

***Ubuntu* as human flourishing? An African traditional religious analysis of *ubuntu* and its challenge to Christian anthropology**

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Abstract

From a Christian anthropological perspective, the article seeks to answer the question: what does *ubuntu* mean when analysed from the anthropocentric nature of African traditional religions (ATR)? This leads to another question: how does the ATR informed meaning of *ubuntu* challenge Christian anthropology in Africa in the light of the prevailing context of human suffering and poverty? These related questions are answered by critiquing the common tendency in modern scholarship on *ubuntu* of linking the concept with the Nguni proverb *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*. A plea is made that *ubuntu* should instead be interpreted according to the anthropocentric nature of ATR that leads to an existential view of *ubuntu* as human flourishing. The article concludes by looking at how Christianity in Africa should develop an anthropological perspective that promotes human flourishing by enabling African human agency and enhancing a holistic engagement of the socioeconomic and political factors that hinder human flourishing on the continent.

Keywords

Ubuntu; human flourishing; African Christianity and ubuntu

1. Introduction and background

Ubuntu remains an important concept in Africa although it maybe be fraught with “vagueness, collectivism and anachronism” (Metz 2011:534), resulting in the concept being used arbitrarily. Magezi (2017:113) highlights that *ubuntu* is a fluid concept with many diverse voices although having core features which characterise it. While *ubuntu* is an ancient foundational African concept, it only recently gained prominence in written literature

from the mid-1990s, led by South African scholars who emerged in the post-Apartheid era. Christian Gade's essay *The Historical Development of the Written Discourses on Ubuntu* (2011) traces shifts in the use of ubuntu in written literature which he finds dates back to at least 1846.¹ Gade (2011) finds that in literature published prior to 1950, *ubuntu* is defined as a human quality; in the second half of the 1900s, *ubuntu* is used more broadly to define African humanism, a philosophy, an ethic, and as a worldview. However, from 1993 to 1995 ubuntu began to be viewed as a summary of the Nguni proverb *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (often translated as "a person is a person through other persons"). Gade finds that most contemporary authors today refer to the proverb when defining *ubuntu*, regardless of whether they understand *ubuntu* as a human quality, African humanism, a philosophy, an ethic, or a worldview. Gade's (2011:313) hypothesis, affirmed by Mboti (2015:126), is that it was between 1993 and 1995 that *ubuntu* was first connected to the proverb *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*. This highlights the role played by South Africa's early post-Apartheid context in forming the modern conceptualisation of *ubuntu*.

However, in 1980 Stanlake and Tommie Samkange may have been the first to use *ubuntu* as a concept for nation building through their book *Hunhuim or Ubuntuism: A Zimbabwe Indigenous Political Philosophy* (1980) published soon after Zimbabwe's independence from Britain. However, the Zimbabwean government's led atrocities in Matabeleland and Midlands provinces, in the early post-independence period, showed that the new black rulers did not embrace Samkange's *ubuntu* framework. The modern embrace of *ubuntu* may be accredited to its use by post-1994 South African national leaders such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki and various prominent academics such as Mogobe Ramose and Augustine Shutte, who all popularised *ubuntu* as a conceptual framework of building humane, democratic and just society (Gade 2011:315; Houtman 2011:32). It was from this context that *ubuntu* "came into the spotlights of intellectuals and visionaries all over the world" (Houtman 2011:32).

1 It is important to note that Gade's study seems to have only concentrated on literature written in European languages and not indigenous African languages.

The knowledge that the popular linking of *ubuntu* and *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* is a recent development leads to the question: what does *ubuntu* mean when viewed from the anthropocentric nature of African traditional religions (ATR)? Furthermore, how is Christian anthropology in Africa challenged by this ATR informed meaning of *ubuntu* in light of the prevailing context of human suffering and poverty? These interrelated questions will be answered by first critiquing the common virtuous and communitarian understandings of *ubuntu* and highlighting their problems to being human in Africa. This will be followed by examining *ubuntu* from ATR's human-centred nature and also considering some cultural expressions of *ubuntu*. The cultural and religious analysis of *ubuntu* will highlight the need to interpret *ubuntu* in an existential perspective of human flourishing or human wellbeing, and not limiting it to virtuous-communitarian terms for promoting social cohesion as is the current trend.

The understanding of human flourishing in this article leans towards holistic human wellness that includes social, economic and political wellness and justice, in short: a life worthy of dignified human existence. The article closes by looking at some aspects that should comprise a meaningful Christian anthropological framework of engaging *ubuntu*'s concern for human flourishing. The article will contribute towards a bottom-up grassroots-oriented understanding of *ubuntu*, instead of the common top-down hegemonic view. A bottom-up approach may be more fruitful in responding to Africa's dehumanising socioeconomic and political situation.

2. The challenge of human flourishing to the virtuous and communitarian notions of *ubuntu*

This discussion critiques the common use of *ubuntu* to express virtuous personhood, relationality and human dignity. It will be highlighted that the aspect of human flourishing is generally absent in these virtuous-communitarian interpretations of *ubuntu*.

