122/Meiring\\_Theology\\_2015.pdf;sequence=1](https://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/50122/Meiring_Theology_2015.pdf;sequence=1), 3

<sup>17</sup> Jacob S Meiring, ‘Theology in the flesh – a model for theological anthropology as embodied sensing’, 3

trump his misogyny. He wants to recognise the merits of the sexist views expressed by a ‘Negro carpenter’ – but he cannot because the man’s blackness *is in itself* proof of his lack of rational capacity:

Of course, Father Labat reports that a Negro carpenter, whom he reproached for haughty treatment toward his wives, answered: ‘You whites are indeed fools, for first you make great concessions to your wives, and afterward you complain when they drive you mad.’ And it might be that there were something in this which perhaps deserved to be considered; but in short, this fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid.<sup>18</sup>

Kant’s equation of stupidity with blackness is echoing the racialised hierarchy of intellect and virtue which Hume had outlined earlier in an even more notorious passage:

I am apt to suspect the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the Whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual, eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences. On the other hand, the most rude and barbarous of the Whites, such as the ancient Germans, the present Tartars, have still something eminent about them, in their valour, form of government, or some other particular. Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction between these breeds of men. Not to mention our colonies, there are Negro slaves dispersed all over Europe, of whom none ever discovered the symptoms of ingenuity; though low people, without education, will start up amongst us, and distinguish themselves in every profession. In Jamaica, indeed, they talk of one Negro as a man of parts and learning; but it is likely he is admired for slender accomplishments, like a parrot who speaks a few words plainly.<sup>19</sup>

Note here that Hume is so convinced of the natural inferiority of black people, that he is at pains to circumvent his own deeply held empiricist convictions when faced with evidence of

---

<sup>18</sup> Immanuel Kant, ‘Of National Characteristics, so far as They Depend upon the Distinct Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime’ in his book, in his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 113

<sup>19</sup> David Hume, footnote to ‘Of National Character’ (1748), in *The Philosophical Works of David Hume, Volume III* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996), 228

a black person who was indeed able and educated. Without due investigative empirical observation, he dismisses the man as a ‘parrot’. It is true that some have come to Hume’s defence on the grounds that this is a mere isolated footnote which goes contrary to his empirical work and which should be mitigated by his opposition to slavery.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, John Immerwahr argued strongly that there seems to be a good deal of evidence against this ‘casual’ interpretation of Hume’s racism.<sup>21</sup> Immerwahr highlights the fact that there were certainly a number of educated and accomplished black people who moved in circles which would have known to Hume: if Hume had been genuinely interested in finding evidence against his position, he would not have struggled to find it. Indeed the Jamaican whom Hume had dismissed as a ‘parrot’ was identified as Francis Williams, who had graduated from Cambridge, taught Latin and Mathematics, and had published Latin poetry. Williams was known to be deeply offended by Hume’s remarks and made this public – but Hume did not respond.<sup>22</sup>

Clearly, Hume’s racism seems to contradict his empirical method – in this episode, he seems to consciously avoid taking cognisance of facts which contradict his claim. It appears that rather than allow any kind of objective empirical methodology to challenge racism, Hume has misappropriated empiricism to substantiate unproven racist assumptions. Whether or not this incident is isolated and the footnote quoted above was a personal aberration from Hume, or whether reflects a thoroughgoing racism within him, is a debate which is beyond the scope of this thesis. What is not in doubt is that Hume –like Kant - gives clear expression to an Enlightenment worldview which was characterised by a hierarchy of racial groups based on perceived moral and rational capacity.

---

<sup>20</sup> See for example R. H. Popkin in ‘Hume’s Racism’ in R. H. Popkin, *The High Road to Pyrrhonism* (Indianapolis: Austin Hill Press, 1980), 251 - 266

<sup>21</sup> John Immerwahr, ‘Hume’s Revised Racism’ in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 53, no. 3, 485 - 486

<sup>22</sup> Immerwahr, ‘Hume’s Revised Racism’, 485

We might further illustrate this point by analysing the views of John Locke who had a pervasive influence not only on empiricists like Hume, but on the Enlightenment as a whole. David Theo Goldberg has pointed that while the opening sentence of Locke's *First Treatise on Government* unmistakably rejects slavery, in the *Second Treatise* he specifies the conditions under which slavery may be acceptable.<sup>23</sup> In addition, Locke played a pivotal role in drafting both Carolina's Fundamental Constitution in 1669, in which citizens were considered to 'have absolute power over their negro slaves', and the 'Instruction to Governor Nicholson of Virginia', which considered the enslavement of negroes justifiable because they were prisoners of a just war. (Locke considered the slave expeditions of the Royal Africa to be just wars in which the 'negroes' captured had forfeited their claim to life).<sup>24</sup> Goldberg suggests that Locke is making a very significant connection between the perceived irrationality of black people and human subjectivity:

...it is a basic implication of Locke's account that anyone behaving irrationally is to that degree a brute and should be treated as an animal or machine. Hence rationality is a mark of human subjectivity and so a condition of the necessity to be extended full moral treatment. Rational capacity, in other words, sets the limit upon the natural equality of all those beings ordinarily taken to be human.<sup>25</sup>

While empiricism rejects the notion of essentialism (the notion of properties essential to the constitution of a person or object), Locke develops the notion of 'nominally essential property', that is, 'any contingent property of an object conventionally designated by speakers of a language to be essential'.<sup>26</sup> For seventeenth century speakers of European languages, colour was considered to be such a property and it was considered such by Locke because he held that empirical observation had demonstrated it to be linked to rationality.

---

<sup>23</sup> David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 27

<sup>24</sup> Goldberg, *Racist Culture*, 27

<sup>25</sup> Goldberg, *Racist Culture*, 27

<sup>26</sup> Goldberg, *Racist Culture*, 27

Thus, the notion that blackness undermined a person's rational capacity, and therefore humanity, served as intellectual basis on which the treatment of slaves as less than human was based. Empiricism, then, not only failed to provide a constraint to racism, but provided an intellectual framework within which it could be articulated and flourish. Yet this criticism goes beyond empiricism, to the elevation of rationality which was at heart of the Enlightenment. As Goldberg puts it,

The rational, hence autonomous and equal subjects of the Enlightenment project turn out, perhaps unsurprisingly, to be exclusively white, male, European and bourgeois.<sup>27</sup>

Goldberg is pointing to the convergence of the Enlightenment with ideology and power. If reason was regarded as the human virtue *par excellence*, it follows that those who have the power to define what constitutes rationality, could legitimise their own position and status. Hence it was that powerful oppressive mythologies developed about black people (or women for that matter) being less rational, and being inclined to base appetites or emotion. (It is indeed ironic that within much of the racist discourse present in western anthropology there have been concerted attempts to portray black people as being controlled by bodily impulses, whereas in reality excess of consumption and greed have been the hallmarks of western civilisation and colonialism.) Thus it was that the valorising of reason, together with the constructed rationality / barbarism dualism, became a central ideological underpinning of the West's exploitation of Africa. Furthermore, central to this ideology of rationality was a pattern identified in the second chapter: European identity, defined by reason and concomitant moral virtue, was *normative* and deemed to represent civilisation, in contrast with African peoples, who were dominated by bodily desire and were deemed to be deviant

---

<sup>27</sup> Goldberg, *Racist Culture*, 28

and aberrations from civilized standards. *In other words, the elevation of reason created otherness.*

A theology of *Ubuntu* must seek to deconstruct this vocabulary of otherness and emphasise the common humanity which Africans share with all other persons. In so doing, *Ubuntu* rejects reason as being the primary characteristic which defines and constitutes human identity. Personhood is brought into being through the medium of the subject's relationship with the other. This is personhood through an extrinsic response of compassion to the needs of the other – which is very different conception of personhood as an intrinsic rational quality within a subject, who relates to the other only as object. In the former we have a human response to the other, in the later we see the full humanity of the other being denied.

All of that said, however, it also important to note – in keeping with our commitment to offer a more nuanced view of the western tradition than is sometimes presented in African theology – that Plato himself is very much aware of the conflict between his conception of reason as the defining element of the human being, and the obligation to act morally and in the service of others. This is precisely why he asks the crucial question, 'Why act justly?' to which we made reference at the beginning this chapter. We will argue below that it is possible for a reformulated Platonic tradition to satisfactorily address this question – *if* it is viewed through the lens of *Ubuntu*. Before we do so however, we must turn to other two other significantly influential elements within the Platonic philosophical tradition – the thought of Augustine and Descartes.

### **Augustine and the Self**

Pauline theology notwithstanding, there is little doubt that Augustine of Hippo was primarily responsible for christianising Platonic dualism. Augustine was profoundly influenced by the Platonic tradition in his belief that being represents a state of *unchangingness*, for ‘it is only that which remains in being without change that truly is.’<sup>28</sup> In his exegesis of Exodus 3:14, Davies points out that St Augustine ‘baptizes’ platonic metaphysics when he says

He is without doubt a substance, or essence, which the Greeks know as ‘ousia’, for as wisdom derives from being wise and knowledge from the act of knowing, so what we know as essence comes from being. And who can be said to exist more than he who said to his servant Moses ‘I am that I am’...But other things which are called essences or substances admit of accidents, whereby they undergo a change, whether great or small. But there can be no accident of this kind with regard to God, so he who is God is the only unchangeable substance or essence, to whom being itself, from which the name of essence derives, most truly belongs.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, as Plato linked true being to the world of Forms, and the form of The Good in particular, so for Augustine everything can only have being through God. We see in Augustine what Webster has called the ‘coinherence of subjectivity and ontotheology’, referring to the ‘tie between the self as an enduring moral and cognitive foundation and appeal to the metaphysics of substance to explicate the nature of God and the world’.<sup>30</sup> In Augustinian theology, drawing on platonic metaphysics, God the supreme being is equally the supreme subject. The *imago dei* is therefore understood as being integrally linked to subjectivity, for human subjectivity replicates divine self-possession. Thus, we see human being as the rational and knowing supreme subject receiving divine sanction.

---

<sup>28</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin, *Confessions* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964), 147

<sup>29</sup> Augustine, *De Trinitate* V, 2, 3 quoted in Oliver Davies, *A Theology of Compassion: Metaphysics of Difference and the Renewal of Tradition* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 78

<sup>30</sup> John Webster, ‘The Human Person’ in Kevin J Vanhoozer, *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 2003) 221

Augustine's theological anthropology, then, draws on the same oppositions as are present in Plato – spirit/matter, higher/lower, eternal/temporal and immutable/unchanging.<sup>31</sup> Where Augustine develops these oppositions further is in his distinction between the inner and outer man. The outer man, including the senses, is the bodily, what we have in common with the animals. The inner man is the soul - and it through attending to this inner self that we can advance on the spiritual road, on the journey from the lower to the higher. A famous line from *De Vera Religione* sums up much of Augustine's thinking about the human being:

Do not go outward. Return within yourself. In the inward man dwells truth.<sup>32</sup>

Our contention here is that this represents a decisive step in the orientation of western theological anthropology. For Augustine, the route to God and thus true selfhood, is within the domain of the subject rather than the object. In his understanding, it is very much an *inner* light which illuminates the order of being. This is what John refers to when he proclaims the 'true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world' (John 1:9). In Augustine's own words

There is one light which we perceive through the eye, another by which the eye itself is enabled to perceive; this light by which [outer things] become manifest is certainly within the soul.<sup>33</sup>

Augustine's reinterpretation of the light metaphor illustrates his turn inwards, his move to what Taylor has called a 'the inwardness of radical reflexivity'.<sup>34</sup> Augustine has shifted the focus from the objects of knowledge to the process of knowledge as it occurs within the subject. The inner light is the means by which human beings gain knowledge, but it also

---

<sup>31</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 128 - 129

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 129

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 130

<sup>34</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 131

reinforces a first-person standpoint. Augustine's radical reflexivity represents an epistemological legacy which has had profound implications for the way in which the self is understood in western theology and philosophy:

It has gone as far as far as generating the view that there is a special domain of 'inner' objects available only from this standpoint; or the notion that the vantage point of the 'I think' is somehow outside the world of things we experience.<sup>35</sup>

Augustine's dualistic outlook was expressed not only in his view of the human being, but also in his conception of the relationship between the church and the world. In his *Civitas Dei*, Augustin called the church 'the redeemed family of Christ the Lord and the journeying community of Christ the King'.<sup>36</sup> The life of the church is directed entirely towards a future heavenly kingdom – 'What other and have we except to reach that kingdom which has no end?' Thus the heavenly and earthly kingdoms form two distinct communities, 'of which one is predestined to reign for ever with God, and the other to undergo eternal punishment with the devil'.

### **Other Theological Manifestations of Individualism and Dualism**

Thus, we see in (the early) Augustine a theology which is shaped by an emphasis on the individual and a strongly dualistic Platonic worldview, which cast a shadow over subsequent western theology for centuries to come. That said, as Niebuhr makes clear in his analysis of individualism within western theology, in mediaeval Catholicism beyond Augustine,

---

<sup>35</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 131

<sup>36</sup> This summary of Augustine's *Civitas Dei*, together with the quotes cited from it is found in John Suggit, 'Redemption: Freedom Regained' in John de Gruchy and C. Villa-Vicencio (eds.), *Doing Theology in Context: South African Perspectives* (Cape Town and Johannesburg: David Philip, 1994), 120

individualism had no strong manifestation.<sup>37</sup> Niebuhr accounts for this by citing socio-economic factors – the agrarian-feudal economy necessitated a type of ‘tribal’ unity – but mainly with reference to Catholic religious authoritarianism. He argues that individualism in any modern sense is rooted in both Protestantism and the Renaissance.

Within Protestantism, Niebuhr accounts for this heightened sense of individuality through the Reformation theological principle of the ‘priesthood of all believers’, which Niebuhr sees as being based on

a strong sense of the peril of meaninglessness in the freedom of human spirituality which only the individual’s direct relation to God can overcome. Luther puts the matter in a typically robust illustration: “When you live upon your death. You cannot console yourself by saying ‘The Pope said thus and so...’ Suppose the Pope were wrong. Then you will be defeated.”<sup>38</sup>

Niebuhr’s critique is that this places too much emphasis on the individual. Protestantism sees the will of God as being the norm, and Christ as being the relation of that will; the difficulty is that it leaves individual with the difficult task of discerning that will amidst all the complexities of human life, with no source of authority which can arbitrate or interpret.<sup>39</sup>

This conception of human being has resulted in what Niebuhr calls Protestantism’s contribution ‘to the anarchy of modern life by its inability to suggest and to support relative standards and structures of social virtue and political justice.’<sup>40</sup> One might well argue that Niebuhr’s analysis lacks nuance in making broad generalisations about all Protestantism. However, there is no doubt that certain forms of evangelicalism have stressed individual salvation above socio-political engagement. This was certainly the case with the church in

---

<sup>37</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol 1: Human Nature* (New York: C Scribner’s Sons, 1941), 59

<sup>38</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 60

<sup>39</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 60

<sup>40</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 60-61

South Africa; while church leaders such as Tutu who were prominent in their opposition to apartheid had *some* support, there were many thousands of Christians who robustly opposed such political involvement – because they saw the primary role of the church as proclaiming a future, individual and spiritual salvation.

It was precisely this approach which was critiqued by the *Kairos Document*, which was a very significant analysis of the crisis in South Africa by an ecumenical group of theologians and church leaders in 1985. The document discussed the problems within what it calls ‘Church Theology’, which it saw as not engaging meaningfully with the socio-political realities of the South Africa of that time. The reason for this is that within this theological paradigm

spirituality has...been understood to be purely private and individualistic. Public affairs and social problems were thought to be beyond the sphere of spirituality... It is precisely this kind of spirituality that, when faced with the present crisis in South Africa, leaves so many Christians and Church leaders in a state of near paralysis.<sup>41</sup>

The following year another theological document was published, which specifically criticised the evangelical church in South Africa for its lack of political involvement during the apartheid era. The authors were the ‘Concerned Evangelicals’, a minority group of Protestant leaders who sought to analyse the reasons for some of their churches’ explicit and tacit support of apartheid, and to establish a biblical mandate for political involvement. The document was clear in its challenge of the purely personal approach to salvation:

---

<sup>41</sup> Gary S. Leonard (ed.), *The Kairos Document*, 1985, 21, available at [http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za/Libraries/manuals/The\\_Kairos\\_Documents.sflb.ashx](http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za/Libraries/manuals/The_Kairos_Documents.sflb.ashx)

We believe that salvation and social change cannot be separated from one another. We believe that God loved the world as a whole when he gave his only begotten son, Jesus Christ. We believe that the saving act of God is directed not only at individuals, but at the whole creation.<sup>42</sup>

As well as highlighting the problem with individualism, both documents were also unequivocal in condemning the dualism which prevented the church from fulfilling its prophetic role in the context of realities of apartheid. *The Kairos Document* denounced the type of spirituality which

has tended to be an other-worldly affair that has very little, if anything at all, to do with the affairs of this world. Social and political matters were seen as worldly affairs that had nothing to do with the spiritual concerns of the Church.<sup>43</sup>

Similarly, the ‘Concerned Evangelicals’ wrote:

To try to extract some ‘spiritual life’ from a political or economic life, in the name of ‘non-involvement’ in politics is dualism. This dualistic outlook on life is unscriptural. Life is a whole. A ‘born-again’ Christian was not exempt from carrying a ‘pass’ book, with its evil accompaniments! This is a political issue.<sup>44</sup>

We have already explored how the dualistic worldview is at odds with a more African integrated, holistic outlook – please see p. 94-96 above. At the very heart of the theology of *Ubuntu* is relationship – relationships which are not only constitutive of our personhood, but also call us to a response of compassionate action on behalf of those who suffer and are oppressed. The theology of *Ubuntu* challenges the dualistic strain within western theology by fundamentally challenging the false dichotomies which underpin it, and by emphasising that our relationship with God is inextricably bound up with our relationship with our neighbours.

---

<sup>42</sup> ‘Concerned Evangelicals’, ‘Evangelicals Critique their own Theology and Practice’, *Transformation*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (1987), 25

<sup>43</sup> *The Kairos Document*, 21,

<sup>44</sup> ‘Concerned Evangelicals’, ‘Evangelicals Critique their own Theology and Practice’, *Transformation*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (1987), 28

## Augustine Moves Closer to Ubuntu

Indeed, it should be noted that the later Augustine moved closer to this position. As Oliver Davies has pointed out, we should not lose sight of the fact that Augustine develops a more kenotic understanding of the human being, modelled on Christ's love for us.<sup>45</sup> Davies points to Augustine's text *On John's Epistle* to argue that love and benevolence towards others are much more prominent in his thought. In Davies' view, in this later Augustine, we see the exchange of

a platonic paradigm, with its account of being as immutability, and source of truth, for a Christian ecclesiology, as an account of the ethical realm between self and other, opened up by the creator God.<sup>46</sup>

We would concur with Davies' assessment. In Augustine's commentary on the first epistle of John, referred to above, he very clearly emphasises the centrality of love. In reflecting on the great Johannine statements about love ('He who does not love, does not love God' and 'Love is God'<sup>47</sup>), he states:

What more could be said, brethren? If nothing were said in praise of love throughout the pages of this epistle, if nothing whatever throughout the other pages of the Scriptures, and this one only thing were all we were told by the voice of the Spirit of God, For Love is God; nothing more ought we to require.

This is very evidently *not* a statement of platonic metaphysics, about how one can apprehend truth through the rational comprehension of that which is eternal and unchanging. Instead this is an Augustine much closer to the spirit of *Ubuntu*, who recognizes that the human *telos* is fulfilled not through reason, but through self-sacrificial love.

---

<sup>45</sup> See Oliver Davies, *A Theology of Compassion: Metaphysics of Difference and the Renewal of Tradition* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 80-81

<sup>46</sup> Oliver Davies, *A Theology of Compassion*, 81

<sup>47</sup> Augustine uses this translation of 1 John 4:8, which allowed by the ambiguity of the Latin, whereas the original Greek clearly means 'God is Love'

## Descartes

The notion of the rational, autonomous self is most famously articulated in the work of Descartes, to which we have already made reference. Descartes' highly influential epistemology began by calling into question all his previous beliefs and claims to knowledge. 'We must doubt everything' was the maxim at the very core of his method. However his project sought ultimately to be a positive one – his whole plan was the 'rejection of shifting ground in the sand in order to find rock or clay'.<sup>48</sup> Descartes thus came to reject the poetry, theology, astrology and philosophy of his day as providing insufficient grounds for certain knowledge. He was critical of the empiricists' reliance on the senses, the reliability of which are called into question by phenomena such as dreams and mirages. What then could provide the foundation of epistemological certainty? The answer is provided by Descartes' most famous words:

While I decided thus to think that everything was false it followed necessarily that I who thought must be something; and observing that this truth: *I think therefore I am*, was so certain and so evident that all the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptics were not capable of shaking it, I judged that I could accept it as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking.<sup>49</sup>

Thus, while Descartes continues to call the external world into doubt, the 'I' which does the doubting seems to be beyond questioning.

It is also highly significant that the existence of the Cartesian 'I' is affirmed as being independent not only from the external world beyond, but from the body itself. Descartes concluded that he

---

<sup>48</sup> Rene Descartes, *A Discourse on Method*, trans. J. Veitch (London: Dent, 1637), 50

<sup>49</sup> Descartes, *A Discourse on Method*, 53

was a substance, of which the whole essence or nature consists in thinking, and which in order to exist, needs no place and depends on no material thing; so this *I*, that is to say, the mind... is entirely distinct from the body, and that even if the body were not, it would not cease to be all that that it is.<sup>50</sup>

While it is important to not to oversimplify Descartes position (in other contexts he does argue for a much closer relationship between the mind and body, leading to what has been called an ‘interactive dualism’<sup>51</sup>), it is a distinction which simply could not have merged from a context of oppression. For those slaves who felt the whip on their backs there was no question that their ‘I’, their essence was inextricably bound up with their material selves. The dualism on which much western anthropology is predicated is alien to the oppressed whose bodies are integral to their sufferings and struggles for liberation. This is very much Anthony Pinn’s point when he contrasts Foucault’s and Du Bois’ approach to the body

The differences between Foucault and Du Bois] stem largely from Foucault’s lack of attention to the material body and the preference for the body thought and written, and Du Bois’ concern extending to the body lived and experienced. “How does it *feel*”, asks Du Bois, “to be a problem?” This question draws from a history of both the ownership of physical bodies and the discursive construction of bodies. Real bodies experience and feel the discomfort, suffering, sorrow and moments of joy involved: they are disciplined and punished for disruptions they cause to the social body and its logics.<sup>52</sup>

### **The Platonic Tradition Reformulated Through the Lens of *Ubuntu***

Thus far, then, our argument has been that that Platonic dualism was profoundly influential in Western thought and in particular was given expression in Augustine theology and Cartesian

---

<sup>50</sup> Descartes, *A Discourse on Method*, 53-54

<sup>51</sup> For a discussion of the nuances of Descartes’ dualism, see Brian Morris, *Western Conceptions of the Individual* (Oxford: Berg, 1996), 11ff

<sup>52</sup> Anthony B. Pinn, *Embodiment and the New Shape Of Black Theological Thought* (New York University Press, 2010), p. 36

philosophy, with their emphasis on the atomised individual and individual and introspective conceptions of reason. This led to the notion of an autonomous subject, cut off from the world beyond itself and also inevitably, in the historical context of colonialism, a hierarchical and elitist conception of humanity. The Other was construed as inferior as well as an alien presence and a threat. The Plato-Augustine-Descartes axis within western philosophy and theology (our observations about the later Augustine notwithstanding) therefore, has been a significant obstacle in the development of a holistic theological anthropology because it fails to make provision for the relational component of the human being. There thus appears to be, ostensibly, little common ground between western rationalist approaches and African approaches to theological and philosophical anthropologies. Certainly this is the view of scholars like Mangena who view ‘normative’ western systems of ethics and understandings of the human being as being, premised on Platonic individualism and rationalism as being wholly incompatible with the African view.<sup>53</sup>

However, we contend here that this proposed dichotomy between African and Platonic thought is too simplistic. In order to substantiate this view, we wish to turn to Plato’s story of *The Ring of Gyges*, told to Socrates by Glaucon in Book II of *The Republic*.<sup>54</sup> Gyges was a shepherd who, with the help of a ring which gave the power to make himself invisible, seduced the king’s wife and took over his kingdom. In the light of the story, Glaucon challenges Socrates to respond to the crucial question, *why act justly?* It is a question very much at the heart of *The Republic*. Surely, he argues that any rational person Gyges’ position would do the same? Glaucon is asking why someone would *not* act unjustly if they knew that their unjust actions

---

<sup>53</sup> Fainos Mangena, ‘Towards a hunhu/ubuntu dialogical moral theory’ in *Phronimon*, Volume 13(2) 2012, 1-17

<sup>54</sup> See Lesley Brown, ‘Glaucon’s Challenge, Rational Egoism and Ordinary Morality’ in Douglas Cairns, Fritz-Gregor Herrmann and Terry Penner (eds.), *Pursuing the Good: Ethics and Metaphysics in Plato's Republic* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 42-60

would be advantageous to them and they knew they would not be discovered by others or punished. Conversely *why* would a rational agent act justly, but in way which would be disadvantageous to them?

While any detailed analysis is beyond the scope of this study, there are two elements of Socrates' response which we might profitably highlight here. In the first instance, he questions what *constitutes* the advantage or consequent happiness that a person derives from acting unjustly. In the case of Gyges, he has achieved wealth, power and satisfied his sexual lusts. However Socrates argues that his happiness cannot be constituted by the fulfilment of these desires – Gyges is neither enviable nor happy – because 'happiness is not sex, wealth and power, but, partly at least, justice itself'. Socrates is here pointing to the reality that happiness, at least to some degree, is premised on interconnectedness with others.

Therefore to be able to act unjustly with impunity is not an advantage, nor will it make one happy, for the unjust actions will undermine that interconnectedness and thus destroy the harmony of the soul in which true happiness consists. It is the just and good action which preserves or brings about this harmony of the soul's elements. For Socrates justice is present within a person when the internal elements of the psyche are correctly harmonised – and hence the just person is a happier one than the unjust person. Thus says Socrates:

...a just and good action is one which preserves or brings about this state of mind [i.e. the harmony of the soul's elements] – wisdom being the knowledge which directs the action. An unjust action, by contrast, is any action which tends to destroy this state of mind – ignorance, in its turn, being the opinion which directs the unjust action.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Lesley Brown, 'Glaucón's Challenge, Rational Egoism and Ordinary Morality', 58

The second element of the Socratic response to Glaucon, very much related to the first, centres on the argument that there is in fact no conflict between benefit to oneself and moral action which benefits others – it is a false dichotomy. As van Niekerk has argued in the context of his analysis of Glaucon’s challenge, ‘it seems almost tautological to say that loving or friendly relationships are prudentially beneficial.’<sup>56</sup> It is certainly the case Gyges – as described by Glaucon – does not seem to value such relationships. Instead he seeks to gain the benefits from relationships without being prepared to fulfil the obligations which are necessary for them to be nurtured. Yet while Gyges may have an instrumental view of relationships, using them as a means to increase his wealth and power, it seems clear that this does not reflect the real value of friendship for most people. Authentic friendship is grounded in a sense of concern for the well-being of another which goes beyond any instrumental advantages which might accrue from that friendship. Van Niekerk suggests that the Luo proverb ‘a feast is only so if there are people to call it so’ might well have been a direct response to Glaucon’s question.<sup>57</sup> The proverb underlines the view that a ‘good’ life can only be judged so in the context of relationship with other people who give content and meaning to that life.

The *Ubuntu* conception of friendship would certainly emphasise its intrinsic rather than instrumental value. Within the theology of *Ubuntu*, friendship is an expression of human mutuality and a validation of the principle that we flourish in relationships of reciprocal love. That being the case, sacrificial acts of love within friendship may result in disadvantage in terms of power or wealth, but are certainly of ‘prudential’ benefit. In his theology of *Ubuntu*, Tutu underlines this convergence between the benefit accrued to oneself and benefits imparted to others when one acts out of compassion for others. He contends that the person with *Ubuntu*

---

<sup>56</sup> Jason van Niekerk, *Ubuntu and Moral Benefit*, unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of the Witwaterstrand, Johannesburg, 2013, 94

<sup>57</sup> Jason van Niekerk, *Ubuntu and Moral Benefit*, 97

has the sense of belonging and self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs to a greater whole. Yet beyond even these prudential benefits which accrue for the agent from living in an other-centred way, such actions and attitudes are also, for Tutu, fundamentally constitutive of what it means to be a human being. Acting with compassion and forgives makes a person more fully human whereas, by the same token, harming others or a failure to forgives detracts from a person's humanity:

To forgive is not just to be altruistic. It is the best form of self-interest. What dehumanises you, inexorably dehumanises me. Forgiveness gives people resilience, enabling them to survive and emerge still human despite all efforts to dehumanise them. *Ubuntu* means that in a real sense even the supporters of apartheid were victims of the vicious system which they implemented and which they supported so enthusiastically. Our humanity was intertwined. The humanity of the perpetrator of apartheid's atrocities was caught up and bound up in that of his victim whether he liked it or not. In the process of dehumanising another, in inflicting untold harm and suffering, the perpetrator was inexorably being dehumanised as well.<sup>58</sup>

The notion of one's humanity being enhanced, or in contrast of one becoming dehumanised, in relation to the extent that one is in relationship with others reinforces an idea at the heart of *Ubuntu* – that one's humanity becomes fully realised through community. In the last chapter, we rejected Menkiti's view that personhood is *entirely* constituted by the community, and that that being the case, a human being could *cease* to be a person. However we did argue there that while personhood is not entirely *constituted* by community, it is *developed* and (all being well) fully *actualised* in community. This is consistent with our argument, central to this thesis, that the individual person and the community are mutually constitutive.

---

<sup>58</sup> Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, 35

We would argue that this *Ubuntu* concept of becoming fully human converges in no small degree to the eudaemonist emphasis, which is integral to Platonic system of ethics and understanding of the human being. We will examine later on how Aristotle's eudemonia shares even more characteristics with *Ubuntu* than Plato's version, but for now it is enough for us to note the significance of the Greek emphasis of human flourishing and well-being. It is thus the case that *Ubuntu* on the one hand and Plato and Aristotle on the other hand share a teleological, virtue-based understanding of the human being. To be sure they differ on precisely what that virtue is and how it is attained, but there is agreement that it necessarily involves both an element personal flourishing and of good relationship with others. Thus this teleological approach to human flourishing, characteristic of both *Ubuntu* and Greek philosophy, leads us to answer Glaucon's challenge by suggesting that one must act justly because in so doing one fulfils one's purpose as a human being. This notion of human *telos* resonates with the words of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark about the way the cross:

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it."<sup>59</sup>

In the light of these words of Jesus, the Christian response to Glaucon's challenge might be to point out that Gyges' actions have not benefitted him but rather have caused him to lose everything of substantial worth in his life. The context in which Jesus is speaking is a discourse about the way of the cross, which is characterised by sacrifice and self-denial. To choose such a way of life does not make sense as a purely rational choice – precisely Glaucon's point – for it can only be understood through the lens of kenosis. Christian theological anthropology is premised on the self-emptying of Christ, which becomes a paradigm for a redemptive model

---

<sup>59</sup> Mark 8: 34-35 (NIV)

of being human. It is paradigm which conceives of human flourishing as ultimately expressed in the deep mutuality of unconditional love and service, rather than the domination of others.

