

# ECUMENICAL ECCLESIOLOGY IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT: TOWARDS A VIEW OF THE CHURCH AS *UBUNTU*

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## Abstract

*This purpose of this essay is to provide an overview of approaches to ecclesiology in the African context with specific reference to various institutional expressions of the ecumenical movement. While wider ecumenical ecclesiological debates have pondered on the distinctive nature of the church, African contributions have focused on the embeddedness of the church in the African context with its evolving cultures and social context. Decrying the split between what the church is (read: ecclesiology) and what it does (read: ethics) as a false dichotomy within the African context, I will argue for a critical appropriation of the sub-Saharan African non-dualistic notion of ubuntu as apposite for articulating an ecumenical ecclesiology within the African context. This is buttressed by the connotations of communality, communion and interrelatedness that ubuntu carries in addition to its resonance with other concepts in African thought, such as vital participation and vital force.*

**Key Words:** African Theology; African Ecclesiology; Church as Family; Communion Ecclesiology; Diakonia; Ecumenical Ecclesiology; Koinonia; Trinity; *Ubuntu*

## Introduction

African theologians operating within the paradigm of inculturation have employed a variety of metaphors to describe the church within the African context, such as clan (Waliggo, 1998), family (Oduyoye, 1991; Onwubiko, 2001; Chukwu, 2011), and community (Omenyo, 2000). Within African liberation and reconstruction theologies, ecclesiology has often been framed in sociological terms. More generally, African contributions to ecclesiology have typically responded to several aspects of the African social context. This is understandable given the consideration that churches as historical communities are indeed culturally and historically grounded and conditioned. As an attempt at an African contextual ecumenical reflection on the church, this contribution will offer an appraisal of selected proposals for an African ecclesiology in African ecumenical discourse in general and in the African theologies of inculturation, liberation and reconstruction specifically. On this basis, I will argue for an approach to African ecumenical ecclesiology that does justice to the integral relationship between ecclesiology and ethics. I share the conviction that the relationship between these two crucial ecumenical concerns can hardly be overlooked in any meaningful reflection on ecumenical ecclesiology within the African context. This contribution will therefore proceed from an African ecumenical vantage point.

## Antecedents of Ecumenical Ecclesiology

Dominant historical understandings of what the church is in sub-Saharan Africa reflect a heritage of missionary Christianity and its concomitant western interpretations. Most churches that were established as a result of the 19<sup>th</sup> century missionary movement were

trapped in denominational and theological stripes of its 'parent' European churches. Ironically, it was among missionaries serving in the so-called mission fields that the scandal of denominationalism was deeply felt. Little wonder that the Edinburgh Missionary Conference (1910), which is regarded as the birthplace of the modern ecumenical movement, was a conference of missionary societies and not of churches. The ecumenical movement was therefore, in large part, an outgrowth of the missionary movement. In many respects, the formation of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948 and the subsequent merger of the International Missionary Council into the WCC as its Commission for World Mission and Evangelism at New Delhi in 1961 signalled an ecclesiological renaissance. This issued in a sustained search for a common understanding of church and mission among WCC member churches, as well as increased attention to needs and concerns of churches in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

In protestant circles in Africa, the creation of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) in 1963 in Kampala signalled a new impetus for the search for unity among churches in Africa. Since its inception, the AACC has always been in the vanguard for the development of creative African theology. It is indeed a case study of the 'church enabling task' of African theology in the sense that church and theology in Africa have been closely connected (Maluleke, 1997:9). Established as a fellowship of churches for consultation and cooperation within the wider fellowship of the universal church, the AACC was soon positioned to become a stimulus for the quest for authenticity in African Christianity. Already at the Kampala Assembly (1963), it was recognised that the church in Africa had hitherto not attained true selfhood (AACC, 1963:32). Churches in Africa were thus invited to a thoughtful study of particular forms of the church. The AACC's (1970:117) second Assembly at Abidjan (1969) revitalized the search for African cultural and liturgical forms through which African churches could express the faith in all aspects of church life (AACC, 1970:117). This was crucial given the ambiguous legacy of mission in Africa including an understanding of the church in its western categories.

Several African theologians bemoaned this status quo during the 1960-70s.<sup>1</sup> Idowu (1968:426) observed that the church in Africa "came into being with prefabricated theology, liturgies and traditions" while Mbiti (1972:51) lamented that the church in Africa was without a theology, theologians and theological concern. Pobee (1983:5) characterised this predicament as the "North Atlantic Captivity of the Church" in which Christianity in Africa began with an assumed definition of the Christian faith, which is "definitely North Atlantic – intellectually, physically, spiritually, economically and culturally." For Idowu, what was needed was an indigenous African church devoid of acquired theological foreignness. This implied among other things the need to develop African forms of the liturgy and incorporate the use of African musical instruments in the church. The AACC Kampala Assembly (1963) framed this task in terms of the "selfhood of the church" as an attempt to situate the Christian Church within the spiritual, cultural and political realities of Africa.