2.1. *Ubuntu* as virtuous personhood

Ubuntu is often defined as personhood which can be rendered as human identity, human virtue, humanness or human nature. The Nguni word for a

person is *umuntu*. Therefore, *ubuntu* expresses personhood or humanness (Gichure 2015:118–119). The diverse expressions of *ubuntu* among scholars include, personhood (Letseka 2013:357), humanity (Eliastam 2015:2), “[the] art of being a human person ... the ideal of being a good person” (Broodryk 2005:12). The aspects that emerge prominently include ideal human nature, humaneness, ethical morality, human identity and human feeling. This is the quality of being an authentic human person, which distinguishes a person from all other creaturely beings.

Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu made *ubuntu* prominent in post-Apartheid South Africa, when he chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He acknowledged the difficulties of defining *ubuntu* by stating:

Ubuntu is very difficult to render into a Western language. It speaks to the very essence of being human. When we want to give high praise to someone we say, “Yu, u nobuntu.”; “Hey, he or she has ubuntu.” This means they are generous, hospitable, friendly, caring, and compassionate. They share what they have (Tutu 2009:34).²

Tutu presents various shades of the essential quality of authentic personhood, or being human, the quintessence of human identity and humanness. Morality is a significant component of the view of *ubuntu* as personhood by highlighting humane, moral consciousness and reason which separates people from animals which are driven by instinct or a stone which has no heart (Gichure 2015:144). Metz (2011:328; 2011:535) and Letseka (2012:54) projected *ubuntu* “as a moral theory” concerned with behaviour fitting for human beings. Furthermore, Metz (2011:537) highlighted *ubuntu* as that which we “ought to value the most in life, namely, personhood, selfhood and humanness. One’s ultimate goal in life should be to become a (complete) person, a (true) self or a (genuine) human being” (Metz 2011:537). Therefore, “the assertion that ‘a person is a person’ is a call to develop one’s (moral) personhood, a prescription to acquire *ubuntu* or *botho*, to exhibit humanness” (Metz 2011:537).

2 Letseka (2012:51) also highlights Retired Justice Mokgoro acknowledging that the concept of *ubuntu* is difficult to express in Western language.

Similarly, Manyonganise (2015:1) highlights that the Shona word *munhu* refers to an ordinary person and also describes a truly virtuous person. Consequently, an individual who exhibits immoral behaviour is viewed as not a person, *haasi munhu*, to mean a lack of *unhu*, while a person of noble character is described as a real person, *munhu chaiye*. Similarly, the Zimbabwean Ndebele describe a person exhibiting depraved behaviour as *inyamazana yomuntu* meaning a beastly person. The cited Shona and Ndebele examples show that there are occasions when a person's conduct may result in diminished human identity. It may be said that a person's deeds and character either authenticate or disprove his or her human personhood.

However, a serious challenge with *ubuntu* as personhood or human identity, is its masculine and patriarchal leanings resulting in *ubuntu* being “exclusive and discriminatory” (Manyonganise 2015:3–4). This envisioning of human personhood in masculine terms expresses a limited vision of human flourishing that discriminately favours the welfare of men over the welfare of women. The limited vision of human flourishing is also demonstrated by the fact that while claiming *ubuntu*, many African communities continue to favour the socioeconomic development of boys over that of girls. In many *ubuntu* professing communities, human development is conceptualised in masculine terms, for example it is common to hear the Ndebele praise a successful woman as *yindoda ngokwakhe* (she is a man in her own right) or *yindoda mfazi* (she is a man-woman). Even in modern *ubuntu* professing communities, the ideal woman and or ideal child continues to be in terms of subservience instead of fully flourishing in their human endeavours.

The limited vision of human flourishing in *ubuntu* is further expressed by a discriminatory and exclusive view of human identity that narrowly defines ideal personhood. Magezi (2017:114) stated, “Ubuntu's definition of community narrowly refers to people bound geographically and relationally”. He added, “Ubuntu tends to exclude people who do not come from the same geographical area (ethnicity) or not filially related” (Magezi 2017:114). One finds many instances in work places where capable people are even discriminated or poorly because they are from a different race, tribe and nationality. In this, people are different are viewed as non-people – as not *abantu* (people) but *izinto* (things) that can be conveniently abused and exploited as expendables for one's self-gratification and denied

the right to fully flourish as human beings.³ The innumerable occurrences of gender based discrimination and violence, xenophobia, tribalism, inter-political party violence, and the abusive disregard of the poor in a continent claiming to be founded on *ubuntu*, is testimony that the claimed *ubuntu* is not sufficiently informed by human flourishing. That one can find violent and deadly clashes even over different soccer teams within a continent claiming to be one hundred percent *ubuntu*, is testimony that personhood is applied conveniently and that the human flourishing of other people is not part of the vision of this notion of *ubuntu*.