## Chapter Seven

### Subjectivity: The Theology of *Ubuntu* in Dialogue with Existentialism

The previous chapter sought to outline the theology of *Ubuntu*'s critique of the rationalism central to many western theological and philosophical traditions. Yet there are other significant strands of western thinking with which it can very profitably engage, particularly with reference to the recovery of the subjectivity in African thought – which we are arguing is crucial to the process of reformulating the theology of *Ubuntu*. One of these is unquestionably existentialism. The question of subjectivity is at the heart of existentialism, because it relates to the freedom to act (rather than be acted upon), which is fundamental to that philosophy. At the same time, this turn to the subject is largely uncharted territory for African theology because it has been traditionally been the preserve of western philosophical and theology anthropology. Indeed African and Black theologies have sought to distance themselves very clearly from what they see as the individualism of western outlooks. Thus, in his summary of the European approach, Battle asserts,

...in Western thought, especially in existentialism, the individual alone defines self-existence. This Sartrean view of person is as a 'free, unconditioned' being, a being not constrained by social or historical circumstances. In the end ...this 'flies in the face of African beliefs'<sup>1</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> Battle, *Ubuntu*, 113

In the first instance, this seems to be altogether too broad a generalisation about western philosophical anthropology, which leaves little room for more nuanced analysis. While on the one hand, as we highlighted in the previous chapter, there clearly *has* been a dominant trajectory which has centred on the individual, on the other hand - from Aristotle to Marx - there have been alternative understandings within the west which focus on the essentially social nature of the human being. Even within existentialist scholarship itself (which Battle targets as being particularly individualistic), there are many gradations of approach and developments in thinking which take us beyond the free individual existing beyond social relations, as described above. Battle seems to overlook the fact that the post-war Sartre became a politically engaged Marxist, recognising precisely that the ‘authentic way of being’ which characterised *Being and Nothingness* needed to be grounded in a concrete historical context. Furthermore, Battle’s perceived dichotomy between western existentialism and African thought is also too simplistic because there *is* an *African* existentialist tradition, of which the Black Consciousness and figures such as Steve Biko certainly do form a part.

In challenging Battle’s argument, we seek to propose here that existentialism is a profoundly helpful tool in understanding human identity, because it alerts us to the reality that the roles assigned to us in society are part of a constructed identity – an identity which may be some distance removed from an authentic expression of our selfhood. In addition, whereas *Ubuntu* has up to now seemed to take a pre-critical view of community, the insights of thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir point out that the community, as we encounter it, does not have an essential ontology, but in fact is something which has been formulated and legitimised by other human beings. As such, an African – or indeed any other human being – does not, and indeed *should not*, accept the community as they find it, but continually subject it to a hermeneutic of suspicion. It is only in so doing that we prevent community from

becoming a potentially oppressive hegemonic discourse and from an obstacle to achieving selfhood rather than a means of fulfilling it. Like *Ubuntu*, existentialism does not countenance an essential human being, but argues that identity has been constructed within a matrix of social relationships. However, it goes beyond *Ubuntu* in highlighting that it is precisely because identity has been *constructed* that it can and indeed must be *deconstructed*.

What existentialists would refer to as ‘authenticity’ requires the individual to make a free choice, to resist the constraints of one’s social environment and to have a greater sense of the self as subject. Clearly one can see how this leads to individualistic modes of existentialism, which have indeed been the object of criticism from the theologies of liberation. Yet at the same time, it can also be seen that the free subject, acting and speaking freely in the face of the dominant forces and currents within society, is very much of the heart of politically radical and theologically prophetic traditions.

## **Kierkegaard**

In developing the dialogue between existentialism and *Ubuntu*, we start with Thomas Kochalumchuvattil’s significant Kierkegaardian critique. He has argued that the emphasis on communalism in Africa has led to a ‘lack of subjective becoming’, which he goes as far to suggest ‘may be seen as a primary cause of many of the persistent and current problems besetting Africa.’<sup>2</sup> Kochalumchuvattil decries what he sees as being the scant attention paid

---

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Kochalumchuvattil, ‘The Crisis of Identity in Africa: A Call for Subjectivity’ in *Kritike*, Vol 4 No 1, (June 2010), 112

to self-individuation and the fact that even within African cities one's primary responsibility is to the clan or ethnic group. He goes on to question the view expressed by some African thinkers that 'although the individual is swallowed by the society in African communalism, he still enjoys his freedom and responsibility'.<sup>3</sup> Kochalumchuvattil is in fundamental disagreement because he believes that

the existential situation in most African communities is that there is little or no room for individual values such as personal initiative, responsibility, subjectivity, spontaneity and self-determination. These values are essential in the exercise of personal freedom and autonomy, for each individual person has an intrinsic dimension to his/her being. A person cannot be reduced to a mere set of extrinsic relations. A person is a subject, not simply an object; an end in himself/herself and not simply a means. Being an individual subject, he/she is self-determined and not merely other-determined.<sup>4</sup>

It is within the context of his critique of *Ubuntu*, and what he sees as Africa's need to recover the Subject, that Kochalumchuvattil turns to existentialism's founder father, Soren Kierkegaard. Kochalumchuvattil sees Kierkegaard's relevance for Africa precisely in the fact that he (Kierkegaard) emphasises that ethical responsibility is anything but conforming to the demands of society or established custom. The most important question for the individual is how does he or she related to truth:

How does the individual relate to the truth? If the individual relates to the truth objectively, it amounts to empty conformism. However, if the individual relates to truth subjectively then he will critically question and examine the efficacy and merits of the prevailing social, cultural, religious and ethical currents, responsibility is accepted, conscience is awakened and personhood established. Now and

---

<sup>3</sup> Chukwuemeka Nze, *Aspects of African Communalism* (Nigeria: Veritas Publishers, 1989), 22 - 23

<sup>4</sup> Kochalumchuvattil, 'The Crisis of Identity in Africa', 114

only now may a genuine encounter with the other take place. Only now may the principles of Ubuntu become a living possibility. Only now can there be true intersubjectivity.<sup>5</sup>

Kochalummchuvattil's approach is certainly not without its problems. He seems to advocate Kierkegaard somewhat uncritically and lapses into broad negative generalisations about Africa (e.g. 'The current situation in most African countries is the failure of the individual to take responsibility for his/her own life', p. 119). However, Kochalummchuvattil is right to point to subjectivity as the basis for authentic intersubjective relationship, and to the critiques of social consensus and established institutions, as important Kierkegaardian insights from which African humanism can learn. Kierkegaard's insistence on subjectivity and the value of the 'inner' person provides a hugely important challenge to the theology of *Ubuntu*.

Kierkegaard's radical turn to the Subject is very much an expression of his autobiography. His life turned on three personal crises, in each of which he explored a singular path, which flew in the face of social convention.<sup>6</sup> The first of these significant events occurred when he broke his engagement with Regine Olsen, a woman ten years his junior because he felt that he did not want his melancholy spirit to darken her radiant, youthful beauty, but also because he wanted to protect the privacy he regarded as essential to the writer. It is the context of this chosen life of solitude that, over the next four years, Kierkegaard produced an astonishing volume of words. They were to be words which forged the concept of 'subjective' or 'existential' truth and the notion of the 'self as a unique and irreplaceable individual. It was the elaboration of these closely connected two ideas which was Kierkegaard's most

---

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Kochalummchuvattil, 'The Crisis of Identity in Africa: A Call for Subjectivity' in *Kritike*, Vol 4 No 1, (June 2010), 118

<sup>6</sup> John D. Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard* (London: Granta, 2007), 2ff

fundamental contribution to philosophy – and which, we are arguing here – constitute a necessary corrective to African theological anthropology.

The second pivotal point in Kierkegaard's life occurred in 1846, when he claimed that his literary calling was concluded and resolved to take up a post as a pastor. However, he became embroiled in a dispute with a popular Danish weekly, *The Corsair*. The newspaper cruelly caricatured him, with images that are reproduced even today, showing him as a strange looking hunchbacked eccentric with uneven trouser legs.<sup>7</sup> On the basis that he felt that if he took up the pastoral post, Copenhagen's high society would conclude that he had been driven from public life by the scurrilous gossip of the newspaper he despised, he abandoned his plans and returned to writing. It was a period that saw Kierkegaard develop a particular disdain for the notion of 'the public', which he saw as a construction, created by the press, in order to impose stifling cultural norms:

For a long time the basic tendency of our modern age has been toward levelling by way of numerous upheavals; ...For levelling really to take place, a phantom must be raised, the spirit of levelling, a monstrous abstraction, an all-encompassing something that is nothing, a mirage – and this phantom is *the public*. Only in a passionless, but reflective age can this phantom develop with the aid of the press, when the press itself becomes a phantom. There is no such thing as a public in spirited, passionate, tumultuous times...Only when there is no strong communal life to give substance to the concretion will the press create this abstraction 'the public'.<sup>8</sup>

In this critique of the press and the notion of 'the public' we see extraordinary prescience from Kierkegaard, in that he lays the foundations for later critical approaches to the media and ideology. Yet we can also see clearly expressed the powerful trajectory of the critique of

---

<sup>7</sup> Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 4

<sup>8</sup> Howard and Edna Hong, (trans. and ed.) *Kierkegaard's Writings, XIV, Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age* (Princeton University Press: 2009), 90

collectivism which is at the heart of Kierkegaard's writings. Viewed theologically, he seems to echo the biblical tradition of the 'voice crying out in the wilderness' – which belonged to the often solitary prophet speaking out against the dominant ideologies of their day.

The third crisis in Kierkegaard's personal life came in 1854 with the death of Jacob Mynster, the bishop of the Danish Church. Prior to Mynster's death, Kierkegaard had already been developing the concept of authentic Christianity, which stood in direct contrast to the comfortable, bourgeois, establishment Christianity of the Denmark of his day. However, Mynster was a close friend of his father, and it was only after his (Mynster's) death that Kierkegaard felt at liberty to step up his attack on the what he saw as the inauthentic Christianity which he embodied. Thus, Kierkegaard launched a personal attack on the clergy and what he called 'Christendom' - i.e. the religion of the establishment which had more to do with power, status and convention than true faith:

Verily there is that which is more contrary to Christianity, and to the very nature of Christianity, than any heresy, any schism, more contrary than all heresies and schisms combined, and that is to play Christianity. But precisely in the very same sense that the child plays soldier, it is playing Christianity to take away the danger (Christianly, "witness" and "danger" correspond), and in the place of this to introduce power (to be a danger to others), worldly goods, advantages, luxurious enjoyment of the most exquisite refinements – and then to play the game that Bishop Mynster was a witness to the truth ...<sup>9</sup>

Clearly there was much in Kierkegaard's critique of social and ecclesiastical convention which revealed his own troubled and deeply conflicted psyche. For example, he eventually declared marriage and sexual desire 'criminal' and held up his own celibacy and solitude as

---

<sup>9</sup> Walter Lowrie (trans.), *Soren Kierkegaard: Attack Upon Christendom* (Princeton University Press: 1968), 8

the norm. He viewed marriage as a compromise with the desires of the flesh, in the manner of St. Paul's infamous statement about marriage in 1 Corinthians.<sup>10</sup> Yet there is also much in Kierkegaard a penetrating critique which is continuity with, and illuminates, a long line of theological critique of a religiosity which conforms to social convention. Kierkegaard's deconstruction of the religious façade of establishment Christianity has deep resonances with liberative theologies.

### **Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer**

This can clearly be seen in his influence on Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Matthew Kirkpatrick has argued persuasively that, while Kierkegaard the melancholic and eccentric solitary is seldom thought of as being complementary to Bonhoeffer's radical social witness, in fact Kierkegaard is integral to Bonhoeffer's concepts of knowledge, being, community and Church.<sup>11</sup> Kirkpatrick builds his case upon the fact that not only do Bonhoeffer and Kierkegaard both see established 'Christendom' as a corruption of authentic Christian witness, but Bonhoeffer's concrete and sacrificial existential commitment in the context of Nazi Germany is a fulfilment of Kierkegaard's vision of the true individual Christian living out a life of faith without regard to their own safety, or indeed social or ecclesiastical status. Kirkpatrick further argues that many of the central themes from Bonhoeffer's classic *Discipleship* find many parallels in Kierkegaard's work, most notably *Fear and Trembling*.

---

<sup>10</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:7-9: 'I wish that all of you were as I am... Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion' (NIV).

<sup>11</sup> Matthew D. Kirkpatrick, *Attacks on Christendom in a World Come of Age: Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer and the Question of 'Religionless Christianity'* (Oregon: Pickwick, 2011)

He points out that both men rejected the notion of Christ as a mere idea or doctrine; instead they believed that the mandate for Christians was a total commitment to an 'imitation' of Christ. It was this 'imitation' of Christ which characterised the radical existential obedience to the demands of the Gospel, which was at the heart of true Christianity. Both men were profoundly influenced by Thomas a Kempis' famous *Imitatio Christi*: it was one of Kierkegaard's favourite works of devotion and Bonhoeffer had a copy of it at the time of his imprisonment for resistance to the Nazis. This radical obedience to the demands of the Gospel was in stark contrast to what both writers saw as the cultural collusion of the Church of their time with the state.

It was in the context of that imprisonment in 1943, in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, that Bonhoeffer developed his profound reappraisal of the notion of religion. Bonhoeffer's critique of religion and his indictment of the Churches for their complicity in the rise to power of Hitler converges in many respects with Kierkegaard's attack on the ecclesio-political power structures of Christendom:

We are proceeding towards a time of no religion at all: men as they are now simply cannot be religious any more. Even those who honestly describe themselves as 'religious' do not in the least act up to it, and so when they say 'religious' they evidently mean something quite different...if we reach the stage of being radically without religion - and I think that is more or less the case already, else how is it, for instance, that this war, unlike any of those before it, is not calling forth any 'religious' reaction? - what does that mean for 'Christianity'?<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM Press, 1953), 91

Bonhoeffer's questioning of religion was the result of having to watch the German Evangelical Church fall under Nazi control, headed by a bishop appointed by Hitler. He also looked on while Christians in Europe and America turned their backs on the atrocities being committed and looked the other way while horrible evils were committed. The Church was in an ideological Constantinian captivity and had, as Bonhoeffer saw it, proved to be morally bankrupt and incapable of dealing with the evils of the modern world. Instead of raising a prophetic voice, the mainstream churches had become chaplains for their nations' political policies and war machines. If religious institutions had willingly transformed themselves into servants of the state, was there another possibility for Christianity in the world?

Are there religionless Christians? If religion is only a garment of Christianity—and even this garment has looked very different at different times—then what is a religionless Christianity?<sup>13</sup>

For both Bonhoeffer and Kierkegaard, then, truth lay in a rejection of social and ecclesiastical convention that was very much based on a radical subjectivity. In a famous passage, Kierkegaard gives expression to the idea of truth as a personal existential experience:

What I really need is to be clear about *what I am to do*, not what I must know, except in the way knowledge must precede all action. It is a question of understanding my destiny, of seeing what the Deity really wants *me* to do; the thing is to find a truth which is the truth *for me*, to find the idea *for which I am willing to live and die*. And what use would it be if I were to discover a so-called objective truth, or if I worked my way through the philosophers and were able to call them all to account on request...What use would it be if I were able to propound the meaning of Christianity, to explain many separate facts, if it had no deeper meaning for me and my life?

## Sartre and de Beauvoir

---

<sup>13</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 91

Kierkegaard's radical subjectivity was echoed in many respects by Sartre's notion of authenticity. Authenticity might be best understood by looking at its opposite, bad faith (*mauvaise foi*), which referred to an oppressive mode of conformity. In a famous passage from *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre uses the example of a waiter, who is meticulously playing a role, as an example of bad faith:

[W]hat *are we* then if we have the constant obligation to make ourselves what *we are* if our mode of being is having the obligation to be what we are? Let us consider this waiter in the cafe. His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid. He bends forward a little too eagerly; his voice, his eyes express an interest a little too solicitous for the order of the customer. Finally there he returns, trying to imitate in his walk the inflexible stiffness of some kind of automaton while carrying his tray with the recklessness of a tight-rope-walker by putting it in a perpetually unstable, perpetually broken equilibrium which he perpetually re-establishes by a light movement of the arm and hand. All his behaviour seems to us a game. He applies himself to changing his movements as if they were mechanisms, the one regulating the other; his gestures and even his voice seems to be mechanisms; he gives himself the quickness and pitiless rapidity of things. He is playing, he is amusing himself. But what is he playing? We need not watch long before we can explain it: he is playing at *being* a waiter in a cafe. There is nothing there to surprise us.<sup>14</sup>

This image of the waiter in the cafe has become the classic symbol of bad faith within existentialist literature. Being a good waiter involves conforming very precisely to a socially determined role and fulfilling the needs of other people, while sublimating your own individuality. We would argue that that this waiter is a good representation of those whose freedom and identity is suppressed in collectivist distortions of community life. Collectivism demands that we become the waiter in that Parisian café. For Sartre, bad faith exists where

---

<sup>14</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, trans. Richard Eyre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay Phenomenological Ontology* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), 82

people cannot transcend the constrictions of their situation in order to realise what they must be (free human beings) and what they are not (in this case, a waiter). Bad faith or *self-deception* (an alternative translation which brings out the idea of not being true to self), can be understood as existing in that formal mode of projection which is defined by a social categorisation – e.g. a waiter, a grocer, etc. For Sartre the way to escape from bad faith is to come to the realisation that one's existence and one's formal projection of self are entirely separate – and it is this separation which is a form of *nothingness*. Thus, the separation between the person's pure existence and the role defined by social categorisation becomes a form of negation.

In the case of feminist existentialism, Simone de Beauvoir famously summarised the construction of female identity by saying 'one is not born a woman, one becomes one.'<sup>15</sup> Her argument in *The Second Sex* was that for too long women have accepted that they were precisely that - 'the second sex'. By doing so, they have denied themselves the possibility of authentic freedom - which men have achieved - because they have allowed themselves to be the passive by-standers in society. Women have accepted a falsely constructed feminine identity as mothers, home-makers and objects of male desire. Expressed in her existentialist terminology, this is the false consciousness, which needs to be exposed and reconstructed. She further argued in the book that women's 'invisibility' is explained by the fact that males define them as 'The Other'<sup>16</sup> – which is what Mary Daly has called 'non-being'.<sup>17</sup> De Beauvoir believed that stereotyping is always done by the more powerful groups in society and men have been able to use their power to categorise women as this 'Other' - mysterious

---

<sup>15</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Vintage, 1997), 295

<sup>16</sup> de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 16-18

<sup>17</sup> Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973), 23

and by nature fundamentally different from masculine temperament and values (which are, of course, normative in the patriarchal world).

Women are also 'The Other' because they are objects whose identity is defined by men and who see themselves through the gaze of men. De Beauvoir's notion of women seeing themselves through the male lens echoes W.E.B. Du Bois' famous notion of 'double consciousness', as applied to the black experience in the USA. For Du Bois, fundamental to the black person's understanding of self was the fact that he or she saw themselves through the eyes of white society. Thus for the black person America is

a world which yields him no self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.<sup>18</sup>

### **Nietzsche and Slave Morality**

This concept of a self-consciousness which is framed through the lens of the oppressor has parallels in Nietzsche's notion of 'slave morality', which he saw as being responsible for keeping people in a state of psychological captivity. He understood human beings as comprising of two natures, which for him were embodied in two classical gods: the beautiful and passive self is represented by Apollo and the chaotic, fruitful, powerful and active self by Dionysius. In order for humanity to thrive, we need to throw off what he regarded as being

---

<sup>18</sup> W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, 'Strivings of the Negro People' in *Atlantic Monthly* 80 (1897), 195

the ‘apollonian veil’ – the veil of civility and subservience.<sup>19</sup> For Nietzsche – echoing the Marxist critique of religion - Christianity above all else was responsible for the chains which enslaved the human spirit. He argued that Christian morality is essentially duplicitous: it cannot openly admit it preaches servility and mediocrity and so its true nature is obfuscated by the language of virtue,

But it is difficult to preach this morality of mediocrity! For it can never admit what it is and what it wants! It must speak of moderation and dignity and duty and brotherly love.<sup>20</sup>

In his famous novel *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*<sup>21</sup> Nietzsche outlines the human journey towards self-mastery, towards becoming what he described as a ‘superman’ (*Übermensch*).

Zarathustra becomes the representative of this new human being – an almost Christ-like figure. However, whereas the age of Zarathustra and what Nietzsche calls the ‘Will to Power’ is represented in his time scale by noon, the brightest part of the day, Christianity is characterised as being synonymous with darkness, the age of slave morality. Christianity is seen as constraining human progress because it represses the Will to Power. The Will to Power is the only authentic moral command - which is to will what you are. Furthermore, this process of becoming your true self is always active and dynamic, never static: being human is the process of becoming. It is the Will to Power, which, for Nietzsche, most fully expresses the *telos* of the human being:

Physiologists should think again before postulating the drive to self-preservation as the cardinal drive in an organic being. A living thing desires above all to vent its strength-life as such is will to power:

---

<sup>19</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy: A New Translation by Douglas Smith* (Oxford University Press, 2008)

<sup>20</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, *Beyond Good and Evil* (London: Penguin, 2003), 202

<sup>21</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A New Translation by Graham Parkes* (Oxford University Press, 2005)

self preservation is only one of the indirect and most frequent consequences of it. In short, here as everywhere, beware of superfluous teleological principles such as the drive to self-preservation.<sup>22</sup>

However in order for this Will to Power to be fully realised in the human being, for the liberated, Dionysian person to emerge, there is one prerequisite: the death of God.

Nietzsche's famous parable tells of the madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market -place and cried incessantly,

... 'I am looking for God! I am looking for God!' as many of those who did not believe in God were standing together he excited considerable laughter... The madman sprang into their midst and pierced them with his glances. 'Where has God gone?' he cried. 'I shall tell you. *We have killed him* -you and I. We are all his murderers... There has never been a greater deed - and whoever shall be born after us, for the sake of this deed he shall be part of higher history than all history hitherto.<sup>23</sup>

Thus it is that for Nietzsche it is the death of God – who stands at the apex of the hierarchy of slave morality – which precipitates the age of human flourishing and freedom.

There is much in Nietzsche which militates against the development of a relational and compassionate anthropology – most notably his glorification of the highly aggressive and competitive self which asserts dominion over other selves. Furthermore – like Marx – Nietzsche sees the notion of God as inherently oppressive without taking into account the possibility of revolutionary expressions of Christianity (after all Jesus' iconoclasm and challenge to established values has much in common with Nietzsche's Zarathustra).

However as one of Ricoeur's 'three great masters of suspicion' (along with Freud and Marx),

---

<sup>22</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 26

<sup>23</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, trans. Thomas Common, *The Gay Science (The Joyful Wisdom)* (Digireads.com Publishing, 2009), 79

Nietzsche's penetrating deconstruction of the Christian self helps to clear the way for a liberative understanding of the human being.

This point has been grasped by Mary Daly within the radical feminist tradition. Daly – even though she acknowledges that he was a ‘prophet whose prophecy was short-circuited by his own misogyny’<sup>24</sup> - appropriated Nietzsche's model of the liberated self to the feminist struggle.<sup>25</sup> Women needed to shed the passivity and oppression of the Apollonian veil imposed on them by a patriarchal and phallic feminine ethic. From the perspective of a liberative theological anthropology, the insights of Nietzsche clearly cannot be used uncritically, but they are crucial to understanding the importance of self as subject in the process of liberation. It is the Dionysian self – insofar as it represents creativity, energy and active engagement – which is constitutive of full personhood. The passivity of the objectified Apollonian self recalls the slave in the Master-Slave relationship and thus represents the negation of personhood.

The incisive analyses of the condition of mental enslavement by de Beauvoir, Du Bois and Nietzsche call on the oppressed to see themselves as subjects, to be agents of their own liberation and to deconstruct their roles as they have been defined for them by the powerful. This expression of agency and this sense of freedom are at the very core of existentialism. Similarly, at the heart of all the theologies of liberation is an attempt to reverse the predicates. The oppressed are no longer objects to be acted upon – even benignly – by the

---

<sup>24</sup> Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 102

<sup>25</sup> Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, 102 - 106

oppressor. Liberation demands that the oppressed become the subjects of their own liberation.

### **An African Existentialism: Steve Biko and Black Consciousness**

This link between liberation and existentialism is an appropriate juncture to turn to its importance for the African context. Our argument that existentialism has a significant contribution to make within African philosophy and theology is strengthened when one considers its impact on the thinking on Steve Biko. In a significant article on this theme, Mabogo P. More has argued that Biko's legacy must be seen not only in terms of his political activism, but his contribution to philosophy as well.<sup>26</sup> More seeks to locate Biko within what he calls 'the Africana existentialist tradition,'<sup>27</sup> which he deems to be bound up with the questions of liberty and identity which result from the reality that African people are generally black people, who are affected by the significance of race and suffering under racism. Indeed, More differentiates this Africana existentialist tradition from European existentialism in that, whereas the latter purports to be universal, the former, by contrast, 'deals with the emergence of black selfhood, black suffering, embodied agency, freedom, racism and liberation, in short it deals with *being-black-in-the-world*'<sup>28</sup> (i.e. being black in an antiblack society).

---

<sup>26</sup> Mabogo P. More, 'Biko: Africana Existentialist Philosopher' in A. Mngxitama and Nigel C Gibson (eds), *Biko Lives!: Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 46

<sup>27</sup> For the links between Black Consciousness and existentialism, and an overview of African existentialism, see Lewis R. Gordon, *Existentialia Africana: Understanding African Existentialist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000)

<sup>28</sup> More, 'Biko: Africana Existentialist Philosopher', 48

Referring to the work of Lewis R. Gordon, who has been hugely influential in its development, More argues that Africana existential philosophy deals primarily with two themes regarding this state of *being-black-in-the-world*, identity and liberation. These two elements of Africana existential philosophy captures the fundamental tenets of Biko's Black Consciousness philosophy:

From an identity point of view, Black Consciousness as articulated by Biko means (1) black people's consciousness or realization that the world is infested with an antiblack social reality and (2) black people's recognition of themselves as black and a feeling of pride about this fact. From a liberation perspective, Black Consciousness meant black people's intense desire to annihilate this social reality, and to move toward the creation of a new reality, a fair social reality as a condition for universal humanism. Thus the two motifs of Black Consciousness find their expression in the tenets of Africana existential philosophy.<sup>29</sup>

It is in these emphases - on the development of consciousness and selfhood, and on the struggle for liberation - which makes Africana existentialism such a formative influence on Black Consciousness, and such an important dialogue partner for the theology of *Ubuntu*. Indeed, these themes already have theological expression in the work of James Cone, who has much to say about the denial of black humanity in a racist world. Cone approvingly makes reference to the work of the existentialist theologian Paul Tillich, particularly his analysis of the distinction between being and nonbeing. For Tillich,

to *be* is to participate in Being, which is the opposite of nonbeing. To exist is to exist in freedom – that is, stand out from nonbeing and *be*. But, on the other hand, finite being 'does not always stand completely out of non-being.' Always present is the threat of nothingness, the possibility of ceasing to be. The human person, therefore, is a creature who seeks to be in spite of nonbeing.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Mabogo P. More, 'Gordon and Biko: Africana Existential Conversation' in *Philosophia Africana*, vol 13, no. 2, Fall 2010, Spring 2011, 75

<sup>30</sup> Cone's summary of Tillich's position in Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 88

For Cone, this threat of nonbeing is precisely what it is to be a black person in racist America, because racism, above all else, serves to deny the humanity of its victims.

Yet the truly insidious element of racism is the way in which causes black people to deny their *own* humanity. This acquiescence, and indeed participation, in their own oppression is precisely an expression of what Jean-Paul Sartre meant by *bad faith*, which we discussed above. Gordon R Lewis, in his interpretation of the term, has argued that given that Sartre uses it to refer to a ‘human existence characterised by self-deception, self-evasion, and the acceptance of values as pre-given,’ *bad faith* can be seen to accord with the experience of black people who have forced to deny their own blackness and call their very being into question.<sup>31</sup> It was because it directly addressed this profound *existential* dilemma emerging from the black experience, that Biko’s Black Consciousness spoke so powerfully to African people.

Biko’s thought must be viewed in the context of the South African history which produced it. Black resistance to racism gathered momentum throughout the twentieth century. The African National Congress and Pan African Congress (the main black political organisations) became increasingly radicalised after the Nationalist Party came to power in 1948 on the platform of their policy of apartheid. In 1960 came an act of brutality which was to decisively alter the political landscape: on 21 March a group of between 5000 – 7000 black demonstrators gathered outside a police station in a town called Sharpeville. They intended to give themselves up for arrest for not carrying the hated ‘pass book’ (an identity document that all black people had to carry to prove they have permission to enter white areas of South

---

<sup>31</sup> More’s summary of Lewis’ argument on bad faith in More, ‘Biko: Africana Existentialist Philosopher’, 65

Africa). The police opened fire and killed at least 69 people. Many of those killed were shot in the back and there was no evidence of any weapons in the crowd.

In the wake of Sharpeville, international opinion began to turn against the apartheid government leading to campaigns involving sporting and cultural boycotts and economic sanctions against South Africa. Within the country, the political opposition became enlivened and launched mass campaigns of defiance. However, the resistance was quickly and brutally crushed – the main political organizations were banned and political leaders (such as Nelson Mandela) were either imprisoned or forced into exile. The struggle for black freedom could not be permanently suppressed however. During the 1970s new leaders black leaders began to emerge, shaped strongly by the philosophy of black consciousness.

The most prominent of these leaders was Biko, who had been deeply influenced by black theology while a medical student and leader of the Student Christian Movement at the University of Natal. The impetus provided by Biko and his black consciousness philosophy had much to do with the radicalisation of young blacks in the mid-1970s – as did his death at the hands of the police while in custody in 1977. On 16 June 1976, thousands of black schoolchildren in the township of Soweto, just outside Johannesburg, embarked on a march to protest against plans to introduce Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in black schools. As in Sharpeville the police opened fire with live ammunition. The official police figures report that 23 students died – other observers believe the number to be around 200.

The Soweto Uprising, catalysed by the black consciousness movement, reignited the opposition to apartheid both within and outside the country. Church leaders – such as Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu – played a crucial role in mobilising people at home and abroad. The pressure piled up on the Nationalist government to such an extent that the

maintenance of apartheid simply became untenable, as was seen in the decades which followed. Black consciousness' impact was not just that of a political movement – it fundamentally altered the social psychology of South Africa. Most decisively, black people saw themselves no longer as servants, but as *subjects*, agents of their own freedom.

This was indeed a victory for black consciousness because it had been the psychological impact of apartheid which had concerned Biko most. For him, the tragedy of racism is the self-negation which characterises the black person's situation:

[T]he black man in himself has developed a certain state of alienation, he rejects himself, precisely because he attaches the meaning white to all that is good, in other words he associates good and he equates good with white.<sup>32</sup>

However, black consciousness offered black people the potential for authenticity, the possibility of *choosing* to be black in the face of racism. Black Consciousness offered to black people the prospect of

taking charge of their destiny, of resolutely taking responsibility for who they are and the choices they make, of committing themselves to authentic possibilities, taking over their freedom, uniqueness and resolutely engaging in the projects through which they create themselves. Black Consciousness thus become the quest (vehicle) for authenticity.<sup>33</sup>

### **The Body of Steve Biko: An Icon of *Ubuntu***

We conclude our discussion on Biko with an image, which, although horrific and revealing of the full extent of human cruelty, is also a powerful expression of the enduring struggle for

---

<sup>32</sup> Biko, quoted in More, 'Biko: Africana Existentialist Philosopher', 66

<sup>33</sup> More, 'Biko: Africana Existentialist Philosopher', 67

freedom – his body, after his death in police custody on 12<sup>th</sup> September 1977. A few days later, the Minister of Justice, Jimmy Kruger, issued a statement saying that the cause of death had been a hunger strike.<sup>34</sup> In fact, Biko had suffered a massive brain haemorrhage, caused by the application of severe force to his head.<sup>35</sup> In their amnesty application to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the policemen who killed Biko were evasive, just as they had been in the original inquest in 1977; the full details will probably never come to light. However, they admitted that they kept Biko standing, after he had suffered a brain injury, that they continued the interrogation even after they noticed him speaking with a slur, and that his hands and feet were shackled to his cell door.