### **Selfhood of the Church in Africa: Ecclesiology within the All Africa Conference of Churches**

The Kampala Assembly underscored the three-fold task of the church as prophetic, reconciling and witnessing (AACC, 1963:61). The AACC next Assembly at Abidjan urged African churches to seek unity – not for its own sake but for mission (AACC, 1970:120). The third Assembly at Lusaka (1974) went further than describing the prophetic role of the

<sup>1</sup> See for instance the publication *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs* (1969).

church to defining the prophetic ministry of the churches in Africa as follows:

The mission of the church is prophetic, and in serving it can accomplish its prophetic mission by being engaged, involved and sensitive to the well-being of the society. The Church must be alive in the present in order to live better in the future (AACC, 1975:38).

The AACC's concern with the selfhood of the church in Africa led to the adoption of the policy of moratorium at Lusaka in the quest for the self-reliance, self-expression and self-identity of the churches in Africa. The moratorium debate accentuated a missiological debate that signalled a shift from paternalistic to partnership models of mission. While churches, mission boards and ecumenical organisations in the West critiqued the moratorium debate, the Lusaka Assembly appealed to the credo belief in the "one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church" but that this is manifested in the "church in every locality". The moratorium was therefore an implicit critique of a distorted missionary version of catholicity that limited catholicity to the churches in the West.

At its Harare Assembly (1992), ecclesiological reflection focused on the role of the church in social transformation with respect to the concerns of human rights, democracy, peace and reconciliation. Harare clearly marked a shift from the quest for authenticity – which had hitherto characterised AACC ecclesiological reflections – towards advocacy. Discourse on civil society burgeoned within the AACC during this time, encapsulated in the publication of *Civil Society, the State & African Development in the 1990s* (1993). These developments further necessitated the need to clarify the place of the church in wider civil society. The African theology of reconstruction, mooted by Jesse Mugambi at the request of the AACC leadership soon became characteristic of theological initiatives within the AACC.

Despite a robust focus on reconstruction theology at the Addis Ababa Assembly (1997), ecclesiological reflection was extremely weak while at the Yaoundé Assembly (2003) it was tangential. Nonetheless, a functional view of church unity emerged from Yaoundé and this was encapsulated in the proposed vision of the AACC, namely "Churches in Africa: together for Life, Truth, Justice and Peace".

When the AACC gathered for its 9<sup>th</sup> General Assembly at Maputo in 2008 having "regained its place as the pre-eminent ecumenical organisation on the continent" following successful restructuring, there was a renewed call for the revitalisation of the theological basis of its work. In the post-Maputo period, the AACC department of "Theology, Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations" became a major focus of ecumenical activities. The focus of ecclesiological reflections at Maputo was largely on the role of the church in addressing the various issues facing the African continent, particularly in relation to economic, environmental, health, and peace and reconciliation concerns. The AACC's most recent Assembly at Kampala in 2013 stressed a view of church unity as a functional requirement for the effective common witness of the church in the world. The Assembly deliberated on the relationship between the "imperative of Christian unity and the promotion of peace, justice and dignity" (see AACC, 2015:102).

From the above, it may be argued that notions of church that have emerged at various points in the AACC history stress varied aspects of the social responsibility of the church rather than ecclesiological questions on the nature of the church (Sakupapa, 2017:256). The unity of the church has thus been underscored as a matter of credibility for the churches' witness in society. Here one may infer a tension between ecclesiology and ethics. The South African story in which churches found unity in their common struggle against apartheid is instructive. De Gruchy (1995:14) observes that such unity "was based on a common social praxis" without paying much attention to divisive theological and confessional issues.

Although the technical expression, ‘ecclesiology and ethics’, is indeed artificial within the African context given the African communal ontology, it is significant to note this tension since African ecclesiologies typically tend to focus on what the church does rather than on its theological nature. In a case study of the AACC, this author has argued that ecclesiology and ethics are integrally linked and need not be separated (see Sakupapa, 2017:249). Before venturing into a discussion of possible ways to develop an ecumenical ecclesiology that does not split ecclesiology and ethics, I will briefly discuss the profile of ecclesiological models proffered by some African theologians.

### **Ecclesiology in an African Context**

Various models of the church have been advocated by African theologians. Most of these recognise the church as a complex reality that defies any simple description. Jesuit ecclesologist Avery Dulles, who pioneered the use of models in ecclesiology, considers the theological reality of the church as a mystery and therefore identified five dominant models of the church. His models are best understood as hermeneutical tools; windows onto the complex reality church. Dulles draws together a variety of biblical and traditional images of the church in developing his models. He further points out the strengths and limitations of each model. The institutional model tends to degenerate into institutionalism (2002:34) while that of mystical communion may deteriorate into spiritualism (2002:52). The model of the church as sacrament, Dulles argues, may grow into symbolism. The model of the church as a herald can so easily give rise to biblical fundamentalism and often focuses too exclusively on witness to the neglect of action (79), while the model of the church as servant tends to view the church no more than a non-government organisation active in dealing with social concerns (2002:91).

