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Paul, the "New Humanity" (Eph 2) and Tutu's Ubuntu Reconciliation Theology in Dialogue

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Abstract

The research examined the complex contextual factors that influence ethnopolitical conflict in Africa. When considering inclusive solutions for the common good, African philosophers and theologians advocate for retrieving Ubuntu as a cultural, communal resource to promote reconciliatory intercultural dialogue in Africa. The proposal is justified, as Ubuntu is an existential African homogeneity in a culturally diverse religious continent. The challenge to articulating Ubuntu from an African religious and Christian worldview is that it intersects with the robust discussion of adopting an uncritical merging of culture and African Traditional Religions, which is inconsistent with Evangelical theology. Many are sceptical about whether Ubuntu can be authentically Christian and African. Despite the testing areas of contention, I argue that it is realistic. The methodological use of a biblical intertextual and interdisciplinary method revealed that a nuanced Ubuntu can be authentically Christian and African. This is therefore A contribution to a cultural resource to encourage reconciliation, curb ethnopolitical conflicts, and foster social cohesion among diverse cultural and ethnic peoples.

Keywords: African Christian theology; Ephesians 2; "The New Humanity"; Paul's reconciliation theology; The *Ubuntu* theology of Desmond Tutu; African traditional religion

Introduction

Reflecting on inclusive solutions for the *summum bonum* (common good), African theologians advocate retrieving *Ubuntu* as a cultural and communal resource to foster reconciliatory intercultural dialogue in Africa. The overarching reasoning is that *Ubuntu* is an existential African homogeneity in a culturally diverse religious continent.

Considering *Ubuntu's* African cosmological nature, can it be authentically Christian and African? The challenge to articulating *Ubuntu* from an African and Christian worldview is that it intersects with the robust discussion of adopting an uncritical merging of culture and African Traditional Religions (ATRs), which is inconsistent with Evangelical theology.[1]

[1] Due to the politicisation of the term "evangelical," it will henceforth be referred to as "orthodox biblical theology."

Considering the complex contextual factors of the prevalence of ethnopolitical conflict in Africa and the complex issue of Christian and African identity, the article navigates several interdisciplinary and intertextual methods.

The first body of research uses a biblical intertextual method to probe the Pauline *corpus* for Christian identity markers. First, it discusses Paul's hierarchy of nested identities depicted in Pauline literature and how it defined his emerging Christian identity. Second, it engages with the *hena kainon anthrōpon* ("one new humanity" Eph 2:15 NIV 2011), one of the most fundamental biblical concepts defining the *Ekklēsia tou Christou* (Church of Christ; a community of Christ believers) in ethnic difference. Lastly, it identifies how the horizontal dimensions of vertical reconciliation impact social reconciliation.

The second body of research defines *Ubuntu* using a biblical interdisciplinary approach. It then discusses the late Archbishop Desmond (Mpilo) Tutu's (1931–2021) *Ubuntu* reconciliation theology as an instrument of peace. Lastly, it evaluates how the biblical worldview of the *ekklēsia, koinonia* (fellowship and communion), and *diakonia* (communal service) relate to *Ubuntu*.

Considering *Ubuntu's* African cosmological nature, reflection is necessary to assess whether it can be authentically Christian and African (e.g., *Sanctorum communio*, the living dead are in fellowship and spiritually connected with the living community). Consequently, the last body of research engages with the robust discussion of continuity *versus* discontinuity with ATRs by biblically interrogating various applicable areas of contention.

African ethnic identity: Solidarity or divisiveness?

Africans are divided into diverse ethnic groups, cultures, and languages, making it impossible to refer to Africa as a monolithic whole. There are an estimated 1000 to 2000 languages, depending on the delineation of language *versus* dialect, making Africa home to approximately one-third of the world's languages. Although ethnolinguistic and cultural diversity is not necessarily divisive, and ethnicity is valuable, the African melting pot of diversity is susceptible to divisiveness and exploitation.

In the past forty years, about 40 per cent of sub-Saharan Africa has experienced at least one civil war (Elbadawi and Sambanis 2002:1–3). The conflicts are primarily between ethnic groups, not states. Without denying the influence of ethnopolitical fragmentation and tribal exceptionalism in conflict areas, researchers concur that many complex contextual factors cause factional conflict in Africa. Further research concluded that the prevalence of civil war in Africa is not just due to extreme ethnolinguistic and cultural diversity but also high levels of poverty, socio-economic conflicts, and failed governmental institutions (Eldabawi and Sambanis 2002).