The doctors involved in the case were, at the very least, negligent, if not actively complicit in his death. One of them could apparently find nothing wrong with Biko, even though he found him dazed and with badly swollen hands and feet; he suggested Biko could be ‘shamming’. Another doctor, even though he was aware of the severity of Biko’s condition, recommended that he be driven to the prison hospital in Pretoria, which was some 1200 km away (from Port Elizabeth, where Biko was imprisoned). On the 11<sup>th</sup> September, Biko was put in the back of a Land Rover, and driven for nearly twelve hours, while naked, manacled and unconscious. On the night of 12<sup>th</sup> September, Steve Biko died, in the words of the lawyer who would act at his inquest, Sydney Kentridge, ‘a miserable and lonely death on a mat on a stone floor in a prison cell.’<sup>36</sup> Kruger’s response, while addressing a National Party Congress, was to become infamous: “I am not saddened by Biko’s death and I am not mad.

---

<sup>34</sup> Xolela Mangcu, *Biko: A Life* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2012), 24

<sup>35</sup> The account of Biko’s death which follows is based on Mangcu, *Biko: A Life*, 260-263

<sup>36</sup> Xolela Mangcu, *Biko: A Life* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2012), 262

*His death leaves me cold.*” Kruger’s words reverberated around the world; if Biko’s death illustrated apartheid’s brutality, his callousness reflected its inhumanity.

Of course, Biko was fully aware of what his final fate might be. In an interview given just a few months before his death, which now constitutes the basis a very moving chapter entitled ‘On Death’ in his *I Write What I Like*, he famously said: ‘You are either alive and proud or you are dead, and when you’re dead, you don’t care anyway.’<sup>37</sup> Implicit here is a sense of existentialist authenticity, that to truly live is to have freedom, autonomy and a sense of one’s own worth. To be truly alive is to assert your humanity, even in the face of those who seek to violate and suppress it. Biko is saying that to be physically alive, but without those qualities, is a form of death anyway. This is why he and the young people of the Soweto Uprising of 1976, to whom he refers to below, had no fear of death:

So you die in the riots. For a hell of a lot of them, in fact, there’s nothing really to lose – almost literally, given the kind of situations they come from. So if you can overcome the personal fear for death, which is a highly irrational thing, you know, then you’re on the way.<sup>38</sup>

Similarly, the context of the interrogations that he experienced, Biko would not allow his humanity to be diminished by the terror and violence of the regime. In the same interview, he reflected on the police’s attempts to beat him while in detention:

If they want to beat me five times, they can only do so on condition that I allow them to beat me five times. If I react sharply, equally and oppositely, to the first clap<sup>39</sup>, they are not going to be able to systematically count the next four claps, you see. It’s a fight... So I said to them, ‘Listen, if you guys

---

<sup>37</sup> Biko, *I Write What I Like*, 152-153

<sup>38</sup> Biko, *I Write What I Like*, 152

<sup>39</sup> A reference to the Afrikaans word *klap*, which means a slap

want to do this your way, you have to handcuff me and tie my feet together, so that I can't respond. If you allow me to respond, I'm certainly going to respond. And I am afraid you may have to kill me in the process...'<sup>40</sup>

Biko's remarks were both tragically prescient and astonishingly courageous. Here was a man who was seemingly at the mercy of one of the most notorious regimes in history, but he refused to be cowed, and was proud and defiant until his dying breath. He would not allow himself to be beaten without response, for that implied submission. No amount of violence or intimidation could subdue Biko's awareness of his existential freedom and full personhood - his sense of *Ubuntu*. Indeed, the violence inflicted upon his body only served to give momentum to the cause of freedom in South Africa and beyond. The subsequent inquest into his death, Donald Woods' book, featuring graphic photos of Biko's battered body in the morgue which he had smuggled out of South Africa, the consequent international outrage, Richard Attenborough's film about Biko, *Cry Freedom* - all of these served to embed the legacy of Biko's life and death in the consciousness of people around the world.

Thus, Biko's body, as South African theologian Katleho K. Mokoena has suggested, came to reflect that of the crucified Jesus, because his wounds, too, were redemptive. Mokoena likens the public crucifixion of Jesus on the cross to the media images of Biko's body. Both, he said, made people aware of

---

<sup>40</sup> Biko, *I Write What I Like*, 152

how brutal the system [of government] was to whoever challenged it. A Biko Christ-figure becomes a symbol of bravery, courage and standing for social justice no matter the consequences. The death of a Biko Christ-figure is not that of defeat but victory, because he does not give in to intimidation...<sup>41</sup>

We have already discussed how, within Eucharistic theology, the *broken* body of Jesus comes to reflect the violated bodies of the suffering peoples of the world – see page 144ff. More than that, however, in the midst of all the violence, suffering and evil of this world, the body of Jesus on the cross proclaims, with supreme eloquence, the victory of love, of our *Ubuntu* over all that seeks to dehumanize us. Therefore, what Mokoena called the ‘Biko Christ-figure’ becomes a symbol of suffering, but also inspiration and hope. It is a hope which enables us, with confidence and conviction, to continue to strive for Biko’s goal:

We have set out on a quest for true humanity, and somewhere on the distant horizon, we can see the glittering prize.

## **Malcolm X and Black Existentialism**

Biko’s black consciousness of the 1960s and 1970s had very African roots, but was also deeply influenced by, and reflected, developments in the United States. For example, in a very similar way to Biko, the compelling power of Malcolm X’s message lay in the way in which his message addressed existential, rather than simply political, concerns. His very name was a reflection of the themes we have discussed above, of the struggle to reclaim authenticity in the face the forces which sought to dehumanise black people. Malcolm changed his surname from ‘Little’ to ‘X’ because the given surnames of black people were a

---

<sup>41</sup> Katleho K. Mokoena, ‘Steve Biko Christ-figure: A black theological Christology in the Son of Man film’ in *HTS Theological Studies*, vol.73 no.3, 2017 (online edition), [http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S0259-94222017000300090](http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0259-94222017000300090)

legacy of slavery. The 'X' was the attempt to salvage his lost African heritage, a reclamation of his identity.

Malcolm X's own biography<sup>42</sup> reflected the wider denial of black being in the America of that time. His father was an outspoken Baptist preacher who was the victim of threats and harassment from the Klu Klux Klan. When he died, it was officially judged to be an accident, despite evidence of assault. The young Malcolm's anger was intensified when his mother, unable to cope with her husband's death, had a nervous breakdown and Malcolm and his siblings were sent to a series of foster homes. Another pivotal event was to shape the young Malcolm's life. Despite being one of the best students in his junior high school, he was told by his teacher that becoming a lawyer simply was 'no realistic goal for a nigger.'<sup>43</sup> He dropped out of school and turned to a life of crime in Boston and New York. His lifestyle was wild and, significantly, he had no sense of who he was a black person. In an episode related in his autobiography, Malcolm goes into a barber shop for a strange treatment designed to straighten his hair in order to look more white.<sup>44</sup> It was something that he would look back on later with horror, something which reflected the mental enslavement of black people, which we have discussed above - that they aspired to be white.

In 1946, he was sentenced to eight to ten years in prison for armed robbery. In prison Malcolm met a man called John Elton Bemby, whom he refers to as *Bimbi* in his autobiography. He was immediately struck with how different his demeanour and speech were from the other black prisoners. Bimbi, it turns out, was a member of the Nation of Islam and he spoke passionately and eloquently about the Nation's key teachings to his

---

<sup>42</sup> See Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (London: Penguin, 1968)

<sup>43</sup> Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 118

<sup>44</sup> Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 136-139

fellow black prisoners.<sup>45</sup> The Nation had some bizarre beliefs (including the fact the white people had been created by renegade scientist called Yacub), but they gave powerful expression to black needs and aspirations in the America of the time. They gave black people a clear sense of their own identity. They sought to empower black people, to make them agents of their own liberation, to take pride in their blackness – which is precisely what the young Malcolm seeking to straighten his hair to make it white had not done.

The Nation of Islam was also an explicit rejection of Christianity – seen as the religion of the white man. As far as they were concerned, Christianity preached passivity and acquiescence to blacks, and they were deeply critical of what they saw as the compromising and accommodating attitude towards white America by black Christian leaders such as Martin Luther King. Most of all, the Christian God was white – and as such a deeply alienating figure to the black Muslims. In that context, one can understand why the early Malcolm did not want even sympathetic liberal white people being part of the struggle. Throughout history black people had been objects – had had things done to them by whites. Now, in their struggle for equality, blacks had to be agents of their own liberation, they had to be their own subjects – which, in existentialist terms, is the requirement to live *authentically*.

Malcolm X's legacy represents a fearless challenge to injustice by a man who refused to passively accept inequality and oppression – even when his very life was under threat. He is a truly prophetic figure – one whose message was profoundly disturbing to the establishment. He represents the refusal of the human spirit to acquiesce to tyranny. He articulated passionately a call for the restoration of the full humanity of those who had been treated as

---

<sup>45</sup> Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 246-249

less than human. His message is about the essential dignity and worth of each human being. It resonated with the Christian understanding of the *imago dei* – see the discussion below. Furthermore, we are arguing that he recognised the *existential* element of black suffering. In the words of Cornel West:

Malcolm X recognized, as do too few black leaders today, that the Black encounter with the absurd in racist American society yields a profound spiritual need for human affirmation and recognition.<sup>46</sup>

### **South African Black Theology and *Imago Dei***

It is the context of *black consciousness* and the concomitant idea of *black power*, embodied by figures such as Biko and Malcolm X, that we must view the emergence of *black theology* in South Africa. South African theologian Alan Boesak has helpfully defined the three terms, and how they are distinct from, and relate to, each other.

Black Consciousness may be described as the awareness of black people that their humanity is constituted by their blackness. It means that black people are no longer ashamed that they are black, that they have a black history and a black culture distinct from the history and culture of white people. It means that blacks are determined to be judged no longer by, and to adhere no longer to white values. It is an attitude, a way of life. Viewed thus, Black Consciousness is an integral part of Black Power. But Black Power is also a clear critique of and a force for fundamental change in systems and patterns in society which oppress or give rise to the oppression of black people. Black Theology is the reflection of black Christians on the situation in which they live and on their struggle for liberation.<sup>47</sup>

From the late 1960s, the work of James Cone became well known to South African theological students. Cone's emphasis on black dignity and worth spoke powerfully to South African black people at that time. For example, his contextualising of the concept of *imago*

---

<sup>46</sup> Cornel West, Malcolm X and Black Rage in Theresa Perry (ed), *Teaching Malcolm X* (New York: Routledge, 1996),

<sup>47</sup> Alan Aubrey Boesak, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Oxford: A. R. Mowbray & Co., 1978), 1

*dei* had a particular resonance. In *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone points to a much closer connection between *imago dei* and relationality than had previously been the case in more traditional theological outlooks. He distinguishes between the understanding of *imago dei* as *analogia entis* ‘which means the being of human persons as such (in respect of their rationality for example) is in the likeness of the being of God’<sup>48</sup> and as *analogia relationis*, which is not part of human nature, but rather ‘is a given relationship in which human beings are free to be for God because God is free for them in Christ.’<sup>49</sup>

This latter understanding of the *imago dei* thus puts emphasis on human freedom which emerges out of relationship. Human beings are not like God simply in respect of some innate individual quality, but in their capacity to live in relationship and for freedom. This strikes one as being a profoundly *existential* reading of *imago dei*, with profound social and political implications, particularly for the marginalised and oppressed. If we are able to develop a theology of community which is built on the recognition of the *imago dei* as *analogia relationis*, then we will have a firm foundation upon which to premise the idea freedom, authenticity and right relationship with the Other, which are the cornerstones of human identity.

Cornell West similarly emphasises the centrality of the notion of *imago dei* to black personhood when he says that it functions to

...spotlight the sanctity and dignity of individuals. All individuals are unique and made in God’s image and thereby warrant a certain kind of treatment. This is very important because it relates to the universalism and egalitarianism of the Christian gospel. I would suggest that ‘*imago dei*’...has

---

<sup>48</sup> James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 90

<sup>49</sup> Cone, *Black Theology*, 92

subversive implications...it, in fact diametrically opposes the hierarchical structures we see shot through societies such as the United States and South Africa.<sup>50</sup>

South African theologian Simon Maimela also sees the *imago dei* as integral to the understanding of the value and dignity of black people in contexts of oppression. However, Maimela goes further by stressing the way in which people are *empowered* through the *imago dei*. Human beings can 'representatively act on earth as the Godself would have acted';<sup>51</sup> thus, the *imago dei*

has to be understood in terms both of human living relationships to their surroundings and their calling to a dynamic task and vocation of becoming sharers of God's creative nature.<sup>52</sup>

He goes on to elaborate on this call to share in God's creative work when he says that

the idea of divine image should be understood as referring to the divine empowerment of men and women, granting to them of the ability to create and produce the world and to structure human interrelationships for the furtherance of history.<sup>53</sup>

The connection made by Maimela between the *imago dei* and power is significant. It demonstrates that black theology is connected, not only to the notion of black *consciousness*, but black *power* as well. For the black person, the *imago dei* speaks not only of transformation in the way they view themselves in the context of racism, it also brings them to the realisation that they have the power to change that context. The *imago dei* restores agency to the oppressed, enabling them to act, rather than be acted *upon*. It is this agency which must be at the very heart of a reformulated theology of *Ubuntu*. Boesak also reflects this theme of black personhood being fulfilled through divine empowerment when he says:

---

<sup>50</sup> Cornel West, 'Present Socio-Political-Economic Movements for Change – US Perspective' in Simon S. Maimela and Dwight N. Hopkins (eds.), *We Are One Voice: Black Theology in the USA and South Africa* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2017), 74

<sup>51</sup> Simon S. Maimela, *What is the Human Being?* (Pretoria: University of Pretoria, 1994), 7

<sup>52</sup> Maimela, *What is the Human Being?*, 16

<sup>53</sup> Maimela, *What is the Human Being?*, 17

God's power is a liberating, creative power and it is this "full authority" with which God has endowed humanity. To share power and to share in power is to be fully human. It means to be able to *be*, to live in accordance with one's God-given humanity. It means to be able to realise this essential humanity in the socio- historical world in which people have responsibility. Human responsibility presupposes freedom, which is power shared.<sup>54</sup>

Our reference to Boesak and Maimela's work is a reflection of the fact that South African black theologians sought to develop a theology that spoke directly to their own situation, and did not simply replicate developments in the USA. For one thing, black Christians in South Africa sought not only to develop a political theology of liberation following Cone's model, but also to shape an African Theology, which had an emphasis on the *indigenisation* of Christianity. This refers to the attempt to firmly embed the church in Africa, to ensure that Christianity became rooted in African culture, language and expressions of worship. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century black Christians in South Africa had begun to revolt against western styles of worship and white leadership within the mainline churches. This revolt found institutional expression in the formation in the African Independent Churches, which broke away from the mainline white churches and emphasised black culture and leadership – and was thus another highly significant example of black subjectivity and agency.

However, the critics of black theology suggest that it speaks not of black agency, but of racial exclusivity of another sort. Certainly, the emphasis on the word 'black' in the context of theology has often been misunderstood and misrepresented. Alan Boesak's clarification with regard to South African black theology is helpful here; for him, 'black' has to do with the existential situation, not with the fundamental point of departure for theology:

---

<sup>54</sup> Boesak, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 51

The black situation is the situation within which reflection and action takes place, but it is the Word of God which illuminates the reflection and guides the action.<sup>55</sup>

It is vital to understand this in order to appreciate the evangelical conviction and motivation that characterised the emergence of black theology in South Africa. Fundamentally, it was not about racial exclusivity, but about restoring the dignity and worth of black people, which is inherent in the *imago dei*, within the context of a racist society. Thus understood, Black theology is a response to the black existential condition.

## Conclusions

Thus we have seen that, far from representing the polar opposite of pure individualism to *Ubuntu's* communitarianism, as per Battle's argument outlined at the beginning of this chapter, elements of existentialist thought interrogate *Ubuntu* in a manner which makes possible a far more nuanced and indeed liberative understanding of the relationship between individual and community. In particular, the existentialist emphasis on authenticity and personal freedom – in the face of those forces which threaten people with nonbeing - give expression to that essential hallmark of the liberated human being, subjectivity. The human discovery of truth through subjectivity and of freedom through authenticity – which characterise existentialism - is not a denial of community; on the contrary, it should be the *telos* of true community, the process by which we become fully human *in* community.

---

<sup>55</sup> Boesak, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 12

## Chapter Eight

### **The Theology of *Ubuntu* and Western Relational Approaches**

At the heart of this study is the belief that the theology of *Ubuntu* needs to recover human agency and subjectivity in order to transcend the very present dangers of collectivism. Furthermore, we are proposing that it could profitably engage with sources beyond Africa in seeking to do so - while at the same time arguing its emphasis on relationality still constitutes a rigorous and necessary challenge to western approaches to theological and philosophical anthropology. In seeking to draw together these two strands of this work – the critique **of** *Ubuntu* and the critique **by** *Ubuntu* – we now to turn to western approaches which have areas of convergence with *Ubuntu*, in terms of a relational understanding of the self. Clearly, the western canon is vast and we must necessarily be selective in our thinking; however, we will argue that (within philosophy) in Aristotle and Ricoeur, and (within theology) in Trinitarian relational approaches, the theology of *Ubuntu* has fruitful partners for dialogue.

#### **The Theology of *Ubuntu* and Aristotelian Virtue Ethics**

At the heart of the discussion about the convergence between *Ubuntu* and Aristotle is the issue of teleology. Aristotle's understanding of the human being is fundamentally linked to purpose; this he understands to be *eudemonia* (human flourishing), and it is achieved through the life of virtue. Similarly, *Ubuntu* reflects a teleological understanding of the person related to how he or she achieves full self-realisation in the context of community. The central question in discussing the relationship between the two approaches is the extent to which the Aristotelian understanding of virtue can stand apart from community, in a way

which would not be conceived of in some models of *Ubuntu*. Our argument will be that, in fact, a proper understanding of virtue must necessarily involve an acknowledgement that some of its elements are constituted independent of community, and that this has important implications for a theology of *Ubuntu*.

In the first instance, it is necessary to have an understanding of *eudemonia* and the virtuous life within the framework of Aristotle's overall conception of teleology.<sup>56</sup> As both a scientist and a philosopher, Aristotle was concerned with both causation and with an object's *form* – i.e. what qualities make it precisely what it is. For example, a copper bowl is like other articles made of the same metal – e.g. candlesticks, coal scuttles, etc. – in that it is made of the same material stuff; however, it is unlike them in having the special shape or structure which makes it a bowl. For Aristotle, any individual thing – whether it is the product of natural reproduction or human manufacture – has two components: the stuff of which it consists, which is its matter, and the structural arrangement which makes it unique to the 'special' thing under consideration, which is its *form*.<sup>57</sup> In the case of a person: he or she has natural dispositions and tendencies which can be seen as the 'raw material' (matter). The mind is then developed during a formative period of its growth, and these initial dispositions develop into the relatively fixed character of a person in adult life (form).

From this we can see that in Aristotle matter must not be confused with body. Matter is that which is still relatively incomplete – it is something which is yet to be made complete by being made into form. In its strictest sense, form is the last determination of matter, and matter is that which is yet to receive this last determination. The same process of growth can

---

<sup>56</sup> See A. E. Taylor, *Aristotle* (London and Edinburgh: T. C. and B. C. Jack / T. Nelson and Sons, 1919), 49-70.

<sup>57</sup> Taylor, *Aristotle*, 52ff.

also be seen as *potentiality* and *actuality*.<sup>58</sup> If you take two seeds, even a botanist may have difficulty telling them apart. Yet of these two indistinguishable seeds, let us say one will develop into an oak and the other elm. Thus, we may say of a particular seed that though it is not actually an oak, it is potentially an oak. This means that under the right conditions the seed will grow into an oak, but also that the oak that cannot – under any circumstances – be made into an elm or a beech. So, too, will a baby become an actual adult human. Thus, potentiality can be seen as undeveloped matter and actuality can be the finally developed Form. Matter is the potential which something has to become actualised (form). Thus we see the process of growth is not unending, but has an End. Once it has become an oak, the oak does not grow into something else. This tendency of the organic world to culminate in a last stage of development led Aristotle to contemplate the problem of the ‘true end’ in his *Ethics*.

Aristotle’s solution for this central question for Greek philosophy is what he called the ‘Four Causes.’<sup>59</sup> Aristotle proposed four causes which he saw as revealing the true nature of a thing: 1) the material cause, comprising the physical matter of which the object consists, 2) the formal cause, i.e. its design, 3) the agent with whose initial impulse the development began, which he called the efficient cause and 4) the completed result of the whole process: the final cause, which was bound up with the object’s purpose. Thus in the example of a house, its material cause might be bricks and concrete, its formal cause would be its architectural design, its efficient cause would be the builder, and its final cause is fulfilled when people live in it. The *telos* of a house is for people to live in it – that is its purpose and final end.

---

<sup>58</sup> Taylor, *Aristotle*, 56ff.

<sup>59</sup> Taylor, *Aristotle*, 58ff.

This process of causation might be clear in manufactured things, as in the example given above, but in living organisms, the process is somewhat more complicated. For one thing, in nature the formal cause and the efficient cause tend to converge because organic beings give birth to organic beings of the same kind. Furthermore, while we might suppose that we might easily reach agreement regarding the final cause of a house (although even there one could envisage competing answers to the question of what it is for), the final cause of a living being is much less readily apparent.

In particular, the final cause of a human being seems far more elusive. For Aristotle, however, the final cause of the human being *is* clear: *eudemonia*, which is achieved through pursuing the life of virtue, and is based on reason (as opposed to the appetites). Furthermore, as the work of Thomas Aquinas – who was so profoundly influenced by Aristotle – bears testimony to, a teleological approach to the human being seems to be integral to the Christian theology of creation. Christian theology might seek to dialogue with atheistic forms of existentialism – as we have sought to do in this thesis – insofar as they are about freedom, authenticity and subjectivity, but it certainly diverges from the existentialist view that there is no innate purpose or meaning to life. Inherent in the notion of a God who creates the world not out of necessity, but in love, is the idea that the response of love to God in turn represents the final end of human beings.

There are thus clearly areas of overlap between the Aristotelian, teleological, *eudemonist* view of the human being and the theology of *Ubuntu*. Perhaps the most famous quotation from Aristotle is his declaration that ‘man is meant for political association’.<sup>60</sup> There is no

---

<sup>60</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, Book 1, Section 1253a, available at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0058%3Abook%3D1%3Asection%3D1253a>

doubt that Aristotle believed that one integral element of human nature is an orientation towards relating positively towards other human beings. Both Aristotle and *Ubuntu* reflect a view of human flourishing which cannot be understood other than in the context of human nature as being innately social. There is evidently much Aristotle's understanding of the *polis* which coheres with the African understanding of the interrelationship between self-realisation and the flourishing of the community, as summarised by African theologian Benezet Bujo:

[I]t is exactly the community which enables the self-realisation of the individual. According to the African representation of values, it is not possible to achieve the ethical ideal individually or as a strictly personal achievement.<sup>61</sup>

*Ubuntu* also has a specifically *eudemonist* element insofar it, as Ramose has put it, enjoins, indeed commands, one to become a better human being.<sup>62</sup> Thus, in the sense that *Ubuntu* calls upon people to act virtuously so that they can become better people, rather than doing so because they are following a normative ethical system (be it deontological or consequentialist), it is very much an expression of virtue ethics.

However, while acknowledging that there are several areas of convergence between Aristotle's ethic and *Ubuntu*, Thaddeus Metz argues that the two are also substantially different. In particular, Metz focusses on four Aristotelian virtues (three moral and one intellectual) that are essentially individual, and can thus be categorised as being self-regarding, rather than other-regarding.<sup>63</sup> In the first instance, Metz highlights temperance, which is the good of having moderate desires toward sensual pleasure, of regarding such desires as being appropriate and satisfying them. Secondly, continence is the good of being

---

<sup>61</sup> Benezet Bujo, quoted in Thaddeus Metz, 'Ethics in Africa and in Aristotle: some points of contrast' in *Phronimon* Vol. 13(2) 2012, 99-117 'Ethics, 100

<sup>62</sup> Ramose quoted in Metz, 'Ethics in Africa and in Aristotle', 101

<sup>63</sup> Metz, 'Ethics in Africa and in Aristotle', 105ff.

drawn to bodily desires, but judging them to be not so worthy of pursuit and subsequently not giving in to them. Thirdly, toughness is the good of not being overly sensitive to bodily pains, but not judging them to be worthy of avoidance and consequently ‘resisting’ them. All of the states being mentioned above appear to be entirely internal to an individual. They appear to rest on the extent one’s rational judgement about one’s own pleasure or pain determines one’s conduct, in the face of what Aristotle would see as base desires.

The same might be said of the Metz’s fourth example – the intellectual virtue of knowledge. Aristotle categorises different forms of knowledge, but the intellectual reflection to which he ascribes most value is philosophical wisdom, contemplation of the heavens and of God. To be in a state of knowledge about these facets of the world requires does not necessarily require any relationship with other human beings. In this respect, argues Metz, Aristotle’s virtues differ from the ethics of *Ubuntu*, in which all virtues are constituted through relationship with other people.

Metz acknowledges that when Aristotle discusses self-love, he is clear that it is not enough on its own, but ought also to go alongside concern for others. Thus Aristotle says in his *Ethics*:

[W]hen everyone competes to achieve what is fine and strains to do the finest actions, everything that is right will be done for the common good.<sup>64</sup>

However, Metz argues that while it is true that Aristotle believes that the most choice-worthy life, the one which is most worthy of pride, is one in which the virtues are exercised in the context of community, it does not follow that states such as temperance, continence, toughness and knowledge are wholly without virtue outside the context of community.<sup>65</sup>

Aristotle is often concerned with describing the ideal life – e.g. it is most desirable that we

---

<sup>64</sup> Aristotle, quoted in Metz, ‘Ethics in Africa and in Aristotle’, 109

<sup>65</sup> Metz, ‘Ethics in Africa and in Aristotle’, 110

should study. This does not preclude the idea that studying alone can be somewhat desirable. Incomplete virtue is still virtue, as becomes apparent when Aristotle observes that ‘many are able to exercise virtue in their own concerns but unable in what relates to another.’<sup>66</sup> Thus, while within both Aristotle and *Ubuntu* the ideal life is a communal one, in Aristotle *some degree* of virtue is possible without relationality, whereas in *Ubuntu* – at least as it has been conceived up to now - this is not possible because virtue can only be expressed in the context of relationship. In other words, the question is whether the human *telos* has an element of *self*-realisation or whether it is *entirely* fulfilled in community. If we put the question differently, we might ask whether the *telos* of human being is the life of virtue which is necessarily given expression in community or is the human *telos* simply community *per se*?

Metz argues that Aristotle’s account of virtue is more coherent. He acknowledges that proponents of *Ubuntu* have a plausible case: they could argue that if one lacked the moral virtues of temperance, continence and toughness, it could cause problems for the lives of other people. It is clear, for example, that drunkenness caused by intemperance might well have very damaging effects on relationships. By the same token, it could be argued that the intellectual virtue of knowledge is fulfilled in that knowledge being shared with others.

However, Metz argues that while one could agree that the lack of these virtues might have a substantial impact on other people and on the community, this does not exhaust the respects in which the absence of these virtues is undesirable. Drunkenness is not *only* undesirable because it means that of its impact on relationships; even apart from those relationships, the person who drinks excessively is likely to be less than happy and fulfilled, to not be experiencing *eudemonia*.

---

<sup>66</sup> Aristotle, quoted in Metz, ‘Ethics in Africa and in Aristotle’, 110

This understanding of virtue as not being entirely defined by relationality is reinforced by Metz's use of a thought experiment which involves him being stranded on a deserted island.<sup>67</sup> Metz argues that were he to be in that situation, it would be a vice if he did not build himself a shelter because of laziness. Similarly, it would be a virtue if he realised his inclination to avoid the short-term pain of hard work was irrational and he acted to overcome that inclination. Likewise, Metz goes on, he would be considered to be a more excellent human being if he charted the planets and the stars and, after a time, was able to give a coherent account of their orbits. The point is that in these scenarios it is possible to conceive of virtue and vice outside the context of relationship. Metz acknowledges that the isolation thought experiment is artificial since human beings very rarely live in other than a social context – but he argues that this does not demonstrate that all human behaviour is other-regarding, nor that a relational dimension is necessarily the best explanation of why certain behaviour may be regarded as virtuous.

We would argue that Aristotle's conception of the relation of virtue to community – that the former is most often expressed in the latter, but that need not *necessarily* be the case – is consistent with Christian spirituality. For the Christian, the *telos* of the human being is a life lived in the service of God. To be sure, the service of God will inevitably and necessarily involve the service of the community – hence Jesus' summary of the commandments as 'Love God, Love your neighbour'<sup>68</sup> – but the service of neighbour does not replace, nor does it constitute in itself, the call to fulfil one's own vocation and to discover one's true self. In Christian spirituality, for example, the purpose of the disciplines of prayer, meditation,

---

<sup>67</sup> Metz, 'Ethics in Africa and in Aristotle', 107

<sup>68</sup> Mark 12:30-31

fasting, etc. is the fostering of personal spiritual growth, through which an individual comes nearer to self-actualisation, *not* the strengthening of community *per se*.

### **The Theology of *Ubuntu* and Ricoeur**

Within modern philosophy, an important voice in the deconstruction of the self as supreme subject and the turn towards the Other in western philosophy - a voice which indeed we shall argue closely parallels African communitarianism - is that of Paul Ricoeur. In *Oneself as Another*,<sup>69</sup> he explores the interaction between identity and selfhood. According to Ricoeur, selfhood implies otherness to such an extent that otherness is intrinsic to selfhood. The self necessarily implies a relation between the same and the other. This dialectic of the self and other contradicts Descartes' *cogito*, which posits a subject in the first person (an 'I', or an ego) without reference to an other.

Thus, Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the self differs fundamentally from the philosophy of the *cogito* – which he is at pains to point out in the Introduction to *Oneself*:

It seemed to me that a brief confrontation with...the *philosophies of the subject* would form an appropriate introduction, making it clear why the quarrel over the *cogito* will henceforth be considered to have been superseded. To be sure, other discussions will arise in the course of this work in which the dialectic of *ipse*-identity and of *idem*-identity, that of the self and its other, will play the major roles. But the polemic in which we shall then be engaged will be situated beyond the point at which our problematic will have parted ways with the philosophies of the subject<sup>70</sup> (my underlining).

Ricoeur locates his position between this Cartesian tradition on the one hand and Emmanuel Levinas on the other hand. In other words, he is seeking to reformulate the self as being

---

<sup>69</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, translated by Kathleen Blamey (University of Chicago Press, 1992)

<sup>70</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 4

more than self-possessing subjectivity (Descartes), but as also distinct from the idea that it is located only in the other and has no subjective dimension (Levinas).