2.2. *Ubuntu* as relationality

Ubuntu is also understood in communitarian terms of human solidarity, interdependence, commonality and communality that can be summarised as relationality. This character is inseparably tied to the above discussed notion of personhood, for in traditional African thought the essence of human personhood is interconnectedness and solidarity with other people in one's community. *Ubuntu* as relationality is aptly captured by the proverb *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* that can be translated as a person is a person through other people.⁴ Tutu (2009:34–35) states,

Ubuntu ... means my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in theirs. We belong in a bundle of life. We say, "a person is a person through other people". It is not "I think therefore I am". It says rather: "I am human because I belong." I participate, I share. A person with *ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good; for he or she has the proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole, and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are.

3 Slavery, Apartheid, colonialism and various other forms of exploiting and subjugating other people groups by others show that the tendency of regarding other people as non-people is a universal problem.

4 The proverb is difficult to translate precisely in English, as various translations can be noted, such as a person is person because of others, or by others, or through others.

Tutu's view of *ubuntu* corroborates Mbiti's (1990:106) famous statement, "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am". Several African writers (Manyonganise 2015:1; Van Norren 2014:256; Letseka 2013:355; Chisale 2018:4; Gathogo 2007:112) acknowledge John Mbiti's famous dictum as expressing *ubuntu*. Mbiti used the statement from a kinship perspective to emphasise the communitarian nature of traditional African people and he included the community of people still alive (the living-living) and also those who have since died (the living-dead or the dead ancestors). The view of *ubuntu* presented in Tutu's above quoted text is denominated by communal interdependence, mutual communal relationships, and is heavily anti-individualism, anti-alloofness and seeks to promote communality, relationality and communal cooperation and integration. The basic relational nature of *ubuntu* is the extended family, where life is only understandable within a system of kinship (Moyo 1999:52).

The significance of *ubuntu* as relationality is asserted by Shutte (2001:12) stating, "Personhood comes as a *gift* from other persons" (emphasis added). In other words, authentic personhood is a communal derivative; therefore, the community is necessary to one's attainment of personhood. In its relational nature, *ubuntu* is "social interdependence and a deep rootedness in community" (Letseka 2012:48), "the social dimension of being human" (Gichure 2015:131), "the interconnectedness of human society, with the implication that people should treat others as part of the extended human family" (Eliastam 2015:2). Consequently, as has already been seen from Tutu, *ubuntu* involves fellowship, hospitability, harmony and communal solidarity with others. Thus Gichure (2015:127) says the "significant element of ubuntu culture is that it lends itself to a communal and traditional lifestyle in which every person is their *neighbour's keeper*" (emphasis added). This is evidenced by the fact that traditional African cultures neither had private hospitality facilities such as hotels and restaurants, nor care centres such as hospitals, orphanages and geriatric homes, for those in need were cared for within the confines of homes (Gichure 2015:127). Indeed, African traditional communities undertook several steps to provide social security. For example, there were programmes for empowering the poor such as the Nguni practice of *ukusisa* where rich people provided an opportunity for poor people to own livestock by temporarily allocating them a small herd of cattle to raise as their own (Moyo 1999:53; Nyathi 2001:47; Banda & Van

der Merwe 2017:253). In traditional African communities, sickness, burials and weddings were community events meaning that one's life struggles, happiness and sorrow were shared by the community. Hence Magezi (2017:112) highlights *ubuntu* as a “distinctive African quality that values collective good, humanness and respect for their community”.

Ubuntu as relationality does provides a good ground for human flourishing because it provides interdependence, communal support, communal networking and communal security that is needed for other people to thrive. African sayings such as “hands wash each other” and “no log of fire can glow alone” affirm one needs other people to flourish as a human being. However, for some poor people, the foreigners and the disabled *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* can mean exclusion, discrimination, oppression and loneliness because their *otherliness* often disqualifies them from the category of *umuntu* in many communities. A serious African scandal of claiming the communitarian notion of *ubuntu* is that in many African countries there are wholesale communities, districts, tribes, provinces and segments of societies that have been deemed fit to languish in perpetual poverty while other communities perpetually receive the lion's share of national budget allocations on grounds of tribe, race, gender and region.

Furthermore, the hegemonic nature of the communitarian view of *ubuntu* can be oppressive and unjust in some situations. Tutu (2009:35) states,

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. 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.

Indeed, the vision of human flourishing is discernible in Tutu's statement because harmony, friendliness and hospitality carry the idea of promoting the human flourishing of other people. However, the communitarian ethics and harmony expressed in Tutu's words would work in a context of justice and fairness. However, in many cases social harmony in African

communities is achieved through oppressive and unjust means, for example abused women and children suffer in silence, fearing that exposing their abusers and reporting them to the police may disrupt the harmony of their families and societies. In such revolting contexts, *ubuntu* means submission to exploitative and human damaging structures. Because of a lack of vision of human flourishing, *ubuntu* does not function as a protective instrument of vulnerable people, but as an instrument for protecting abusers.