As influential as these models are, one has to recognise their relativity. Ecclesologist John Fuellenbach (2006:62) rightly notes that there “is no model to end all models” (c.f. Dulles, 2002:25). Dulles’ models presuppose theological understandings rather than socio-logical ones. One may thus venture to suggest that no single model embraces all that may be said about the visible life of the church in the world.<sup>2</sup> Here, a tension emerges between the sociological and theological dimensions of the church. This observation begs an epistemological question, namely whether at all it is thinkable for us to obtain knowledge of ultimate reality.

Among African scholars, various approaches are employed in the classification of churches. Some embark of typological<sup>3</sup> assessment (Waruta, 1998) distinguishing between dominant denominational churches (so-called mainline churches), popular types (e.g, Pentecostal churches) and indigenous churches (independent church ecclesiologies)<sup>4</sup> while most adopt the approach of models (Nyamiti, 1998; Onwubiko, 2001; Waliggo, 1996). Accordingly, various ecclesiological models have been proposed within African theologies of inculturation, reconstruction, and in various African liberation theologies, including South African black liberation theology and African women’s theology.

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<sup>2</sup> The crucial question here pertains to the relationship between an idealist and concrete ecclesiology. The earlier is addressed via models while reflections on concrete activities and distinctive functions of the church relate to the latter.

<sup>3</sup> In the South African context, scholars talk about settler churches which are further distinguished between Afrikaner and so-called English speaking churches (De Gruchy, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> See Omenyo’s “Essential Aspects of African Ecclesiology: The Case of the African Independent Churches”.

## **Models of the Church in Africa**

Nigerian theologian Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator (1996:268) rhetorically asks whether there is a systematically elaborated theological conception of the origin, nature, mission and meaning of the African church “in terms which are peculiar to and expressive of the African way of being church.” This begs reflection on whether there is such a thing as an ‘African ecclesiology’.<sup>5</sup> What qualifies such ecclesiology as African? It seems fair to argue that there have been attempts to reflect on the church taking into consideration the African social-cultural-religious context. African inculturation theologians have particularly re-interpreted western theological traditions of the church through a retrieval of some traditional African concepts and values.

Among African Roman Catholic theologians, the official endorsement of the notion of the “Church as family of God” as an ecclesiological concept by the Roman Catholic African Synod in 1994 and its subsequent promulgation by Pope John Paul II stimulated ecclesiological reflections on the concept of family.<sup>6</sup> In their propositions, the African bishops argued that “the mystery of the Truine God is the origin, model and purpose of the Church..., a mystery which finds suitable expression for Africa in the image of the Church-as-Family” (African Synod 1996:89). Proponents of ecclesiological models patterned after the African family find the notion attractive for fostering ecumenism given the stress on solidarity, fraternity, openness and inclusivity which these values elicit (Waliggo, 1998:118).

However, the models of family and clan also carry potentially damaging associations. It is often the case that an African family is hierarchical while clan identity may provide ‘an incentive to nepotism, corruption and the advancement of one social group to the detriment of others’ (Sankey, 1994:448; c.f Waliggo, 1998:124). The notions of clan typically reinforce a preoccupation with internal relations amongst members to the detriment of the ‘world’ outside. Further, the view of the church as family may well entail a narrow conception of the universality of the Church. Given the hierarchical and unequal nature of family relations in both contemporary and traditional Africa, Waliggo sees the need for “a vision of an African family where equality is guaranteed, sharing of responsibility is accepted, the clear option for the disadvantaged members is made, and deadly tensions are eliminated” (see African Synod, 1996:208). Without this, he contends, the theology of the Church as family is a double-edged sword that may be used profitably but may also lead to benign paternalism.

Other theologians have elaborated on African ancestral ecclesiologies. For instance, Charles Nyamiti (1998:137) articulates an ancestral-koinonia ecclesiology on the basis of an ancestral Christology rooted in the mystery of the Trinity. On this basis, Nyamiti (1998:132) describes communion in the church as *koinonia* and perceives the church as the extension of Christ’s ancestorship in human communities. The ancestral relationship that Christ shares with all church members transcends the distinctions of tribe, race and gender. For Nyamiti (1998:144), ancestral ecclesiology not only lends itself to an understanding of the church as communion of saints but also avoids the danger of secular ecclesiologies which perceive the church as just another institution in society. Similarly, Bujo (1992:85) develops an ancestral ecclesiology grounded in the concept of life with a nuanced focus on

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<sup>5</sup> See Nyamiti’s (2007) *Contemporary Models of African Ecclesiology* in which he offers a useful survey of African ecclesiologies from a Roman Catholic perspective.