Levinas was a particularly significant voice giving expression to ‘the Other’ because he spoke out of an experience of the very worst of human oppression and suffering.<sup>71</sup> Born in 1906, he was a Lithuanian Jew who during the Second World War was imprisoned in France and did forced labour; many of his family died under the Nazis. In that context, one can certainly understand his deep and profound concern about the dangers of the Supreme Self, the Subject which leaves no room for regard of the Other. It was thus precisely this Other with whom Levinas was most concerned. His contention was that Western philosophy has been preoccupied with Being, the totality, at the expense of what is otherwise than Being, what lies outside the totality of Being as transcendent, exterior, infinite, the Other. For Levinas, this relationship with the Other cannot be reduced to a mere moral code or a symmetrical relationship. It is far more radical than that – the relationship with the Other is a calling into question of the self. However, our argument here is that while Levinas provides a necessary challenge and very powerful corrective to the Cartesian Self, the loss of all elements of subjectivity is problematic in a manner similar to that outlined in our critique of collectivism – i.e. it entails the loss of personal freedom, autonomy and authenticity. Ricoeur, on the other hand, as we shall argue, presents a thoroughgoing critique of Descartes, but retains a strong sense of the self.

---

<sup>71</sup> Davies, *A Theology of Compassion*, 129ff

Ricoeur's response to the Cartesian cogito is different: he proposes a hermeneutics of the self which is based on a radically different epistemology. The notion of hermeneutics has the implication of *attestation* rather than the indubitable knowledge of truth in cogito. Ricoeur defines attestation as the type of certainty, the method of truth, proper to hermeneutic philosophy. Attestation thereby distinguishes hermeneutic philosophy from philosophies of the cogito, with their claims to complete transparency and certainty. This hermeneutical understanding of the self, contrasted as it is with the self-positing Cartesian cogito, leads to a more communitarian understanding of self, consistent with African anthropologies. Ricoeur has consistently stressed the impossibility of direct self-awareness, and thus sought to move away from the Cartesian and Husserlian epistemologies of the supreme, knowing Subject. Thus Ricoeur rejects, as a point of departure, complete and transparent self-awareness, or the self-evident truth of the *cogito*. Instead, hermeneutics enables Ricoeur to recognise that for self-awareness even to have content, the self must appropriate the expressions of its desire to be and effort to exist in the signs, symbols, narratives, actions and institutions that objectify it: '[T]here is no self-understanding that is not *mediated* by signs, symbols, and texts'<sup>72</sup> As David Klemm has rightly observed, 'we live deeper than we think.'<sup>73</sup> In other words, thinking is the attempt to recover the meaning of the self in the actions of living.

This hermeneutical understanding of the self is essentially reflexive, which is best illustrated by the grammatical points with which Ricoeur begins *Oneself as Another*.<sup>74</sup> For Ricoeur individual identity is either sameness or selfhood. Ricoeur locates the difference between the

---

<sup>72</sup> Paul Ricoeur, 'On Interpretation', in *From Text to Action*, trans. Kathleen Blamey & John B. Thompson (London & New York, NY: Continuum, 1991), 15.

<sup>73</sup> David E. Klemm, (2008), 'Philosophy and Kerygma: Ricoeur as Reader of the Bible' in David M. Kaplan (ed.), *Reading Ricoeur* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008). p.48.

<sup>74</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago, IL & London: University of Chicago Press, 1992). 1 – 3.

two terms within the framework of French grammar. He is intrigued by the difference in meaning of the French word *meme*. The word can mean ‘same’ on the one hand and on the other can have a sense of ‘self’ in the reflexive pronoun *soimeme*, ‘oneself’ or literally ‘self-same’. This says Ricoeur corresponds to the Latin terms *idem* and *ipse*. For Ricoeur, authentic selfhood is linked to *ipse*- rather than *idem*- identity. It is *ipse* which allows for complex but positive relationships to form with the other. Differently put, *idem*-and *ipse*-identity is the difference between formal and narrative identity. *Idem*-identity means to be identical to someone in some quality or characteristic. Thus, it can mean either to be the same as someone or indeed the state of being oneself and *not* another – that thing which belongs to one individual and not to another. In contrast to *idem*-identity, *ipse*-identity is not dependent on something permanent for its existence. That is, having a self over time does not necessitate having something the same, something perhaps metaphysical which grounds the identity of self.

*Iipse*-identity therefore discloses a deeper ontological dimension to Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of the self. ‘What mode of being,’ asks Ricoeur, ‘belongs to the self, what sort of being or entity is it?’<sup>75</sup> As stated above, Ricoeur is clear that selfhood as *ipse*-identity can only be attested to: ‘attestation is the assurance – the credence and the trust – of *existing* in the mode of selfhood’.<sup>76</sup> Attestation serves also to reveal a further ontological dimension to selfhood; namely, the dialectical relation between self and other. Ricoeur argues for a self that stands in mutuality between self and other as suggested in the Aristotelian theme of friendship.

---

<sup>75</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 297

<sup>76</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 302

Love for the other and love for the self are now mutually grounding. In the words of Ricoeur:

Solicitude is not something added on to esteem from the outside but... unfolds the dialogic dimension of self –esteem.<sup>77</sup>

For Aristotle, a friend is defined as ‘another self’; for Ricoeur, friendship is at a midpoint between Levinas’ ‘summons to responsibility where the initiative comes from the other’<sup>78</sup> and post-Husserlian sympathy for the suffering other, where the initiative comes from the loving self. It is this intersubjectivity which characterises both Ricoeur and the *Ubuntu* notion of the self. Ricoeur’s nuanced conception of the relationship between self, which involves not a complete negation of the subject, but rather a recognition of how it is constituted in relationship with the other, serves to further define our reformulated conception of the theology of *Ubuntu*.

### ***Ubuntu* and Trinitarian Theology**

In terms of western theology, relational approaches to anthropology have gained much greater prominence in recent years. We have already made reference to the work of Oliver Davies, which argues for a revitalised kenotic ontology - a theology of compassion – to guide Western humanity in the rediscovery of self.<sup>79</sup> Other such approaches to selfhood have in

---

<sup>77</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 180

<sup>78</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 192

<sup>79</sup> Davies, *A Theology of Compassion*

particular been premised on a relational understanding of the Trinity. An example of this thinking is Paul Fiddes' *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity*. In it, Fiddes argues for a return to the insights of the church fathers:

When the fathers used the word 'person' – whether persons in God or human beings – they meant a 'distinct identity', an otherness, which only made sense in relationship.<sup>80</sup>

This relational, Trinitarian mode of existence also offers us an insight which is significant for a theology of *Ubuntu* seeking to help black people develop a sense of their own selfhood (rather than it being defined by white society): *Otherness is not always oppressive*. Indeed, correctly understood, it can be intrinsically constitutive of personhood. Fiddes demonstrates this when he pinpoints the Arian Christological controversy as being a crucial moment in developing the Christian understanding of personhood.<sup>81</sup> Arius had argued that Christ could not be 'the same in being' as God the Father – as a separate reality (*hypostasis*) he must also be of a different nature (*ousia*). Through the dispute with Arius, a consensus emerged amongst Greek theologians that *hypostasis* should denote the distinct identity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, while *ousia* should denote the one divine nature. This corresponded to the balance between one *substantia* and three *personae* which Tertullian had proposed earlier in the Latin-speaking West.

These insights were developed by Athanasius who – in response to the sceptical Arian question of what the difference could be between the persons of the Trinity if they are one divine essence – articulated the view they are different in the way they relate to each other:

---

<sup>80</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000), p. 16

<sup>81</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000), 13ff

...the Father is 'other' (*heteros*) in that he alone begets the Son, the Son is 'other' in that he alone is begotten, and the Spirit is other in that he alone proceeds from the Father.<sup>82</sup>

Thus within the Trinity, difference - rather than being an alienating negation of self – is *that which defines personhood*. In this regard, McFarland is helpful in distinguishing between Jesus' divergent interpretations of difference. He uses the example of the healing of the woman with the haemorrhage in Matthew 9: 18-22. Within the story, there are two discourses of difference – 'haemorrhage' and 'woman', each of which are treated differently by Jesus in ways which are significant:

That Jesus seeks to eliminate 'haemorrhage' (along with 'leprosy', 'blindness', 'paralysis', 'mental illness' and of course 'sin') suggests that this form of difference is an impediment to fulfilling one's calling as a person. By contrast the fact that Jesus does not treat 'woman' (or 'Gentile' or 'Samaritan') in the same way would seem to count as evidence that this form of difference is no such impediment and, indeed, may contribute positively to one's personal identity.<sup>83</sup>

Thus, within the divine economy of the Trinity itself and within the Jesus' own interaction with people, we see the ontological potential of Otherness as constitutive of personhood. What distinguishes Otherness as a liberative element of human identity from Otherness an instrument of negation and oppression, is that the latter is imposed on the self as object in a coercive way, whereas the former necessarily implies the self as subject celebrating difference in relation to other selves. For Christians, then, it is the Trinity which becomes the paradigm for a relational understanding of personhood. Whereas for Mary Daly, the process of liberation necessarily implies jettisoning the notion of God (changing from 'He' to 'She' is not enough: for Daly the very concept of God reinforces patriarchal concepts of hierarchy), other feminist theologians such as Soskice see the Trinity as a model of the new human

---

<sup>82</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity*, 14

<sup>83</sup> Ian A. McFarland, *Difference and Identity: A Theological Anthropology* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001), 130-1

community. For Soskice, the Trinity is a 'community' of persons, not the master-slave dichotomy which Daly considers Christianity to be predicated on. Soskice emphasizes the ancient term to describe this relationship of persons was *perichoresis* ('mutual interpenetration').<sup>84</sup>

In similar vein, John Zizioulas, in his highly influential *Being and Communion*, has sought to develop a relational understanding of being, rooted within ecclesiology:

From the fact that a human being is a member of the Church, he becomes an 'image of God', he exists as God Himself exists, he takes on God's 'way of being'. This way of being is not a moral attainment, something that man *accomplishes*. It is a way of *relationship* with the world, with other people and with God, an act of *communion*...<sup>85</sup>

Within Zizioulas's high ecclesiology, this being as communion is thus fulfilled within the Church (although as with our critique of Tutu's ecclesiology above<sup>86</sup>, one wonders if the reality of the Church with all its contradictions actually does give full expression to such an ontology. The Church may be the harbinger of relational personhood, but one would struggle to argue that it consistently exemplifies it).

Zizioulas goes on to argue that it was within patristic theology that we see developed a notion of personhood which subverted the existing order of the time, but which emphasized both relationality and personal freedom. Patristic theology represented a significant development from Ancient Greek thought, which had remained tied to an 'ontological monism': it was unable to see human individuality as permanent in any real sense because of its basic principle which sought to trace the multiplicity of existent things back to a unity in the 'one'

---

<sup>84</sup> Janet Martin Soskice, 'Trinity and Feminism' in Susan Frank Parsons (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 2002) 135ff

<sup>85</sup> Zizioulas, John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985), 15

<sup>86</sup> See pages 108-109

being.<sup>87</sup> As we have seen, Aristotle had a strong sense of the *telos* of human beings as a whole – but not of the freedom of *each* human being. Not even God could escape the constraints of this ontological monism – Aristotle’s impersonal God, for example, was clearly seen as being as contingent upon the world as the world is on God. This in turn led to the notion of the *cosmos*, the harmonious relationship of all existing things – but a notion which precluded human or indeed divine freedom.

Indeed, the very premise of Greek tragedy was the conflict between the attempted expression of human freedom and necessity in a unified cosmos. As John Zizioulas puts it, it was in the Greek theatre that the human being tried to become a ‘person’,

‘...to rise up against this harmonious unity which oppresses him as rational and moral necessity. It is there that he fights with the gods and with his fate... but it is there too that he constantly learns... that he can neither escape fate ultimately nor continue to show hubris to the gods without punishment... Thus he confirms tragically the view, expressed so typically in Plato’s *Laws* that *the world does not exist for the sake of man (sic), but man exists for its sake.*<sup>88</sup>

However, the danger with such a view, which sees the order of the cosmos as necessarily static and any questioning of it or actions to undermine as being aberrant, is that it becomes, essentially, an ideological justification of the status quo. Plato’s ‘ideal’ society as envisaged in *The Republic* is only ideal for the Philosopher-Kings at the apex of his rigid hierarchy – but certainly not for the Workers at the bottom. Intrinsic to this Greek world-view, then, is the negation of the freedom – and therefore the personhood – of the oppressed human being. The notion of personhood is thus already identified as subversive.

---

<sup>87</sup> John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 29

<sup>88</sup> Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 32

Zizioulas speaks of two ‘leavenings’ in patristic theology which made possible the development of a theology of personhood in the face of this Greek worldview.<sup>89</sup> In the first instance, the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* traced the world back to ontology outside of the world, i.e. God acting freely and not out of necessity. The notion that being is constituted through freedom is of course of profound significance for an anthropology of liberation. In the second place, the being of God was identified with a person, i.e. the Father. The ‘substance’ of God never exists in some kind of ‘naked’ or self-contained state – it is dependent on a relational, Trinitarian mode of existence.

## Conclusions

In this chapter, we have sought to further challenge the prevailing view amongst some Black and African theologians that the totality of western theological and philosophical anthropology is represented by a homogenous Cartesian tradition. In so doing, we have highlighted *some* elements of relational approaches in the West and have demonstrated how they both converge with important themes in the theology of *Ubuntu*, but also enhance its development in significant ways.

Our dialogue with Aristotelian virtue ethics has reminded us that the human *telos* is fulfilled in community, but is not entirely constituted entirely by community. Ricoeur has delicately and painstakingly chartered a course - between the poles of the reign of the Supreme Subject on the one hand, and the complete negation of the Subject on the other hand – which we would argue is vital for a relational theology to follow. The Trinitarian relational theologians

---

<sup>89</sup> Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 39-40

not only point to the Trinity as being the exemplar of community, but also that *difference* is fundamental to personhood. All of these are important constitutive elements of a reformulated theology of *Ubuntu*.

## **Section Three – The Theology of *Ubuntu* Applied: Some Key Issues**

### **Chapter Nine**

#### **The Theology of *Ubuntu*, Gender and Sexuality**

As we have seen, at the heart of this study is the understanding that uncritical approaches to *Ubuntu* and essentialist conceptions of African culture, rather than strengthening the bonds of authentic community, can lead to the reification of patterns of social domination. The first section of this chapter focusses on how this is the case with patriarchy in particular – how *Ubuntu*, as an African cultural discourse, has been used to justify the oppression of women in the South African context. However, we shall go to argue that if we allow the culturally essentialist elements within *Ubuntu* to be held up to critical scrutiny, *Ubuntu's* relational conception of personhood and its emphasis on the dignity of the human being, means that is potentially transformative and liberative in the area of gender relations. Thus, our argument is not that the theology of *Ubuntu* is *inherently* patriarchal or homophobic, but rather that patriarchy and homophobia can be justified through the way it has been misappropriated.

#### **African Patriarchy**

The patriarchal nature of South African society is well known and is all too clearly illustrated by damning statistics about the prevalence of sexual violence. In a document written in the

context of one particularly brutal rape and murder, but reflecting on the general rate of offences against women in South Africa, The Centre for Constitutional Rights (CFCR) highlighted the disparity between the country's progressive constitution and the reality and 'a society largely driven by patriarchal traditions and culture'.<sup>1</sup> CFCR's document goes on to cite the 48<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, held in April 2011, which expressed serious concern that violence against women in South Africa appears to be 'socially normalized, legitimized and accompanied by a culture of silence and impunity.'<sup>2</sup>

This violently patriarchal culture is manifested in shocking sexual assault statistics. In a 2009 Medical Research Council survey of 1686 men in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal provinces of South Africa, 466 of them (27.6%) had committed an act of rape, whether alone or with accomplices. 5% of men admitted to raping a child (under the age of fifteen years) and among those who raped, most had done it on more than occasion.<sup>3</sup> As with the CFCR report, the researchers in this survey found the main factor in explaining these extraordinary levels of sexual violence was deeply embedded attitudes which reflected gender power relations. In this regard, it is highly significant that nearly nine out of ten men interviewed believed that women should obey their husbands – and almost six in ten women agreed with them.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Johan Kruger, Director of Centre for Constitutional Rights, 'Government and Society Must Act Against Sexual Violence' document published online, [www.cfc.org.za/.../docs-statements?...government-and-society-must-act](http://www.cfc.org.za/.../docs-statements?...government-and-society-must-act), 11 February 2011

<sup>2</sup> Kruger, 'Government and Society Must Act', 1

<sup>3</sup> Rachel Jewkes, Yandisa Sikweyiya, Robert Morrell and Kristin Dunkle, 'Why, when and how men rape: Understanding rape perpetration in South Africa' in *SA Crime Quarterly*, no 34, December 2010, 25-26

<sup>4</sup> Statistics quoted in *Mail and Guardian* article about the MRC survey, see <http://mg.co.za/article/2010-11-26-one-in-three-sa-men-admit-to-rape-survey-finds>

Our findings on motivations for rape indicate that the most common ones lie in our society's accentuated gender power hierarchy, and the concomitant socialisation of children from early childhood into social norms that legitimate the exercise of gendered sexual power.<sup>5</sup>

The research was conducted amongst a broad cross-section of the male population of that area, with about 85% of the respondents being classified as African, 10% Indian and 5% white or coloured.<sup>6</sup> A detailed analysis of the attitudes of men within specific racial groups might well prove instructive, but is beyond the scope of this particular study. For our purposes, it is enough to note that there is a pervasive and aggressive patriarchy within the South African male psyche across racial boundaries. Certainly it would appear that, in general, notions of *Ubuntu*, even where they hold currency amongst South African men, are not incorporated into gender relations in any kind of liberating or progressive way.

### **The Extended Family and *Ubuntu***

On the contrary, as argued powerfully by Fainos Mangena, because *Ubuntu* has embedded within it strongly entrenched notions of extended family and the role of the woman therein, it leads inevitably to conformity on the part of women.<sup>7</sup> The expectation on the woman is that she plays a reproductive and caring role, with the latter being extended not only to her husband and children, but her husband's family as well. Essentially, Mangena is saying that the caring role is not constituted by freely offered acts of compassion, but is instead imposed on the woman and serves to reinforce patriarchal power relations. Mangena cites the

---

<sup>5</sup> Jewkes et al, 'Why, when and how men rape', 29-30

<sup>6</sup> Jewkes et al, 'Why when and how men rape', 25

<sup>7</sup> Fainos Mangena, 'The Search for An African Feminist Ethic: A Zimbabwean Perspective' in *Journal of International Women's Studies*, vol. 11, issue 2, 24

example of the Shona people where, in the name of *Ubuntu* (or *hunhu* in the case of Zimbabwe), in which gender roles are clearly defined in the family, mothers are expected to perpetuate sex differentiation by making it clear to the daughters that they are not equal to their brothers in terms of social standing and mobility. Thus, the boy has freedom beyond the domestic realm with his friends, whereas the girl is expected to be at home helping with household chores.<sup>8</sup> Her role is defined by servitude.

This socialisation into rigidly restricted gender roles is also characterised by the expectation of compliance and silence. Speaking from her experience in Kenya, Nyamba J. Njoroge reflects on the way in which girls, from a very early age, are taught that, no matter what level of violence is visited upon them in the home, their duty entails never discussing ‘family affairs:’

In [the] Gikuyu tribe... young women are taught that the underlying meaning of the word *mutumia* which means ‘a woman’ is ‘the one who keeps silent’. Upon marriage, the young bride is coached by the older woman how to not ‘tell it out’. Such lessons have caused many women untold horrors of violence in the home...<sup>9</sup>

This is significant in terms one of the central themes of this study, i.e. the freedom of the human subject. For many African women that freedom is being compromised for the sake of a utilitarian goal – the harmony of the extended family / community. Yet the apparent harmony or consensus in such a patriarchal society is in reality false and obfuscates the stark and brutality reality of women’s suffering and oppression.

---

<sup>8</sup> Mangena, ‘The Search for an African Feminist Ethic’, 24

<sup>9</sup> Nyambura J. Njoroge, ‘The Missing Voice: African women doing theology’ in *Journal of Theology of Southern Africa*, November 1997, no. 99, 83

Returning to Zimbabwean context, we see that Mengena similarly identifies the oppressive nature of the idealised African extended family there:

...*hunhu* or *ubuntu* has so much respect for the extended family which is seen as a proverbial African expression and an African village community. In this extended family, the woman is not only expected to take care of his husband and children but also to take care of those other people related to the husband – the significant other. The woman is expected to play her reproductive role by bearing children for her husband and also socialising the children into the mainstream culture which is patriarchal anyway.<sup>10</sup>

Mengena's conclusion is that *Ubuntu*, thus understood, becomes a legitimising tool for male domination.

### **Critical Approaches to African Culture**

In her introduction to African Women's Theology, Mercy Amba Oduyoye also emphasises that 'African women have identified culture as a favourite tool for domination.'<sup>11</sup> She argues for the need for a 'cultural hermeneutic', by which she means that the way the theologian needs to have a nuanced and critical approach to culture. Such an approach would involve affirming and promoting that which is positive in African culture, but not allowing tradition and ritual to be viewed as 'unchangeable givens'.<sup>12</sup> Amba Oduyoye's cultural hermeneutic seeks to 'uncover the message' of cultural codes and myths<sup>13</sup> – it the process of deconstructing a reality which presents eternal and homogeneous.

---

<sup>10</sup> Mangena, 'The Search for an African Feminist Ethic', 24

<sup>11</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 12

<sup>12</sup> Amba Oduyoye, *African Women's Theology*, 12

<sup>13</sup> Amba Oduyoye, *African Women's Theology*, 13

She goes on to further delineate the main elements of this cultural hermeneutic. These include:

- [Recognizing that] culture is frequently a euphemism to protect actions that require analysis...
- Keen sensitivity to the plurality of cultures and the dynamism of particular cultures...
- [Being aware that] domesticating cultural practices thrive on the power of myth to go unchallenged...
- [Developing] a keen sensitivity to the inherent dangers of tying identity to culture.<sup>14</sup>

Amba Oduyoye's analysis reinforces themes which have already been highlighted in this study with regard to *Ubuntu* – i.e. that an uncritical, romanticised conception of African culture, which views it as monolithic and fails to take into account its dynamism and its contradictions, can function as a justification for oppression.

Reflecting on her experience as a South African woman in church and society, Brigalia Bam asks pointedly why it is that many people (for which read 'men') seem to rediscover their African cultural heritage when it comes to women, but yet they are quite willing to jettison the traditional way of doing things when it comes to other matters.<sup>15</sup> As Bam points out for an African to be a Christian in itself means distancing themselves from many elements of traditional culture. For that same African Christian to refuse to embrace gender equality on the basis of tradition appears to be somewhat selective adherence to tradition. Thus she asks why 'this African tradition suddenly becomes so sacred when it comes to women's rights?'<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, one might well point out that those who oppose gender equality on the basis of culture are taking are adopting an uncritically homogeneous view of culture – whereas the reality is much more complex. Indeed there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that some

---

<sup>14</sup> Amba Oduyoye, *African Women's Theology*, 13

<sup>15</sup> Brigalia Bam, 'Seizing the Moment: Women and the New South Africa' in Denise Ackermann, Jonathan A. Draper and Emma Mashinini (eds), *Women Hold up Half the Sky: Women in the Church in Southern Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1991), 367

<sup>16</sup> Bam, 'Seizing the Moment', 367

traditional African societies were organised along *matriarchal* rather than patriarchal lines. For example, Cheikh Anta Diop has done substantial research to support his thesis that the matriarchal kinship model is an essential characteristic of African society.<sup>17</sup> Diop surveys a broad sweep of social and economic history to explain what he understands to be the fundamentally different attitudes to women in the global North and South – the former was nomadic and patriarchal and the latter was agricultural and matriarchal.

In the context of the very difficult life of what he calls the ‘Indo-European nomadic herders’, Diop postulates that women were not crucial to the process of production, and indeed could be seen as a burden. Women were not used as herders, and in the context of communities which were relocating frequently, as well engaged in warfare for much of the time, one can envisage how pregnant women and small children could be viewed as a burden. Economic realities thus profoundly shaped their view of women:

It is from these considerations that a new explanation may be sought for the lot of the woman in Indo-European society. Having a smaller economic value, it is she who must leave her clan to join that of her husband ... Among the Greeks, the Romans and the Aryans of India, the woman who leaves her own gens (or gens) becomes attached to the latter and can no longer inherit from her own.<sup>18</sup>

It is against this backdrop, says Diop, that within Northern culture the tradition of female infanticide developed and the inferior position of women became entrenched. In the agricultural South, on the other hand, the more labour available to work the fields the better, and hence the labour of women was valued. At the same time, Diop argues, agricultural societies tend to be organised along kinship lines, which allows both men and women to play significant roles – in contrast to the Indo-European model outlined above, which is based on

---

<sup>17</sup> Cheikh Anta Diop, *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa: The Domains of Patriarchy and Matriarchy in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge University Press, 1976)

<sup>18</sup> Diop, *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa*, 29

the family with the man as undisputed head. Citing evidence from Swaziland, Botswana, Ghana, Zimbabwe and the Congo, Diop argues that women occupied leadership positions and enjoyed equal legal status in traditional African societies.<sup>19</sup> One example cited by Diop is that of the Ashanti people in Ghana who have matrilineal lines of descent. He quotes anthropologists Radcliffe-Brown and Forde approvingly when they say:

The Ashanti consider the bond between mother and child as the keystone of all social relations... They consider it as a moral relationship which is absolutely binding... To show disrespect to a mother is equivalent to committing sacrilege.<sup>20</sup>

Diop is quick to point out that the gradual transformation from a matrilineal pattern of family relationships to a patrilineal one was due to external forces, particularly religious ones:

The African who has been converted to Islam automatically is ruled at least as far as his inheritance is concerned by the patriarchal regime. It is the same with the Christian, whether Protestant or Catholic.<sup>21</sup>

One is not arguing here for a defence of Diop's overall thesis, with which there are many problems. He falls into the trap of African essentialism and makes somewhat simplistic distinctions between his 'Southern Cradle-Egyptian Model' and 'Northern Cradle-Greek Model.' Indeed one may well regard his view of African culture as 'uncritically homogeneous' in much the same way as those who use the cultural argument to support patriarchy. However the point is that, in simply making the argument for matriarchy as integral to African society, and citing the sort of evidence mentioned above, Diop is illustrating that there is no *one* African approach to gender power relationships. There are significant historical examples and traditions within which challenge the notion of patriarchy as being essential to African culture.

---

<sup>19</sup> Diop, *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa*, 86

<sup>20</sup> A. R. Radcliffe and D. Forde, quoted in Diop, *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa*, 71

<sup>21</sup> Diop, *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa*, 125

## Marriage and Motherhood

There is a profound ambivalence about the role of mothers and wives in African society – while respect for them is an integral part of many African cultures, at the same time, as we have already pointed out, domestic roles can be highly oppressive for women. This might well be illustrated by citing the views of perhaps African theology’s foremost scholar, John Mbiti. Mbiti is wholly uncompromising in his view regarding the place of marriage within African society:

For African peoples, marriage is the focus of existence...marriage is a duty, a requirement from the corporate society, and a rhythm of life in which everyone must participate. Otherwise, he who does not participate in it is a curse to the community, he is a rebel and a law-breaker, he is not only abnormal but ‘under-human.’ Failure to get married under normal circumstances means that the person has rejected society and society rejects him in return.<sup>22</sup>

However, Mbiti it is not only adamant about the centrality of marriage in African society, he is equally insistent that marriage should conform to traditional gender roles. He speaks of how young people should be taught to prepare for marriage:

Girls are taught how to prepare food, behave towards men, how to care for children, how to look after the husband and other domestic affairs. The boys are taught what most concerns men, like looking after cattle... How to acquire wealth which one would give to the parents of a girl as part of the engagement and marriage contract, and how to be responsible as the ‘head’ of the family.<sup>23</sup>

Noticeable here is what we might term Mbiti’s ‘ethnotheological’ approach (see our critique of ethnophilosophy in chapter two above), in which he appears to accept what it takes to be African tradition without any critical intervention. He seems to be guilty of the naturalistic fallacy with regard to African custom. Simply because something *has always been* the case

---

<sup>22</sup> John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Johannesburg: Heinemann, 1999), 130

<sup>23</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Johannesburg: Heinemann, 1999), 132

in no way implies that it *should* be the case. It is a critical perspective required by the theologian, and yet conspicuously missing in Mbiti's analysis.

Furthermore, Mbiti's inflexible approach is a prime example of communitarianism lapsing into collectivism. He is not prepared to countenance any dissent from that which he sees to be the community norm, leaving no room for personal expression or choice. In this view, tradition and culture are viewed as monolithic an absolute; no consideration is given to dissenting voices or even nuanced readings. Given that Mbiti is such a giant of African theology, and indeed, as we outlined in chapter one, it is often regarded as being one of the primary sources of the theology of *Ubuntu*, this becomes highly significant. Mbiti is illustrating precisely the dangers of which we must be cognisant as we seek to develop an *Ubuntu* which is liberative for women.

Not only is Mbiti rigid in his conception of marriage, he is similarly so in his understanding of the relationship between procreation and marriage. In short, he regards marriage without procreation as being incomplete.<sup>24</sup> In his view it is a sacred duty, in which man and wife try, at least in part, to recapture 'the lost gift of immortality.' This means that

a person who, therefore, has no descendants in effect quenches the fire of life, and becomes forever dead since his line of physical continuation is blocked if he does not get married and bear children...

To die without getting married and having children is to be completely cut off from the human society, to be disconnected, to become an outcast and to lose all links with mankind.<sup>25</sup>

In the light of all this, it is hardly surprising therefore to read Mbiti pronounce that

everybody, therefore, must get married and have children: that is the greatest hope and expectation of individual for himself and of the community for the individual.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Johannesburg: Heinemann, 1999), 130

<sup>25</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Johannesburg: Heinemann, 1999), 130-131

<sup>26</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Johannesburg: Heinemann, 1999), 131

This seems also indicative of an entirely patriarchal worldview. As a man, Mbiti seems to have no difficulty in issuing a clearly incontrovertible injunction about procreation without any reference to women's autonomy over their own bodies and their reproductive rights. It is another example of the apparently benign discourse of tradition and culture in fact becoming an expression of oppressive, patriarchal hegemony. This is precisely the point made by the leading African womanist theologian, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, in her critique of Mbiti's views on marriage:

He is presenting a man's concerns for marriage. That the whole issue of the contemporary struggles of married women in the modern sector is not discussed is related to the factor of perspectives and experience.<sup>27</sup>

Oduyoye further takes issue with Mbiti's notion of a strong correlation between immortality and marriage / procreation:

In contemporary feminism, such an immortality, attached as it seems, to patriarchal concerns for the perpetuation of the home and passing on of property, is seen as oppressive.<sup>28</sup>

Oduyoye, who is childless, questions whether the sole aim of marriage and sex is procreation. Indeed, in agreeing with Oduyoye on this point, one would argue that Mbiti's theology of marriage and sex is seriously deficient, lacking as it does any real focus on love and the unitive aspects of sex. Oduyoye rightly argues that what is needed is a theology of marriage which focuses more on its spiritual and sacramental meaning, rather than its social function. Furthermore, what of those married couples who cannot, or indeed choose not, to have children? To say that marriage is simply about having children seems to invalidate other crucial aspects of that relationship.

