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The tenet of *ubuntu* in South (African) ethics: Inclusive hospitality and Christian ethical disposition of effective pastoral care in Africa

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Abstract

The notion of *ubuntu* as a moral theory in the South African and African contexts presents attractive norms of an African worldview that can be articulated and applied to contemporary Christian ethics. The proponents of *ubuntu* perceive it as an African philosophy based on the maxim, "a person is a person through other persons", whereby the community prevails over individual considerations. It is not merely an empirical claim that our survival or well-being is causally dependent on others but is in essence capturing a normative account of what we ought to be as human beings. However, *ubuntu* has shortcomings that make it an impractical notion. Despite its shortcomings, *ubuntu* has natural ethic potential that enforces and engenders hospitality, neighbourliness, and care for all humanity. This article contributes to further conceptualisation and understanding of the notion of *ubuntu* and its relationship with hospitality in order to retrieve some principles that can be applied to effective and meaningful pastoral care. The principles drawn from *ubuntu* are juxtaposed with Christian principles and pastoral care to encourage embodiment of God by pastoral caregivers.

Keywords

ubuntu; ubuntu and hospitality; pastoral care; ubuntu and pastoral care; hospitality and pastoral care; pastoral care in Africa; ubuntu ethics; Christian ethics

1. Introduction and study framework

The notion of *ubuntu* as a moral theory in the South African and African contexts, presents attractive norms of an African world view that can be

articulated and applied to contemporary Christian ethics. The proponents of *ubuntu* perceive it as an African philosophy based on the maxim, "a person is a person through other persons", whereby the community prevails over individual considerations. From the *ubuntu* perspective, it is arguably not an empty claim that our survival or well-being is causally dependent on others. In essence, it captures a normative account of what we ought to be in life, particularly for the African people. However, African, and South African problems including corruption and other acts that rob other human beings their dignity and worth like abuse of human rights and gender-based violence (GBV) inevitably makes one question the notion of *ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* can be viewed as an idealistic idea that is unrealistic. Magezi (2017:111) characterised *ubuntu* as being in "flames" because of the contradiction of what *ubuntu* stands for and what actually transpires in reality among African countries and many communities where corruption is rife. Therefore, a question that emerges is: what value and benefit is *ubuntu* as a concept? Should *ubuntu* not be discarded?

In response to the above questions, this article argues that the shortcomings of *ubuntu* should not discourage us from retrieving positive natural principles that enforce and engender "good" humaneness. Our humaneness should be displayed to those who are "suitable and unsuitable" alike (Louw 2016:347), and "this is done humanely (humane) when it is done without hope on reward" (Lactantius in Davies 2001:35). Central to our humaneness, *ubuntu* presents a constructive perspective to humanness when considered intertwined with hospitality, neighbourliness, and care for all humanity. In pastoral care and practical theological thinking, hospitality is linked to service (*diakonia*) (Louw 2016:348). The notion of pastoral care metaphors in pastoral care is an attempt to communicate ways in which a caregiver can embody God's acts. Louw (2015:264) rightly argued that "within practical theological hermeneutics, the relation between God and creation should be interpreted from a metaphorical perspective". This means that human beings should employ "an as-if mode of theologising" (McFague 1987:70). An "as if" mode makes caregivers conceive, portray, and act in the space of people's lives "as if" they are God, thereby bringing hope and healing in people's lives. Viewing pastoral care in this manner challenges a caregiver to exhibit the "unbounded mercy of God that is visible by means of the unqualified praxis of hospitality and *diakonia*" (Louw 2016: 347).

However, for *ubuntu* to be considered from a Christian perspective and make a meaningful contribution to pastoral caregiving, Magezi (2017:111) argued that it should shift from a traditional *ubuntu* based on blood or geographical location to a liminal *ubuntu* where human beings are bound by Christ's bond. This will arguably enable *ubuntu* to restore African communal cultural behaviours and optimise its human care potential. This means *ubuntu* and hospitality should be viewed as interlinked concepts and moral values that should encourage holistic human care. Human care is about care for all human beings as informed by the notion of human dignity because all human beings are created in the image of God (*Imago Dei*).

In view of the above, this article explores the notion of *ubuntu* with hospitality as its central tenet. *Ubuntu* as a concept that is deeply embedded in African ethics' perspectives of contemporary moral theorists is largely shaped by the worldviews of the indigenous black people of sub-Saharan Africa excluding those of Arab, Indian, and European descent and culture. The worldviews of the indigenous people of sub-Saharan Africa have recently, especially in the past five years or so, been compared and contrasted with Western philosophy. Generally, although there has been limited rigorous engagement between Western philosophy and the maxim often associated with *ubuntu*, namely "a person is a person through other persons" (Tutu 1999:35; Khoza 1994:3). This has led to Wiredu's (2016:80) observation that when one reads Western philosophy, it is natural for one "to read it to see what he can learn from it", but he is of the opinion that African philosophy has not reached a stage where somebody would "look at African philosophy and readily say, what can I learn from it?".

Therefore, the purpose of this article is to further conceptualise and understand the notion of *ubuntu* as a moral theory. It is in this context that the more analytical and critical approaches to the attractive norms of an African worldview will be articulated and applied to contemporary Christian ethics to unravel the deeply embedded moral principles of *ubuntu* that could be employed for the embodiment of effective pastoral care in Africa. The *ubuntu* moral principles have been discussed by many scholars (Tutu 1999; Ramose 1999; Shutte 1993, 2001; Metz 2007, 2011; Magezi 2017; Meylahn 2017). The task of retrieving *ubuntu* principles and

applying them to pastoral care in Africa will be implicit while the ethics argument will be explicit.