<sup>6</sup> See *The Church We Want: African Catholics Look to Vatican III* (2016) edited by Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator for a collection of instructive essays on ecclesiology by a number of African Roman Catholic Theologians.

the central role of Christ, the Proto-Ancestor and the Eucharist.

The use of ancestor models in relation to the doctrine of God in African theology has been criticised for not taking full cognizance of the divinity of God and Christ. Since both Nyamiti and Bujo take ancestral Christology as the starting point for ecclesiology, the same criticism may be levelled in addition to the fact that such ecclesiologies have little influence on the actual life of African churches.

In liberation theologies, including South African black theology, the social context has been decisive for ecclesiology (see Goba, 1981:56). Describing black theology in South Africa as having enjoyed only the status of ‘a guerrilla enterprise’<sup>7</sup> since its beginnings, Tshaka (2015:10) argues that “a church that is conversant with her own context is one which must realise that black people are not yet liberated.” This concern with liberation is shared by African liberation theologians north of the Limpopo who describe the church as “a liberating agent in Africa” (Magesa, 1992). Among African women theologians, ecclesiological reflections have a starting point in the lived experiences of marginalisation and oppression to which African women are subjected in both church and society. Women theologians have therefore critiqued ecclesiologies which undercut the dignity of women and disgruntle women’s contribution to the life and work of the Church as well as uncritical servant models of the church. According to Lenka-Bula (2008:300), the goal of such critique is to build “communities of wholeness and inclusivity where all God’s children and God’s creation are affirmed”. In similar vein, Isabel Phiri (2012:265) notes the need for just relations between men and women against the background of the marginalisation of women in the church. Although African women theologians draw on African culture in their reflections, they reframe the inculturation debate using gender as a tool of analysis. In this way, they embark on a reconstruction of ecclesiology captured in feminist ecclesial portraiture and call for new visions of partnership among men and women in the sense of *koinonia*. Several essays in the edited volume, *On Being Church: African Women’s Voices and Visions* capture this concern by reflecting in diverse ways on the issues of inclusivity and communion.

### **Ecclesiology in African Theology of Reconstruction**

Within the paradigm of African reconstruction theology, Jesse Mugambi (1995:163) captures the contradiction between the much celebrated numerical growth of Christianity in Africa towards the end of the twentieth century and the socio-economic challenges confronting Africans. In his words; “How can the most religious continent in the world be abandoned by God to perish in poverty, in debt and under the yoke of the great powers of the world?” Mugambi wonders whether the kind of religiosity that African Christians have embraced can help them cope with the challenges they face. These considerations underlie his call for the “need to shift our theological gear from liberation to reconstruction” (1995:165). Given his conviction that the church in Africa is one of the most influential and sustainable social institutions especially in rural areas, Mugambi speaks of the church as “the facilitator of social transformation”. Mugambi’s ecclesiology indirectly reflects the belief that the world sets the agenda.

Mugambi’s approach is however problematic given the nature of his recommendations for future of African theology. As Katongole (2011:84) argues, Mugambi “shifts his reflection away from the church and her practices and instead suggests a ‘theology of reconstruction’ whose

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<sup>7</sup> This notion resonates with Gustavo Gutierrez’s idea of the church in liberation theology as being “uncentered” in solidarity with the marginalised.

main protagonist and beneficiary is the African nation-state.” To counter such an approach, Katongole draws on Jean-Marc Ela and Stanley Hauerwas and suggests that the decisive role of Christianity is to be located in a new ‘Christian social hermeneutics’ that may aid Christians to imagine an ‘alternative social history’. He insists on the church formulating a new social imaginary in Africa as an alternative to the state social imaginary. In this way, he embraces narrative theology and gives priority to social imagination.<sup>8</sup> Katongole’s view of the church as a “uniquely suited community for the task of the social re-imagining of Africa” is indeed attractive. However, his treatment of the notion of nation-state does not seem to fully capture its dubious nature within the African context.

Like Mugambi, Katongole is appalled with how an overwhelmingly Christian continent is a site of horrific events such as the Rwandan genocide, the burden of disease, wars and poverty. In a recent publication, he offers interesting perspectives on a theological grammar of hope.<sup>9</sup> He writes, “the church’s unique calling and mission at the intersection of social brokenness and repair is to be a sacrament of God’s ongoing work of social repair” (2017:264). At the heart of this claim is an attempt to articulate a view of the church as a sacrament of hope. The theological grammar of hope is, in Katongole’s view, the unique contribution that the church offers at the above-named intersection. Interestingly, Katongole (2017:120) calls attention to the need for lament as a social ethic; driving the church to the margins, to the crucified ones in history. While this analysis is useful, one also needs to ponder about ecclesiology from the perspective of the margins rather than the church reaching out to the margins.