---

<sup>27</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 'A Critique of Mbiti's View on Love and Marriage in Africa,' in Jacob K. Olupona and Sulayman S. Nyang (eds) *Religious Plurality in Africa: Essays in Honour of John S. Mbiti*, (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1993), 360-361

<sup>28</sup> Oduyoye, 'A Critique of Mbiti's View on Love and Marriage in Africa,' 347

As one would expect, Mbiti's views on procreation within marriage lead him to regard homosexuality with disdain. He lists it together with incest, rape, seduction, sleeping with a forbidden 'relative' or domestic animals, and intimacy between relatives as egregious sexual offences in any given community.<sup>29</sup> In response, Oduyoye strongly criticises Mbiti for what she considers to be his unquestioning approach to African culture and tradition, which has meant that he has condoned the 'demonization of homosexuals' which she has observed in Africa.<sup>30</sup>

Oduyoye here demonstrates a general trend – that African womanist theologians tend to interrogate African culture for more rigorously than their male counterparts, who can be guilty of applying the principle of inculturation without the necessary theological evaluation and analysis. African womanists employ a hermeneutic of suspicion when it comes to African culture. Oduyoye applies this critical hermeneutic to another aspect of marriage – the notion of the 'marriage gift.' While Mbiti lauds the traditional African custom of the son's family bringing gifts for the daughter's family because it strengthens kinship ties, Oduyoye sees it as nothing less than the 'objectification of women', which results in their 'dehumanization.'<sup>31</sup>

At the same time, it is important to stress that the role of mother within African society also confers status upon women, and presents opportunities for challenging the masculinist paradigm. Mangena – and Oduyoye would certainly concur - sees the role of mother and the strategic position women occupy in the home, as a potential starting point for a reconstruction of African gender relations. As we have seen above, Mangena argues that *Ubuntu* or *hunhu*

---

<sup>29</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Johannesburg: Heinemann, 1999), 144

<sup>30</sup> Oduyoye, 'A Critique of Mbiti's View on Love and Marriage in Africa,' 347

<sup>31</sup> See Oduyoye, 'A Critique of Mbiti's View on Love and Marriage in Africa,' 356ff

(Zimbabwe) promotes patriarchal values – but it also ‘part of the solution as it gives women a central role to play in the home.’<sup>32</sup> This serves to highlight the indispensability of women within the family, but also, consequently, wider society. However, the crucial step is a change in women’s consciousness, a realisation on their part of the real value of their role. This is the heart of African womanism:

The success of African womanism derives from the discovered awareness by women of their indispensability to the male. This is the bedrock of their actions; this gives the anchor and the voice. Thus, the myth of male superiority disappears, for the woman looks inward for a fresh appreciation of self.<sup>33</sup>

## **Relationality**

South African feminist theologian, Denise Ackermann, speaks of *transformative* relational theology, because ‘transformation’ suggests fundamental change in way which ‘equality’ – the goal of liberal feminism - simply does not.<sup>34</sup> Ackermann is here pointing to the critique of liberal feminism which suggests that, while it seeks to improve the conditions and status of women, and gain access for them to the corridors of power, it does not challenge the patriarchal social order or the consciousness which underpins it.

---

<sup>32</sup> Mangena, ‘The Search for an African Feminist Ethic’, 28

<sup>33</sup> H. Chukwuma, H., ‘Voices and Choices: The Feminist Dilemma in Four African Novel’, in Ernest N. Emenyonu (ed), *Literature and Black Aesthetics* (Nigeria: Heinemann, 1990) quoted in Mangena, ‘The Search for an African Feminist Ethic’, 25

<sup>34</sup> Denise Ackermann, ‘Being Women, Being Human’ in Ackermann, Draper and Mashinini (eds), *Women Hold up Half the Sky*, 100

Sexism distorts gender relations into patterns of oppression, domination and hierarchy – it creates the consciousness which construes of women as The Other. This can happen either through explicit discrimination or ‘the advocating of masculine-feminine complementarity.’<sup>35</sup> The latter may appear to espouse equal rights for women, but in reality it continues to consign women to roles assigned to them by masculine hegemony. For example, in his own interpretation of *Ubuntu* as applied to gender, Augustine Shutte writes:

I want to argue that gender is a natural difference between men and women and that it affects every level of our being...Only through the internalization of the radical personal otherness of the other gender can I accomplish the full acquisition of otherness within myself. A world of only one gender would realize the capacities of our humanity to a lesser degree. In fact one may doubt whether such a world would be a world of human persons at all.<sup>36</sup>

Shutte is a philosopher, but also a Roman Catholic shaped by Thomism - and one can see here his attempt to integrate *Ubuntu* with the natural law tradition. Shutte formulates his essentialist views of gender in terms of parenthood because it is this

common, universal activity of ‘having a child’ that is the most expressive and most demanding of all our powers, and thus the focus for the fullest form of friendship possible for human persons.<sup>37</sup>

On the basis of this assumption, Shutte proceeds to explain how gendered roles evolve in the context of the parents’ relationship to their children. From the moment of conception the child is *internal* to the mother. She contains the other within herself and as ‘a mother her own identity is defined by this intimate internal relation to the other’.<sup>38</sup> The father, on the other hand, argues Shutte, is on his own and is only connected to the child by his personal

---

<sup>35</sup> Ackermann, ‘Being Women, Being Human’, 101

<sup>36</sup> Augustine Shutte, *Ubuntu: An Ethic for a New South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001), 71

<sup>37</sup> Shutte, *Ubuntu*, 70

<sup>38</sup> Shutte, *Ubuntu*, 72f

relationship to the mother. Thus in Shutte's conception of a gendered humanity, a woman is defined by her relation to others, i.e. self-transcendence, whereas a man is defined by the relation to self, i.e. self-determination.

Shutte's complementarianism demonstrates the multiple problems evident in this view of gender relations. In the first instance, he simply makes an *assertion* about the parenthood as the fullest expression of human friendship – clearly he does not feel this view needs substantiation. Many people, including those whose intimate relationships are not procreative, would vehemently disagree. Furthermore, his views are shaped by crude biological determinism. Women's biological role in motherhood might well lead to a degree of 'self-transcendence', but that need not *necessarily* be the case at – see de Beauvoir's argument below. Shutte is also guilty of the confusion highlighted by Hume's 'is / ought' distinction and Moore's naturalistic fallacy. Hume points out that simply because something *is* the case does not mean it ought to be so, and Moore, in developing Hume's critique, says that we cannot derive an ought for the way things appear to be from how they appear to be 'naturally'. Thus Shutte not only infers a determined role of self-transcendence for *all* women – and self-determination for all men - based on the nine months of child-bearing which *some* women experience, he also seems to think that this pattern has intrinsic moral value.

In fact, complementarianism undermines genuine relationality. Ackermann rightly points out that that a fully expressed *I-Thou* relationship between a man and a woman is only possible when 'an authentic self is free to respond to another and not when the relationship is no more

than an expression of what male ideology sees as the ideal.<sup>39</sup> A woman confined to a particular role by what is still male hegemony, as in the complementarianist paradigm, does not have the freedom to be her own subject – which is the very foundation of the *I-Thou* relationship. Ackermann grounds her relational theology in the work of Buber, who, as we have already noted, spoke of the distinctive capacity of human beings for subject-subject relationships.<sup>40</sup> Buber outlines three spheres in which the world of relation is manifested: life with nature, life with other human beings and life with spiritual being. The mutuality of the second sphere is famously summarised by him thus:

If I face a human being as my *Thou*, and say the primary word *I-Thou* to him, he is not a thing among things, and does not consist of things...I do not experience the man to whom I say *Thou*. But I take my stand in relation to him, in the sanctity of the primary word...Even if the man to whom I say *Thou* is not aware of it in the midst of his experience, yet relation may exist. For *Thou* is more than It realizes.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, it is the unmasking of our I-Thou relationality which is the fundamental human task; it is I-Thou relationality which will enable us to overcome our alienation and experience true freedom – and it is this relationality which characterises the theology of *Ubuntu*.

---

<sup>39</sup> Ackermann, 'Being Women, Being Human', 101

<sup>40</sup> Ackermann, 'Being Women, Being Human', 100

<sup>41</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Scribner, 1958), 8-9

# The Theology of *Ubuntu* and Homosexuality<sup>42</sup>

## Homosexuality and African Culture

This relationality at the heart of *Ubuntu* also means that it should be the basis for a liberative view of human sexuality. Far too often, however, ‘African tradition’ has been deployed to legitimise the most egregious forms of homophobia, as demonstrated by the following quote:

[t]he practice of same-sex marriage is against most of African beliefs, cultures, customs and traditions, and this in turn goes against the mandate of traditional leaders which is to promote and protect the customs of communities observing a system of customary law. Traditional leaders have vowed to make it their mission for the coming five years to campaign against this wicked, decadent and immoral Western practice.<sup>43</sup>

The tension between the traditional African worldview and the notion of equal rights for gay people in South Africa is crystallised by this statement made by the National House of Traditional Leaders in South Africa.

The following year (soon-to-be President) Jacob Zama made what became infamous homophobic remarks at a public gathering when he stated

---

<sup>42</sup> There are clear limitations to this section: the emphasis is on male, rather than female, homosexuality; there is no detailed *theoretical* discussion about homosexuality (e.g. on the differences between gay liberation theology and queer theology); there is very little about other forms of sexuality, such as bi-sexuality. Indeed, I am aware that the failure to broaden this analysis and consider transgender issues, in addition to homosexuality, might also be considered a shortcoming. However, the emphasis here is on a broad analysis of the *Ubuntu* approach to homosexuality – rather than a detailed study of homosexuality *per se*, which, in any case, the limits of space would render impossible.

<sup>43</sup> Statement made by the National House of Traditional Leaders at its 2005 Annual Conference ahead of parliament passing legislation allowing same sex marriage.

When I was growing up, an *ungqingili* (homosexual individual) would not have stood in front of me. I would knock him out.<sup>44</sup>

When the inevitable row broke out surrounding his remarks, Zuma's apology (equally inevitable, given pragmatic political considerations) was also illuminating. He said that his remarks were not intended to be a condemnation of homosexual people, but that instead they were made in the context of the traditional way of raising children, saying that 'the communal upbringing of children in the past was able to assist parents to notice children with a different social orientation.'<sup>45</sup> While this apology appears incoherent and seems to accentuate rather than diminish the disturbing and dangerous sentiments expressed in his original statement, it also significantly places his homophobia in the context of community.

In this section, we are arguing that *Ubuntu* has an ambiguous role in the struggle for the rights of gay people in South Africa. While one would find it difficult to find an explicit link between *Ubuntu* and homophobia, there is much evidence to suggest that some of the problematic elements within *Ubuntu* – specifically the way in which consensus can be used to stifle dissent and the harmony of the community can legitimise the suppression of personal freedom – have underpinned the homophobia which characterises much of Africa. Zuma's remarks point to the dominant hetero-normative mode of discourse about sexuality within Africa. On the other hand, the relational aspect of *Ubuntu* and the way in which it transcends essentialist understandings of the human being, lends itself to a liberative view of sexuality, which we seek to develop below.

---

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Dianne Hawker, ENCA website, 16 May 2015, Maimane, Zuma and other 'anti-gay' statements in SA politics' <http://www.enca.com/south-africa/maimane-zuma-and-other-anti-gay-statements-sa-politics>

<sup>45</sup> Hawker 'anti-gay' statements in SA politics' <http://www.enca.com/south-africa/maimane-zuma-and-other-anti-gay-statements-sa-politics>

## Homosexuality: A Western Deviation?

The debate about homosexuality within Africa takes place within the context of a dominant view – articulated by politicians, scholars, church people and many others - that homosexuality is foreign to Africa and is a perversion imported from the West.<sup>46</sup> The French critic, Daniel Vignal, in his survey of African literature, comments

For the majority [of African writers], homophilia is exclusively a deviation introduced by colonialists or their descendants; by outsiders of all kinds: Arabs, French, *metis*, and so on. It is difficult for them to conceive that homophilia might be the act of a Black African.<sup>47</sup>

In his own study of the role of homosexuality in African literature, which follows on from that of Vignal, Chris Dunton outlines how the perceived alienating effects of homosexuality come to be viewed as an expression of the way in which colonialism has disrupted and destabilised African society as a whole. If the relationship between the West and Africa is based on exploitation, such a view sees homosexuality as being a particularly repulsive example of this very exploitation. Dunton goes on to highlight how

[i]n a number of different contexts - the colonial situation; the neo-colonial state ruled with through collusion with Western advisers; the prison system under apartheid; the situation of the African student living in the West – homosexual activity is identified with exploitation, being enabled by money or power relations, and understood to be all the more disturbing because alien to African society.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> Deborah P Amory, “‘Homosexuality’ in Africa: Issues and Debates”, *A Journal of Opinion*, Vol 25, no. 1, 5-10

<sup>47</sup> Daniel Vignal, quoted in Chris Dunton, “‘Wheyting be dat?’ The Treatment of Homosexuality in African Literature”, *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 20, no. 3, 1989, 422

<sup>48</sup> Dunton, ‘Wheyting be dat?’, 424

Dunton cites many examples in African literature which lend credence to this interpretation of homosexuality as an extension of colonialism and an expression of western exploitation Africans. In Awoonor's *This Earth, My Brother* the houseboy Yaro has left his master because he 'wanted to turn him into a woman,'<sup>49</sup> while in Sarif Easmon's short story 'For Love of Therese' the moral degeneration of expatriates is exemplified by running away from their wives and developing sexual relationships with boys. Dunton also explores how the link between homosexuality and colonial power relationships is developed in Mongo Beti's *Remember Rueben*. At one point in the novel there is a discussion between two Cameroonian freedom fighters on the alleged sexual relationship between the European Sandrinelli and Baba Toure, the future dictator of the country who was seen as being the lackey of the colonialists. Sandrinelli's homosexuality is used by Beti as means of discrediting him and drawing attention to his attempts to corrupt and exploit Africa. In the case of South Africa, Dunton points to several writers who equate the deviance of homosexuality with the deviance inherent in the system of internal colonialism that was apartheid. For example in Bessie Head's description of how violations of normal behaviour are accepted South Africa in her novel, *A Question of Power*, she speaks of South African slums as places where 'little girls are raped and homosexuality is laughingly accepted.'<sup>50</sup> Homosexuality is portrayed here as being part of the disruption to the fabric of social order and harmony.

### **The 'Unsayings' of Homosexuality**

---

<sup>49</sup> Cited in Dunton, 'Wheyting be dat?', 425

<sup>50</sup> Cited in Dunton, 'Wheyting be dat?', 426

Marc Epprecht argues that the myth of homosexuality as being alien to Africa was the result of the complex social processes by which homosexuality was hidden in Africa. He insightfully speaks of the *'unsaying'* of homosexual identities in the Zimbabwean context.<sup>51</sup> By this he means that while in reality homosexuality has always been part of Zimbabwean culture, the predominance of aggressively heterosexist masculinity has led to the silencing of male-to-male sexualities in Zimbabwe. Epprecht argues that maintaining appearances has always been an important element of social discourse in African communities in Zimbabwe. As is common in societies throughout the world, people in Zimbabwe developed mechanisms by which there was a common aversion of gaze, a pretence that realities which were deemed to threaten social harmony did not exist.

Epprecht cites the example of fertility – having children was one of the most important signifiers of a successful marriage and indeed of adulthood for both men and women. A person who was married for a long time without producing children was

an object of ridicule among the Mashona. He is not doing his primary duty to the nation, which is to marry and have children.<sup>52</sup>

Inevitably, it was the case that some husbands, whether due to a medical problem or indeed a concealed homosexual orientation, could not meet this expectation. The custom of *kupindira* or *kusikara rudzi* ('raising seed') was a means whereby the social disgrace and shame arising from such a situation could be avoided. It allowed the husband to make a secret arrangement with a trusted friend or relative to impregnate his wife.<sup>53</sup> The community could then celebrate in the birth of 'his' offspring and any awkward questions about the couple's

---

<sup>51</sup> Marc Epprecht, "The 'Unsaying' of Indigenous Homosexualities in Zimbabwe: Mapping a Blindspot in an African Masculinity", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 24, no. 4

<sup>52</sup> Cited in Epprecht, 'Unsaying Indigenous Homosexualities', 634

<sup>53</sup> Epprecht, 'Unsaying Indigenous Homosexualities', 634

inability to have children would be avoided. Men who felt same-sex attraction also need not feel that this would undermine the socially-required performance of procreative duties.

Also of crucial significance in shaping attitudes to homosexuality, and in requiring that it be ‘unsaid’ in traditional societies, was the *economic* imperative to have children. Children’s labour was vital to the process of production in rural communities and, in many African societies, grown children were the main source of security for parents (and grandparents) in later life. The focus on sex was thus strongly procreative and functional – it ensured the ongoing material wellbeing of the family.

Some African commentators have used the impossibility of pregnancy as a result of gay and lesbian sex as an argument in itself an argument against it. In a manner akin to the natural law approach, they have linked procreation to the legitimacy of sexual activity. Thus for example one can clearly perceive the sense of bafflement in one Zimbabwean parliamentarian when he argued as follows:

We have asked these men whether they are able to get pregnant. They have not been able to answer such questions. Even the women who are engaged in lesbian activities, we have asked them what they have got from such practices and no one has been able to answer.<sup>54</sup>

The coercive power of the extended family in enforcing heteronormativity was also very considerable. For girls, the obligation imposed by custom to submit to male desire was such that a girl who refused could legitimately (in the eyes of the community) be kidnapped and

---

<sup>54</sup> Mr B. Gezi, *Zimbabwean Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 22/38 (6 September 1995), 2518 cited in Epprecht, ‘Unsayings Indigenous Homosexualities’, 634

forced to do her 'duty', often with the approval and indeed sometimes active participation of her family.<sup>55</sup> For young men the extended family could also intervene if they failed to extend the lineage through direct means such as demanding that a son divorce an infertile wife or arranging *kupindira* without his knowledge. The pressures to reproduce brought about by this traditional culture were reinforced by colonial rule. The declining powers of the chiefs in the new dispensation meant that they had less power as redistributors of wealth and increased the need for the economic security of children, while increased market incentives under capitalism meant that a greater labour pool which children represented could be potentially profitable.<sup>56</sup>

Both the rigid framework of traditional culture and the demands of racial capitalism, therefore, militated against the open expression of a homosexual orientation. Thus it is that even gay and lesbian Zimbabweans who have come out often marry, have children and maintain the appearance of a heterosexual lifestyle. In many cases, their homosexuality will be not only invisible to other people but even to themselves – they will regard themselves as being 'normal', but yet seek out homosexual encounters. This construction of a veneer to cover the reality of homosexuality must be seen in the context of the strong taboo imposed by the dominant groups on the discussion of sexual matters in general.<sup>57</sup> In cases of child abuse or incest 'a curtain of silence would descend to prevent the shame from becoming public.'<sup>58</sup> It might well be acknowledged that rituals of purification were necessary – but these would be conducted in secret.

---

<sup>55</sup> Epprect, 'Unsayng Indigenous Homosexualities'. Epprect cites historical examples which substantiate this claim.

<sup>56</sup> Epprect, 'Unsayng Indigenous Homosexualities' 635

<sup>57</sup> Epprect, 'Unsayng Indigenous Homosexualities' 636

<sup>58</sup> Epprect, 'Unsayng Indigenous Homosexualities' 636

Indigenous languages reinforced this culture of silence about sexual taboos in general, but homosexuality in particular. In the case of Zimbabwe, words that make homosexual behaviour explicit only became common in the late nineteenth century, and then only as imported from other languages. The majority of the words used to denote homosexual orientation and behaviours are Western in derivation, while indigenous blacks engaged in homosexual relationships employed an elaborate vocabulary of euphemisms to make their practices and desires invisible. That there were no such words of local origin in turn served to give impetus to the view that homosexuality is un-African and a result of corrupting foreign influences.

In the Shona language itself, there are no explicit words for homosexuality – a fact taken as confirmation of the ‘un-African’ nature of homosexuality by the cultural traditionalists. Instead, the possibility of same-sex attraction was subsumed within respectable words such as *tsvimborume* (meaning one who does not marry or, literally, one who possesses a knobkerrie, that is, phallus, but as nowhere to put it) and *sahwira* (an intimate male comrade). These words, which in themselves had no connotations of sexual impropriety, have today been adopted by the gay and lesbian community in Zimbabwe in recognition of their historical role of creating a linguistic space within which homosexual relationships could take place within drawing their attention of the community to them.<sup>59</sup> Alongside the language used – or not used - to describe sexual activity must be placed the way in which sex was narrowly defined in heteronormative terms. One of the most common defences by African men against the charge of sodomy or indecent assault was that they were only ‘playing.’<sup>60</sup> This form of cultural casuistry meant that anything other penetrative heterosexual intercourse was not

---

<sup>59</sup> Epprecht, ‘Unsayings Indigenous Homosexualities’ 637

<sup>60</sup> Epprecht, ‘Unsayings Indigenous Homosexualities’ 637

defined as sex at all, hence enabling both the men involved and the community to deny any accusations of homosexuality.

This attitude of cultural silence and denial was condoned, and almost certainly reinforced, by the influence of Christian missionaries. For many of the missionaries, shaped by Victorian sensibilities, talking about sex seemed tantamount to advocating it outside of marriage, and was thus to be avoided. David and Charles Livingstone expressed their tacit agreement to give no acknowledgment of such matters made with the local people when they wrote :

By pointed enquiries, and laying oneself out for that kind of knowledge, one might be able to say much more; but if one behaves as he must do among the civilized and abstains from asking questions, no improper hints will ever be given by any of the native[s].<sup>61</sup>

The culture of silence about homosexuality, embedded in traditional culture and reinforced by western Christian puritanism, goes some way to explaining why the sexual preferences of former president Canaan Banana were kept secret by Zimbabwean officials for so many years. There was evidently a fear about naming homosexuality amongst them – even if the purpose was to denounce it.

## **Homosexuality and Power**

---

<sup>61</sup> Epprecht, 'Unsayings Indigenous Homosexualities' 637

Edward Antonio sees African attitudes to homosexuality in terms of a crisis precipitated by the advent of modernity in Africa, which meant that Western culture was imposed on various aspects of African reality – economics, politics, religion, culture and morality. The proclamation that homosexuality is alien to Africa is, he suggests, the ‘the moral cry of the disorientated ego’.<sup>62</sup> Insightfully pinpointing a key element within the social psychology which underpins this African view on homosexuality, Antonio goes on:

For is it not the case that that which is alien, particularly if it is both linked to something familiar (such as homosexuality to sexuality) and plays such a fundamental role in the organization of the social structure (as sex undoubtedly does in African society – witness the system of bridewealth), always threatens uncertainty and disorientation?<sup>63</sup>

Furthermore, the argument that it is homosexuality that fundamentally undermines the moral fabric of society can be seen to highly selective. What of traditional practices which have very powerfully damaging effects for women and children, such as female genital mutilation (FGM), the marriage of young girls to much older men, polygamy and the inheritance of wives? Note for example the views of Jomo Kenyatta on FGM:

The operation is (still) regarded as the very essence of an institution which has enormous educational, social, moral and religious implications, quite apart from the operation itself. For the present it is impossible for a member of the tribe to imagine an initiation without clitoridectomy (FGM). Therefore, the abolition of the surgical element in this custom means to the Gikuyu the abolition of the whole institution.<sup>64</sup>

Kenyatta goes on to outline the close links of FGM to marriage in traditional culture and the practice, noting that it is taboo for a Gikuyu man to marry an uncircumcised girl – it would

---

<sup>62</sup> Edward P. Antonio, ‘Homosexuality and African culture’ in Paul Germond and Steve de Gruchy (eds), *Aliens in the Household of God* (Claremont, South Africa: David Philip, 1977) 296

<sup>63</sup> Antonio, ‘Homosexuality in African Culture’, 296

<sup>64</sup> Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), 128

result in ostracisation by the community. Kenyatta's views are in line with many African communities where FGM continued to be practised on the basis of justifications which focus on morality, virginity, honour, marriage and control of women's sexuality.<sup>65</sup>

Antonio hits the mark when he says,

To suggest, as some African men do, that these practices were not socially disruptive because they were culturally accepted *is merely to say that the social arrangements were more comfortable for some members of society, especially those who benefitted from them, than for others*. It is to display a kind of ideological hypocrisy for its own sake, as though it were sacrosanct or as though it were not, for the most part, *man-made*<sup>66</sup> (first italics mine).

This is a point of crucial significance because it presents a more nuanced – and therefore more accurate – picture of African society and the cleavages within it. The notion of an African cultural practice seems hold implicit within it the idea that the community is homogenous and that the said practice is accepted, upheld and supported by the entire community. The reality is that – as with any community – there are power relationships within African communities, of which cultural practices are in large part a reflection.

Power relationships are underpinned in large part by the ideologies which hold them in place. Marx gave considerable attention to the question of ideology, and his insight that ideology is the way in which the contradiction between the essence of society and its appearance is hidden, is of particular significance here. When, famously, he says that 'if the essence and

---

<sup>65</sup> Ashenafi Moges, 'What is behind the tradition of FGM?', <http://www.african-women.org/documents/behind-FGM-tradition.pdf>, 4

<sup>66</sup> Antonio, 'Homosexuality and African culture', 300

appearance of things directly coincided, all science would be superfluous',<sup>67</sup> he is pointing to his belief that the primary intellectual task is to unmask the reality which ideological constructions of the world seek to hide. Following in the Marxist tradition, Louis Althusser speaks of ideology as part of the relation between the individual and society. He defines it as 'a system (with its own logic and rigour) of representations endowed with a historical existence and role within a given society'.<sup>68</sup> This 'historical existence' gives ideology a sense of objectivity, which obscures the fact that it is fact constructed by those who have hegemony in any given society. Thus, people will act in a way which has been consciously shaped by a given ideology, but are not aware of the ideological nature of their actions. The notion of 'African culture' can thus be seen to be highly ideological in nature – but it obfuscates its own ideological nature, and instead presents itself as objective and timeless truth which is beyond questioning.

Antonio goes on to point out that this perceived dichotomy between 'Africanness' and homosexuality rests on a fundamental divergence between the view that homosexuality is an individual choice, and the view that sex is an expression of culture. In African contexts, where the latter view holds sway, culture functions ideologically to delegitimise and proclaim as 'perverse' that which that which is outside the bounds of acceptability.<sup>69</sup> Antonio's point goes very much to the heart of this thesis because it highlights the way in which African communitarian thinking can become oppressive and stifle the freedom and authentic expression of the human subject. African communitarianism in general and *Ubuntu* in particular are at their best when they have at their core a relationality which *embraces and*

---

<sup>67</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol III*, available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-III.pdf>, 592

<sup>68</sup> Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (London: Verso, 2005), 231

<sup>69</sup> Antonio, 'Homosexuality and African culture', 297

*affirms* the other; at their worst (and this is particularly the case when it comes to homosexuality), they constitute the very basis of the *alienation* of the other.

Clearly, then, the notion that homosexuality is ‘un-African’ is highly problematic. Yet as Antonio points out, to formulate a moral argument on the basis of whether or not something is ‘African’ is in any event a category mistake.<sup>70</sup> Those espousing the traditionalist view about homosexuality seem to equate the fact something is African with its being morally legitimate. ‘Africanness’ is not a moral category and to attempt to make it such is both illogical and dangerous, as discussed in previous chapters. A time-honoured custom might be thoroughly African in its origins and its practice, but – as in the example of female genital mutilation – to denote it as such is to say nothing about its moral status. To conflate ‘African’ with ‘morally good’ is not a way of taking forward an ethical debate, but rather of shutting it down. The proponent of this view seems to think that once the ‘un-African’ status of a particular practice is ascertained, all counter-arguments are rendered invalid or redundant. By the same token, in this line of argument, to allege that an opposing point of view is ‘western’ in origin or orientation is, *in and of itself*, to be exposing its moral illegitimacy.

### **Homosexuality and the ‘Pain of Exile’**

This African cultural view of sexuality is precisely the opposite of the ‘sense of autonomy and self-determination’ which John E. Fortunato argued were pre-requisites for gay people to

---

<sup>70</sup> Antonio, ‘Homosexuality and African Culture’, 298

give expression to their true selves in his influential book, published in 1982, called *Embracing the Exile: Healing Journeys for Gay Christians*.<sup>71</sup> Fortunato argues that, in the context of alienation from self and from the divine which characterises its societies, the west has constructed mythical metanarratives which give order and meaning to the whole of reality. Within the imposing strictures of this metanarrative, gay people are constructed as outsiders – a state of exile which Fortunato likens to the Israelites in captivity. As for the Israelites, exile for gay people is painful – but is also an opportunity for growth and self-realisation.

Exiles are forced to acknowledge that reality is greater than they previously perceived – they need to expand their notions of the divine beyond its previous limits. Furthermore, exile involves a process of letting go - letting go of the mythology of the metanarrative and our own investment in it. For gay people the process of letting go refers not only to the dominant heteronormative ideology of sex, but also, potentially, of family and of other sources of security such as jobs, protection under the law, the support of the Church. Fortunato points out that while straight people in situations of oppression, such as sexism and racism, might have the support of family and friends, for gay people the isolation is often total, heightening their sense of exile. However the ‘letting go’ of exile can also be liberating; it also means letting go of the denial of the reality of your oppression. Abandoning the dominant metanarrative for gay people means coming out of the closet, letting go of the heteronormative constructions of reality, and seeing themselves as they really are.

---

<sup>71</sup> John E. Fortunato, *Embracing the Exile: Healing Journeys for Gay Christians* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982), 23

Fortunato's approach is essentially psychotherapeutic, but has had a profound effect on gay theology and spirituality. Craig O'Neill and Kathleen Ritter developed Fortunato's emphasis on self-realisation in *Coming Out Within: Stages of Spiritual Awakening for Lesbians and Gay Men*, published in 1992. O'Neill and Ritter speak of the notion of 'transforming loss',<sup>72</sup> referring to the idea that, while this state of 'exile' is painful for gay people, and involves a sense of bereavement, it also makes a possible the journey of self-discovery and self-realisation. The loss which alienates gay people from a heteronormative society also enables them to construct new and more authentic forms of identity. This transformation is part of what of O'Neill and Ritter call 'individuation', which is

that process through which we journey to the core of our beings, of our selves...The gay and lesbian soul yearns for oneness with the Divine and feels a desire to allow the God of Creation to embrace the God mirrored within. The uniting of the inner and outer experiences of the same God lead toward a wholeness. The self is complete when the lesbian or gay being imagines his or her core as holy and merged within the divine.<sup>73</sup>

This notion of individuation goes to the very heart of this thesis. It is a concept which underlines the truth that authenticity necessitates a discovery, acknowledgment and acceptance of one's true self, a true self magnified in the reflection of the Divine – but a true self often suppressed or silenced by the normative ideology of a given society or community. Individuation is a challenge to the *Ubuntu* which conceives of personhood as being *entirely* constituted through other people, because it recognises that often personhood is largely a struggle to throw off the constraints of the community, rather than allowing oneself to be shaped by them. Nowhere is this more true than for gay people in the African context; for

---

<sup>72</sup> Craig O'Neill and Kathleen Ritter, *Coming Out Within: Stages of Spiritual Awakening for Lesbians and Gay Men* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 205

<sup>73</sup> O'Neill and Ritter, *Coming Out Within*, 208

many of them, personhood is asserting an integral part of their humanity which has been shunned and repressed by the very communities which claim to be infused with the spirit of *Ubuntu*.

