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Address by

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**Transforming Theology and Life giving Civilization-An African perspective of
*Ubuntu***

Africa is such a huge continent and it would be fallacy to claim to be giving an African perspective on a broad subject on African theology which deals with life-giving civilisation. There are varieties of theologies and world views amongst the various African scholars and peoples. What I will be sharing therefore is an aspect from some parts of Africa. Even the word *Ubuntu* used so much in this paper is only used mainly by the Bantu-speaking people of Africa. Be that the case, other peoples of Africa may have similar expressions which describe what I am trying to communicate in this paper.

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Since *Ubuntu* is a challenging concept to explain, this paper will heavily rely on the work done by Desmond Tutu as explained by Battle, Michael (1997) and the work done by Barbara Nussbaum entitled *African Culture and Ubuntu: Reflections of a South African in America as Published by the World Business Academy Perspectives, Volume 17, No 1. Feb 12, 2003*

Nussbaum approaches this term from a variety of perspectives, providing examples from some African leaders, African literature, African philosophy, and African cosmology. Her paper attempts to explain the context and meaning of Ubuntu at the individual level as well as the implications for the wider community. She goes on to indicate that Ubuntu is a “deeply moving yet intangible African soul force”² that has been demonstrated most powerfully by personalities like Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King.

The paper then discusses the potential contribution of *ubuntu* to a life transforming ecumenical theology for the 21st century. In her paper Nussbaum suggests that *ubuntu* could enrich the range of new paradigms emerging worldwide that are currently inspiring business, political and civic leaders to transform organizations. Finally the spirit of *Ubuntu*, if taken seriously, could influence and change relationships between nations. One of the challenges remains, how then can we produce appropriate language for communicating these important images for a life transforming theology?

Mbiti (1991) has indicated that in African cosmology, the world as a sacred abode of the life forces of God, the ancestors, and diverse spirits endow human activity with the necessary sacred disposition. Consequently, the essence of the African ethical consciousness must, and does answer to religious demands. Spiritual beings, ancestors, humankind, living things and all non-living things are enjoined by life-giving and sustaining forces emanating from the very reality of God. The definitive purpose of these forces in our world is ultimately the preservation of humanity and hence the ‘*ubuntu*’ of life.

The interdependency between life-sustaining forces in the universe constitutes the very complexity of African Religion³. It is how these forces are mediated and managed that promotes the abundance of human life. What then would be the kind of spirituality that will give us the confidence to embrace a transformative way of being human in the modern world? If the Church in Africa and by implication the ecumenical movement is to be the place where we can again find

² Soul force is an ideal used by Ali Mazrui in his work entitled the Africans
Mazrui, A. 1986. The Africans: A Triple Heritage BBC lecture series.

³ This assertion is inspired from the seminal work of the Catholic Theologian , Laurenti Magesa i.e. Moral Traditions of abundant Life .

our humanity as a sign of contradiction to the world, then it must be also the place where we embrace the reality of the Church and her institutions as the organic space for reinventing an alternative world in which there is respect for the dignity and integrity of every human person not merely as a creature but a child of God.

This paper is an attempt to interrogate our own faith and the essence of the African Christian vocation on the basis of the inescapable question: How to be human in an inhuman world! The power of religion and the Church in particular in many African societies can not be over estimated. The Church has become in many ways an 'opinion leader' in many issues that affect the lives of its adherents. Sometimes the Church would say no to the use of condoms as a way for family planning or even for the prevention of HIV transmission and people religiously obey that edict. In other cases the Church has stopped some politicians in their greed for power. A case in point is the Zambian situation where the Church joined with civil society and together they were able to force a sitting president not to seek a third term in office. Or indeed the story of how peace returned to Mozambique - it took the Church to go to the bush and speak to the rebels who obeyed the Church leaders and started negotiating for peace and today Mozambique is still turning weapons into plough shares.