The article first discusses the nature and history of *ubuntu* followed by the developments of the debate. The notion of *ubuntu* and its undergirding principles are then discussed before describing the link with hospitality and drawing some pastoral care principles.

2. Towards conception and understanding of *ubuntu*

2.1 The nature and history of *ubuntu*

Metz (2014:447) observed that the scholarship on *ubuntu* has attracted diverse academic approaches in the 21st century. *Ubuntu* in its literal translation from the African Nguni linguistic group (i.e., Zulu, Xhosa, Ndebele, and Swati) means humaneness. Hence, it is common for traditional black people on the continent to believe one's aim in life is to exhibit *ubuntu* though different linguistic groups have their own corresponding meaning for the term. *Ubuntu* entails prizing communal relationships with other people. The substantial anthology devoted to the work in African ethics began with the classic but somewhat dated texts by Placide Tempels (1959) and John Mbiti (1969) (Metz, 2017:62). However, these classic texts from Tempels and Mbiti were mainly used by sub-Saharan ethicists as a matter of moral anthropology in an attempt to shape indigenous morality to address their own interpretations of the world.

Tempels (1959:18,30) acknowledges that all behaviour depends on a system of principles and for Africans (Bantu), according to Tempels, that system of principles has a different conception of relationships between people. This African approach is contrary to the one held in European thought. He postulated that the fundamental concept of African ontology is centred in a single value, which he termed "vital force", that denotes the integrity of the whole being and which is not used exclusively in the bodily sense (1959: 44–45). Therefore, he posits that "muntu" signifies the vital force that is endowed with intelligence and will in African ontology as espoused in the interpretation of the African saying *Vidye i muntu mukatampe*: meaning "God is the great Person", alluding that He is the great, powerful and reasonable living force. Therefore, for Tempels, the philosophy of forces in

the theory of life is the guiding principle in the motivation for all African customs that decrees the norms in which personality in the individual shall be kept unaltered or allowed to develop (1959:74).

Tempels further posits that "objective morality to the African is ontological, immanent and intrinsic morality" as their moral standards are essentially dependent on things ontologically understood (1959:120–121). The knowledge to discern the natural order of forces is informed by their natural intelligence and by their philosophical notions of the relationships and interactions between things. Thus, Tempels concluded that an act or usage will be described as ontologically good by the African and will be similarly accounted as ethically good; therefore, by deductive extension, be evaluated as juridically just (1959:121). The knowledge of an individual's moral duty and legal obligations is bound to the pain of losing their vital force, as they know that by carrying out their duties, they will enhance the quality of their being. It is therefore important for the "muntu" to live life in accordance with their vital rank in the community, to make a meaningful contribution to its well-being and maintenance by the normal exercise of their favourable vital influence. This not only exists for members of their community but has to be extended to outsiders as they are equally God's people; and their vital force has to be respected, as the destruction or diminution of an outsider's life is tantamount to the disturbance of the ontological order and the subsequent repercussions thereof (1959:136).

According to Tempels (1959:142–143), evil is conceived by Africans as an injustice towards God and directed towards the natural order which is the expression of His will; and it is also seen as directed to the ancestors in an attempt to act against their vital rank. Accordingly, every injustice is an attempt on the life of a person, whether belonging to the community or a foreigner, of which the attendant malice in it proceeds from the great respect due to human life, the supreme gift from God. Thus, for Africans, real injustice is the harm done to the vital force which accords restitution based in terms of the worth of life, which will serve as the basis of assessment of the damages or compensation. Tempels concluded that the inherent principle in African philosophy is the vital force, with the preservation of the vital force the all-consuming and motivating aim that guides and motivates all their practices (1959:179).

The seminal work of Mbiti (1969), *African religions and philosophy*, set a new intellectual climate for understanding African social and cultural studies from their own norms, internal rules, and within the logic of their own systems. According to Mbiti (1969:1), Africans are notoriously religious with each person having their own set of beliefs and practices, as religion permeates each facet of their everyday life. Through his comprehensive anthropological study of the African traditional concept of God, he concluded that the ontological expression of God for all these people was that He is the origin and Sustainer of all things, the Supreme Being (1969: 29). For Africans, God is simultaneously transcendent and immanent, therefore a balanced understanding of these two extremes is necessary for the discussions concerning African conceptions of God. The knowledge of God by Africans emanates from expressions about Him in proverbs, songs, prayers, names, myths, stories, short statements, and religious ceremonies (1969:29).

Mbiti contends that (1969: 29–38) for Africans, their concepts of God are shaped by the historical, geographical, social, and cultural background or environment of each person. This explains the similarities and differences when considering their beliefs about God throughout the continent. Their attributes of God for an African are difficult to grasp and express, since they pertain more to the realm of the abstract than concrete thought forms, albeit African thought forms are broadly speaking more concrete than abstract. Therefore, many African societies consider God to be omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent in that He knows all things, He is simultaneously everywhere, and almighty. Thus, in a similar vein, God is considered to be merciful, shows kindness and takes pity on mankind by averting calamities, supplying rain, and providing fertility to people, animals and plants.

Mbiti (1969:108) observed that:

> in traditional life the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes his existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. He is simply part of the whole. This community must therefore make, create, or produce the individual; for the individual depends on the corporate group.

The sense of corporate relationship is so deep and perverse that the solidarity of the community must be maintained, otherwise there is disintegration and destruction, and this must be avoided at all costs as this order is primarily conceived of in terms of a kinship relationship. According to Mbiti, most African people accept or acknowledge that God is the final arbiter of all moral and ethical codes as well as the final guardian of law and order. Therefore, the breaking of such an order either by the individual or by a group, is tantamount to condemnation by the corporate body of society (1969:206).