Another significant challenge is that the communitarian view of *ubuntu* can foster a dependency syndrome and exploitative parasitic tendencies. This is when some people shun work in order to depend on others instead of maturing into independent players that can be assets for development for other people. The communitarian view of *ubuntu* can also stifle individuality and democracy by promoting uniformity that suppresses divergence of opinion and conviction. The communitarian view of *ubuntu* can stifle ambition, individuality and even diversity. The challenge when *ubuntu* is a gift given to those who hold similar views, is that taking a divergent path results in one being denied personhood and until the right to flourish as unique human being.

2.3. *Ubuntu* as human dignity

Ubuntu is also understood as human dignity or human value. Tutu's (2009:35) already noted view of *ubuntu* as social harmony promotes the notion of human dignity by calling for human beings to be treated in a dignified manner that upholds their human value. However, human dignity does not only lie in treating other people in a humane manner; it also lies in conducting oneself in a dignified manner that asserts one's dignified humanness. Therefore, mistreating another human being does not only diminish the human value of the victim; it also diminishes the human value of the perpetrator because of acting in a manner not fitting of dignified human being. Tutu (2009:35) asserted, "What dehumanises you, inexorably dehumanises me". Tutu's plea for forgiveness was based on the fact that bitterness and vengeance prompts people to act in ways that dehumanises both the victim and the perpetrators. Tutu highlights that violence and vengeance harm human dignity by degrading the victim's *ubuntu* – violence harms one's very dignified standing as a human being. This view of *ubuntu* centres on the sacredness and dignity of a human

being. The implications of Tutu's above noted communitarian view in which he emphasises that what dehumanises one person also inexorably dehumanises the whole community raises the need to uphold and protect the human dignity and human flourishing of others.

However, the challenge with Tutu's view of *ubuntu* is that it is essentially interested in social harmony and tends to have weak mechanisms for securing or obtaining justice for victims. For instance, many victims who forgave their violators during the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings continue to wallow in extreme poverty while the violators enjoy a good life. This raises the question, can human dignity be preserved without compensation and restitution? How is human flourishing preserved when economically poor, oppressed and landless people who forgive those who robbed them of their land remain poor while those who unjustly benefitted continue to wield economic power? These questions affirm the already noted problem that *ubuntu* is sometimes applied conveniently and oppressively against the poor and powerless.

Ubuntu as human dignity upholds the intrinsic dignity and worth of human beings and is also communitarian in its operation. As an example, the significance of greeting other people in traditional African cultures is not just based on politeness, but on the fact that a greeting acknowledges and affirms the other person's human value and dignity. Consequently, actions such as hospitality to strangers, friendliness and even attending funerals of other people are not just good humanly acts, but also an acknowledgement and upholding of the human dignity of the people concerned. To let another person die of starvation when you could help, to ignore another person and not greet them or even to stay away from the burial of another person communicates not only a disregard of the dignity and worth of the affected person but are also in themselves actions not fitting to be done by any dignified person.

Without a doubt, *ubuntu* played a considerable role in the post-Apartheid South African public discourse. Eliastam (2015:2) further highlights that in democratic South Africa *ubuntu* informed the constitution-making process, the emerging nation's moral theory, the implementation of public policy. *Ubuntu* also functioned as a guiding principle for citizenship education, a normative value for education, a foundation for business

ethics, a model for management, a foundation for an African approach to conflict resolution and peace building, as a theological motif and as the framework for a theology of relational ontology.

However, as already pointed out in the above sections, the emphatic African claim for *ubuntu* exists along not only gross socioeconomic justice and inequality but also high levels of social violence, lawlessness and corruption, among other dehumanising elements. Magezi (2017:113) bemoaned the fact that “despite the ubuntu rhetoric in South Africa, political leaders and the general population are clearly disrespecting humanness”. Magezi (2017:113) further noted the concern by Cilliers that in many cases people treat one another as things, *izinto*. While proclaiming the *ubuntu* rhetoric, human life in many African communities continues to suffer from corruption by government officials, violent crime, injustice and inequality and gross human rights abuses (Enslin & Horsthemke 2004:549; Magezi 2017:113). Gathogo (2008:46–47) asks the question: “Why do we find many acts of *unyama* (animal like behaviours) in a continent that is hundred percent ubuntu?”

In summary, it is noted that the above discussed contemporary views of *ubuntu* rely heavily on the Nguni proverb *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*. This leads to top-down hegemonic view of *ubuntu* (Mboti 2015:126) and functions prescriptively and regulatory as an instrument of controlling and managing society by the dominant and privileged voices. It is a view of *ubuntu* that tends to be more concerned with the harmony of the community and less about the human wellbeing of the individuals. Furthermore, it is a view of *ubuntu* that promotes social cohesion while undermining aspirations of the individual. There is therefore need to look at ubuntu as more than a communitarian gift but one that also includes the existential aspects of human flourishing.