On the other hand, if some Christians in the modern world are losing faith in the institutional Church then it means that they do see a contradiction between the claims which the Church makes of herself and the reality of her being in the world. We can extend this very dilemma to the ecumenical movement , how do the related claims of seeking unity not just in a fragmented world but also in a fragmenting ecclesia bring us closer to the reality of who we really are and how we can truly be human as God intended us to be ? This seems to be the key question: How can the Church become a place in which we find our humanity (*ubuntu*) and how can the ecumenical movement be the space in which it is expressed and shared? One basic problem that is often alluded to is that by virtue of her way of expressing a coherent vision for humanity, God and the Cosmos, the Church is often faced with the erosion of confidence and hence lack of authentic language that relates to the realities of the world in which we live. Hence, the problem of theology with regard to the question of life-giving civilization in the 21st century. In this specific area of concern , the problem is not just about the absence of language, rather, it is also about what that language is meant to express in the first place and the power it invokes in relation to the world of ideas it represents .

And this brings us back to the original question, what does it really mean to be human in a world that is not only inhuman but also anti human? And a world in which those who possess the military machine use religious symbolism as a

weapon of naming the enemy in ethical terms? As someone once said, “what do you say to someone who tells you that you should love your neighbour when at the same time he/she is engaged in a scheme of disinheriting you from your land, making you a slave and planning to massacre you and your entire race and population?”⁴ When religious language is used to camouflage evil intentions where else do we go to find the ethical vision for human dignity other than the secularly-inspired approaches?

At a time when the people in what was once considered Christian Europe are losing faith in the institutional church, it is not surprising that the language for human dignity is increasingly becoming secular rhetoric for a new ethic of a just and free world. During the enlightenment Divine authority was replaced by human experience of the observable universe. The world then became the world of self necessity. Absolute freedom became the essence of human nature and therefore the will of the ‘self’ was privileged with unconditional autonomy. But this gradually led to the idea that autonomy includes self negation and contentedly doubting what was once considered theologically to be the ultimate object of freedom. Hence free rebellion against God was considered a virtue and as a validating and humanizing experience. One can trace this increasingly secular ethic as a running thread through history from the renaissance to the French revolution.

It is in this ideological climate that one ought to understand the exclusion of any specific reference to ‘God’ and by extension to spirituality in the formulation of ethical / legal codes in the constitution of the European Union. And the constitution as we know it, is the law of laws i.e. the law upon which all other laws are derived and hence the basis of Human Rights.

And so theological language in the context of the edifices of the enlightenment has increasingly become tired and lost its lustre in public discourse. And yet there are many yearnings for a deeper understanding of a universe without God among secularist. It is this dilemma of affirming the gains of the empirical method on the one hand and meeting the spiritual demands of a secularized complex world on the other hand that constitutes one of the greatest theological questions and challenges of our times. This dilemma can only be cured by a coherent and balanced understanding of our world as distinct and yet deriving her origins and value in God.

Our quest for authenticity, our yearning for a new humanity and a definitive future cannot be without God. And the tremendous thing that has come to me more and more is this recognition of God as Emmanuel, God with us, who does

⁴ Anyanwu, C. (1981)

not give good advice from the sidelines. The God who is there with us in the muck (Desmond Tutu, 2004). In African spirituality it is ethically considered that by conducting one's life and that of the entire community in a manner consistent with the life giving and sustaining forces as preserved in that community's tradition, one is affirming the right to life as primal and essence of being. However, when the right to life and dignity of persons are violated in the community through deliberate wrongdoing an opportunity for the enemies of life to invade the community is actualized. The prime value of a life-transforming theology in this context is to preserve the community from the enemies of life. Hence we endeavour to demonstrate in this paper that the African theology of 'ubuntu' requires re-visioning and renewed articulation on the basis of African theology and Spirituality. As the basis of our common search for a new grounding of a new ecumenical theology we turn to the contemporary civic virtues and asocial structures in modern Africa without which the notions of human dignity would not be fully understood.