Mbiti concludes that in African societies one can interpret what constitutes a good character as it pertains to the traditional concepts of "good" and "bad" or evil, as it relates to the morals and ethics of any given society. Good character in African ethics shows itself in the following ways: hospitality, generosity, kindness, protecting the poor and weak (especially women and orphans), giving honour and respect to the elderly, with justice, truth, and rectitude as essential virtues (1969:212). Thus, good character is the propensity to accept and adopt the customs, laws, regulations, and taboos that govern conduct in society that obviate, what Mbiti aptly called, a distinction between "moral evil" and "natural evil". "Moral evil" pertains to what a man does against his fellow man and "natural evil" is suffering, calamities and accidents wrought upon others through "natural" causes that are caused by some agent (either human or spiritual) which in African ontology are intricately associated with certain individuals (1969:214–215). Finally, Mbiti warns that the dilemma facing African societies rooted in traditional solidarity and yet increasingly being faced with a rapidly changing world, is to search for new values, identities and self-consciousness based on the time-honoured ideas of their forefathers as being "valuable", "good" and "honourable" (1969:271).

The texts written by Tempels and Mbiti, while viewed from different perspectives and motivations, take cognisance of traditional African morality that is founded on traditional African ontological reflection (a reflection on being). The texts are written, albeit on different planes of understanding, as a sympathetic and systematic account of the worldview of a wide array of traditional African people, in particular, Mbiti's interpretations on African personhood. However, both authors tend to speak of the beliefs of a particular group of African people. They at

least provide an overview of some notable strands of moral thought and practices of sub-Saharan people (Metz 2017:63). Thus, they both shed some light on the discovery of man, of meaning in himself from the reflection on his being and his relation to other beings and how he ought to be. This provided the basis of traditional African morality (Musoke 2018:6). Of particular interest to this study about the texts of Tempels and Mbiti, is that the common ground in African thought of the observed societies is traceable to language, which is the vehicle for thought, and thought being the originator of culture (Cononici 1999:2–3). Therefore, we can advance our discourse by generalising that African thought and culture has common elements on which to base assumptions on African morality, despite the diversity of cultures. This discussion should lead us to explore the historical development of *ubuntu*.

2.2 The historical development of *ubuntu*

The development of *ubuntu* was largely influenced and inspired by the context of social transformation of post-colonial Africa whereby leaders in most spheres of life attempted to identify past values that they believed should inspire politics and life in general in the future society (Gade 2011:304). The advent of Africans gaining sufficient political power post-independence propelled them to attempt to restore their dignity and culture by returning to their traditional, humanist, or socialist values, which has been best represented in recent years by President Thabo Mbeki's propagation of an African Renaissance ideal (Gade 2011:305). Therefore, the promotion of African ethics as a field that is systematically studied started properly only in the 1960s with the advent of literacy and the decline of colonialism, as more often than not, African traditions were largely oral, lacking written documentation of ethical practices (Metz 2017:62).

Gade (2011:315) opines that the historical development and definition of *ubuntu* in "written sources happened during different historical periods" which he (Gade) divided into the:

> (1) period in which *ubuntu* was defined as a human quality; (2) the period in which *ubuntu* was defined as something either connected to, or identical to, a philosophy or an ethic; (3) the period in which *ubuntu* was defined as African humanism; (4) the period in which *ubuntu* was defined as a worldview; and (5) the period in which

> *ubuntu* was defined as something connected to the proverb "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu".

These historical periods indicate that much of the initial material mainly recounted the morals of a given sub-Saharan people, with a hint of a typical Western approach, as a desperate need for Africans to overcome the yoke of colonialism and become familiar with African interpretations of the world, particularly those of their own people. This prompted Wiredu (1992) to assert that "African philosophy must be understood within the context of its emergence with its associative socio-cultural and political milieu". Therefore, it is reductionistic to conceive of African philosophy as merely "ethnophilosophy" as "the authority of African philosophy is the ability to create meaning for a culturally differentiated society, meanings that are not anachronistic but relevant to the socio-political and economic condition of people" (Eze & Metz 2016:75).

Hountondji (1995), in his *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, asserts that Africans may learn philosophy in Western institutions of higher learning abroad or at home and become extremely skilful in philosophical disputation and may even make original contributions in the discipline. However, the fact remains that they are not engaged in African philosophy but rather in Western philosophy. Part of the concerns of contemporary African philosophy has been the controversy of Hountondji's critique of ethnophilosophy that has precipitated and constituted a large discourse. Nevertheless, there is still a pervasive belief among African philosophers that there were unpublished or unrecorded philosophical texts in traditional African philosophy (Mahaye 2018). Wiredu (2016) opines that there are basic human questions concerning people that can only be answered by utilising embedded knowledge in their indigenous thought systems of which the study of such philosophical texts by Africans has not been conceptually illuminating nor has it been eminently critical and reconstructive.

These days, one often finds African ethicists wanting to know not only what merits preserving from their tradition, but also what should be taken seriously by those outside it, with more robust arguments and critical approaches (Metz 2017:63). Metz (2017:63) further contends that scholarship in African philosophy has evolved with the publication of

texts that appeal to deep moral principles from African cultures in order to judge certain common cultural practices to be either matters of mere etiquette or to be downright immoral as evidenced by Wiredu (1996:61–77) and Gyekye (1997:242–258). He (Metz) further asserts that there are texts that seek to develop and defend comprehensive African moral philosophies in contrast to utilitarian, Kantian and Aristotelian grand ethical traditions in the West (Bujo 1997,2001; Gyekye 1997; Ramose 1999; Iroegbu 2000; Shutte 2001; Odimegwu 2008; Metz and Gaie 2010).