3. The anthropological nature of African traditional religions as a basis for *ubuntu* as human flourishing

That *ubuntu* is a vision of human flourishing can be derived from the anthropocentric and utilitarian nature of African traditional religions (ATR). In ATR human existence is a religious journey for as Mbiti (1990:1) asserted, “Africans are notoriously religious ... [r]eligion permeates into

all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it”. The statement affirms both the utilitarian and anthropological nature of religion in Africa. To corroborate Mbiti’s statement, Magesa’s (1997:60) stated,

At all times in a person’s life, a religious consciousness is always explicitly or implicitly present. In no way is anything understood apart from the context of God, the ancestors and the spirits; in no way is any thought, word or act understood except in terms of good and bad, in the sense that such an attitude or behaviours *either enhances or diminishes life*. (italics added).

In other words, religion exists for purposes of promoting and safeguarding human flourishing. Mbiti (1990:2) finds that traditional Africans carry their religion everywhere they go, to important tasks such working in the fields and to mundane activities such as going to a beer party. This affirms that ATR has practical and existential value by being directly connected to real life issues.

Consequently, *ubuntu* must not just be based on the virtuous and communitarian foundations but also on the ATR worldview where human life is the *summum bonum*, “the central theme of African religiousness” (Okorochoa 1994:72). In ATR religion is practised for anthropocentric purposes (Nyathi 2001:9). Charles Nyamiti is amplified by Magesa (1997:54) stating that “African religious practice is centred mainly on man’s (*sic.*) life in this world, with the consequence that religion is chiefly functional, or a means to serve people to acquire earthly goods (life, health, fecundity, wealth, power the like) and to maintain social cohesion and order”. Religion is practiced functioning as a means of promoting and protecting human wellbeing (Magesa 1997:50). To emphasize the point, Mbiti (1990:5) states that in ATR people’s “acts of worship and turning to God are pragmatic and utilitarian rather than spiritual or mystical”. In other words, people do not worship God out of a need for a relationship with him but for existential purposes. To further emphasise the utilitarian view of religion in ATR, Mbiti adds,

To live here and now is the most important concern of African religious activities and beliefs. There is little, if any, concern with the distinctly spiritual welfare of man (*sic.*) apart from his (*sic.*)

physical life. No line is drawn between the spiritual and the physical. Even life in the hereafter is conceived in materialistic and physical terms. There is neither paradise to be hoped for nor hell to be feared in the hereafter. The soul of man (*sic.*) does not long for spiritual redemption, or for closer contact with God in the next world (Mbiti 1990:4).

Simply stated, the purpose of religion in ATR is to enable people to find human flourishing in this present life. Consequently, the interest of God in ATR is with reference to humanity's "[hu]mans" contact with time" (Mbiti 1990:5) and not with reference to some future messianic hope or apocalyptic hope in which God will bring some radical transformed glorious existence. This means that all life forces are intended to serve and enhance the life of the human person and society. The emphasis on the anthropological and utilitarian nature of ATR provides useful insights into the basic vision of *ubuntu* that is overlooked or undermined by the moralistic and communal ethical view of *ubuntu*.

Consequently, religion is paramount to the building and maintenance of the spiritual equilibrium that fosters human wellbeing. The importance of the defence mechanism implemented by the ATR's utilitarian and anthropocentric nature arises from a high sense of vulnerability in traditional Africans. Ngong (2010:24) notes that traditional Africans see their human flourishing as under constant threat from "the capricious activities of some spirits and witchcraft". ATR's utilitarian view of religion expresses the dualistic spiritualised cosmology in which the state of affairs in human life is viewed as the outcome of the ongoing intense battle between two bitterly competing spiritual powers, one good and the other evil. As Bhebhe (2013:56) explains, in ATR it is believed that, "for people to live comfortably, a mutual relationship of balanced reciprocity between the physical and the spiritual worlds is to be maintained". In other words, wellbeing depends on the state of harmonious relationships between the people and the spirit world, which "creates equilibrium between the material and spirit world, making the world safe for human beings" (Banda & Masengwe 2018:3). Safety and human wellbeing does not only depend on harmonious relationships with the good spiritual powers but also diligently guarding against "provoking good spirits to avoid their wrath, or antagonising evil powers, to avoid their terror" (Banda & Masengwe 2018:3).

This means that any disturbance of the equilibrium between human beings and the spiritual powers results in the loss of wellbeing. Thus, from an ATR anthropocentric perspective *ubuntu* is not just a behavioural tenet of promoting and upholding social harmony and cohesion. It is also a vision of abundant life that leads to authentic human existence.