On the basis of the foregoing brief overview, I affirm with Conradie (2007:18) that “there is an apparent resistance to drawing any clear distinction between the agenda of the church and that of state or civil society” in African contributions to ecclesiology. Katongole’s approach is undoubtedly an exception, albeit limited given its inadequate treatment of the dubious nature of the African nation-state. Conradie’s argument highlights a critical question, namely how to understand the nature and distinctive mission of the church within the whole household of God. In my view, what is at stake here is the need for appropriate language to express the link between what the church is and what it does. In the African context, this might be enriched through an appropriation of the African notion of *ubuntu* as a metaphor for an ecumenical ecclesiology that does justice to both ecclesiology and ethics.

### **Towards a Notion of the Church as the *Ubuntu* Community**

The notion of *ubuntu* has been employed in African theological reflections on peace and reconciliation, African spirituality, ecological theology and on economic justice (see Sakupapa, 2017:257). Within wider ecumenical circles, the significance of this notion has been intimated in *inter alia* reflections on the “theological basis for wider ecumenism in which the whole family of the *oikoumene*, particularly people of other faiths, and creation are related and connected on the basis of a spirit of *Ubuntu* and *Sangsaeng*” (Bringing Together 2008:131).

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<sup>8</sup> The theologian Kā Mana (2004:103) similarly locates the church as the site where God’s people are “mobilised for new activities and new strategies for social change and for building a new society.” He accordingly considers the role of theology as “the creation of a visionary, creative and resourceful society for the struggle against all the negative forces that Africa is suffering from” including socio-political and economic powers that are embodied in sterile local and international institutions and social structures.

<sup>9</sup> Compare Kobia’s (2002) *Courage to Hope: The Roots for a New Vision and Calling of the Church in Africa*. One limitation of Kobia’s reflections on hope is its inadequate theological account for such hope.

Etiologically, the term *ubuntu* is derived from the Bantu languages of sub-Saharan Africa. It finds expression in a variety of terms across Southern Africa such as *umunthu* (Chewa, Zambia), *botho* (Sesotho), *obuntu* (Ganda, Uganda), *obunu* (Jita, Tanzania), *umundu* (Kikuyu, Kenya), and *unhu* (Shona, Zimbabwe) among others. It consists of the prefix *ubu* and the root *ntu*. *Ubu* stresses the quality of *ntu* (being). Rwandese scholar Alexis Kagamé (1956) proposed four categories of a Bantu philosophy of being under which all being, in whatever form, may be subsumed. These are namely *muntu* (human being), *kintu* (thing), *hantu* (place), and *kuntu* (modal time).

### ***Ubuntu: A very Brief Conceptual Analysis***

Conceptually, there are at least three ways in which the notion of *ubuntu* has been employed in recent discourse on the subject. These are namely, as a signifier of a quality of being human, an ethical theory (Thaddeus Metz) and as a notion of relational cosmology (Desmond Tutu). According to Tutu (2004:27), “*ubuntu* has to do with what it means to be truly human ... that you are bound up with others in the bundle of life, for a person is only a person through other persons.” *Ubuntu* may well be described as an African communitarian philosophy. This is best encapsulated in Mbiti’s (1969:108-109) famous phrase, “I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.” By implication, it is only in terms of other people that the individual becomes conscious of his being. This begs further clarification regarding African conceptualisation of personhood.

Menkiti (1984:172) argues that personhood in the African context is “something which has to be achieved, and is not given simply because one is born of human seed”. Such a view is indeed value-laden. Kwasi Wiredu (1992:104) recounts the following words of Zambia’s first Republican President, Kenneth Kaunda, which he addressed to Margaret Thatcher in praise of her constructive role at some point during negotiations to rid Zimbabwe of white minority rule: “Personhood is not an automatic quality of the human individual; it is something to be achieved, and the higher the achievement, the higher the credit.” Such an understanding of personhood assumes human existence but situates the acquisition of personhood within a wide web of relationships. As Bujo (2003:114) argues, this view describes the person “as a process of coming into existence in the reciprocal relatedness of individual and community, where the latter includes not only the deceased but also God”.