The relationship between *ubuntu* and the aphorism associated with it "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*" is no coincidence as it was a desire to find something uniquely African in post-apartheid South Africa in an attempt to transform society by incorporating traditions from the past that were deemed to be noble or worthy. This is reinforced by the observation of Louw (2001:15) that:

> The maxim "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" articulates a basic respect and compassion for others. As such, it is both a factual description and a rule of conduct or social ethic. It not only describes human beings as "being-with-others", but also prescribes how we should relate to others, i.e., what "being-with-others" should be all about.

The principles of *ubuntu* resonate with values of human worth and dignity that are universally acknowledged.

Unsurprisingly, Shutte (1993, 2001) was persuaded by the appeal of *ubuntu* as a guiding principle to harness its usefulness as the foundation for moral theory. Metz (2007:321–341, 2011:532–559), when responding to critics of *ubuntu* as too vague, collectivist and anachronistic, constructed a moral theory of Southern African worldview based on the conception of human dignity that is based on the premise that "human beings have a dignity by virtue of their capacity for community, understood as the combination of identifying with others and exhibiting solidarity with them, where human rights violations are egregious degradations of this capacity". The proponents of *ubuntu* such as Shutte (2001) and Broodryk (2002) have advocated that *ubuntu* should be exported to the rest of the world as Africa's unique gift to humanity (Eliastam, 2015:2). But how should *ubuntu* be understood as a moral concept?

2.3 The definition of *ubuntu* as a moral concept

Designating the meaning of the term *ubuntu* is a problematic and yet tantalising activity as the term resists vigorous exercises to describe it, particularly when interpreted, given the hegemonic, foreign development and civilisation discourse prevailing in the sub-Saharan region (Mawere & van Stam 2016). What *ubuntu* entails is context dependent as the different shades of meaning and presence depend on the geographical, historical, linguistic, and other components that weave together the texture and matrix of societies. *ubuntu* is well grounded and understood in African communities and is also embedded in their cultures (Gade 2012:486).

According to Mnyaka and Motlhabi (2015:216), the origins, usage and contextual development of the word *ubuntu* has often been vague, ill-defined and amorphous; however, most of the sub-Saharan African populace know the word or its equivalent but are not usually able to define it. During the various stages of written sources of the term from the early 1800s through to the present day, different authors have defined *ubuntu* broadly as: a human quality, African humanism, a philosophy, an ethic, and as a worldview (Gade 2011:21). However, African usage reveals *botho/ubuntu* as a significant quality of *motho/umuntu* and is a person who respects other people (Motlhabi 1988:127). Motlhabi and Mnyaka (2005:217) explain that it is difficult to define *ubuntu* precisely. They note that:

> Defining an idea like *ubuntu* is akin to trying to give a definition of "time." Everybody seems to know what "time" is until they are asked to define it or detail its essential characteristic without which "time" could not be "time." This is based on the notion that *ubuntu* is something abstract, [a] non-perceptible quality or attribute of human acts the presence or absence of which can only be intuited by the human mind.

This quality is meant to be acquired by human beings. So "*ubuntu* is not only about human acts, but also about being, it is a disposition, and it concerns values that contribute to the well-being of others and the community" (Mnyaka & Motlhabi 2005:217). Mnyaka and Motlhabi are of the opinion that "*ubuntu* is not only just accepted human qualities but also the very human essence itself, which points to become batho/abantu

or humanised beings who have amicable relationships in the community and the society" (2005:217).

The word *ubuntu* is derived from Nguni and represents notions of universal human interdependence, solidarity and communalism that can be traced back to small-scale communities in pre-colonial Africa, and mostly underlie every sub-Saharan African culture (Roederer & Moellendorf 2004:441). The adage "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" (I am a person through other persons) articulates a basic respect and caring for others. It is both a factual description and a social ethic that not only describes an individual as being-with-others, but also prescribes how one should relate to others, that is, it is all about being-with-others (Louw 2001:15). This places the concept of *ubuntu* within the realm of the contemporary Western philosopher Sartre who asserts that being-for-others is the way that places the individual in the state of possessing equal ontological status with the rest of society (Sartre, 1958:222). It is succinctly expressed as "no man is an island". It is therefore unsurprising that Cornell and van Marle (2005:207) posit that *ubuntu* is "an ontic orientation within an interactive ethic".

These understandings of *ubuntu* coincide with some of the modern perspectives of Western philosophy as espoused by Sartre (1958:370) that being-in-the-world presupposes the existence of the other in that "others are for me as I am for them, and I enter into relations with them much as they enter into relation with me". Khoza (1994) views *ubuntu* as a world in which people share and treat each other as humans based on the underlying "universal brotherhood" of Africans. The practising of *ubuntu* thus unlocks the capacity of an African culture that encapsulates and expresses compassion, caring, reciprocity, dignity, humanity, and mutuality in the interests of building and maintaining communities based on justice and solidarity (Poovan et al., 2006:23–25). Thus, *ubuntu* practises fairness, compassion and values human dignity that governs communal accountability for life's preservation (Chaplin 2006:1). To gain clarity on *ubuntu*, one should rather consider its characteristics.