AFRICA'S CONTRIBUTION

In this quest for African contribution Nussbaum strongly suggests that, 'Africa has something very important to contribute to the change of heart that is needed in the world'. She goes on to suggest that, this may come about through the contribution of the African social philosophy, *Ubuntu* (umunthu in my language Ngoni from Zambia). She agrees with Desmond Tutu (2003) and other African Theologians that, it is a way of being, a code of ethics, deeply embedded in the African culture. In the midst of these realities, a lead question is eloquently posed by Kwame Bediako (1995): ". . . What possible promises [does] this African [R]eligion hold for moulding and transforming African life in the future [?]" Or, to state the question in a slightly different manner: What would be the effect on life in the African continent if precepts and values of African Religion were at the very least consciously taken into consideration in the development or change process, even if they were not adhered to as formal religious practice? Nussbaum provides what I consider an appropriate response by indicating that 'the underlying values of this extraordinary philosophy of *Ubuntu* seek to honour the dignity of each person and are concerned with the development and maintenance of mutually affirming and enhancing relationships'. *Ubuntu* acknowledges, among other things, that:

Your pain is My pain,
My wealth is Your wealth,
Your salvation is My salvation⁵.

⁵ This is well articulated by Nussbaum and also supported by John Pobee in his book, "Toward an African Theology" (1979).

Nussbaum further asserts that African values have a lot to contribute to world consciousness, but Africa is deeply misunderstood in the West for a number of reasons.

She gives three reasons for that misunderstanding; firstly, much of the richness of Africa's traditional culture is inaccessible since it is oral rather than written, lived rather than formally communicated in books or journals. It is difficult to learn about from a distance.

Secondly, some African political leaders have chosen to betray many of the very philosophical and humanitarian principles on which African culture is based and the political failures in these African countries tend to tarnish the views of many Westerners.

Thirdly, people in the West, for whatever reason, receive negative and limited information through the media -- images of ethnic wars, dictatorships, famine and AIDS predominate, so the potential contribution of African values is often lost in these images.

Nussbaum is convinced (and I fully agree with her) that Africa has something very important to contribute to the change of heart that is needed in the world. The need for this change has become clearer in my own mind since the insecurity which has entered the world since September 11, but also because of the negative effects of a profit-driven economy, the serious problems of global warming and other major global challenges when increasingly there is no doubt that our world must embrace a sense of our interconnectedness as a global community if we are to survive.

ATTEMPTS AT DEFINING *UBUNTU*

Nussbaum defines *Ubuntu* as the capacity in African culture to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony and humanity in the interest of building and maintaining community with justice and mutual caring. (This view resonates with Desmond Tutu (1997), Mvume Dandala (1996), Mugambi, (1992) Kwame Bediako (1995) and other African Theologians)

There are many possible translations in English for *ubuntu*, including

Humanity towards others

I am because we are

I am what I am because of what we all are

A person becomes human through other persons
A person is a person because of others

A popular definition of *ubuntu* is, 'the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity'. An attempt at a longer definition has been made by Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1997 as quoted by Battle, Michael):

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 a 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.

Louw (1998) suggests that the concept of *ubuntu* defines the individual in terms of their several relationships with others and stresses the importance of *ubuntu* as a religious concept. He states that while the Zulu maxim *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a person is a person through (other) persons may have no apparent religious connotations in the context of Western society; in an African context it suggests that the person one is to become by behaving with humanity is an ancestor worthy of respect or veneration. Those who uphold the principle of *ubuntu* throughout their lives will in death achieve a unity with those still living.

Nelson Mandela (1994: 542) explained *ubuntu* as follows:

A traveller through our country would stop at a village, and he didn't have to ask for food or for water. Once he stops, the people give him food, entertain him. That is one aspect of *ubuntu* but *ubuntu* has various aspects. *Ubuntu* does not mean that people should not address themselves. The question is: Are you going to do so in order to enable the community around you to improve?

Nussbaum qualifies that *Ubuntu*, therefore speaks to our interconnectedness, our common humanity and the responsibility to each other that flows from our deeply felt connection. *Ubuntu* is the "consciousness of our natural desire to affirm our fellow human beings and to work and act towards each other with the communal good in the forefront of our minds." (2003)

Munthu ndi munthu cifukwa ca anthu - A person is a person because of others.
Nussbaum has explained that *Ubuntu* can also be said to be a social philosophy, a way of being, a code of ethics and behaviour deeply embedded in African culture. The underlying value seeks to honour the dignity of each person and is concerned about the development and maintenance of mutually affirming and enhancing relationships. Because *ubuntu* embraces and requires justice, it inspires and therefore creates a firm foundation for our common humanity. It has been in existence for thousands of years in most countries of Africa and

continues to lie at the core of intrinsic values in traditional African culture, although in urban areas, such values are being increasingly eroded.