### **Circumcision: Queer Theory Interrogates Traditional Culture**

It is in the light of this powerful dichotomy in their lives that Xavier Livermom has argued that Blacks queers need to redefine what constitutes African tradition. Queer theory is characterised by a rejection of essentialist conceptions of sexual orientation, as well as broader terms of reference to include other forms of what are considered to be ‘deviant’ sexual behaviours. Thus, Livermom argues that black queer engagement with African tradition reveals that tradition to be a fluid and dynamic, rather than the static and monolithic category envisaged by the traditional leaders’ statement quoted above.<sup>74</sup> Livermom’s re-reading of African traditional culture focusses on various aspects that culture in relation to queer identity – but it is his analysis of circumcision, which best highlights our concerns here.

The tradition of male circumcision is indeed one of the hallmarks of traditional black communities in South Africa. While not practised in all ethnic groups, the persistence of ‘initiation schools’ reflects the desire to connect with elements of traditional religion and culture, which colonialism sought to eliminate. Amongst Xhosa-speaking men in particular, one cannot take on the rights and responsibilities of adulthood without going through the

---

<sup>74</sup> Xavier Livermom, ‘Usable Traditions: Creating Sexual Autonomy in Post-apartheid South Africa’, *Feminist Studies*, vol 41, no. 1, 17

process of initiation. There is a very clear delineation between the circumcised and uncircumcised, with those amongst the latter group often still being addressed as a boy and being excluded from activities which call for the participation of men.<sup>75</sup> Circumcision is not only characterised by this framework of social coercion, but it is also strongly hetero-patriarchal in the way in which it conceives of masculinity. After a period of isolation in the bush with the other initiates, the boys are expected to have their foreskin cut without anaesthetic while shouting out '*ndi ndoda*' ('I am a man'). Being able to withstand the pain and not crying become essential hallmarks of the manhood that the initiate hopes to attain.<sup>76</sup> In his study of circumcision, Funani reports that hardships are a feature of all initiation schools. Beatings, unpalatable food, being deprived of water, performing the initiation during the heart of cold winters, bathing in icy rivers – these are examples of some privations forced upon the boys which are supposed to instil discipline and thereby reinforce particular notions of masculinity.<sup>77</sup>

Rankhotha argues persuasively that while, historically, initiation ceremonies may have served a constructive purpose – e.g. it was important that young men were prepared for adverse conditions and had a strong sense of identity during times of tribal war – in the modern age these ceremonies simply serve to reinforce narrow models of masculinity.<sup>78</sup> He contends that this method of delineating manhood, coercive and violent in nature, reinforces absolute male

---

<sup>75</sup> Livermon, 'Usable Traditions', 24

<sup>76</sup> Livermon, 'Usable Traditions', 25

<sup>77</sup> Lumka Sheila Funani, *Circumcision Amongst the Ama-Xhosa: A Medical Investigation* (South Africa: Skotaville Publishers, 1990), 25

<sup>78</sup> Charles Sylvester Rankhotha, 'Do Traditional Values Entrench Male Supremacy' in *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, No. 59, Women in War (2004), 83

power and that it militates against instilling values of respect for others, especially women and girls.<sup>79</sup>

For many queer Xhosa-speaking men, the prospect of circumcision crystallises tensions between traditional cultural practice and the conception of masculinity which they find alienating. However, the queer interrogation of traditional practice, says Livermon, also provides an opportunity for the reinterpretation of African tradition. He cites the example of well-known South African Gospel singer, Lundi Tyamara, who declared publicly that he would not undergo the initiation ceremony amidst rumours about his sexual orientation.<sup>80</sup> It thus came as a surprise to many when Tyamara not only disclosed that he had gone through a traditional initiation process ‘in the bush’, but that his initiation had given him the courage to openly come out as gay. As might be expected, the fact that Tyamara attributed the courage and self-acceptance required to come out to the rites of initiation and circumcision did not sit well with those who view Africa culture in static and heteronormative terms. Livermon’s argument is that if the aim of the rites of circumcision is to produce men of character by instilling in them a respect for self and for others, and to confront and to speak the truth, then indeed queerness and traditional circumcision are far from mutually exclusive.

### ***Ubuntu as an Inclusive Theological Anthropology***

---

<sup>79</sup> Rankhotha, ‘Traditional Values’ 84

<sup>80</sup> Livermon, ‘Usable Traditions’ 26ff

The task for an authentic theology of *Ubuntu*, then, must be deconstruct the false essentialist traditionalism which aligns Africa with an alienating and oppressive heterosexism. Instead, we must look to the theological resources which allow us to develop an inclusive anthropology. South African theologian Steve de Gruchy, in a significant contribution to the homosexuality debate, argued that theological anthropology, rather than being a basis for exclusivism and discrimination, by definition calls us into an inclusive relationship with the Other.<sup>81</sup> De Gruchy called for a definition of being human which has much in common with the definition of *Ubuntu* for which we arguing for in this thesis (see final chapter) - he states that being human ‘means being who I am (faith); being on a journey (hope); and being in community (love).’<sup>82</sup>

De Gruchy reads the first of these elements – being who I am – in the light of the way the New Testament struggles with the question of whether Gentiles needed to convert to Judaism in order to become Christians. At the first ever council of the Church in Jerusalem, there were those who argued vehemently that this indeed must be the case:

...some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, ‘The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.’ (Acts 15:5)

However Peter’s passionate plea, based on his experience of the Holy Spirit who ‘did not discriminate between us and them’ (Acts 15:9), persuaded the council to agree that the Gentiles did not need to become ‘something else’ in order to become Christians.<sup>83</sup> This decision represented the foundation upon which Paul’s missionary work and theology were

---

<sup>81</sup> Steve de Gruchy, ‘Human being in Christ’ in Paul Germond and Steve de Gruchy (eds), *Aliens in the Household of God: Homosexuality and Christian Faith in South Africa* (Cape Town and Johannesburg: David Philp), 233-269

<sup>82</sup> De Gruchy, ‘Human being in Christ’, 252

<sup>83</sup> De Gruchy, ‘Human being in Christ’, 252

based, and was the based for his famous proclamation, ‘There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.’ (Galatians 3:28). De Gruchy sees this as an expression of God’s grace – we are saved, affirmed and accepted as who we are:

The Gentile does not have to become a Jew in order to be saved. The woman does not have to become a man in order to be saved. The slave does not have to become free to be saved (absurd but true). Is the logic not moving to the point of saying, The homosexual does not to become heterosexual in order to be saved?<sup>84</sup>

This radical inclusiveness of the Church, intrinsic to the manner it is constituted, is also emphasised by Elizabeth Stuart in relation to the theology of baptism. Critiquing the Roman Catholic Church for failing to live out the implications of its teaching on baptism with respect to gay and lesbian people, Stuart points out that in the end all other identities, other than the one manifested in baptism, are eclipsed:

At death the Church teaches that all identities are placed under ‘eschatological erasure’...At my death all that has been written on my body will be once again overwritten by my baptism... In the end, before the throne of grace, everything will dissolve except that identity.<sup>85</sup>

Stuart goes on to quote Mary McClintock Fulkerson who points out that what is remarkable about the debates about homosexuality within western Christianity is that

both those who refuse gay and lesbian persons and those who insist on their inclusion in the life of the church share the idea that persons have sexual identity and sexual preference and that this identity, for good or ill, is an absolutely fundamental status-determinative reality about subjects.

---

<sup>84</sup> De Gruchy, ‘Human being in Christ’, 252-253

<sup>85</sup> Elizabeth Stuart, *Gay and Lesbian Theologies: Repetitions with Critical Difference* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 2

Stuart's point is that it is precisely this assumption which the theology of baptism challenges.

There is some difference in the anthropologies being proposed here by de Gruchy and Stuart, with the former adopting a more essentialist approach to sexual identity as opposed to the latter who sees sexuality from the perspective of queer theory, and thus does not see sexual identity as being fixed. However both theologians have in common an approach to ecclesiology which is constructed upon the radical inclusivity, which they see as being at the heart of the gospel message. We would argue that this radical inclusivity must also be at the heart of the theology of *Ubuntu*. If in *Ubuntu* one's identity is defined in relationship, if it is constituted in the processes of seeing oneself as another, then it follows that a theology of *Ubuntu* must maintain a critical distance from absolute and dogmatic expressions of human identity. Whether or not one accepts sexual identity as being fixed, in theological terms it is provisional, subordinate to a broader identity as a child of God. It is this latter identity which forms the basis for unity and more than that, our capacity to recognise the Divine in the Other.

The radical inclusivity of grace, at the heart of the theology of *Ubuntu*, also becomes the basis upon which gay people are able to come to the self-acceptance, which flies in the face of the heterosexism so patently dominant in church and society. In a rather moving autobiographical article entitled, 'Who Told You So', the former Anglican Dean of Cape Town cathedral, Rowan Smith, chronicled his journey in a manner which resonates with our current themes. Reflecting on his own inner struggles precipitated by his identity as both a priest and gay man, Smith spoke of the lack of acceptance and sense of alienation felt by many gay people within the Church:

[M]any Christians continue to struggle with their faith and their sexual experience, believing that God does not love us as we are, and we have to ask: ‘Who told you so?’<sup>86</sup>

The answer to Smith’s poignant question is that it is the institutional Church, underpinned by the hegemony of heterosexism, that has powerfully transmitted to gay people the message that they are the dangerous and sinful Other, that they need to fundamentally change who they are to be fully embraced by the divine love. Significantly, for Smith – designated ‘coloured’ under the racial classification of the old South African regime – it was his identification with Black Consciousness movement in the struggle against apartheid that helped him find the belonging and acceptance he needed. The struggle for him to give expression to his identity and sense of worth as a black person in a racist society empowered him to be able to grapple with his sexual identity. Thus he says ‘to be able to claim my identity as black was the spur to claiming my identity as gay...’<sup>87</sup>

## **Conclusions**

We have argued above that, in theological terms, sexual identity could be seen as subordinate to Christian identity, and the same could certainly be said of a person’s racial identity. Yet even if identities such as ‘black’ or ‘gay’ are ultimately placed under ‘eschatological erasure’, even if they are provisional or fluid, this does not undermine their significance in establishing selfhood. To affirm that the human being’s ultimate identity, which transcends all others, is

---

<sup>86</sup> Rowan Smith, ‘Who Told You So?’ in Robin Malan and Ashraf Johaardien (eds.), *Yes I am: writing by South African gay men* (Cape Town: Junkets Publisher, 2010), 92

<sup>87</sup> Rowan Smith, ‘Who Told You So?’, 92

as a child of God, is to establish the theological basis for the unity and equality of all people. Yet that unity and equality is an eschatological goal, rather than a present reality. The current position of gay people within the worldwide church does not reflect a unity wherein Christian identity transcends sexual identity, but rather an imposition of heterosexist normativity in which gay sexual identity is suppressed. It is those in positions of power, whose identities conform to that which the hegemonic discourse has deemed to be normative, who perpetuate discourses of superficial unity, which negate the expressions of identity of those who are oppressed. In the context of the struggles to establish authentic unity and equality, and that justice on which it must be premised, it is necessary for those whose humanity has been undermined by homophobia, racism or sexism, to reclaim and celebrate their identities. The theology of *Ubuntu* must help them to do precisely that.

## Chapter Ten

### The Theology of *Ubuntu* and White African Identity

If, as we have argued, the theology of *Ubuntu* is about the existential freedom and subjective becoming of the oppressed, and a response of compassion to those who suffer, what message does it hold for those who have power? If it seeks to create just and compassionate communities through empowering those previously marginalised, how does it challenge those who are at the top of the pyramid of social relations, to develop a more authentically relational understanding of their own humanity. In particular, how does the theology of *Ubuntu* address white people in the post-apartheid South Africa? Our argument here will be that it challenges them to do nothing less than fundamentally reconstitute their white identity. What we are pointing to here is that the theology of *Ubuntu*'s challenge to the oppressor – to give expression to a radical conversion through guilt, shame and repentance – is no less significant than its message of freedom and selfhood to the oppressed.

Certainly, as we have argued earlier, a theology of *Ubuntu* must recognise the humanity of the oppressor and must always offer redemptive possibilities. This is because the eschatology of *Ubuntu* points to a vision of a reconciled humanity. Yet if this reconciliation is to be characterised by authenticity, rather than cheap grace, it demands a radical repentance from the oppressor. In the context of South Africa – although we would hold that our argument is very much applicable to privileged groups in other parts of the world – such a radical repentance would involve the need for white people to i) understand and acknowledge the nature of whiteness, which compromises both assumed privilege and an alienation from

Africa itself, ii) respond appropriately through humility, guilt, shame and silence and iii) seek conversion as a prerequisite for reconciliation.

Our interlocutors, whose work we shall use as a basis for our theological reflections upon whiteness in South Africa, will be two white South African women, Samantha Vice and Nadine Gordimer. The former, a philosopher, has written a provocative paper which cuts to the heart of white selfhood in South Africa, making it a rich resource for theological anthropology; the latter, a Nobel Prize-winning writer, trenchantly crystallises in her work the paradoxes and conflicts which characterise white African identity – as we hope to show in what follows, with reference to her novel, *July's People*.

### **The Nature of Whiteness as Privilege**

In her significant contribution to the debate about whiteness in contemporary South Africa – which provoked outrage amongst the country's white population<sup>1</sup> – Vice has suggested that what is required from whites is humility, expressed in a particular form of silence. Vice argues that these are appropriate responses, once whites come to finally understand and acknowledge what whiteness is, i.e.

...a global norm that is invisible, working in the background as a standard, not of one particular way of being in the world, but as normalcy, as universalizability, of just being 'the way things are.'<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Vice's article was published in an academic journal – see next footnote – but was brought to the attention of the wider public through a review published in South African newspapers. See an online version - Eusebius McKaiser, 'Confronting Whiteness' in *Mail and Guardian*, available at <https://mg.co.za/article/2011-07-01-confronting-whiteness> 1 July 2011

<sup>2</sup> Samantha Vice, 'How Do I Live in This Strange Place?', *Journal of Social Philosophy*, vol.30, no. 3, 324

This notion of simply ‘the way things are’ and of ‘invisibility’ points to a very significant aspect of white privilege. Whiteness involves the incapacity of whites to see themselves as advantaged; the social system as it stands simply reflects the ways things have always been, and indeed ought to be, ordered. James Cone gives theological expression to this in his typically forthright way when he defines the sin of whites as being

the definition of their existence in terms of whiteness...[but] whites, because they are white, fail to perceive this as the nature of sin. It is characteristic of sin that it permeates the whole of one’s being, distorting one’s humanity, leaving the sinner incapable of reversing the condition or indeed of truly recognizing it.<sup>3</sup>

Crucial here is the idea that white privilege is *unconscious* - the white person is not aware that they are privileged. Vice describes this as privilege which is ‘nonvoluntary in its origins’<sup>4</sup> - but of course that does mean white people benefit any less from it. This was the point being made by Steve Biko when assessing the role of white liberals in apartheid South Africa:

It is not as if whites are allowed to enjoy privilege only when they declare their solidarity with the ruling party. They are born into privilege and are nourished by and nurtured in the system of ruthless exploitation of black energy.<sup>5</sup>

Vice argues in spite of the nonvoluntary origins of these privileges, and of the identity which they construct, they are the responsibility of white people and they must respond appropriately. In the first instance, it is incumbent upon whites to acknowledge the reality

---

<sup>3</sup> James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 2010), 107-108

<sup>4</sup> Vice, ‘How Do I Live in This Strange Place?’, 325

<sup>5</sup> Steve Biko, “White Racism and Black Consciousness,” in *I Write What I Like* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1987), 66

and effects of white privilege – they ‘cannot in good faith pretend they do not exist.’<sup>6</sup> It is whites’ response to this recognition which constitutes a great moral challenge to them.

Facing that moral challenge for whites necessitates coming to terms with the fact that they have been a problem in South Africa. In response to Linda Alcoff’s question, ‘Is...to acknowledge [one’s whiteness] to acknowledge that one is inherently tied to structures of domination and oppression, that one is irrevocably on the wrong side?’, Vice’s answer is a resounding ‘yes’.<sup>7</sup>

Alcoff’s question is also very much at the heart of Nadine Gordimer’s novel, *July’s People*. As we have already alluded to, Gordimer’s work is firmly embedded in the African soil, and has at its core questions of identity and relationship, which emerge from the crucible of race relations in South Africa. There is also a latent spirituality in Gordimer’s work, which lends itself to theological reflection. She stated that, while not adhering to any specific body of belief, she had a ‘basically religious temperament, even a profoundly religious one.’<sup>8</sup> Certainly, as we shall see, in *July’s People* we see evidence not only of a strong spirituality, but one which is profoundly relational. At the heart of Gordimer’s spirituality is an emphasis on the need for authentic union with other human beings and indeed – and this is clearly reflective of African religious tradition – the land. Her ‘religious temperament’ manifests itself in several of her novels through, in the words of one Gordimer scholar, ‘characters who feel that underlying union, committing themselves to it as their faith.’<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Vice, ‘How Do I Live in This Strange Place?’, 326

<sup>7</sup> Vice, ‘How Do I Live in This Strange Place?’, 326

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Andrew Ettin, *Betrayals of the Body Politic: The Literary Commitments of Nadine Gordimer* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 13

<sup>9</sup> Ettin, *Betrayals of the Body Politic*, 34

*July's People* itself is very much an appropriate lens through which to view the theology of *Ubuntu*, because at the novel's heart is Gordimer's call for a profound re-evaluation of the roles and relationships which have been constructed in the social matrix that was apartheid South Africa. Written in 1981, and set in a fictitious post-revolutionary South Africa, it remains acutely relevant precisely because it explores the reconfiguration of identities, which continues to be such a dominant theme in the South Africa of today. The book is about the necessary process of deconstruction, and, ultimately, about some form of reconstitution of social identity. This process of deconstruction is explored particularly with regard to white liberalism – Gordimer relentlessly strips away its benign façade, exposing its inherently paternalistic nature and its inability to establish an authentically African identity for white South Africans. The crisis of white liberal identity in the South Africa at the time the novel was written is brought into focus by projecting it into a revolutionary future. In that future, the representatives of this liberalism – the Smales' family – are temporally and spatially dislocated. Thrust into a time and a place where they are aliens, they find that the framework upon which they constructed their former identity has been dismantled. Thus, in *July's People*, the broader process of revolutionary political dislocation, which constitutes the novel's background, is reflected in the breakdowns which occur on both inter-and intra-personal levels.

The plot of *July's People* is predicated on a successful armed revolution, which removes white minority rule from South Africa. In the ensuing chaos, Bamford and Maureen Smales, flee from their previously comfortable urban home to seek refuge in the rural village of their long time servant, *July*. A central theme of the novel thus becomes an inversion of previously established patterns: the former white masters, now in a place and time in which all that is familiar and has given them security has been removed, are now reliant on the

former black servant. It is the struggle of the white protagonists to accept this new reality and the changing identities which gives *July's People* much of its dramatic impetus. This challenge to white liberalism depicted in the novel reflects Gordimer's own search for identity as a white South African sympathetic to the cause of liberation. In her essay 'Living in the Interregnum', which describes the context in which *July's People* was written, Gordimer calls for a radical appraisal of what it means to be white:

In the eyes of the black majority which will rule, whites of the former South Africa will have to redefine themselves in a new collective life within new structures. From the all-white Parliament, to the all-white country club...it is not a matter of blacks taking over white institutions, it is one of conceiving institutions...that reflect a social structure vastly different from that built to the specifications of white power and privilege.<sup>10</sup>

For Gordimer, then, the interregnum is not only between social orders, but also identities. Whites in South Africa need to conceive of a new way of being, one which casts off the old Eurocentric assumptions of superiority and privilege. These assumptions, and the hierarchy which they underpinned, are powerfully conveyed in the opening scene of the novel:

You like to have some cup of tea?

July bent at the doorway and began that day for them as his kind had always done for their kind.

The knock on the door. Seven o'clock. In governors' residences, commercial hotel rooms, shift bosses' country bungalows, master bedrooms *en suite* – the tea-tray in black hands smelling of Lifebuoy soap.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Nadine Gordimer, 'Living in the Interregnum' in Nadine Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1988), 265

<sup>11</sup> Gordimer, *July's People*, 1

It is a description of a present reality, but at the same time the scene encapsulates centuries of colonial history and the social hierarchy which confined blacks to carefully defined roles of servitude. July is thus acting out not only his present role within South African society, but the one to which he has historically been appointed by the continent's white rulers.

Yet this outward stability of the status quo proves wholly deceptive:

The knock on the door. No door, an aperture in thick mud and walls, and the sack that hung over it looped back for air, sometime during the short night. *Bam, I'm stifling; her voice raising him from the dead, he staggering up from his exhausted sleep.*<sup>12</sup>

The Smales here represent a white South Africa which has been thrown forward into an apocalyptic, revolutionary future. Yet in *July's People* they have not merely been projected into a *future* in which they are aliens – that future also unveils their *present* alienation. Within the future, the fractured and disjointed social relations of the present are starkly revealed. *July's People* exposes the European in Africa, the Settler, as an anachronism. To the contemporary white South Africa reading the novel in the 1980s the message was clearly that – whether or not they were prepared to recognise it – the revolutionary future is implicit in the present. Read through the lens of today's South Africa, the novel continues to challenge those white people have not refuse to let go of the colonial and apartheid dispensations. Rather than embrace an authentic, rooted and relational identity which allows them to see black people as fellow Africans, they hark back, and indeed seek to sustain, patterns of domination of previous ages.

---

<sup>12</sup> Gordimer, *July's People*, 1

*July's People*, then, challenges the assumptions of the old order and reflects the struggle for a new dispensation. Central to the assumptions of the old order which the novel is critiquing is the notion – to which have already made reference earlier in this thesis - that the white settlers embodied some form of 'civilisation', as opposed to barbarism of black people. In tracing the history of this civilisation / barbarism dichotomy within the context of the *July's People*, Paul Rich outlined how the core values of colonial society were externalised, culminating in some form of moral authority, usually sanctified by the divine.<sup>13</sup> Rich argues that, because a dominant theme in the Middle Ages in Europe was its defence against invasion from Asia, a siege-like cultural hostility developed. Alongside it was born the notion of primitiveness associated with non-Christian people, which then also became bound up with colour distinctions drawn up from the colour differentiation between light and goodness and darkness and evil.

This white colonial identity, formed within the crucible of perceived external threat and danger, was reinforced within the South Africa of the early 1980s when the novel was published. At that time, the country was widely considered, by observers both inside and outside the country, to be on the brink of a revolution. Its neighbouring countries, Mozambique, Angola and, most recently, Zimbabwe, had won their independence, leaving South Africa as the last bastion of white supremacy on the continent. Within the country, the 1976 Soweto uprisings had been quelled, but had been the catalyst for longer-term revolutionary fervour, particularly amongst the increasingly radicalised black youth. Mass organised resistance, which had been largely suppressed during the 1960s and 1970s, now

---

<sup>13</sup> Paul Rich, 'Apartheid and the Decline of the Civilization Idea: An Essay on Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* and J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* in *Research In African Literatures*, vol. 15, no. 1, spring 1984, 365

emerged with renewed vigour in the form of the United Democratic Front and the Congress of South Africa Trade Unions. Clearly, the old assumptions and values of white South Africa were coming under increasingly rigorous scrutiny. For most white people, however, unable to accept the reality of the period of interregnum and transformation, the response was a defiant commitment to the status quo. We would argue that precisely the same holds true for the South Africa of today – which indeed is exactly what Vice argued in her article. For Nadine Gordimer then, as it was for Vice some thirty years later, it was clear that a profound reappraisal was needed of the white role in South Africa, and indeed Africa as whole.

It is this process of renewal and reformulation of identity which encapsulates the relevance of the theology of *Ubuntu*, not only for white people in South Africa, but the affluent classes of the western world as well. The theology of *Ubuntu*, with its notions of relationality and compassion for the Other at its core, directly challenges social and economic inequality and master-slave models of identity which are its consequence. The powerful call of *Ubuntu* is to challenge and deconstruct the inauthentic identities premised on hierarchical relationships, and instead to see the full humanity of Other as bound up with one's own. For those at the apex of the hierarchy, however, this process involves the costly relinquishing of privilege.

### **White Privilege as Alienation from Africa**

Bound up with the notion of white privilege is white alienation from the continent of Africa itself. As we have already argued, it is their Eurocentric understanding of their own identity which informs whites' conscious and unconscious sense of superiority. It is a theme which

goes to the very the heart of Gordimer's writing. *July's People's* imagined revolutionary future merely served to magnify the contradictions and fears within the white psyche in a way which has strong parallels with whites in today's black majority-led South Africa – and one of the very deepest of those white fears is that *they do not belong in Africa at all*. In the novel Gordimer powerfully conveys, through the Smales, that the realisation for white people that they have been always alienated from the country of their birth is profoundly disturbing:

They sickened at the appalling thought that they might find that they had lived their whole lives as they were, born white pariah dogs in a black continent.<sup>14</sup>

The Smales family are thus not only dislocated temporally, they are dislocated spatially as well. Having been forced to flee from urban security and familiarity of their Johannesburg home to a far-flung village, they now physically inhabit a world to which they are foreign. They have been removed from 'master bedroom *en suite*' with all its connotations of power and sanitised comfort. Stripped of that power and comfort, they must now confront the harsh reality of the Africa from which they have been protected. The mud hut, in which they have to dwell, comes to represent their forced and painful reconnection with the land, over which they have previously exercised some technological control, but from which they have in fact been alienated. Up until now, the Smales have only ventured into rural Africa from within the paradigm of European visitor. Thus, we are told that Bam had bought himself a *bakkie* (small truck)

on his fortieth birthday to use as shooting-brake. He went trap-shooting to keep his eye in, out of season, and when winter came spent his weekends in the bush, within a radius of two hundred of his office and home in the city... Before the children were born, he had taken his wife on hunting trips

---

<sup>14</sup> Gordimer, *July's People*, 8

further afield – to Botswana, and once, before the Portuguese regime was overthrown, to Mozambique.<sup>15</sup>

We have a picture here of man who *visits* enclaves within Africa he considers safe to pursue the leisure pursuits of the affluent, rather than someone who *inhabits* Africa. Gordimer is here drawing our attention to another significant aspect of African relationality - the human relationship to the land. Our relationship to the Other, at the core of *Ubuntu*, cannot be separated from the land in which those relationships are constituted. Indeed, central to the colonial enterprise was the misappropriation of land by people who had no authentic connection to it, who sought only to exploit it for gain, and, in that process, the original peoples who lived on it. The theology of *Ubuntu*, in seeking to challenge this conception of the land, seeks to develop a literally *grounded* theology – a theology which takes its point of reference from the African soil. In particular, it addresses those who live removed from the land, or seek to exploit it, to re-establish an authentic connection with the natural world.

Significantly, Gordimer expressed whites' alienation from Africa not only as a disconnection with the land, but also as problem of *language*. This is deftly illustrated in *July's People*, as Gordimer demonstrates how both hierarchy and identity are constructed by language. At the beginning of the novel, Maureen, in a manner typical of liberal whites, believes that she and July are able to transcend their language difficulties:

She was confident of his wily good sense; he had worked for her for years. Often Bam couldn't follow his broken English, but he and she understood each other well.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Gordimer, *July's People*, 5-6

<sup>16</sup> Gordimer, *July's People*, 13

In their new context, however, an unsettling linguistic ambiguity emerges. When, for example, July tells Maureen that she does not need to help the women in ‘their place’. She does not know whether he means

‘place’ in the sense of role, or might he be implying that she must remember she had no claim to the earth – ‘place’ as territory...<sup>17</sup>

Maureen simply puts it down to a failure of July’s linguistic abilities. Increasingly, however, it becomes clear that the reason for their lack of authentic communication is not simply that they speak different languages, but that the discourse she employs with July – unconsciously – is that of subservience and not of the intercourse of two equal human beings:

...they could assume comprehension between them only if she kept from even the most commonplace of abstractions; his was the English learned in kitchens, factories and mines. It was based on orders and responses, not the exchange of ideas and feelings.<sup>18</sup>

In the words of Michael Neill, ‘the rupture between Maureen and July is realised as an essentially linguistic catastrophe.’<sup>19</sup>

Central to the Smales’ feeling of dislocation, then, is their discovery of the constraints of their own linguistic competence. Naturally, as educated white South Africans, they are articulate, but their eloquence is not only that of colonial languages (English and Afrikaans), but also that of urban sophistication. It is thus an eloquence that cannot translate into their present context. The inability of the Smales to translate and comprehend becomes a central metaphor in the novel, symbolising their inability to transcend their liberal white linguistic framework.

---

<sup>17</sup> Gordimer, *July’s People*, 97

<sup>18</sup> Gordimer, *July’s People*, 96

<sup>19</sup> Michael Neill, ‘Translating the Present: Language, Knowledge and Identity in Nadine Gordimer’s *July’s People*’ in *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 25. no. 1, 82

Although he speaks French, Bam cannot understand the Portuguese news broadcast from Mozambique (p. 110), and Maureen's attempt at solidarity with the women of the village is rendered ridiculous by the limitations of her communication with them (pp. 131-2). They are similarly constrained in talking to the chief in the village, and are only able to speak to him through July, who, throughout the novel, acts as a point of connection between the two worlds.

This inability to translate and comprehend is reflected in the ongoing struggle to hear the latest developments of the radio. The search for the radio station that will give them news becomes a mirror to their attempts to 'tune in' into the world in which they find themselves:

[Bam] turned the tuning knob of the radio and tried aerial at every angle its swivel allowed. His fingers moved in hesitant concentration, someone feeling out, listening for the combination that would spring the lock.<sup>20</sup>

Yet they are unable to tune the radio, the only sounds that emanate from it being 'chaos, roaring, crackling' (p. 124). Thus, the radio, one of their last links with the language of their former world is no longer able to connect them that world. They have gone beyond the bounds of their language – they have reached the limit of the colonial paradigm. The Smales need a new, relational language – the language of *Ubuntu* – to help the traverse the new social and political terrain in which they find themselves.

There is one moment of genuine, though painful, understanding for the Smales, when the language of urban privilege is cast aside, a moment which seems to contain the seeds of

---

<sup>20</sup> Gordimer, *July's People*, 124

future hope. When July angrily confronts Maureen in his own language, she is able to see him as he really is and *herself as he really sees her*. She understands July without knowing his language because they have transcended the linguistic framework of master and servant. During this crucial encounter, no longer does July speak in the English of servitude; instead, he speaks the language of his own liberation:

Suddenly he began to talk in his own language...She understood although she know no word.

Understood everything: what he had had to be, how she covered up to herself for him, in order for him to be her idea of him. But for himself – to be intelligent, honest, dignified for *her* was nothing; his measure as a man was taken elsewhere, and by others.<sup>21</sup>

For Maureen, July's outburst is a decisive moment, constituting the final disintegration of the master-servant hierarchy, which underpinned not only their relationship and her view of him, but also her identity as a white South African. Thus, the challenge for white South Africans, in overcoming their alienation from Africa, is to reconceive of the continent, not terms of acquisition and domination, but rather of belonging and mutuality. Gordimer expressed her own South African identity as 'the country that owns me (for I do not say 'my Africa' – it is the other way round).'<sup>22</sup> Thus, for Gordimer, her own identity was grounded in Africa – she *was* an African, rather than a European living in Africa. As such, she was part of a new approach in white South Africa writing which reconceptualised white identity. Writers such as Gordimer, J.M. Coetzee, Breyton Breytenbach and Andre Brink did not see themselves writing about Africans or for Africans, *but rather as Africans themselves*.

---

<sup>21</sup> Gordimer, *July's People*, 124

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Ettin, *Betrayals of the Body Politic*, 13

Our argument here, in following Gordimer, is that this reconceptualisation of their identity as African rather than European continues to be one of the major challenges facing white people in the ongoing South African transition from apartheid to freedom. Undoubtedly, white people's acknowledgment and acceptance of their African identity, and of their interconnectedness with the other peoples of the continent – rather than a harking back to an old colonial or apartheid dispensation – would go a long way towards the nation's healing. In other words, a theology of *Ubuntu* could be a key constituent in the reconstruction of an African and relational white identity.