2.4 The characteristics of *ubuntu*

Ubuntu as a moral concept

Msengana (2006:89) views *ubuntu* as a social value from the African context which is characterised by relatedness, collectivism, communalism, spiritualism, and holism. The relatedness is invoked by the African cultural practices embodied in the principles of *ubuntu* that are dependent on interpersonal relations, which are the basis of tightly woven societal fabric. Hence, collectivism is at the heart of African culture, which by its nature places the importance of the group above the individual as group success is more valued than that of the individual (Msengana 2006:91). Consequently, within the *ubuntu* framework, the autonomy of an individual is submerged into the community as it is understood and practised in that community (Mnyaka 2005:215–37). Mbiti argues that spiritualism is manifested since, "only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his own being, his own duties, his privileges and responsibilities towards himself and towards other people" (Mbiti 1969:108). Thus, holism is founded on African humanism entrenched in *ubuntu* as the universal brotherhood of Africans which, can be described as all-encompassing.

Khomba (2011:130) illustrates that practising *ubuntu* represents an African conception of human beings and their interactions within the community that encapsulates their social behaviours that define their African ethics. However, according to Ng'weshemi (2015:15), "for Africans, one is not human simply by birth. Rather one becomes human through a progressive process of integration into society". This means that human beings are communal beings who cannot be conceived apart from their relationship with others.

According to Sebidi (1998), the collective values of *ubuntu* cannot be compromised as *ubuntu* is not just an attribute of individual acts that build the community, but a basic human orientation towards one's fellow human beings. The notion of *ubuntu* is based on the spirit of hospitality in which people display an unconditional collective hospitality (Msengana, 2006:92). *Ubuntu* suggests hospitality and acceptance of fellow human beings in that it guarantees unconditional dignity through fostering the spirit of unconditional collective dignity and respect (Mbigi 1997:6).

For Lenkabula (2008:381), the collective consciousness of African people is found through theoretical and practical commitments in community life which is often referred to as communalism. This communalism is understood as the expression of justice, wisdom, intergenerational concern, and commitment, characterised by compassion in daily interactions and relations. The traditional African person is a social and community orientated person of whom the community is an embodiment of solidarity with most of the duties being performed by the community. Therefore, the ideal person will be judged by his relationship with others, which can be attributed to his kindness and good character as well as respect and living in harmony with others.

The spirits according to Mbiti (1969:75) "in general belong to the ontological mode of existence between God and man". In African religions, the spirit is one's total being or soul. In *ubuntu*, spirituality is expressed and realised in the manifestation of deeds of compassion, caring, kindness, solidarity and sharing. Hence, these acts produce positive results for the community and the individual (Mnyaka & Motlhabi 2005:227). It is difficult to discuss the social and religious systems in isolation to each other in the African way of life as they are strongly interrelated. According to Mbigi (1997:32–33), in both thought and practice, the organisation of African lives is based and influenced by their religious belief either consciously or unconsciously.

The spirit of *ubuntu* is of no consequence if it is articulated and perceived in the absence of a collective survival agenda as the solidarity embodied in the collective is born out of kinship culture that is the heart and soul of their existence. It is in this solidarity that when he suffers or rejoices, he does not suffer or rejoice alone but with his kinsmen, his neighbours, and relatives, whether dead or alive (Mbiti 1969:108). Therefore, the spirits are seen to actually define and identify the community, as people need to know who they are before they know what they are to become (Msengana 2006:95).

Ubuntu anthropology

In line with the meaning of *ubuntu*, it is important to reflect on *ubuntu* anthropology. Kholopa (2016:8) maintained that *ubuntu* anthropology helps us understand the aspects of the culture and personality, political organisation and social life of Africans as seen from the perspective of

its roots and religion. Haviland (1990:30) defines *ubuntu* anthropological culture as "a set of rules or standards shared by members of a society, which when acted upon by the members, produce behaviours that fall within a range of variation the members consider proper and acceptable". Haviland (1990:30) added that "society is a group of people who occupy a specific locality and who share the same cultural traditions". The significant feature of *ubuntu* is that people learn from families through integration in the family and community. In order to maintain *ubuntu*'s anthropological culture, Haviland (1990:28) states that *ubuntu* must "satisfy the basic needs of those who live by its rules and provide an orderly existence for the members of a society". Indeed, *ubuntu* culture is "the common denominator that brings the actions of the individual intelligible to the community" (Haviland 1990:28). Haviland (1990:28) further argues that "there cannot be *ubuntu* culture without community or society, the two of them are interlinked". Conversely, there cannot be community or society without reflecting on individuals. Accordingly, every community has its own culture that portrays *ubuntu* (Haviland 1990).

Ubuntu in a pluralistic community

Haviland (1990:28) defines the pluralistic society of South Africa as a "society in which there exists a diversity of sub-cultural patterns". He explains that by virtue of the identity of their subcultural dissimilarity, different groups are importantly working with different interpretations of regulations. Admittedly, in a diverse plural society such as South Africa, it is not easy to understand the different benchmarks by which different communities function. For instance, South Africa has people from Asia, the Middle East, Northern and Southern Europe and Africans from within the continent. Hence, on the one hand, they may enrich *ubuntu* if it is explained and practiced well by the indigenous people, but on the other hand, they may distort it if *ubuntu* is imposed on other communities, which may cause distrust among people. This will result in the loss of the essence and the meaning of *ubuntu* and its values.

Therefore, building on *ubuntu*'s anthropological culture, *ubuntu* is learned. It is not inherited. It is worth mentioning that for *ubuntu* culture to take root, there should be an amicable integration among all cultures in South Africa. However, for South Africans to integrate, they need to reflect not

only on behaviours, values and beliefs, but also on the economic, political, and social aspects of cultures and structures that are put in front of them, that is different forms of media, literature or even oral conversation. Therefore, for *ubuntu* to provide a valuable contribution to South Africa with the diverse cultures, races and creeds, the people have to reflect on *ubuntu* so that it can profoundly unite South Africans and continue to preserve the traditional values as past experiences are linked with the present and future realities (Kholopa 2016:8–9).