We may surmise from the foregoing that *ubuntu* carries connotations of communality, communion and interrelatedness. It thus resonates with other concepts in African thought such as vital participation and vital force (see Sakupapa, 2012). It shares in the strong connection with life associated with these notions. Such life-centeredness is apparent in African ethics. As Bujo (1992:22) argues, the “morality of an act is determined by its life-giving potential”. Good acts are those which contribute to the community’s vital force. Magesa (2013:97) has recently argued that “*ubuntu* is also a quality of groups and communities, in whom certain reputations of kindness, hospitality, and sharing are perceived.” The emphasis in the notion of *ubuntu* on life, community and hospitality renders it significant for articulating a nuanced form of communion ecclesiology.<sup>10</sup>

The above notwithstanding, recent debates on *ubuntu* illustrate the contested nature of the notion (see Praeg, 2014; Gade, 2011:306). Given what may be termed as an overuse of this notion, some scholars argue that *ubuntu* is passé (Matolini & Kwindigwi, 2013:201-

<sup>10</sup> Communion ecclesiology has emerged as a central concept in recent WCC discussions. See also Doyle’s (2004) *Communion Ecclesiology* for an overview of selected thinkers.

2003)<sup>11</sup> while others postulate that it is no more than an ideological construct, or better still, a product of globalisation; a creation of the African elite (cf. Van Binsbergen, 2001:61-62). Contra these arguments, I consider *ubuntu* a living tradition that is constantly reinvented owing to cultural dynamism, and further affirm its (sub-Saharan) African roots. Leonhard Praeg (2014:37) formulates a compelling argument that *ubuntu* is a glocal phenomenon which in its current articulation – at least in the Southern African context – is infused with Christian and human rights discourses. Therefore, *ubuntu* is neither ‘restorative nostalgia’ nor a ‘narrative of return’. It is an ontological and hermeneutical African reality.

### ***Ubuntu* as Metaphor for Ecumenical Ecclesiology**

The issue of whether or not *ubuntu* may be an appropriate metaphor for an ecumenical ecclesiology begs further questions regarding its usefulness in dealing with diversity. Would the notion of *ubuntu* sufficiently capture the tension between unity and diversity, since unity does not entail uniformity?<sup>12</sup> Some argue that the notion of *ubuntu* does not sufficiently capture deep perspectives of the other as unique (see Conradie 2007:11). This challenge may have to do with the particularistic nature of the notion. This danger becomes pronounced in the face of essentialist notions of identity which stress fortification of such identity. In this way, *ubuntu* becomes a notion of exclusion rather than inclusion and may lead to negative forms of identity such as xenophobia, nepotism and even ethnicism. Consider for instance the view of xenophobia as negative *ubuntu*. Furthermore, one may argue that *ubuntu* is tainted with patriarchal values widespread in many African cultures. By pointing to the emancipatory potential of *ubuntu* to aid the reinvention of violent masculinity, some scholars argue that it is compatible with feminism (Magadla & Chitando, 2014:185-190). On may further argue that the use of concepts such as motherhood (Oduyoye, 2001:45) and womanhood (Masenya) by some African women theologians imply an ethic of care akin to *ubuntu*.

The foregoing notwithstanding, the notion of *ubuntu* has potential for developing an ecumenical ethic that underpins both the ecumenical search for unity and the social responsibility of the church. This is derived from the integrative capacity of *ubuntu* as a relational concept and as a moral vision. I will discuss at least two perspectives in this regard.

### ***Ubuntu* as Koinonia**

From the African religious ethos that underpins *ubuntu*, community transcends the human community of the living to include the living dead and the whole of creation (see Bujo, 2009:281; Mbiti, 1969:175). The human is seen as part of a network of relationships; ‘a cosmic community’ (Bujo, 2009:296). The gamut of relationships that come under the grasp of *ubuntu* holds potential for an ecumenical theological reinterpretation of relationality. *Ubuntu* resonates with various aspects of the notion of *koinonia* as expressed in the New Testament and in recent ecumenical theological discourse. Nalwamba &

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<sup>11</sup> For these two scholars, *ubuntu* is an outdated mode of being. In that regard, they consider contemporary discourses on *ubuntu* as narratives of return that are not “well suited for complex, multicultural societies that do not prize communality and associations drawn along those lines.”

<sup>12</sup> For some, the emphasis on community in *ubuntu* may seem to suggest a constriction of individuality by demanding an oppressive conformity and loyalty to the “group” or “community” (see Menkiti, 1984:171). Others, however, contend that the individual is not absorbed into the community (Bujo, 2003:118). It is argued that individuality in Africa is emphasised by the fact that each one has his [*sic*] own name, which is different from that of his parents (2003:25).

Sakupapa (2016:76) argue that “*koinonia* is expressive of the relationship and unity within and among churches locally and globally”. A recent WCC (2013:10) convergence document has employed the notion of *koinonia* as a key to understanding the nature, unity and mission of the church as well as the character of God and creation. Given the western orientation and terminology in wider ecumenical discourses, *ubuntu* may contribute towards contextual ecumenical theological reflection on ecclesiology and ethics in the African context. *Ubuntu* shares the features of hospitality, fellowship and participation.