4. Human flourishing in the African quest *ubuntu*

That *ubuntu* should be conceptualised as human flourishing can also be discerned from the fact that at an individual personal level, the African quest for *ubuntu* is often a quest for dignified human existence. Okorocho's (1994:73) highlights that the Igbo of West Africa, speak of "the curse of living a life of which death is to be preferred". This is a humanly undignified life of shame and indignity—a state of depreciated dignified human existences that reduces a person from the status of "umuntu" (a person) to the status of "into" (thing). Among the Ndebele, the equivalent of what the Igbo describe as the curse of living a life of which death is to be preferred can be characterised by the saying, "hunger forces one to eat rubbish" – *indlala ikudlisa amanyala*. The proverb captures the dehumanising extent of poverty that forces one to eat what ought to be discarded to the dogs or forces one to scavenge with animals, thus diminishing one's human essence. The fear of lack of human flourishing is that it may lead one to lead an undesirable life and be forced to eat rubbish for survival.

The call for an existential understanding of *ubuntu* takes cognisance that the Nguni stem "-ntu" distinguishes humanness from nonhuman beings designated by the stem "-nto" (Gichure 2015:144). Thus *ubuntu* (humanness) is the essence of being *umuntu* (a person). However, situations such as poverty and sickness can erode one's humanity and reduce one to a thing. It is common to hear Ndebele people muse about an unfortunate period in their past life when sickness or poverty reduced them to a mere thing – *okuyinto*. One commonly hears a Ndebele who has recovered from a lengthy incapacitating sickness or from poverty remarking victoriously, "I am now a person!" – "sengingumuntu manje". From this we see that the deepest fear among Africans, is to be in a situation that diminishes one's *ubuntu* (human standing) making them *okuyinto* (a mere thing). A lengthy debilitating illness or poverty is experienced as diminishing one's

human dignity by hindering one from living a respectable life. Therefore, recovering from an illness is not just a restoration of health, it is also a restoration of one's humanness—*ubuntu*. Among the Ndebele and Shona people in Zimbabwe *ubuntu* entails having a dignified standing among other people. This state of respectability is called *isithunzi* (in Ndebele) and *chiremerera* (in Shona). Poverty, ill-luck, rejection, failure to find a marriage partner, ill-health, infertility, failure, loss of sexual virility, being taken for granted by other people, having lazy children and many such unfavourable social, economic and personal conditions are not just encumbrances to abundant life; they erode one's state of respectability and honour by other people. They take away one's *ubuntu* in the sense of human essence. This explains why in traditional communities, witchcraft is feared and hated, for at the core of witchcraft is its perceived ability to destroy a person's capacity to flourish as a dignified human being.

The aspect of *ubuntu* as human flourishing is reflected in African people's attitudes towards wealth. Just like modern societies traditional African societies were not egalitarian but consisted of rich and poor people and human importance was intertwined with one's wealth (Magesa 1997:55; Houtman 2011:24). Houtman (2011:25) highlighted from Kwame Gyekye that wealthy people such as chiefs and kings were highly respected and were often praised according to the number of cattle or the size of land they owned. The rich were revered, because of the contribution they could make toward the society's welfare. For Moyo (1999:54) says, "In traditional societies, rich people served as insurance against insecurity since the poor could not be refused if they were in need". This highlights the significant role of rich people for which they were respected by their communities.

The rich people could be warned by the proverb *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* to not derive their human significance from their wealth but from human relationships. But because of their economic status, the rich served as the epitome of who to emulate and who to associate with in order to flourish as a human being. As Moyo (1999:54) further added,

In Shona traditional society, it is prestigious to be rich. Being rich means having many herds of cattle. In the past, poor people would arrange for their young daughters to marry rich men, and the *rovora* (payment to the bride's family) would be paid in the form of cattle.

The rich were in an enviable position, but they had to share their riches with the needy of the community.

While the rich man may be said to be practising *ubuntu* by sharing his possessions with the needy, the fact that he is envied because of his wealth, and poor people arrange for their daughters to marry him suggests that existentially he is in a better state of being a human being. Consequently, when poor families gave their daughters to marry rich men, they consolidated their own human flourishing. It can be suggested from this that *ubuntu* should not be understood narrowly in communitarian and virtuous terms, but holistically include the existential aspect of human flourishing. This does not mean that the historical elements of good moral virtues and values, good neighbourliness, respect for human life and corruption free societies must be discarded. It means that they must not be the end but must integrating developmental issues that promote and safeguard human flourishing.

5. The African need for a vision of *ubuntu* that promotes human flourishing

The notion of *ubuntu* as human flourishing is necessary to challenge the virtuous-communitarian notions of *ubuntu* that look beyond social cohesion to human wellbeing. The touted virtuous and communitarian views of *ubuntu* as ideal personhood, human relationality and human dignity lack a strong emphasis on human flourishing that can be a vision for socioeconomic development, political liberation and human empowerment. Indeed, the post-1994 rise of the winds of democracy that swept across the African continent were anchored on *ubuntu* philosophy, driven notably by the African Renaissance and motivated by the New Partnership for African Development that was championed by Thabo Mbeki and other progressive political leaders. Despite the concerted preaching about *ubuntu* as human dignity, morally virtuous personhood, human solidarity and cooperation, Africa remains a continent stricken by diminished human flourishing. There is therefore a need for the virtuous and communitarian views of *ubuntu* to prioritise human flourishing.