### **Guilt and Shame**

However, for a new identity to become even a possibility for white people requires them to acknowledge and comprehend the scale of the injustices and suffering with which whiteness has been associated. That white people have not done so, says Vice – and one can see here why her article caused such a furore amongst white South Africans – is evident because they have not responded with the appropriate feelings of guilt and shame. Vice argues that the unwillingness or inability of whites to feel guilt about apartheid was in part caused by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). This was because the TRC focused on key white figures who had perpetrated outrageous atrocities, rather than fully explore the more mundane forms of complicity of other white South Africans.

Perhaps the most infamous agent of the apartheid regime was Eugene de Kock, who was head of the apartheid government's death squad, which was based at Vlakplaas (a farm near

Pretoria). Details of de Kock's terrible crimes emerged in the TRC as well as the press; South Africans were captivated and horrified by the story and nicknamed de Kock 'Prime Evil'. Vice's point is that white South Africans were able to look at such a figure and say – in good faith, if with great naïveté – that they knew nothing of the callous and brutal killing and torture being practised by the security police, and that they were in no way implicated in such actions.<sup>23</sup> However, this is precisely the approach which Vice wants to challenge:

There are many ways of being unjust, and it is too easy to jump off the moral hook by focusing on the obvious crimes of the apartheid death squads...Even if we put aside blatant discrimination and cruelty, there are still obvious vices like indifference or callousness, cowardice or dishonesty, the failure of imagination and empathy, or just plain laziness. I take it that these vices would be the kinds of psychological habits that...constitute and maintain white privilege all over the world, not only here.<sup>24</sup>

Vice recognises that the question of whether white guilt is an appropriate response is complex because white privilege, its origins in particular, did not come about through the direct agency of many whites alive today. However, she suggests that it is important to question whether guilt must be inextricably linked to direct actions one has performed. Instead, she calls for a more honest appraisal of the role of whites in South Africa, which may rightly elicit a response of guilt:

In this country it is difficult to avoid thinking of oneself as guilty just by being white, irrespective of directly racist actions...One is—even if unavoidably—a continuing product of white privilege and benefiting from it, implicated in and enacting injustice in many subtle ways; it seems to me that feelings of guilt are appropriate.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Vice, 'How Do I Live in This Strange Place?', 327

<sup>24</sup> Vice, 'How Do I Live in This Strange Place?', 327

<sup>25</sup> Vice, 'How Do I Live in This Strange Place?', 328

Vice's reflections on guilt put one in mind of the notion of structural sin, which has been central to the theologies of liberation. The South African theologian, Albert Nolan, explains it thus:

Sin in the Bible means something more than individual acts of wrongdoing. There is another dimension to the whole experience of sin. In very general terms we could say that it is the corporate or social dimension of sin. We have only to think of how the prophets condemned not merely the individual sins of individual people but also, and much more frequently, the sin of whole nations and empires including the sin of Israel itself as a nation... The personal and the social are two dimensions that are present in every sin. All sin is both personal and social at the same time.<sup>26</sup>

Highlighting the social and structural dimensions of sin helps us understand that we are not only responsible for our individual, direct actions but also for the way in which we participate in structures and systems of injustice which are much greater than ourselves. Such participation could 'simply' be passive acquiescence or benefiting from the structural injustice – but it is participation nevertheless.

Furthermore, if someone is not aware of their sin, that would hardly constitute theological grounds for absolving them of guilt or responsibility. When St John says 'If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us,'<sup>27</sup> it would seem clear that he is alluding precisely to a human tendency to avoid being confronted by our own sinfulness. Without the searching self-examination and uncompromising honesty which St John is calling for, one may indeed have impression that one is guiltless – but that impression may well be false! Many grievous sins may be committed unconsciously, but that does not make

---

<sup>26</sup> Albert Nolan, *God in South Africa: The Challenge of the Gospel*, (Cape Town: David Philip, 1988), 42-43

<sup>27</sup> 1 John 1:8 (NIV)

them any less grievous. In theological terms, therefore, it would seem that Vice is entirely justified in suggesting that guilt is an appropriate white response in South Africa.

However, Vice goes further to suggest that *shame*, even more than guilt, might be appropriate for white South Africans. She argues this because

shame differs from guilt in being essentially directed toward the self, rather than outwards toward a harm one brought about...One's very self is implicated in a way that need not be the case with guilt, which is a reaction to what one has done, not primarily to who one is. [Therefore] shame seems an appropriate response to the recognition of one's unavoidable privilege. For white privilege does not attach merely to what one does or how one benefits, but, more fundamentally, to who one is. And one does not wish to be a person whose welfare is dependent upon harm to others. When one discovers that one is, after all, such a person, however unavoidably, and insofar as one is morally aware and rational, one can only feel shame.<sup>28</sup>

As Vice points out, however, the awareness that we are not as we ought to be is only one aspect of shame; the other, more positive, element of shame is that it characterises a morally conscientious person.<sup>29</sup> For a white person to feel shame means they are responding as they should, and are acknowledging and recognising the scale of the injustices and suffering that have been imposed on black people.

Shame in this sense is not something one should seek to overcome or dismiss. This is shame which provides a moral compass, which provides a necessary signal that something is radically amiss. Viewed theologically, it would seem such a sense of shame could be the

---

<sup>28</sup> Vice, 'How Do I Live in This Strange Place?', 328-329

<sup>29</sup> Vice, 'How Do I Live in This Strange Place?', 329

foundation for authentic repentance. Shame indicates comprehension of, and taking responsibility for, the sin committed; as such, is the precursor to salvation. In concurring with Vice, we would contend that such a sense of shame is a prerequisite for the conversion of white people, and the restoration of their right relationship with their black neighbours in particular.

## **Silence**

Vice's exhortation to her fellow white citizens goes one step further in a very significant way – in the suggestion that they display a necessary humility, expressed through *silence*. These qualities, she contends,

would indicate the recognition of one's morally troubling situation and a determination to prevent it causing further harm...recognizing their damaging presence, whites [should] try...to make themselves invisible and unheard, concentrating rather on those damaged selves. Making pronouncements about a situation in which one is so deeply implicated seems a moral mistake...<sup>30</sup>

Vice thus advocates a certain restraint in the public realm on the part of whites. It is whites who have contributed largely to the problems besetting South Africa; they should now step back to allow blacks to resolve them in the process of reconstruction. At the same time, Vice acknowledges the difficulties attached to the notions of restraint and silence – for example, they could be interpreted as being merely passive, or as equating to complete inactivity.

---

<sup>30</sup> Vice, 'How Do I Live in This Strange Place?', 335

However, in contrast, she argues persuasively for a silence which is based not on inactivity, but on engagement. Vice approvingly quotes Paul Taylor when he says

Silence, on this reading, is the complement to the other's voice; it signals one's willingness to receive the other's struggle to find words both for his or her experiences and for the self that those experiences have conspired with the act of expression to create. Silence...is part of listening for a voice.<sup>31</sup>

Yet this imperative to be silent and to listen does not preclude open dialogue and the truth-directed conversations which facilitates greater self-knowledge. The need for silence does not imply that whites should avoid these conversations - on the contrary, they need to engage in precisely those sorts of encounters with black people. Vice is therefore careful to distinguish between 'silence in the political realm' for whites, which is she is calling for, and 'the stifling of all conversation with others in which race or privilege...is the topic'<sup>32</sup> - which is he she is not.

In his book, *On Job: God-Talk And the Suffering on the Innocent*, Gustavo Gutierrez outlines a theology of liberation, elements of which are premised on silence. In Gutierrez's theological model

'[t]he mystery of God comes to life in contemplation and the practice of God's plan for human history; only in a second phase can this life inspire appropriate reasoning and relevant speech... In view of all of this we can say that the first stage is *silence*, the second is *speech*.'<sup>33</sup>

Gutierrez is pointing to the poverty of human language in expressing our encounter with the divine love, and in the proclamation of that love to the world. This poverty of language is the reason Christians use liturgical symbols and imagery, and why the spiritual journey often

---

<sup>31</sup> Paul Taylor, quoted in Vice, 'How Do I Live in This Strange Place?', 336

<sup>32</sup> Vice, 'How Do I Live in This Strange Place?', 337

<sup>33</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *On Job: God-Talk And the Suffering Of The Innocent* (New York: Orbis Books, 1993), xiii

begins in contemplation. This is why, says Gutierrez, a theology which begins in silence will be deeply enriched and have new dimensions.<sup>34</sup> Liberative Christian practice, he seems to be saying, does not begin with an agent imposing his or her actions on a situation – which would suggest a certain arrogance - but rather in the silent contemplation on the mystery of God’s love within that situation of suffering. In liberation theology, silence enables Christians to listen to God – and to the poor.

We would go on to contend that silence can express the profundity of human relationships in a way which can often transcend words. We might think, for example, of the wordless touch or embrace which sacramentally reflects the depths of love in a way which language cannot. Indeed, whereas language often underpins power, dominion and authority, silence is more often indicative of humility and their willingness to engage with, and listen to, the Other. In this respect we might say that silence is integral to the theology *Ubuntu*, because it conveys the deep respect and reverence for another human being upon which authentic relationships must be built.

### **Possibilities of Conversion and Future Hope**

The question which emerges out of all this is: if whites heeded Vice’s call and responded appropriately to the historical injustices through humility, guilt, shame and silence, would that be enough to constitute their conversion and ensure a reconciled future? In *God of the Oppressed*, James Cone acknowledges ‘the *rare* possibility of conversion among white

---

<sup>34</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *On Job: God-Talk And the Suffering Of The Innocent* (New York: Orbis Books, 1993), xiv

oppressors' in the context of the USA, but stresses that, viewed biblically, it must be a *radical* experience, closely identified with repentance.<sup>35</sup> Cone makes reference to the repentance needed by white people in terms of Jesus' parable of the Kingdom as being a 'treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all he has and buys that field.'<sup>36</sup> Thus, the person who repents is the one who completely renews and redefines his or her life through commitment to the Kingdom.

It is for this reason that the symbolism of death is so closely related to repentance in many parts of the Bible. Thus, St Paul says in Romans:

We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.<sup>37</sup>

He explicates this theme further in 2 Corinthians:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!<sup>38</sup>

Thus, in following Cone, we would contend that this death to the old white self, this radical repentance and conversion, is a prerequisite for the new life of authentic reconciliation in South Africa. That such repentance and conversion have not yet taken root amongst white people is demonstrated by their hostile reaction each time there is any mention of effective reparation. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, together with Nelson Mandela's conciliatory approach to whites, was premised to a great extent on the willingness of white

---

<sup>35</sup> James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 221

<sup>36</sup> Matthew 13:44

<sup>37</sup> Romans 6: 2-4 (NIV)

<sup>38</sup> 2 Cor. 5: 17 (NIV)

people to honestly confront the past and address the injustices which defined South Africa. However, we would concur with Vice's conclusion that this has simply not happened.<sup>39</sup>

All of this leads us to a consideration of whether *Ubuntu* has, as some critics have alleged, promoted a superficial reconciliation, which did not demand an authentic repentance on the part of whites. This critique is cogently articulated by Alan Boesak in his most recent work, which speaks of an *Ubuntu* which has 'taken flight'.<sup>40</sup> Boesak speaks admiringly of the work of Desmond Tutu in placing *Ubuntu* at the very heart of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (of which Tutu was the chairperson). Boesak reflects on the TRC as follows:

Significantly, though, and making all the difference, the word and meaning of *Ubuntu* were introduced to the world through these processes by that remarkable spiritual leader, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, whose deeply rooted piety and devotion to Jesus Christ made him shape and embrace a Christianized *Ubuntu* that would not only influence the very work of the TRC, but impact the discourse and praxis of a whole nation...Tutu first framed a question. 'What is it...that constrained so many to choose to forgive rather than demand retribution...?'

Yet this focus on the magnanimity of those who suffered under apartheid has also led some critics to argue that the TRC asked the victims of apartheid to make sacrifices, which were 'never demanded of the perpetrators.' Boesak cites the TRC observer, Richard Wilson, who felt that *Ubuntu* was used as a 'kind of emotional blackmail to stifle righteous anger.'<sup>41</sup> The fact is, says Boesak, while there is no doubt that this expression of *Ubuntu*, closely intertwined as it was with the example and teachings of Jesus, has inspired some great acts of

---

<sup>39</sup> Vice, 'How Do I Live in This Strange Place?', 332

<sup>40</sup> See Chapter 4 of Boesak, *Pharaohs on Both Sides of the Blood-Red Waters*, 117-146

<sup>41</sup> Boesak, *Pharaohs on Both Sides of the Blood-Red Waters*, 123

personal forgiveness, it is ill-equipped to deal with the forces of systematic injustice. While the *Ubuntu* of the TRC called for individual acts of forgiveness (from victims), it ‘could not call forth remorse and conversion, infused by a sense of justice.’<sup>42</sup> The TRC could certainly recommend to the government that it pay reparations, and call on the white business community to voluntarily play a role in compensating black people who were exploited under apartheid – but the crucial point is *that that exploitation did not happen voluntarily, but was rather ‘compulsory and systematic.’*<sup>43</sup> Boesak’s point is that *Ubuntu* must not be allowed to become some kind of political fig leaf, which conceals a failure to deal with structural inequality – it must not be a replacement for justice.

Similarly - in the context of our discussion here – it should also be emphasised that *Ubuntu* cannot be used by white people as an escape route from authentic repentance and conversion. Boesak is right to point out that *Ubuntu* has its limitations in dealing with structural issues, but we would also argue that an *Ubuntu* which promotes reconciliation, as per the TRC process, does not preclude an *Ubuntu* which directly confronts and challenges whites regarding the reformulation of their identity and a necessary dying to the white self. This confrontation and challenge are as much part of *Ubuntu* as is reconciliation – indeed we would argue that they are *prerequisites* for genuine reconciliation. Furthermore, this confrontation and challenge are integral to *Ubuntu* because they constitute a call to white people to discover their full humanity, through abandoning the colonial / missionary model with its implicit assumptions of white leadership.

---

<sup>42</sup> Boesak, *Pharaohs on Both Sides of the Blood-Red Waters*, 141

<sup>43</sup> Boesak quoting economist Sampie Terreblance in *Pharaohs on Both Sides of the Blood-Red Waters*, 141

A reconstituted African identity for whites - the one which the theology of *Ubuntu* is challenging them to embrace – means reconceiving of themselves in relation to blacks.

Desmond Tutu himself, in trying to define whites' participation in the birth of a new South African society writes:

Whites unfortunately have the habit of taking over and usurping the leadership and taking crucial decisions – largely, I suppose, because of the head start they have had in education or experience...the point is that however much they want to identify with blacks it is an existential fact...that they have not really been victims of this baneful oppression and exploitation...it is a divide that cannot be crossed, and that must give blacks primacy in determining the course and goal of the struggle. *Whites must be willing to follow* [italics mine].<sup>44</sup>

It may indeed be the case that Vice's article, written in 2010, is an indication that little has changed in the white psyche since Gordimer wrote *July's People* in nearly thirty years previously. Yet the theology of *Ubuntu* retains an eschatology premised on hope and a belief in the humanity of the oppressor. In key moments of *July's People*, the white protagonists hint at the transformation in their understanding necessary (albeit often forced on them) to reconstruct their roles and identities in future South Africa. For example, at one stage Maureen insightfully points to the truth of what is actually taking place – that the violent revolution taking place on a national level is being mirrored by the radical deconstruction and inversion of personal and social roles – when she says an '*explosion of roles*, that's what the blowing up of the Union buildings and the master bedroom is'<sup>45</sup> [italics mine].

---

<sup>44</sup> Desmond Tutu, quoted in Gordimer, 'Living in the Interregnum', 267

<sup>45</sup> Gordimer, *July's People*, 154

At the very core of the novel is the realisation on the part of the Smales that what is happening is a reversal of the master-servant relationship that has previously characterised their relationship with July:

The decently-paid and contented male servant, living in their yard since they married, clothed by them in two sets of uniforms...given Wednesdays and alternate Sundays free, allowed to have his friends visit him and have his town woman sleep with him in his room – he turned out to be the chosen one in whose hands their lives were to be held; frog prince, saviour, July.<sup>46</sup>

Whereas previously the relationship had been characterised by the Smales' belief in their own beneficence - but had in fact been grounded in the labour relations of master and servant - now the relationship is completely reformulated. It is they – the Smales – who rather than possessing are now possessed. They have become 'July's People':

July's women, July's family – she and her family were fed by them, succoured by them. She looked at her servant: they were their creatures, like their cattle and pigs.<sup>47</sup>

Yet July is not only their means of survival. They come to realise that he is also their guide into the foreign land, which is the country of their birth. July is their saviour not only because he takes them away from danger, but also because he represents for the Smales – through the inversion of the white-black missionary hierarchy – the possibility of reconnection with African humanity, the possibility of a new identity, one based on *Ubuntu*. Further evidence of this residue of hope for the future can be seen in the Smales' children. Initially, they reflect the western consumerist values of the milieu in which they have been socialised. Thus, their son Victor insists that he be allowed to take out the train set he

---

<sup>46</sup> Gordimer, *July's People*, 9

<sup>47</sup> Gordimer, *July's People*, 96

secretly put in their luggage, in order to show it off – but he does not want the children of the village to touch it. Their other son Royce demands that his mother goes to buy Coca-Cola, unable to comprehend a world where what is desired is not a purchasable commodity. Yet their youth means that their world-views are malleable; their deconstruction of their white South African identity occurs with a pace and an ease which contrasts markedly with their parents, and they are soon integrated into village life. It is the children who are able to ‘translate’ from one discourse to another, to redefine themselves in terms of their new context.

Their daughter Gina not only learns the language of one of the girls in the village, but does so in the form of the ‘private talk’ of their very close friendship. Thus one has the image of an intimate relationship of mutual affection between these girls, which transcends the categories of master and servant from their parents’ world, and which is formed in the language of the new dispensation. At the end of the novel, Victor, without parody, copies the black gesture of humble gratitude when he receives fishing line from July:

Victor is seen to clap his hands, sticky with mielie-pap, softly, gravely together and bob obeisance, receiving the gift with cupped palms.<sup>48</sup>

Here, then, is profoundly symbolic and indeed hopeful image which represents the reconstitution of white identity. Victor has moved beyond the framework of white colonial conspiracy into which he has been socialised, and to which even his name is a powerful allusion. His simple, *silent* humility hints at a possibility of a white consciousness free from the assumptions of pre-eminence.

---

<sup>48</sup> Gordimer, *July's People*, 157

This image of a white child ready and willing to receive, with hands open, from a black man powerfully encapsulates the possible reformulation of white identity in manner consistent with the theology of *Ubuntu*. The white child has no assumptions, implicit or explicit, of superiority; on the contrary, he recognises that it is he who depends on the black man. There is a here a full recognition of their human mutuality – but that recognition can only take place when those who have been previously advantaged relinquish the psychology and the position of power. Mutuality is premised on equality.

In the midst of the distorted social relations that characterised the South Africa in which they wrote the works we have considered here - in the 1980s and the 2010s respectively – both Nadine Gordimer and Samantha Vice represent hope. It is certainly tentative and qualified hope, but it is hope nevertheless – that white South Africans might recognise the full humanity of their fellow Africans and reconstruct an authentic, relational identity within the South Africa of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is a hope which is enshrined in the theology of *Ubuntu*.

## Section Four: Conclusions

### Chapter Eleven

#### A Framework for a Reformulated Theology of *Ubuntu*

In drawing together the various strands of this thesis, we want to argue for a theology of *Ubuntu*, which is predicated on a new definition of *Ubuntu* - 'becoming fully human in community'. This, we are arguing is a theology of *Ubuntu* which enables us to see that the self and the community are constituted contemporaneously – *both* are of the utmost significance, but *neither* has priority.

In outlining our preferred definition, we would contend that the *Ubuntu* upon which this theology is based should be placed within the broad humanist tradition. More than that, we hold the view that *Ubuntu* is specifically a form of *African* humanism, which, as discussed above, is distinct in important respects from its European counterpart. European humanism, as it emerged from the Enlightenment, and premised on Greek ideals, privileged the pursuit of individual virtues and elevated reason. The social and political systems which derived from it emphasised individual freedom and civil rights.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the Renaissance emphasis on humanism was characterised by the elevation of individual attainment, as celebrated in 'Renaissance Men' such as Leonardo, Erasmus, Thomas More and John Calvin. African humanism, on the other hand, is profoundly shaped by a sense by a deep sense of

---

<sup>1</sup> See Richard H. Bell, *Understanding African Philosophy*, 40f

respect for the Other, and an understanding of one's position within the social, natural and cosmic orders.<sup>2</sup>

That said, it is of vital importance to stress that African humanism retains a sense of the freedom of the subject and thus cannot be conflated with collectivism. This is well illustrated in the work of Gyeke, whose critique of collectivist conceptions of personhood has already been noted. In outlining his own understanding of African humanism, Gyeke helpfully explores the creative tension between relationality and individual personhood. Gyeke sees African humanism as being characterised by communalism, which he defines as

the doctrine that the group (that is, the society) constitutes the focus of the individual members of the society. The doctrine places emphasis on the activity and success of the wider society rather than, though not necessarily at the expense of, or to the detriment of, the individual.<sup>3</sup>

Using an Akan proverb as a point of reference – ‘when a man descends from heaven, he descends into human society’ (*onipa firi soro besi a, obesi onipa kurom*) – Gyeke argues that African thinking rejects the European notion of the original, pre-social character of humankind in nature.<sup>4</sup> The Western line of argument – certainly in Hobbesian, Social Contract form – was that humans, in their natural state, were solitary and aggressively competitive and only formed society because the consequences of that natural state were untenable and undesirable - in contrast with the Akan notion that human beings are *originally* born into community, as exemplified in the proverb quoted above.

---

<sup>2</sup> Bell, *Understanding African Philosophy*, 40

<sup>3</sup> Kwame Gyeke, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Cambridge University Press: 1987) 155

<sup>4</sup> Gyeke, *African Philosophical Thought*, 155

However, crucially, for Gyekye, human sociality is not just a consequence of the human being's innate nature, it is also the means by which *personal fulfilment and wellbeing* are achieved. If community is the human being's natural state of being, it follows that it is a society based on communalism that will permit 'the full realisation of human capacities, needs and aspirations.'<sup>5</sup> Thus communalism in African thought is *not a negation of the individual*, but rather an acknowledgement of the limitations of the individual and of the state of self-sufficiency – it is only in community that personhood can be realised. Gyekye encapsulates his resolution of the potential conflict between the individualist and relational notions of personhood by identifying between *types* of communitarianism. The idea that one's identity is conferred by the group – 'I am because we are' - is what he calls *radical communitarianism*.<sup>6</sup> Gyekye himself defines his own position as '*moderate communitarianism*' - a view which recognises the claims of both communality and individuality and acknowledges what he calls the intrinsic worth and dignity of the individual'. Gyekye retains thus the notion of a core human being characterised by 'rationality and moral sense' and a capacity for 'evaluating and making moral judgements'.<sup>7</sup>

We would argue that Gyekye's helpful insights steer us in the direction of *inter-subjectivity*, which South African theologian Dion Forster characterises as a situation wherein

[n]either the individual, in isolation, nor the community, apart from the individuals which are together the community, shape meaning. Rather, true meaning comes from mutual interrelationship, the

---

<sup>5</sup> Gyekye, *African Philosophical Thought*, 156

<sup>6</sup> Kwame Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 40

<sup>7</sup> Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity*, 53

‘between’, of the individual and the community. It is the individual that enriches, builds up, maintains, and develops, the community.<sup>8</sup>

Forster points to the famous dialogical conceptual framework of I - Thou developed by Martin Buber in his philosophical essay *Ich un Du* (1923)<sup>9</sup>, in which he says ontological primacy is neither on the ‘I’ (individual) nor the ‘Thou’ (community), but on the hyphen, the ‘between’, of the I – Thou. In concurring, we would argue that the theology of *Ubuntu* is very much a *theology of the hyphen*, its nexus being the creative interplay between self and community.

South African theologian John De Gruchy also describes *Ubuntu* as an African humanism, in the context of his argument for the establishment of a democratic culture in Africa, which avoids the possessive individualism of liberalism and the restrictive collectivism of Marxism:

*Ubuntu*...provided the foundation for the legal code and customs which governed Xhosa society. Its contemporary reaffirmation is essential for the renewal of democracy in Africa...[It] is the root of African humanism, and it relates well to biblical anthropology, trinitarian theology, and to the idea of Christian community.<sup>10</sup>

In a later article, De Gruchy expands on what he understands African humanism to be:

[It is] a social humanism that embodies relationality as central, and affirms a common human dignity beyond race, class and gender, and seeks to embody these values in a human rights culture.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Forster, D.A., ‘A generous ontology: Identity as a process of intersubjective discovery - an African theological contribution’, *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 66(1), Art. no. 731, 2010, 12 pages, available at <https://hts.org.za/index.php/hts/article/view/731/1132> under sub-heading ‘Dignity and respect’ (no page numbers)

<sup>9</sup> First translated into English by Gregor Smith (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1937)

<sup>10</sup> John W. De Gruchy, *Christianity and Democracy*, (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 191

<sup>11</sup> John W. De Gruchy, ‘Transforming Traditions: Doing Theology in South Africa Today’, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 139, March 2011, 15

Significant here is that De Gruchy's conception of African humanism extends beyond *simply* an expression of human relationality – although it certainly is that. He makes clear that humanism is inextricably bound up with essential human worth, and the rights which accrue to each human being as a consequence thereof. This is very important for the central argument of this thesis – that if *Ubuntu* is defined *only* as a statement of human relationality, if it is construed *purely* in terms of *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, then freedom of the human subject comes under threat. Emphasising that *Ubuntu* can be defined in terms of humanism ensures a broader understanding of the word, which makes it possible to hold together the centrality of community with the freedom of the subject.

In sum, we would like to argue for a definition of *Ubuntu* as 'becoming fully human in community' as opposed to a 'person is a person through other persons.' Our contention is that the former definition is in continuity with the best elements of African humanism, and also incorporates the key positive elements from the definitions we considered in chapter three, and thus constitutes a more complete statement of *Ubuntu*. Such the dangers of collectivism in the same way as a 'person is a person through other persons'. 'Becoming fully human in community' recognises that our humanity is constituted *in* community but not *by* community - it is precisely this which makes it the foundation for a reformulated theology of *Ubuntu*.

We believe this new definition of *Ubuntu* offers significant possibilities for the development of African and black theologies. Our proposed, reformulated notion of *Ubuntu* retains its communitarian focus, but also reconceives of it in a way which enables us to develop a

theology of *Ubuntu* which restores subjectivity, and is a source of liberation. In conclusion, it enables a theology of *Ubuntu* which is:

**(i) Premised on *Imago Dei***

Our theological point of departure is that, inherent in the concept of *imago dei*, is the notion that every human should be treated with reverence, and is created for freedom. This has a particular resonance for those who are oppressed, for it speaks powerfully of the restoration of dignity, agency, and subjectivity.

**(ii) Not Essentialist, but Attests to Human Liberation**

We have argued that essentialist notions of Africa are epistemologically unattainable, as well as theologically and morally highly dubious. It is precisely the illusion of an ‘untainted’ African Theology which leads to the situation where it can become deeply entrenched in conservatism under the guise of ‘tradition’ and wherein it is placed beyond critical scrutiny. The crucial question for the theology of *Ubuntu* is not ‘is it purely African?’ but rather ‘what does it attest to?’ Its decisive challenge is not to prove its African genealogy, but rather to demonstrate that it gives witness to the values of the Gospel of liberation in the Africa of today.

**(iii) Communitarian**

At the heart of this theology of *Ubuntu* remains its communitarian focus. Our critique of the collectivist distortions of *Ubuntu* represents an attempt to underscore, rather than undermine,

its properly relational character. It stresses that ‘becoming fully human’ cannot be the individual attainment of great virtue. By definition, the full realisation of our humanity involves the encounter with, and compassionate response to, the Other. The free Subject, at the heart of our *Ubuntu* anthropology, must necessarily be characterised by compassion as much as by agency and freedom. At the same time, the theology of *Ubuntu*, with its relational emphasis, will continue to constitute a profound challenge to the Cartesian view that human identity is constituted *solely* in rationality.

#### **(iv) Premised on a Moral Foundation**

Unlike ‘a person is a person through other persons’, which could be read as simply an empirical statement, ‘becoming fully human’ - in our proposed redefinition - has clear moral content. As we have argued throughout this study, there is a grave danger, in traditional interpretations of *Ubuntu*, of conflating community with moral virtue. In arguing that *Ubuntu* is about ‘becoming fully human in community’ we are emphasising moral virtue, and emphasising in particular that moral virtue is necessarily (though not solely) given expression in community; but we are *not* defining moral virtue simply in terms of that which benefits the community.

#### **(v) Teleological**

Very much linked to the question of moral virtue, is the teleological thrust implied within the notion of *becoming fully human*. The phrase accords with our contention that *Ubuntu* has a significant link to Aristotelian virtue ethics. Correctly understood (i.e. when the conflation between morality and community is avoided, as we have argued above), the theology of

*Ubuntu* is making a powerful statement about the moral purpose of human life being inextricably tied up with the wellbeing of others, particularly the suffering and oppressed.

*Becoming* is also teleological in the sense that it implies moral progress and development – to be a human being is grow in virtue and in relationship with others.

#### **(vi) Affirming of Human Agency**

The notion of *becoming* also accords with Ramose's understanding of *Ubuntu* as be-ing, as discussed in chapter three. Rather than personhood being a fixed entity (which 'a person is a person...' implies), it conceives of it as being in a process of ongoing development, of being authentic, active and creative. As such, *becoming* encapsulates the core elements of the agency of the Subject, and thus very much expresses the concerns at the heart of this thesis.

Our argument has been for an *Ubuntu* which stands in continuity with traditions of black and African existentialism, as we argued in chapter four. To be concerned about the person, as is the case with the theology of *Ubuntu*, is to affirm the sacred freedom of the human being.

#### **(vii) Inclusivist**

The notion of 'becoming fully human' also precludes an exclusivist reading of *Ubuntu*. If we understand *Ubuntu* as a process of *becoming*, it negates the idea of a rigid delineation between those who 'have' *Ubuntu* and those who do not. 'Becoming fully human' implies that all human beings are on a spectrum of realising their humanity, and contains within it the hope of future moral potential in even the most deviant human beings. For all of us, to be fully human is not simply to recognise the needs of others – it is to acknowledge the redemptive possibilities within them. This seems to be of crucial significance, because an

*exclusivist Ubuntu*, one which only recognises the bonds within a *particular* group, serves only to entrench and reinforce divisions, rather than transcend them.

### **(viii) Compassionate**

In discussing the moral aspects of *Ubuntu*, we should not lose sight of the fact that its response to the needs of the Other is governed by not a rationally conceived system of ethics, but a response of compassion to human affliction. As we saw in the life and death of Simone Weil – and we suggested that she was an appropriate interlocutor with *Ubuntu* for this very reason – this response of the heart goes far beyond intellectual discourse. It is an ‘entering in’ to the condition of those who suffer. This is the very foundation of incarnational Christianity – the God who is moved by love to respond to human suffering.