Following Magesa (2013), it may be argued that we can rightfully speak of a community as having *ubuntu*. Accordingly, I suggest a view of the church as an *ubuntu* community. This implies an ecclesiology of inclusion. However, if an *ubuntu* ecclesiology is to be rendered an appropriate metaphor that resonates with both African tradition and Christianity, several questions emerge. The first is Christological. Who is Jesus within the *ubuntu* community? The community called *ubuntu* (ecclesiology) derives its existence from Jesus, the ideal expression of *ubuntu* whose *ubuntu* is continually expressed in the church through the Holy Spirit. The *ubuntu* community is therefore a *koinonia* of the Spirit. This necessarily links with a second question, namely how the proposal set out here relates to the Christian tradition of the doctrine of the Trinity.

There is wide ecumenical consensus that the church is the creation of the Truine God as contained in the creeds and confessions (WCC, 2013:10). This is evident in the appeal to the doctrine of the Trinity in articulating the ecumenical basis of the churches’ search for unity. In this regard, ecclesiology is understood as necessarily derivative to the doctrine of God.<sup>13</sup> However, one must not overdo the correlation between Trinity and church.

Within the African context, the notion of *ubuntu* as a metaphor for an ecumenical ecclesiology must be reconciled with an appropriate African view of the doctrine of the Trinity. There are currently few extensive works on the Trinity within the African context (see Kombo, 2007; c.f. Vähäkangas, 2000:69-78). Charles Nyamiti is perhaps the only African theologian who has written widely on the Trinity albeit from the perspective of an ancestral Christology.<sup>14</sup> Admittedly, the theological doctrine of the Trinity as a heritage of early Church Fathers poses several challenges within the African context. The intellectual infrastructure of Greek philosophy that is employed particularly with regard to the language of persons is foreign within the African set up. Nevertheless, the ecclesial implications of the doctrine of the Trinity and its significance for understanding reconciliation and redemption have been intimated by some African theologians such as Oduyoye (1986:141-142).<sup>15</sup>

Given indispensability of the doctrine of God to an adequate theological account of the nature of the church as argued above, *ubuntu* may be appropriated in ecclesiology since it resonates with the broad outlines of the doctrine of God as the divine community. The church as an *ubuntu* community participates in God’s *ntu* which is constitutive of *ubuntu* as *koinonia*. Theologically, community must be understood as a gift of God made possible

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<sup>13</sup> Scholars such as Leonardo Boff, Miroslav Volf, and John Zizioulas have brought a Trinitarian view to bear on their understanding of the church.

<sup>14</sup> For a helpful overview of some major voices in discourse on the Trinity in African theology see Conradie, EM & Sakupapa, TC “Decolonising the Doctrine of the Trinity” or “The Decolonising Doctrine of the Trinity”? (forthcoming).

<sup>15</sup> Conradie and Sakupapa problematise the African theological appropriation of the social analogy in the Eastern tradition in their forthcoming publication “Decolonising the Doctrine of the Trinity” or “The Decolonising Doctrine of the Trinity”?

through the power (vital force) of God. Therefore, the church as a fellowship of those called together by the Holy Spirit, may be understood as effected not only through the response of community members to the ethic of *ubuntu* but more so as a gift of God through the Holy Spirit (see Sakupapa, 2012:426). The Holy Spirit constitutes the *ubuntu* community.

The above understanding of *ubuntu* as *koinonia* further implies that the unity and interaction within the community called *ubuntu* entails participation and solidarity (cf. Chukwu, 2011:35). This observation necessarily leads me to underscore the second perspective on the significance of *ubuntu* as a metaphor for describing an ecumenical ecclesiology, namely *ubuntu* as *diakonia*.

### *Ubuntu as Diakonia*

Participation in the community called *ubuntu* entails solidarity not only within the community but also towards others. This may be best understood in several vital convictions associated with *ubuntu*, namely that (i) identity is constituted by relatedness to others, (ii) respect for the human dignity of all, and (iii) solidarity in need. The first aspect has been explained above in terms of relational ontology. The second aspect has found radical expression in the writings and work of Desmond Tutu who argues for the essence of human dignity in terms of our common humanity. Drawing on the Judaeo-Christian tradition of the creation of human beings, the Christian teaching of unconditional justification of the sinner and the notion of *ubuntu*, Tutu argues for the human rights and dignity of all, especially of those despised by the majority – the victims of history, beggars, prostitutes, etc. Tutu's focus in this regard is further illuminated by his view of God: "God is clearly not a Christian. His concern is for all his children" (Tutu, 2011:12). Tutu also underscores the inalienable dignity of perpetrators of some unthinkable violations of human dignity in human history, such as apartheid; both the oppressor and the oppressed are created in the image of God. In the words of Tutu (1999:35):

"a person with *ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming others, does not feel threatened that others are able or good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated and diminished, when others are tortured and oppressed."