That *ubuntu* has become a philosophy of moral and communal virtue devoid of human progress can be seen in Luke Pato's cry recorded by

Smit (2003:55): “To be African is to suffer”. This is a universal cry across Africa despite the vociferous projections of the continent as hundred percent ubuntu. Smit (2003:55) says Pato’s cry is not anthropological, but historically and contextually means, “Today, now, to be African is to suffer”. However, the reality is that suffering, pain, hunger and disease are so endemic in the very fibre of the continent, to the extent that suffering and Africanness have become synonymous. The daily saddening events in Africa make it disingenuous to deny the claim that “to be African is too suffer” is an anthropological statement! Therefore, *ubuntu* as human flourishing controverts Africa’s claim to high moral values that are empty of human development. The almost four decades-old lament by Mugomba and Nyaggah (1980) that Africa’s political independence from its colonisers has only produced a broken continent remains true today in the midst of high claims of *ubuntu* (Magezi 2017:111–112).

A meaningful view of *ubuntu* must be holistic and include the existential aspects of flourishing as full human. A view of *ubuntu* that is preoccupied with moral integrity, human dignity and communal relationships without a deliberate focus on human existential wellbeing is inadequate, self-defeating and disempowering for many poor Africans whose daily life is a search for liberation from economic poverty and unjust political systems. For *ubuntu* to stir meaningful socioeconomic and political transformation in poverty-stricken Africa, it must transcend beyond current virtuous and communitarian focus and be realised as an existential vision for human flourishing and wellbeing.

6. The challenge of *ubuntu* as human flourishing to Christian anthropology

Given the worsening context of human suffering in Africa, what is the significance of the proposal that in ATR ubuntu also entails human flourishing upon the Christian view of humanity? It is proposed that the idea of *ubuntu* as human flourishing challenges Christian anthropology to critically promote a holistic biblical anthropological framework of human flourishing in Africa.

6.1. The biblical legitimacy of human flourishing in this earthly life

For some Christians human flourishing belongs to the heavenly world only, and not in this present human life. The idea of *ubuntu* as human flourishing challenges the Christian doctrine of humanity to establish a critical theological basis for human flourishing in this present earthly life. This is one area that the Pentecostal prosperity movement has played a leading role despite some serious dangers and weaknesses in their approach (Chitando & Manyonganise 2011:101; Chibango 2016:72–73). The question that remains is: should Christians and churches be concerned about the lack of human flourishing in this earthly life? Christopher Wright's *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (2006), affirms addressing poverty and human suffering in this world as inseparably integrated in the mission of God, meaning that one cannot truly proclaim the Gospel of Christ and yet turn a blind eye to the pain and suffering in the world. In his *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World* (2010) Longenecker argues that it makes no gospel sense to think of being a church while turning a blind eye poverty; and therefore, portrays addressing poverty as inseparable to preaching the gospel. To Longenecker, (2010:116) the Apostle Paul's remembrance of the plea by the Apostles in Jerusalem to "continue to remember the poor" (Gal 2:10) demonstrates that responding to poverty was integral to the ministry of the early church. Longenecker (2010:116) found it significant that when Jesus did his messianic mission he took seriously the socioeconomic and political context by speaking to it and that when John the Baptist requested Christ to confirm if he was the awaited messiah (Mt 11:3), he responded by citing how he had dealt with the people's physical and socioeconomic situations (Mt 11:4–6; Mt 3:7–12). Biblical texts such as Paul's statement that it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35) provide a biblical basis for responding to the material needs for other people, especially the needy and powerless. Bedford-Strohm (2008:145) highlights that in Judaeo-Christianity "'Theology', talk about God is impossible without talking about the human historical experiences of slavery and oppression and God's action in history to overcome such oppression".

The claim that a concern for human flourishing in this present earthly life is biblically and theologically legitimate takes cognisance of the temporary nature of life in this world. Furthermore, the appeal for human flourishing

does not disregard that in some situations authentic humanity comes through the peace that results from a relationship with God. However, Christ's promise of a better world to come does not require people to be disengaged from the affairs of this present life. Rather, Christ's promise of a future glorious world to come challenges Christians to transform the present world as salt and light instead of disengaging from it.

6.2. Anthropological perspectives that promote African human agency

A further challenge to Christianity in Africa from *ubuntu* as human flourishing is the need to develop anthropological perspectives that enable human agency among Africans.⁵ In addition to socioeconomic and political structural issues, the lack of human flourishing is also intertwined with the state of weak of human agency. The Shona derisively speak of a person who dies of thirst while his feet are stepping in water – *kufa nenyota makumbo arimvura*. To express the sad African reality of the proverbial meaning of dying of thirst while one's feet are in the water Chitando (2010:199) states, "The seed of poverty thrives on the rich soils of Africa". Despite being so well endowed with unlimited natural resources, Africans continue to die of hunger, war and many preventable diseases while waiting for people from the Western countries to assist them. In Africa, a Christian view of humanity that seeks to engage *ubuntu* must not just address issues of personhood, relationality, human dignity, virtue and communality *ubuntu* but also the African human power to imagine, initiate, plan and implement meaning socioeconomic endeavours as envisioned in the biblical cultural mandate (Gen 1:28).