Despite the values highlighted about *ubuntu*, there are some concerns that are raised.

1. *Ubuntu* concerns and transformation of the concept

Ubuntu, as with all moral values, has its own gradation system and ethical standards that allows its practitioners to make value judgements, even when it refers to moral obligations towards other people. Enslin and Horsthemke (2004) argue that *ubuntu* does not offer practical guidance for ills plaguing Africa. It does not offer solutions to Africa's problems, such as the prevalence of autocratic rule, corruption, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia. We argue that our personhood, by virtue of *ubuntu*, accompanies moral responsibility and ethical demands. We therefore ought to understand our responsibility to those who are marginalised and deprived in society and lacking material goods. It becomes a shared identity of a total personhood of *ubuntu* philosophy (Ogude 2018:5).

Cornell and Van Merle (2005:196) acknowledge that *ubuntu* once had social value, but it bears no relevance to the current situation, especially for the youth of South Africa. Some have argued that it is patriarchal and conservative, and its usefulness has been eroded by its vagueness and its ability to accommodate a range of meanings. Matolino and Kwindwingi (2013:197–200) assert that it is an outdated notion that does not have the capacity to shape the ethics in the current South African context as it is not suited to the social and ethical challenges of the present-day situation, notwithstanding that there is no fault with the ideal of *ubuntu* itself. Furthermore, they argue that *ubuntu* does not treat all people equally since it is a cultural system that relegates women to a lower status, especially when it refers to the regulation of customary marriages, access to land and inheritance rights.

Louw (2001:15–36) and Magezi (2017:111) pointed out that *ubuntu* is characterised by tribal conformity to group loyalty, which when interpreted in a narrow or ethnic fashion becomes corrupted. Thus, in a post-apartheid context, it has been reduced to a form of nepotism, and a system of patronage that is used to pursue power and money (Naude 2013:246). This is especially evident from the dilemma of *ubuntu*'s philosophy, which is expressed in the provision of assistance to "our people" who may well be a range of people close to us, and the obvious danger of choosing the criteria determining who are "our people" and "who is not one of us" (Gathogo 2008:47). It therefore leads one to legitimately question the existence or social value of *ubuntu* in the face of the incidence of rape, murder, child rape and violent acts of xenophobia, corruption, and nepotism in South Africa.

To overcome the weaknesses of unhealthy and negative community influence, Magezi (2017:116) suggested a shift from traditional *ubuntu* to liminal *ubuntu* that entails Christ as the bond for all humanity. The Christ bond promotes inclusiveness, responsibility and moral duty, values, and accountability to public structures, among others. It entails transcending the boundary of community and relationship that is often defined by blood relationship and geographical location in popular and general *ubuntu* discussion. This view of society is reinforced by Mbiti (1969:12) that Africans are found both in *ubuntu* philosophy and in religion, and "that anything that threatens Africans would seem to threaten their whole existence". Bujo (2001:2) further explains that Africans tend in practice to speak about human beings rather than God. This is because one who pays heed to the dignity of the human person also pleases God and that one who acts against the human person precisely offends this God. It therefore follows that the ethical conduct is not only based on the individual but on a relational network that is equally anthropocentric, cosmic, and theocentric.

Tutu (2009:24) noted that *ubuntu* is a theological notion. As a theological notion, it enlightens our humanity's worthiness which is intrinsic to what we do and who we are, because we are created in the *imago Dei*. Furthermore, Meylahn (2017:123) states that *ubuntu* theories are developed from oral traditions of African practices but shaped and informed by Western heritage. It is therefore unsurprising that *ubuntu* is interpreted in

Christian language and permeated by its texts thus becoming very difficult to differentiate from certain Christian interpretations.

2. The interplay of *ubuntu* and hospitality in South African communities

The link between *ubuntu* and hospitality is easy to discern. *Ubuntu* is about community, being with other people and seeking the needs of other people. It is defined by identifying with other people and acting in solidarity with others (Metz 2017). *Ubuntu* exists with its twin, hospitality. For Hernandez (2015:93) hospitality means, "primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place". Indeed, it clearly elaborates that it is an offer, and it renders unconditional respect and awards an honour that empowers others as they certainly deserve the respect due to their dignity having been made in the likeness of God. It is certainly true that "no guest will ever feel welcome when his/her host is not at home in his/her own house". Likewise, no healthy relationship (*ubuntu*) can develop when the community members reach out to others from their forlorn situation, because it can have a destructive result in the long run.

The community becomes a wounded healer, and we argue that it is not only hospitality that is changed in the community, but in addition the community can become a healing community where pain and broken hearts become avenues for a new vision of sacrifice and love (Kholopa 2016:68). Certainly, "the South African community must learn to let things go so that the spirit of love and forgiveness can fill people's hearts for them to learn to accept others" (2016:68). Gooden and Wooldridge (2011:248) assert that "to accept others requires a commitment that might cause one to tolerate and take affirmative action to make the difference in the country".

How can members overcome the problem that easily arises and leads members to view others as strangers and threats? How can South Africans build a hospitable community so that this hospitality is not just a facade but a communal representation of life together in Christ? Hospitality should be practiced by doing or reflecting on things which might look insignificant, for instance supporting the vulnerable, the poor, the marginalised, and the immigrants that flock to the country from the neighbouring countries and from abroad (Kholopa 2016:68). However, such simple gestures, although

they may appear insignificant, can make the difference in the new South Africa. This is because one's individual example of such hospitality can expand to cover the whole community. It is true that love breeds generosity and mercy which leads in turn to hospitality. We argue that in order to be hospitable, the members must acquire a sense of generosity by doing good to others and welcoming foreigners, since our fathers too were foreigners who were exiled during the Apartheid era (2016:68).