### **(ix) Able to Accommodate Dissent**

If, as we are arguing here, the harmony of the community is not the *telos per se* of the human being, it follows that allowance is made for dissent and conflict. This model of *Ubuntu* recognises that there will be the occasions when the process of ‘becoming fully human’ involves opposition to the community and dissent from a hegemonic notion of consensus, which is being imposed on the marginalised within that community. Indeed more than that, there will certainly be times when the commitment to human freedom which is at the heart of *Ubuntu* demands opposition to social norms and imposed standards of behaviour. The voice of *Ubuntu* will often be the lone, prophetic voice crying in the wilderness.

### **(x) Liberative for Women and Gay People**

The necessity for the reformulation of *Ubuntu* becomes crystallised when we place in the context of the poor treatment of women and gay people in many parts of Africa. As we have seen, their oppression is often justified through the ideologies of ‘tradition’ and ‘culture’ via the medium of *Ubuntu* and other forms of African theology. An essentialist reading of *Ubuntu*, and one which does not allow for voices of dissent, open itself to such misuse and distortion. However an *Ubuntu* which has human liberation and personal agency as its points of departure must necessarily champion those who are silenced and disadvantaged in society, enabling them to live authentically by giving expression to their true selves. As a relational theology, *Ubuntu* will also celebrate difference as being constitutive of personhood, as is the case with Trinity, which we have argued is a powerful template for it.

### **(xi) A Challenge to the Powerful and Privileged**

However, as much as it speaks to the marginalised, the theology of *Ubuntu* also presents a fundamental challenge to the powerful and the privileged. ‘Becoming fully human in community’ means acknowledging that social relationships based on injustice and inequality are untenable and demean the humanity of the oppressor, as much as they do the oppressed. *Ubuntu* demands of white people in South Africa, as indeed it does of affluent people in the western world, that they work to radically reorder the relationships which have constituted the master-slave paradigm, which has characterised apartheid, (neo-) colonialism and global capitalism. This is a profoundly difficult and painful process, as it requires those at the top of the social and economic hierarchy to be willing to sacrifice and to reformulate their sense of self. In Gospel terms, it requires them to die to self – but as with the Gospels, it is that dying to self which is the prerequisite for redemption and restoration.

Thus, 'becoming fully human in community' is a model of *Ubuntu* which allows the subject to transcend the strictures of collectivism, and enables him or her to express the freedom which is at the heart of personhood – and which must necessarily find fulfilment in community. As such, it constitutes a secure foundation upon which to build a theology of *Ubuntu*, which is continuity with the finest traditions of African humanism. *This* is a theology of *Ubuntu* which will give momentum to the liberation of Africa, and which will be a gift to the world beyond.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ackermann, Denise, 'Being Women, Being Human' in Denise Ackermann, Jonathan A. Draper and Emma Mashinini (eds.), *Women Hold up Half the Sky: Women in the Church in Southern Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1991), 93-105.

Allen, John, *Rabble-Rouser for Peace: The Authorised Biography of Desmond Tutu* (London: Ebury Publishing, 2006).

Althusser, Louis, *For Marx* (London: Verso, 2005).

Amory, Deborah P., "'Homosexuality' in Africa: Issues and Debates", *A Journal of Opinion*, Vol 25, no. 1, 1997, 5-10.

Anderson, David, *Simone Weil* (London: SCM Press, 1971).

Antonio, Edward P., 'Homosexuality and African culture' in Paul Germond and Steve de Gruchy (eds.), *Aliens in the Household of God* (Cape Town and Johannesburg: David Philip, 1997), 295-395.

Appiah, Kwame Anthony, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1992).

Arendt, Hannah, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report On The Banality of Evil* (New York: The Viking Press, 1963).

Aristotle, *Politics*, available at

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0058>

Asmal, Kader and Asmal, Louise and Suresh, Ronald, *Reconciliation Through Truth: A Reckoning of Apartheid's Criminal Governance* (Cape Town and Johannesburg: David Philip Publishers, 1996).

Augustine, trans. Henry Bettenson, *City of God* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972).

----- *Confessions*, trans. and notes Henry Chadwick, (Oxford University Press, 1991).

Bam, Brigalia, 'Seizing the Moment: Women and the New South Africa' in Denise Ackermann, Jonathan A. Draper and Emma Mashinini (eds.), *Women Hold up Half the Sky: Women in the Church in Southern Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1991), 363-368.

Bates, Robert, 'Africa Through Western Eyes: The World's Dark Continent or Capitalism's Shining Light?', *Think Africa Press*, 12 October 2012, available at

<http://thinkafricapress.com/culture/africa-through-western-eyes-worlds-dark-continent-or-capitalisms-shining-light>

Battle, Michael, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1997).

----- *Ubuntu: I in You and You in Me* (New York: Seabury Books, 2009).

Bauman, Zygmunt, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1989).

Benhabib, Seyla, 'Toward a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy' in Seyla Benhabib (ed.), *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political* (Princeton University Press, 1996), 67 – 94.

Bell, Richard H., *Understanding African Philosophy: A Cross-Cultural Approach to Classical and Contemporary Issues* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

Biko, Steve, 'White Racism and Black Consciousness,' in *I Write What I Like* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1987).

Boesak, Allan Aubrey, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Oxford: A. R. Mowbray & Co., 1978).

----- *Black and Reformed* (New York: Orbis Books, 1984).

----- *Pharaohs on Both Sides of the Blood-Red Waters* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2017).

Bonaventure, Ewert Cousins (ed.), *The Soul's Journey into God* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1978).

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM Press, 1953).

Broodryk, Johann, *Africa is Best (Ubuntu Philosophy)* (Waterkloof, South Africa: Ubuntu School of Philosophy, 2010).

Brown Douglas, Kelly, *What's Faith Got to Do with It? Black bodies/Christian Souls* (New York: Orbis Books, 2005).

Brown, Lesley, 'Glaucón's Challenge, Rational Egoism and Ordinary Morality' in Douglas Cairns, Fritz-Gregor Herrmann and Terry Penner (eds.), *Pursuing the Good: Ethics and Metaphysics in Plato's Republic* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 42-60.

Buber, Martin, *I and Thou* (New York: Scribner, 1958).

Buckle, Stephen, 'Descartes, Plato and the Cave' in *Philosophy* 82(02), April 2007, 301-337

Caputo, John D., *How to Read Kierkegaard* (London: Granta, 2007).

'Concerned Evangelicals', 'Evangelicals Critique their own Theology and Practice', *Transformation*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (1987), 17-30.

Cone, James H., *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Orbis Books, 1969).

----- *A Black Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1990).

----- Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare (Maryknoll, New York: 1991).

----- *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997).

Copeland, M. Shawn, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race and Being* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2010), p.124

Daly, Mary, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973).

Davies, Kwame, *Bob Marley: Lyrical Genius* (London: Sanctuary Publishing, 2002).

Davies, Oliver, *A Theology of Compassion: Metaphysics of Difference and the Renewal of Tradition* (London: SCM Press, 2001).

Dean, Ricard, 'Humanity Formula' in Thomas E. Hill, Jr (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Kant's Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 83 – 101.

de Beauvoir, Simone, *The Second Sex* (London: Vintage, 1997).

de Chardin, Teilhard, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper Collins, 1975).

de Gruchy, John *Christianity and Democracy*, (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

--- ‘The Transfiguration of Politics’ in Leonard Hulley, Louise Kretzschmar and Luke Lungile Pato (eds.), *Archbishop Tutu: Prophetic Witness in South Africa* (Cape Town: Human and Rosseau, 1996)

----- ‘Transforming Traditions: Doing Theology in South Africa Today, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 139 (March 2011), 7-17.

de Gruchy, Steve, ‘Human being in Christ’ in Paul Germond and Steve de Gruchy (eds.), *Aliens in the Household of God: Homosexuality and Christian Faith in South Africa* (Cape Town and Johannesburg: David Philp, 1977), 233-269

Descartes, Rene, *A Discourse on Method*, trans. J. Veitch (London: Dent, 1912).

Dietz, Mary G., *Between the Human and the Divine: The Political Thought of Simone Weil* (New Jersey: Rowan and Litchfield, 1988).

Diop, Cheikh Anta, *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa: The Domains of Patriarchy and Matriarchy in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge University Press, 1976).

Dreyer, Jaco and Dreyer, Yolanda and Foley, Edward and Nel, Malan (eds.) *Practicing [sic] Ubuntu: Practical Theological Perspectives on Injustice, Personhood and Human Dignity* (Zurich: Lit Verlag, 2017).

Du Bois, W. E. Burghardt, ‘Strivings of the Negro People’ in *Atlantic Monthly* 80 (1897), 194-198.

Dunton, Chris “‘Wheyting be dat?’ The Treatment of Homosexuality in African Literature”, *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 20, no. 3, 1989, 422-448.

Ekeopara, Chike Augustine, *African Traditional Religion: An Introduction* (Calabar: Natos Affair, 2005).

Eliade, Mircea, *No Souvenirs: Journal, 1957-1969*, trans. Fred H. Johnson, Jr. (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).

----- *The Myth of Eternal Return: Cosmos and History* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005).

Enslin, Penny and Horsthemke, Kai, ‘Can Ubuntu Provide a Model for Citizenship Education in African Democracies?’ in *Comparative Education*, Vol. 40, no.4, Nov. 2004, 545-558.

Epprecht, Marc, “The ‘Unsayings’ of Indigenous Homosexualities in Zimbabwe: Mapping a Blindspot in an African Masculinity”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 24, no. 4, 631-651.

Ettinger, Andrew, *Betrays of the Body Politic: The Literary Commitments of Nadine Gordimer* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1993).

Eze, Michael Onyebuchi, ‘What is African Communitarianism? Against Consensus as a Regulative Ideal’ in *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 2008, 27 (4), 386-399.

Fanon, Franz, *Toward the African Revolution: Political Essays*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1964)

----- *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markann (London: Pluto Press, 1986).

----- 'Racism and Culture' in Fred L. Hord and Jonathan Scott Lee (eds.), *I Am Because We are: Readings in Black Philosophy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 172-181.

----- *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004).

----- 'On National Culture' in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (eds.), *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 36-52.

Freire, Paulo, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: The Seabury Press, 1968).

Fiddes, Paul S., *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000).

Forster, D.A., 'A generous ontology: Identity as a process of intersubjective discovery - an African theological contribution', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 66(1), Art. no. 731, 2010, 12 pages, available at <https://hts.org.za/index.php/hts/article/view/731/1132>

Fortunato, John E., *Embracing the Exile: Healing Journeys for Gay Christians* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982).

Funani, Lumka Shelia, *Circumcision Amongst the Ama-Xhosa: A Medical Investigation* (Braamfontein, South Africa: Skotaville Publishers, 1990).

Gathogo, Julius, 'African Philosophy as Expressed in the Concepts of Hospitality and Ubuntu' in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 130 (March 2008), 39-53.

Gade, Christian B. N., 'The Historical Development of the Written Discourses on *Ubuntu*' in *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 2011, 30(3), 303-329.

----- 'What is Ubuntu? Different Interpretations Amongst South Africans of African Descent' in *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 2012 31(3), 484-503.

Goldberg, David Theo, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

Gordimer, Nadine, *July's People* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005).

----- *The Essential Gesture* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1988).

Gordon, Lewis R., *Existentialia Africana: Understanding African Existentialist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

Gutiérrez, Gustavo, *On Job: God-Talk And the Suffering Of The Innocent* (New York: Orbis Books, 1993).

Gyekye, Kwame, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Cambridge University Press: 1987).

----- *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

----- 'Person and Community in African Thought' in P. H. Coetzee and A. P. J. Roux (eds.), *The African Philosophy Reader* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 2003), 348-366.

Havnevik, Kjell, 'A Historical Framework for Analysing Current Tanzanian Transitions' in Havnevik and Aida C. Isinika (eds.), *Tanzania in Transition: Nyerere to Mkapa* (Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota Publishers Ltd, 2010), 19-56.

Hawker, Dianne ENCA website, "Maimane, Zuma and other 'anti-gay' statements in SA politics", available at <http://www.enca.com/south-africa/maimane-zuma-and-other-anti-gay-statements-sa-politics> 16 May 2015.

Hegel, G. W. F., trans. A. V. Miller, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford University Press, 1977).

Hellman, John, *Simone Weil: An Introduction to Her Thought* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2014).

Holmes, Rachel, *The Hottentot Venus: The Life and Death of Saartjie Baartman* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008).

Hong, Howard and Edna (trans. and eds.), *Kierkegaard's Writings, XIV, Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age* (Princeton University Press: 2009).

Hountondji, Paulin J., *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1983).

Hume, David, *The Philosophical Works of David Hume, Volume III* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996).

Hyden, Goran, *Beyond Ujamaa in Tanzania: Underdevelopment and an Uncaptured Peasantry* (University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1980).

Ikeke, Mark Omorovie, 'The Ecological Crisis and the Principle of Relationality in African Philosophy', *Philosophy Study*, April 2015, Vol. 5, No. 4, 182

Immerwahr, John, 'Hume's Revised Racism' in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 53, no. 3, 481-486.

Jewkes, Rachel and Sikweyiya, Yandisa and Morrell, Robert and Dunkle, Kristin 'Why, when and how men rape: Understanding rape perpetration in South Africa' in *SA Crime Quarterly*, no 34, December 2010, 23-31.

Kant, Immanuel, trans. John T. Goldthwait, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

----- ed. and trans. Allen W Wood, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press: 2002).

Karp, Ivan and Masolo, D. A., 'Introduction: African Philosophy as Cultural Inquiry' in Karp and Masolo (eds), *African Philosophy as Cultural Inquiry* (Indiana University Press, 2000).

Kazeem, Yomi, 'Africa meant a lot to Muhammad Ali—he meant even more to Africa' in *Quartz Africa*, 5 June 2016, available at <https://qz.com/699639/africa-meant-a-lot-to-muhammad-ali-he-meant-even-more-to-africa/>

Kenyatta, Jomo, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965).

Kierkegaard, Soren, trans. Walter Lowrie, *Attack Upon Christendom* (Princeton University Press: 1968).

Kiloni, E. M. and Holmes, P. R., *Rethinking Life: What the Church Can Learn from Africa* (Colorado Springs: Authentic Publishing, 2010).

King, Martin Luther, Clayborne Carson and Peter Holloran (eds.), *A Knock at Midnight: The Great Sermons of Martin Luther King* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1999).

Kirkpatrick, Matthew D., *Attacks on Christendom in a World Come of Age: Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer and the Question of 'Religionless Christianity'* (Oregon: Pickwick, 2011).

Klaasen, John, *The interplay between The Christian story and The Public story: In search of commonalities for moral formation under democratic rule*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Stellenbosch, 2008.

Klemm, David E., 'Philosophy and Kerygma: Ricoeur as Reader of the Bible' in David M. Kaplan (ed.), *Reading Ricoeur* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), 47-70.

Kochalumchuvattil, Thomas 'The Crisis of Identity in Africa: A Call for Subjectivity' in *Kritike*, Vol 4 No 1, (June 2010), 108-122.

Kuckertz, Heinz, 'Selfhood and its Reason to be' in J. G. Malherbe (ed.), *Decolonizing the Mind. Proceedings of the second colloquium on African philosophy* (Pretoria: Department of Philosophy, UNISA, 1996), 57-66.

Kruger, Johan, 'Government and Society Must Act Against Sexual Violence', available at [www.cfcf.org.za/.../docs-statements?...government-and-society-must-act](http://www.cfcf.org.za/.../docs-statements?...government-and-society-must-act), 11 February 2011.

Lane, Dermot A., 'The Eucharist as Sacrament of the Eschaton' in *The Furrow*, vol. 47, no. 9. Sept., 1996, 467-473.

Leonard, Gary S. (ed.), *The Kairos Document*, 1985, available at

[http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za/Libraries/manuals/The\\_Kairos\\_Documents.sflb.ashx](http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za/Libraries/manuals/The_Kairos_Documents.sflb.ashx)

Levi, Primo, *If This is a Man* (London: Abacus, 1987).

Livermon, Xavier, 'Usable Traditions: Creating Sexual Autonomy in Post-apartheid South Africa', *Feminist Studies*, vol 41, no. 1, 2015, 14-41.

Louw, Dirkie, 'Ubuntu and the Challenges of Multiculturalism in Post-Apartheid South Africa' in *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. XV, No. 1-2, 2001, 15-36.

Makgoba, Malegapuru William, 'In search of the ideal democratic model for SA' (South African) *Sunday Times*, 27 October 1996.

Mangcu, Xolela, *Biko: A Life* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2012)

Mangena, Fainos, 'The Search for An African Feminist Ethic: A Zimbabwean Perspective' in *Journal of International Women's Studies*, vol. 11, issue 2, 2009, 18-30.

----- 'Towards a hunhu/ubuntu dialogical moral theory' in *Phronimon*, Volume 13(2) 2012, 1-17.

Manyonganise, Molly, 'Oppressive and liberative: A Zimbabwean woman's reflections on ubuntu', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 36(2), Art. #1438, 2015, available at

<http://www.ve.org.za/index.php/VE/article/view/1438/html>

Martin Soskice, Janet, 'Trinity and Feminism' in Susan Frank Parsons (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 135-150.

Marx, Christopher, 'Ubu and Ubuntu: On the Dialectics of Apartheid and Nation Building' *Politikon* 29(1), 49-69.

Masolo, D. A., 'Western and African Communitarianism' in Kwasi Wiredu (ed), *A Companion to African Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 483-498.

Matolino, Bernard, 'Tempels' Philosophical Racialism' in *South African Journal of Philosophy* 2011, 30(3), 330-342.

Mazrui, Ali A., 'The Re-invention of Africa: Edward Said, V. Y. Mudimbe and beyond' in *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 36, no. 3, Autumn 2005, 68-82.

Mbiti, John S., *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1969).

Mboti, Nyasha, 'May the Real Ubuntu Please Stand Up?' in *Journal of Media Ethics*, 30:125-147, 2015, 125-147.

McFarland, Ian A., *Difference and Identity: A Theological Anthropology* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001).

Meiring, J., 2015, 'Theology in the flesh – a model for theological anthropology as embodied sensing', *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 71(3), Art. #2858, 2015, available at <http://www.scielo.org.za/pdf/hts/v71n3/31.pdf>

Menkiti, I. A., 'Person and Community in African traditional thought', in R. A Wright (ed.), *African Philosophy: An Introduction* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1984), 171-181.

Merton, Thomas, *Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2010).

Mesaki, Simeon and Malipula, Mrisho, 'Julius Nyerere's influence and legacy: From proponent of Familyhood to a candidate for sainthood' in *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, Vol 3(3), March 2011, 93-100

Metz, Thaddeus, 'Towards an African Moral Theory' in *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, vol. 15. no.3, 2007, 321-341.

----- 'Ethics in Africa and in Aristotle: some points of contrast' in *Phronimon* Vol. 13(2) 2012, 99-117.

Moges, Ashenafi, 'What is behind the tradition of FGM', available at <http://www.african-women.org/documents/behind-FGM-tradition.pdf>

Mojola, A. O., *Introductory Ethics for College Students and Teachers* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1988).

More, Mabogo P., 'Biko: Africana Existentialist Philosopher' in A. Mngxitama and Nigel C Gibson (eds.), *Biko Lives! Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 45-68.

Morris, Brian, *Western Conceptions of the Individual* (Oxford: Berg, 1996).

Morton, Stephen, *Gayatri Spivak: Ethics, Subalternity and the Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

Motlhabi, M., 'The Concept of Morality in African Tradition' in B. Tlhagale and I. Mosala (eds.) *Hammering Swords into Ploughshares: Essays in Honour of Archbishop Desmond Tutu*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1986).

Mudimbe, V.Y., *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

----- *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988).

Muller, Julian, "Exploring 'nostalgia' and 'imagination' for *ubuntu*-research: A postfoundational perspective", *Verbum et Ecclesia* 36(2), article 1432, 2015, available at <https://verbumeteclesia.org.za/index.php/ve/article/view/1432>

Murithi, T., 'Practical Peacemaking. Wisdom from Africa: Reflections on Ubuntu' in *Journal of Pan African Studies*, 2006, Vol.1.4.

Ndugane, Njongonkulu Winston, 'UTutu: Ngumntu lowo' [Tutu: The one in whom full personhood is manifested] in Leonard Hulley, Louise Kretzschmar and Luke Lungile Pato (eds.), *Archbishop Tutu: Prophetic Witness in South Africa* (Cape Town: Human and Rosseau, 1996), 71-79

Neill, Michael, 'Translating the Present: Language, Knowledge and Identity in Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*' in *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 25. no. 1, March 1990, 71-97.

Niebuhr, Reinhold, *The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol 1: Human Nature* (New York: C Scribner's Sons, 1941).

Nietzsche, Friedrich, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, *Beyond Good and Evil* (London: Penguin, 2003).

----- *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A New Translation by Graham Parkes* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

----- *The Birth of Tragedy: A New Translation by Douglas Smith* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

----- trans. Thomas Common, *The Gay Science (The Joyful Wisdom)* (Digireads.com Publishing, 2009).

Njoroge, Nyambura J., 'The Missing Voice: African women doing theology' in *Journal of Theology of Southern Africa*, November 1997, no. 99, 77-83.

Nkrumah, Kwame, 'What I mean by Positive Action', speech given to party members and supporters in 1949, found at

[http://www.democraticunderground.com/discuss/duboard.php?az=view\\_all&address=277x47](http://www.democraticunderground.com/discuss/duboard.php?az=view_all&address=277x47)

1

-----*Consciencism: Philosophy and Ideology for Decolonization and Development with Particular Reference to the African Revolution* (London: Heinemann, 1964).

Nolan, Albert, *God in South Africa: The Challenge of the Gospel*, (Cape Town: David Philip, 1988).

Nyerere, Julius, *Ujamaa: Essays on Socialism* (Oxford University Press, 1968).

-----'Ujamaa – The Basis of African Socialism' in Free Lee Hord and Jonathan Scott Lee (eds.) *I Am Because We Are: Readings in Black Philosophy* (University of Massachusetts, 1995), 65-72.

Nussbaum, Barbara, 'Ubuntu: Reflections of a South African on Our Common Humanity', *Reflections*, Volume 4, Number 4, 21-27.

Nussbaum, Martha C., 'Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism' in Joshua Cohen (ed.), *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism, Martha C. Nussbaum with Respondents* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 3-20.

----- *Sex and Social Justice*, (Oxford University Press, 1999).

Nze, Chukwuemeka, *Aspects of African Communalism* (Nigeria: Veritas Publishers, 1989).

Oduyoye, Mercy Amba, 'A Critique of Mbiti's View on Love and Marriage in Africa,' in Jacob K. Olupona and Sulayman S. Nyang (eds) *Religious Plurality in Africa: Essays in Honour of John S. Mbiti*, (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1993), 341-365.

*Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

Okolo, Chukwudum B., 'Self as a problem in African philosophy' in P. H. Coetzee and A. P. J. Roux (eds.), *The African Philosophy Reader* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 2003), 247-258.

Olson, Carl, 'Theology of Nostalgia: Reflections on the Theological Aspects of Eliade's Work' in *Numen*, Vol. 36, Fasc. 1 (June, 1989), 98-112.

O'Neill, Craig and Ritter, Kathleen, *Coming Out Within: Stages of Spiritual Awakening for Lesbians and Gay Men* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992).

Paul, Samuel A., *The Ubuntu God: Deconstructing a South African Narrative of Oppression* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2009).

Pierce, Yolanda, in 'Redeeming bondage: the captivity narrative and the spiritual autobiography in the African American slave narrative tradition' in Audrey Fisch (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative* (Cambridge University press, 2007), 83-98.

Pinn, Anthony B., *Embodiment and the New Shape of Black Theological Thought* (New York University Press, 2010).

Plato, 'The Allegory of the Cave' in *Republic*, VII 514 a, 2 to 517 a, 7, trans. by Thomas Sheehan, available at <https://web.stanford.edu/class/ihum40/cave.pdf>

----- *Euthyphro*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, available at <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/euthyphro.html>

----- *Phaedo*, trans., notes and appendices R. S. Bluck (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1955).

----- Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (eds.), *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* (Princeton University Press 1961).

Popkin, R. H., in 'Hume's Racism' in R. H. Popkin, *The High Road to Pyrrhonism* (Indianapolis: Austin Hill Press, 1980), 251 – 266.

Praeg, Leonhard, *African Philosophy and the Quest for Autonomy: A Philosophical Investigation* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001).

Praeg, Leonard and Magadla, Siphokazi, *Ubuntu: Curating the Archive* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Kwazulu-Natal, 2014).

Ramose, Mogobe. B., *African Philosophy through Ubuntu* (Harare: Mond Books, 1999).

----- ‘The ethics of *ubuntu*’ in P.H. Coetzee and A.P. Roux (eds), *Philosophy from Africa* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 2003), 379-387.

----- ‘But Hans Kelsen was not born in Africa: a reply to Thaddeus Metz, *South African Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 26, Issue 4, 2007, 347-355.

Rankhotha, Charles Sylvester, ‘Do Traditional Values Entrench Male Supremacy’ in *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, No. 59, Women in War (2004), 80-89.

Reid, Graeme, ‘The traditional courts bill threatens LGBT South Africans’ in *The Guardian* 26 May 2012 (online edition), found at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/may/26/south-africa-gay-lgbt-traditional>

Ricoeur, Paul, *From Text to Action*, trans. Kathleen Blamey & John B. Thompson (London & New York, NY: Continuum, 1991).

----- *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

Rich, Paul, 'Apartheid and the Decline of the Civilization Idea: An Essay on Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* and J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* in *Research In African Literatures*, vol. 15, no. 1, spring 1984, 365-393.

Rist, John, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

Roberts, J. Deotis, *Black Theology and Liberation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971).

Rose, Fred, 'Marxism, Mysticism and Liberty: The Influence of Simone Weil on Albert Camus', *Political Theory*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Aug. 1979), 301-319.

Sartre, Jean-Paul, trans. Richard Eyre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay Phenomenological Ontology* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003).

Schipper, Mark, "Muhammad Ali. 'Taking a Knee' since 1960" in *Chicago Review of Books*, 29 September 2017, available at <https://chireviewofbooks.com/2017/09/29/muhammad-ali-a-life-jonathan-eig-review/>

Senghor, Leopold, 'Negritude and African Humanism' in P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J. Roux (eds.), *The African Philosophy Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 438-455.

Setiloane, Gabriel, 'Towards a Biocentric Theology and Ethic – via Africa' in C. W. Du Toit (ed.), *Faith, Science and African Culture: African Cosmology and Africa's Contribution to Science* (Pretoria: UNISA, 1998).

Shute, Augustine, *Philosophy for Africa* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1995).

----- *Ubuntu: An Ethic for a New South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001).

Smith, Rowan, 'Who Told You So?' in Robin Malan and Ashraf Joahardien (eds), *Yes I am: writing by South African gay men* (Cape Town: Junkets Publisher, 2010), 90-92.

Sono, Temba, *Dilemmas of African Intellectuals in South Africa*, (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 1994).

Soyinka, Wole, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge University Press, 1976).

----- *The Burden of Memory, The Muse of Forgiveness* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Stuart, Elizabeth, *Gay and Lesbian Theologies: Repetitions with Critical Difference* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

Suggit, John, 'Redemption: Freedom Regained' in John de Gruchy and C. Villa-Vicencio (eds.), *Doing Theology in Context: South African Perspectives* (Cape Town and Johannesburg: David Philip, 1994), 113-124.

Sugirtharajah, R.S., *Postcolonial Configurations: An Alternative Way Reading the Bible and of Doing Theology*, (Canterbury, SCM press: 2004)

Taylor, A. E., *Aristotle* (London and Edinburgh: T. C. and B. C. Jack / T. Nelson and Sons, 1919).

Taylor, Charles *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge University Press, 1989).

Teffo, Joe, 'Democracy, Kingship, and Consensus: A South African Perspective' in Kwasi Wiredu (ed.) *A Companion to African Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 443-449.

Tempels, Placide, *La Philosophie bantoue*, translated by A. Rubbens (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1959).

Thompson, Alex, *An Introduction to African Politics* (Oxford: Routledge, 2010).

Trible, Phyllis, *Texts of Terror: Literary-feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984).

Tshwane, Nwamilorho Joseph, *The Rainbow Nation: a critical analysis of the notions of community in the thinking of Desmond Tutu*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, UNISA, 2009.

Tutu, Desmond, *Crying in The Wilderness*, (London: Fount Collins, 1982).

----- ‘Apartheid and Christianity’ in John De Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio (eds.), *Apartheid is a Heresy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 39-47.

----- *Hope and Suffering: Sermons and Speeches*, (Michigan: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984).

----- *The Words of Desmond Tutu* (New York: Newmarket Press, 1989).

----- *The Rainbow People of God: The Making of a Peaceful Revolution* (New York: Doubleday, 1994).

----- *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

----- *God Has A Dream* (London: Random House, 2005).

----- *Believe: The Words and Inspiration of Desmond Tutu* (Boulder, Colorado: Blue Mountain Press, 2007).

van Niekerk, Jason, *Ubuntu and Moral Benefit*, unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of the Witwaterstrand, Johannesburg, 2013.

Van Winsbergen, Wim, ‘*Ubuntu and the globalisation of Southern African thought and society*’, available at <http://quest-journal.net/shikanda/general/ubuntu.htm>

Vellem, V.S., 'Ideology and Spirituality: a Critique of Villa-Vicencio's Project of Reconstruction' in *Scriptura* 105 (2010), 547-558.

Vice, Samantha, 'How Do I Live in This Strange Place?', *Journal of Social Philosophy*, vol.30, no. 3, 323-342.

Villa-Vicencio, Charles, *A Theology of Reconstruction: Nation-Building and Human Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

---"Tough and Compassionate': Desmond Mpilo Tutu" in Leonard Hulley, Louise Kretzschmar and Luke Lungile Pato (eds.), *Archbishop Tutu: Prophetic Witness in South Africa* (Cape Town: Human and Rosseau, 1996), 36-48.

Walker, Alice *The Color Purple* (London: Phoenix, 2004).

Webster, John, 'The Human Person' in Kevin J Vanhoozer, *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 2003) 219-234.

Weil, Simone, 'The Love of God and Affliction' in George A. Panichas (ed.), *The Simone Weil Reader*, (Wakefield RI: Moyer Bell, 1977), 439-468.

----- *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Towards Mankind* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

----- Sian Miles (ed.), *An Anthology* (London: Penguin Books, 2005).

----- *Awaiting God: A new translation of Attente de Dieu and Lettre a un Religieux*, trans. Bradley Jersak (Abbotsford, BC: Fresh Wind Press, 2012).

Weisner-Hanks, Merry E., *Christianity and Sexuality in the Early Modern World: Regulating Desire, Reforming Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

West, Cornel, 'Malcolm X and Black Rage' in Theresa Perry (ed.), *Teaching Malcolm X* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

---- 'Present Socio-Political-Economic Movements for Change - US Perspective' in Simon S. Maimela and Dwight N. Hopkins (eds.), *We Are One Voice: Black Theology in the USA and South Africa* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2017), 73-86.

West, David, *Reason and Sexuality in Western Thought* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005).

Williams, Delores S., *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1993).

----- 'Womanist Theology: Black Women's Voice', in James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (eds.), *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, Volume II (New York: Orbis, 1993) 265-272.

Williams, Denise, 'White Man's Justice is not the only way – Zuma' in *Sowetan*, 2November 2012 (online edition), available at <http://www.sowetanlive.co.za/news/2012/11/02/white-man-s-justice-is-not-the-only-way---zuma>

Woolf, Virginia, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Penguin Books, 2000).

X, Malcolm, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (London: Penguin, 1968).

Zizioulas, John D., *Being as Communion* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985).