One of the important starting points of a Christian doctrine of humanity that promotes human agency in Africa is establishing a meaningful link between human flourishing and religiosity. However, while it is true that ultimately poverty and suffering are spiritual problems linked to the effects of the Fall, a narrow view of this link can promote a fatalism that stifles human agency (Van Rooy 1999:243). A serious challenge in the prosperity Pentecostalism is a religiosity that stifles the development of

5 The interest of this article is limited to highlighting the need for human agency, it however belongs to another article to nuance the nature of this human agency.

critical human agency by “absolv[ing] human beings of their responsibility for creating the crisis as well as their role in its resolution” (Chitando & Manyonganise 2011:101). Instead of the constant presentation of poverty and suffering as only the work of the evil spiritual forces, there is need for African Christians to be critically aware of their contribution to their own problems, for example, through poor economic and industrial planning, corruption, election corrupt and visionless leaders into public office, a poor theology of work and consumeristic tendencies that discourage saving and investing in creating sustainable wealth.

A critical component in establishing a meaningful link between human flourishing and religiosity is unpacking the significance of being created in the image of God (Gen 1:26–27; 5:1–3 and 9:1–7). It is important for Africans to realise that they bear the image of God in equal measure with other people from all other the nations of the world. Looking at Africa’s economic and industrial weakness while being richly endowed with many minerals, the scourge of poverty-related diseases and a host of other problems that other nations of the world have long solved, it sadly feels like other nations have more of God’s image than Africa. Cameroonian theologian Marc-Jean Ela (1994:21) laments, “Africa is this ancient land where humanity has been treated with contempt for many centuries”. This contempt with which African humanity has been treated is not just socioeconomic and political oppression, exploitation, oppression and marginalisation, but also the infantilization of Africans by Western countries, their treatment as perpetual children who must operate under the tutelage of Western economic and developmental experts. Christianity in Africa is challenged to address the contempt with which African humanity has been treated, but also the contempt with which African humanity has treated itself. There is need for a critical theology of humanity that will liberate and empower Africans to express the full extent of their being created in the image of God which entails the exercising of creative stewardship over God’s creation. Therefore, a holistic biblical theology of human flourishing must empower Africans to be in charge of their human affairs.

6.3. Engaging the socioeconomic and political factors that hinder human flourishing in Africa

A serious challenge in Africa is the common tendency by Christians to define human flourishing and the causes of Africa's dehumanised state narrowly in terms that do not lead to holistic and broad-based solutions. For example, prosperity Pentecostalism often defines prosperity in narrow terms of material plenty and good health. As a result, one finds many Pentecostal prophets and pastors who are content with having nice material things while their congregants wallow in oppressive and corruption riddled contexts. Or they may simply be content with their own wealth and health in the midst of poverty-stricken neighbourhoods. Africa's lack of human flourishing must be defined comprehensively. The problem with such a narrow materialistic definition of human flourishing is its fixation with material possessions or favourable status while ignoring systemic injustices that fuel the poverty and suffering of other people. To emphasize the comprehensive approach Nürnberger (1994:136) states:

Economic measures must become part of an integrated religious, cultural, social, economic and political programme. Theology should become a partner in an interdisciplinary team, while the local church should be part of the main swell of public initiative and responsibility.

Good Christian anthropology must empower Christians to meaningfully engage the whole breadth of economic and political realm and also to respond to systemic socioeconomic and political injustice that impoverish a large scale of societies.

7. Conclusion

The article sought to answer from a Christian anthropological perspective the question: what does ubuntu mean when analysed from the anthropological nature of African traditional religions? This question further led to another question stated as: how is Christian anthropology in Africa challenged by this ATR informed meaning of *ubuntu* in light of the prevailing context of human suffering and poverty? The article observed that modern views led by post-Apartheid South African scholarship commonly view *ubuntu* in term of *ubuntu umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, leading to viewing the concept in largely virtuous and communitarian terms. The plea in the article is that while the virtuous and communitarian views of *ubuntu* provide a basis of moral ethics, human solidarity and human dignity they tend to operate from a top-down approach that do not adequately account for the existential quest of the ordinary people of Africa who live in extreme poverty and suffering. The article suggested that, without discarding the virtuous and communitarian views of *ubuntu*, *ubuntu* should be considered from the anthropocentric nature of African traditional religions and culture. From an ATR perspective *ubuntu* is an existential reality of human flourishing. Christianity in Africa stands challenged to respond to the poverty and suffering faced by many poor and oppressed Africans by a doctrine of humanity that empowers them to flourish as human beings. Christianity in Africa must engage the African quest for authentic humanness in this present life by an anthropology that enables human agency and a holistic engagement with socioeconomic and political factors that hinder human flourishing in Africa.

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