Developing the attitude of sharing and of being with others (*ubuntu*), not necessarily of the same tribe or culture, but also those different from them, can make the difference (Kholopa 2016). Newman (2007:183) explains that ""being with" (*ubuntu*) fits with our understanding of worship itself as hospitality, in worship we are welcomed and received, through Christ and the Spirit, into God's triune communion, God's desire to be with us, God gathers us". She emphasises the point that South Africans must reciprocate that desire to be concerned with other nationals.

A Christian response in appreciation to God is to create service (work) for those who have nothing. Hence, there is a need to cooperate with God in order to serve the needs of others, to rebuild the country in a more hospitable manner which is conducive to the contract made by God and the human community. God does not accept people manipulating other human beings who do not possess the economic means for their own survival. He enjoys the human kindness whose actions are an expression of His stewardship (Kholopa 2016:69). Surprisingly enough, Wogaman (1970:239) argues that:

> Protestant ethics portrays a half-truth; the true half is the importance of work in human fulfilment. The false half is the subordination to man to work and, worse yet, the attempt to establish whether or not people are deserving of what God has already given them.

Humans are social and spiritual beings by nature. By drawing on Protestant ethics in South Africa and African countries in general, a major problem has emerged, since only elite blacks remain rich, and the majority poor are suppressed. Unfortunately, ignorance has led these unfair and unwelcome situations to develop and has prevented many from enjoying the fruits of the earth God has given to humankind (Kholopa 2016: 70).

How then do we proceed to understand *ubuntu* in relation to African religion and Christian values to foster effective and meaningful Christian ministry in Africa?

3. Towards hospitality and Christian ethical disposition for effective pastoral care embodiment in Africa

3.1 *Ubuntu*, religion, and convergence of African and Christian values

Africans' understanding and beliefs spring from the world which surrounds them. However, they interpret life given to them by *Molimo* in Sesotho, and *Unkulunkulu* in Zulu languages; that is the Highest One, the Supreme Being. Before the Christian missionaries arrived, this Supreme Being, *Molimo*, had no gender; it was neutral, neither male nor female. Likewise, the *Badimo* ancestors had no gender; it could mean male or female. Hence people's understanding of life was both natural and supernatural and provided the guidance of how to behave and act (Kholopa 2016:42).

Tylor (1990:358) argues that religion is viewed as the belief and model of behaviour by which members manipulate a situation that is beyond their understanding using various prayers, singing, and dancing, offering sacrifices, etc. Gathogo (2016) sees indigenous religion as a "system of beliefs and practices that are integrated into the culture and worldview of the African peoples". In the same vein, Gathogo (2016) believes that, "every person is born into a specific culture that influences a person's religious pattern". Hence, religion is a necessary tool for the members' ethos and culture. Religion offers people ethical values and guides them to hope and provides solutions for people to lead harmonious lives; that is to say, it regulates between right and wrong and nourishes one's spiritual hunger through rituals like meditation, ceremonies, and devotions.

Ubuntu's foundation can be traced to both culture and religion. Seemingly both culture and religion influence each other, just as *ubuntu* has elements of cultural-religious aspects, so Christianity has its Judeo-Roman influences. However, religion also influences politics since human beings are social beings and the organisation of communities is understood as part of the foundation of life. Berger and Buttimer (1976:29) argue that "it has been

seen throughout human history that the maintenance of the community has been the role of religion". We argue that the Africans knew God/the Supreme Being before Christianity arrived in both South Africa and the whole African continent. Indeed, Christianity is a recent religion in South Africa. Mofokeng (1988:38) argues that, "when the white man came to our country, he had the Bible and we [Blacks] had the land. The white man said to us "let us pray". After the prayer, the white man had the land, and we had the Bible".

This, then is how the Christian religion was received and embraced. The above anecdote may, however, have different interpretations. Thus West (2016:143) interprets it using three arguments: Firstly, the Bible is an integral part of a continual process of colonisation, regional oppression, and exploitation. Secondly, Africans acknowledged the unclear contradiction of being colonised by a Christian people and accepting their ideological philosophy. Thirdly, blacks themselves convey commitment in accepting it and passing it on to the next generation. Hence, black South Africans had no problem with the Good News, however, they did have problems with the ideological interpretation of the Bible of the colonisers and missionaries.

Msafiri (2002:86–87) opines that within the New Testament, there are many family metaphors that reflect the relationship between the human community and the Church. Similarly, Paul upholds the Church community as a "household of God" (1 Timothy 3:15). He goes further to say believers are "part of God's household" (Eph 2:19–22). Thus, there are many references in the New Testament that refer to families that signify the beginning of communities, such as the household metaphor in Acts 11:14; 16:15, Colossians 3:18–21, Romans 16:3–5 and 1 Corinthians 16:19. However, these communities were not perfect, just like African communities, but they held together clinging onto their similarities rather than their differences.

Do we find some similarities with biblical communitarianism? There are certainly many instances that indicate identical communal aspects in both *ubuntu* and the Bible. The first correlation is in the gospels. These are narratives describing Jesus with his disciples forming a community. For instance, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, blessed are the poor in spirit and peacemakers (Mt 5:1–12). On the one hand, there are many

places in the gospel where Jesus is with different communities, such as at Cana, and at Caesarea Philippi. Ela (1988:10) posits that there is evidence of communal dialogues, by and through African oral tradition, conversing and listening and passing on values to the future generation through rituals, ceremonies, and purifications. Hence, the communication between Jesus and his early followers could be a form of socio-cultural structure and Jesus opened a mutual path leading to the formation of a community (1988:10).