For Tutu we are made for interdependence. Elsewhere, he adds to his views on *ubuntu* an ecological slant when he intimates that "we are beginning to discover that it is true that – that that tree does hurt, and if you hurt the tree, in an extraordinary way you hurt yourself."

From the foregoing, one may infer a view of *ubuntu* as a radical ethical vision. More specifically, such views of *ubuntu* echo various aspects of solidarity and hospitality. Such solidarity (read: African hospitality) is extended not only to friends and neighbours but also to enemies. It is in this regard that Oduyoye (2001:100) has described "the limitation of hospitality to one's own ethnic group" as a "perversion of hospitality in Africa".

I suggest that *ubuntu* resonates with the idea of *diakonia* (read: solidarity, struggle for justice) as a missiological description of the social responsibility of the church. *Ubuntu* as solidarity attains ecumenical significance in this regard. The Church as the *ubuntu* community is expected to be a community of sharing, interdependence and solidarity. This however requires a reinterpretation and theological enrichment (through Scripture) of negative forms of solidarity such as those based on essentialist notions of identity whether that is in the form of race, ethnicity or even religion. In that way, *ubuntu* becomes an ecumenical socio-ethical vision of inclusion. In his reflections on xenophobia, David Field (2017:6) suggests a theological reimagining of the "church as God's Makwerekwere" as

one way of asserting that “God is in a particular way the God of the rejected and excluded in all their diversity”.

Proper solidarity as informed by the ethic of *ubuntu* also entails respect for the other. A community that is informed by the ethic of *ubuntu* can rightly be spoken of in terms of a moral community in so far as *ubuntu* entails a moral ethic. Kobia (2006:100) came closer to an expression of this idea in his address to the AACC General Assembly at Yaoundé (2003) where he observed as follows: “The ecumenical movement in Africa is called to reinvent a network of moral communities inspired by communitarian spirit”. South African theologian Barney Pitso (1995:98) makes a similar point when he argues with respect to the South African context that “the possibility of the church as a mutually supportive and moral community is compelling”.

### *Metaphor for an African Ecumenical/Ecclesiological Vision*

The church as an *ubuntu* community and in that regard, a moral community, participates in the struggles for peace and justice in the world. The church as *ubuntu* community stands in solidarity with the world. The *ubuntu* as a metaphor for an African ecumenical/ecclesiological vision needs to do justice to the distinctive nature of the church in the whole household of God. It seems to obscure the distinction between church and world. As Conradie (2007:23) argues, African ecclesiological discourses “describe the nature of the church in terms of a free community of equals, but seem to place less emphasis on the distinctiveness of the church community within the larger human community.” Conradie’s proposal of the metaphor of “whole household of God” does not equally resolve the challenge he notes.

The above notwithstanding, there is a danger in either sharply contrasting between the church and the world or joining the two. Indeed, a crucial aspect that requires further reflection in my proposal of *ubuntu* as a horizon for ecclesiology and ethics concerns how to do justice to the church as a distinct body within the *oikoumene* (cf. Raiser, 1991:104-105). The second limitation has to do with whether or not *ubuntu* does justice to a non-hierarchical model of community.<sup>16</sup> Thirdly, there is a question whether or not *ubuntu* ecclesiology implies divinisation of the church since the *ubuntu* community includes God. The other concern pertains to how an African understanding of the church as *ubuntu* may do justice to wider concerns regarding religious pluralism in Africa.

The above limitations notwithstanding, the notion of *ubuntu* may well be appropriated to express the integral relationship between ecclesiology and ethics since it denies the separation of ‘being’ and ‘doing’.

### **Unconcluding Thoughts**

This contribution has argued for a critical appropriation of the notion of *ubuntu* in articulating an African ecumenical ecclesiology. Such a notion integrates both ecclesiology and ethics. The discussion of *ubuntu* as *koinonia* and *diakonia* as argued in this contribution has implications for a missional understanding of the church in Africa. Indeed, the ecumenical affirmation of the missionary nature of the church necessarily posits the

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<sup>16</sup> Jürgen Moltmann offers a useful analysis of a non-hierarchical model of the church based on his social doctrine of the Trinity. This understanding is further developed by Miraslov Volf (1998:217-219) in *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* by means of an egalitarian understanding of the Trinity. Volf (1998:231) portrays the church as “a community of men and women whom the spirit of God has endowed in a certain way for service to each other and to the world in anticipation of God’s new creation.”

inseparability of the church and mission. Mission, understood in its broad sense as the mission-Dei, is at the heart of the church's calling. An ecumenical ecclesiology predicated on the notion of *ubuntu* is in essence a missional ecclesiology in that it is missio-centric. The church in Africa cannot be truly church if it does not engage with the existential needs of God's people on the continent and in creation as a whole.

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