On the other hand Nussbaum acknowledges the sad trend that, the eclipse of *ubuntu* “has darkened the spirits of some modern-day African political systems, and indeed, most countries in the world. However, imagine the potential of *ubuntu*’s sunlight, were it to be embraced as a vital part of the African renaissance and as Africa’s unique contribution to heal a divided and fragmented world.” (2003:)

Nussbaum quotes the former AACC General Secretary Bishop Dandala, who said “*Ubuntu* is not a concept easily distilled into a methodological procedure. It is rather bedrock of a specific lifestyle or culture that seeks to honour human relationships as primary in any social, communal or corporate activity.” *Ubuntu* becomes a fountain from which actions and attitudes flow. Consciousness of what one is able to give and/or receive becomes equally important. The saying *munthu ndi munthu cifukwa ca anthu* (a person is a person because of others) becomes a statement that levels all people. Dandala says it “essentially states that no one can be self-sufficient and that interdependence is a reality for all.”

The South African sociolinguist Buntu Mfeenyana is quoted by Nussbaum that he explains, “*Ubuntu* as the quality of being human. It is the quality, or behavior of ‘ntu’ or society that is sharing, charitableness, cooperation. It is a spirit of participatory humanism.” Kenneth Kaunda the first president of Zambia has expounded more on participatory humanism in his book , ‘A letter to my children’ (1973).

According to Dandala, in its practical manifestation, *ubuntu* could include any actions that express an individual, organizational, corporate or governmental commitment to expressing compassion, caring, sharing and responsiveness to the community as a whole.

The writer believes that the view we have about human happiness is connected to our view of human nature, its needs, capacities and possibilities. The notion of *ubuntu* surely has much to offer in this respect. In particular it would seem to embody a conception of human nature that avoids both the opposed extremes of materialism and dualism of contemporary European thought. Added to that is also an avoidance of both individualism and collectivism in its understanding of the relationship between persons and society. In spite of its insight into the radical dependence of persons on other persons to develop as persons, socialist and communist collectivist conceptions of society are rejected by *ubuntu* as impersonal. Though completely dependent on society for all that they are and do, human individuals cannot be reduced to functions or roles within a

mechanistic or organic whole. Human community transcends any sub-personal model; the best model is perhaps the family.

Some Examples of *ubuntu* in practice

Nussbaum gives two examples of Ubuntu in practice first, President Nelson Mandela's decision to donate one-third of his presidential salary to the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund, which he formed to provide assistance to disadvantaged children in South Africa, is an expression of *ubuntu*.

Further she gives a further example of a tradition called Ukusisa where a family in a rural village would "lend" a cow and a bull to a newly married couple recently arriving in a village and wait until an offspring was produced before taking back the original cow and bull. The offspring would stay with the newcomers, leaving them both with their own "seed capital" and their dignity. This mutually beneficial transaction is based on kindness, but also with the idea of reciprocity, sharing wealth in the interests of building the community as a whole.

Other manifestations of *ubuntu* are that it is taboo to call elderly people by their given names but by their surnames. This has the effect of banishing individualism and replacing it with a representative role, in which the individual effectively stands for the people among whom he/she comes from at all times. The individual identity is replaced with the larger societal identity within the individual. Thus, families are portrayed or reflected in the individual and this phenomenon is extended to villages, districts, provinces and regions being portrayed in the individual. This places high demands on the individual to behave in the highest standards and to portray the highest possible virtues. The fact that society strives for *ubuntu* embodies all the invaluable virtues that society strives for towards maintaining harmony and the spirit of sharing among its members.

Under *ubuntu* children are never orphans since the roles of mother and father are by definition not vested in a single individual with respect to a single child. Furthermore, a man or a woman with *ubuntu* will never allow any child around him to be an orphan.