Secondly, the early Christian community was formed when Jesus gathered disciples together in different places such as on the hillside, on a boat and on the seashore. Hence, there is a resemblance between how the early *ubuntu* community gathered in the past and still gathers today, in some places, under a tree. The people are still connected to nature when they go to the mountains, or the seashore to reflect on God speaking to them. One could say it is one of the best ways to be in tune with God and the present world (Èla 1988:11). Thirdly, we observe Jesus' concern, not only for the particular needs of his region, but also the entire universe. He does not want to deprive anyone, since there is an invitation to every individual to belong to and to participate in the community he founded. Hence, Jesus postulates the great mission by sending his disciples to go out and make many more communities of believers, to heal and baptise them (Mt 28:19–20). Similarly, *ubuntu* commenced with family clans and slowly expanded and planted its values in people's hearts, which suggests that "a person becomes a person through or because of another person" (Gade 2012:486).

But how does the above understanding of *ubuntu*, religion and convergence of African and Christian values assist us in the design and practice of pastoral care?

3.2 Towards a Christian ethical disposition for effective pastoral care informed by *ubuntu* and hospitality – pastoral care embodiment

Pastoral care ministry entails being metaphorically God to people through embodying the characteristics of God, i.e., being under shepherds and representatives of God in the world. To shift *ubuntu* to a Christian informed principle, Magezi (2017) suggests what he called liminal *ubuntu*. He argued that by embracing liminal *ubuntu*, African Christians embody Christ and His values. Embodiment and practice become possible and implementable

when people operate from their natural potentials. *Ubuntu* as a factual description and a social ethic describes a pastoral caregiver as being-with-others where one relates (empathy) to others meaningfully (Louw 2001). *Ubuntu* is about being with others and for others. This entails a ministry of presence, which could be learnt and applied from African *ubuntu* practices. The *ubuntu* worldview can contribute to answering pastoral care needs by utilising embedded knowledge and potentials in indigenous thought systems of African people (Wiredu 2016).

Being with others and for others fosters oneness in society, which ensures one's burden and anxieties are shared and collectively addressed through a community of believers (kononia. Being-for-others is the way that places the individual in the state of possessing equal ontological status with the rest of society (Sartre 1958:222). *Ubuntu* provides a natural potential and foundation by not viewing the task of pastoral caregiving as a theoretical enterprise but a lived and practiced vocation. This perspective and natural African background provides a disposition that encourages positive and quality human interaction and positive regard of other human beings who you identify with. In New Testament theological language, this is denoted by the "one-another" and community (koinonia) formula.

Ubuntu entails a world of brotherhood. Hence, Christ provides superior and universally binding brotherhood, which is liminal *ubuntu* (Magezi 2017). Importantly, Khoza (1994) views *ubuntu* as a world in which people share and treat each other as humans based on the underlying "universal brotherhood" of Africans. As indicated above, *ubuntu* entails compassion, care, reciprocity, dignity, humanity, and mutuality in the interests of building and maintaining communities based on justice and solidarity (Poovan et al. 2006:23–25). Stated theologically, a person who practices *ubuntu* practices "presensing" of God to others, an embodiment of God. A kind of metaphor of "presensing" God in people's lives. The creativity of God to save human beings through incarnation due to his compassion and mystery of identification with human beings indicates modalities of the divine presence of God in the world (Davies 2001:243). Louw (2016:348) explained that "this kind of ministry should be a mode of interpenetration and infiltration within the antinomy and paradox of fear and compassion without the selective morality to side only with one person". Louw

(2016:348) added that this kind of God's "perichoresis of unconditional love is what cura animarum (care and cure of human souls) is about."

Linking embodiment of care through *ubuntu* and hospitality, Louw (2016:348) added that in dealing with other human beings, pastoral care (*cura animarum*) provides an alternative to xenophobia (fear of others resulting in exclusion) but encourages people "to be part of a grassroots movement that keeps the welcoming machine running" for the many marginalised people like refugees.

The notion of embodiment of God to people through energising potential from *ubuntu* natural potential endowment by Africans means pastoral caregivers, like God, become true friends who commune with struggling people. As Metz (2011:539) stated, the morality of Southern African culture as it pertains to interpersonal relationships is summed up by Tutu (1999:35) as "harmony, friendliness, community are great goods. Social harmony is the *summum bonum* – the greatest good. Anything that subverts or undermines this sought-after good is to be avoided like the plague." A person is socialised to think of himself as inextricably bound to others as *ubuntu* promotes the spirit of selflessness as espoused in the scriptures.

Conclusion

The article highlighted that *ubuntu* scholarship has gained momentum in the past two to three decades as African scholars have started taking a keen interest in their own interpretations of their cultures and worldviews. African communitarianism is informed by an ethic of reciprocity as community is seen not as a mere association of individuals whose interests are contingently congruent, but a communal social order whereby there is a sense of solidarity and members of the group have common interests, goals, and values (Gyekye 1997:42–45; Wiredu, 1998:320). In a pluralistic society such as African countries and South Africa, behaviours that are anti-traditional African, like xenophobia, rape, murder, etc, have posed challenges to *ubuntu* and social ethics by lowering the esteem of the community, and as a consequence community members have developed an individualistic philosophy that runs counter to the many traditional African values (Mabovula 2011:39). In this situation, *ubuntu* should be

transformed by Christianity to embrace an *ubuntu* that views people as connected by the bond of Christ, which provides a perspective where one should view all humanity as their neighbour and community. At a practical level, pastoral care in Africa should embrace and embody the positives of *ubuntu* to enable caregivers to seamlessly connect with the Christian "one-another" formula and koinonia.

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