The concept of *ubuntu* also constitutes the kernel of African Traditional Jurisprudence as well as leadership and governance. In the concept of *ubuntu*, crimes committed by one individual on another extend far beyond the two individuals and has far-reaching implications to the people among whom the perpetrator of the crime comes from. *Ubuntu* jurisprudence tends to support remedies and punishments that tend to bring people together. For instance, a

crime of murder would lead to the creation of a bond of marriage between the victim's family and the accused's family in addition to the perpetrator being punished both inside and outside his social circles. The role of "tertiary perpetrator" to the murder crime is extended to the family and the society where the individual perpetrator hails from. However, the punishment of the tertiary perpetrator is a huge fine and a social stigma, which they must shake off after many years of demonstrating *ubuntu*.

A leader who has *ubuntu* is selfless and consults widely and listens to his subjects. He or she does not adopt a lifestyle that is different from his subjects and lives among his subjects and shares what he/she owns. A leader who has *ubuntu* does not lead but allows the people to lead themselves and cannot impose his/her will on the people, which is incompatible with *ubuntu*.

Stanlake Samkange (1980), highlights the three maxims of *Ubuntuism* which shape this philosophy: The first maxim asserts that 'To be human is to affirm one's humanity by recognizing the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish respectful human relations with them.' And 'the second maxim means that if and when one is faced with a decisive choice between wealth and the preservation of the life of another human being, then one should opt for the preservation of life'. The third 'maxim' as a 'principle deeply embedded in traditional African political philosophy' according to Samkange and also echoed by Nussbaum, 'that a good chief listens to the group and finds the point of consensus. He (most are men) would play a low key role, listen to all viewpoints, facilitate debate and, in the end, summarize and make a decision which is just, preserves dignity and reflects the consensus of the group.'" The phrase, *ufumu ndi anthu* (a chief is a chief by the people), underlies the traditional way in which leaders, through listening to people, understand the place of the common good.

Theological ideas

Clearly the power in question is not one that technology could supply; nor it seems could any political ideology and system. On the other hand in a secular age it is not possible to pin our hopes on supernatural powers or miracles. If power of a kind to realise human solidarity and creativity does exist, it will have to manifest itself differently in our time. This is the challenge that actual religions will have to face: they must find a way of empowering humanity to become a community (in every sphere of human life) and to make the world our common home.

The Church in Africa is yet to seriously face the challenge of secularization but the effects are being seriously faced in the context of the search for a more democratic and just society. Other ideological systems born out of the secularisation process are unable to transcend it in any way, either theoretically or practically. They offer only a limited vision of human happiness, and are unable to achieve even what they offer. The question facing us is whether the religious dimension of *ubuntu* has anything to offer in this context.

How would its conception of the transcendent cope with secular culture? Is it able to find a way between a dualistic other worldliness and the limitations of materialistic secularity? Has it anything to offer to our understanding of death and community with the dead? Is its attitude to ancestors simply part of a superseded sacral world-view which has no place in a scientific and technological culture? Can *ubuntu* offer anything to facilitate dialogue between different religious faiths? These are some of the questions that arise out of a basic question about the religiosity of *ubuntu* in relation to contemporary Africa. Thus, the African struggle for dignity must equip churches and social movements with a renewed ethic of critical solidarity with the poor and the oppressed. Weak economic performance, increasing poverty, climbing debt, declining social capital, general dysfunctionality and incapacity for institutions to deliver public goods are some of the basic characteristics of contemporary manifestations of the African dilemma. While globalization represents the rapid and pervasive diffusion around the world of consumption driven by the logic of private enterprise and market ideology, there is also local tyranny which imposes with impunity the global agenda upon the poor. Thus, the African struggle for dignity brought a new reality of prophetic engagement from the seventies and eighties, equipping churches and social movements with new transformative insights towards critical solidarity with the poor and the oppressed while maintaining critical distance from partisan engagement in politics.

In other words, support for apartheid was considered demonic. The sin of apartheid led to such immoral exclusion and bloodshed of innocent South Africans that the yearning for freedom and liberation from the yoke of oppression could only be contained by the solidarity between the global moral community and the local spiritual forces. That moral and spiritual force could be helpful in a project of transforming theology which is concerned about human dignity as proposed in the philosophy of *Ubuntu*.

Transforming theology for the 21st century using *Ubuntu* is an agenda which needs sustained and critical analysis as well as sustained funding for the theologians to do the writing and relate that to the language which is being used daily in creative positive and life affirming messages.

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