Throughout history, foreign interference in Africa has significantly caused conflicts that must not be overlooked. The partition of Africa began with the Berlin Conference, which took place from 1884 to 1885 to determine how European countries would claim colonial land in Africa and prevent conflict among European nations over African territory (Fall 2009; Gashaw 2017). A noteworthy impact was the creation of borders by colonial powers for self-interest without consideration for the ethnic and cultural affinities of the land and the consequential effect on local communities. The implication was divided ethnic groups in some cases and combined rival groups in others within the

confines of a single state, perpetually fuelling ethnic confrontation for resources and mobility (Gashaw 2017). The ethnopolitical and socioeconomic implications of historical periods of colonisation and Cold War alliances are still prominent.

Political scientists see religion as an aspect of social identity that defines an individual as part of a social group (Longman 1993:164). It is generally accepted that religion plays an essential role in shaping human consciousness and is an aspect of social identity that defines an individual's perception of belonging to a cohesive social group. Notably religious, this notion applies particularly to Africa (C. du Toit 2009:40–41).

Despite the statistical dominance of Christianity in many sub-Saharan countries, with a Christian population averaging 80 to 90 per cent (Statista 2014) and Africa being the fastest-growing Christian continent in the world, Christianity has not succeeded in reshaping ethnic identity. The persistence of divisions within the churches based on national, ethnic, tribal, and other identities prompts us to question: are we not all part of the "Jesus tribe"? Could biblical literature offer mechanisms for ethnic conflict management? The Pauline literature provides valuable insights into developing an African Christian identity (Lovemore 2016:101, 104–105).

Paul's multiple identities: Toward an emerging Christian identity

Saul was born in Tarsus in the Roman province of Cilicia, the son of a Pharisee (Acts 23:6). He was a Roman citizen by inheritance (22:28). From his biographical statements in Philippians 3:4–6, he was from the tribe of Benjamin, circumcised according to the Jewish Law, and raised as a Hebrew-speaking Jew in Jerusalem, where he received his formative education to become a Pharisee from Gamaliel, a leading Pharisaic teacher of the day (Acts 5:34).[2] The phrase "Hebrew of Hebrews" (Phil 3:5) probably refers to the purity of his genealogy. However, it also echoes his total commitment to preserving the Jewish way of life – "extremely zealous for the traditions of my ancestors" (Gal 1:14) - and living in the diaspora in perfect conformity with the Torah in Pharisaic tradition (Phil 3:6; Acts 26:5).

The fundamental transformation of Saul was his radical encounter with the risen Christ *en route* to Damascus (Acts 9; Gal 1:13). Henceforth, for Saul, to live was to live for Christ (2:19–20; Phil 1:21). Saul, the Jewish Pharisee and persecutor of the Christian movement, became a believer in Jesus as Messiah and apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 9:1; Cor 9:1–2; Gal 1:12–16). What does this mean? Did he cease to be Jewish? As an ethnic identifier and line of descent, no! Romans 11:1 confirms, "I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin." The "Damascus Road" experience did not wholly cut him from his past; however, it gave him a new perspective that redefined his relationship with Judaism (Dunn 2005:177, 261). Such a radical transformation inevitably affected his self-identity. Paul's Jewish identity was relativised; he is now circumcised at heart (Rom 2:29).

On the one hand, the challenge is to harmonise the fact that Paul confesses himself as a Hebrew and Israelite (Rom 11:1; 2 Cor 11:22, 24). It thus can be inferred that he still relates to his historical origins and ancestry (Dunn 1999:178). On the other, he appears

[2] Unless otherwise specified, all Scripture references in this section emanate from the NET Bible Version.

to make a clear break with his past, as evidenced by "my former way of life" (Gal 1:13–14) and that "I died to the law so that I may live to God. I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me." (2:19–20) The point is that for Paul, his new identity is solely defined by his identification with Christ and is no longer defined by ethnic identity or obedience to the Torah, which marked out the distinctiveness of the Jewish people. If Paul died to the Law, it means that the Law is no longer constitutive of his identity; it is now redefined by Christ (P. du Toit 2019b:7).

In Philippians 3:7–9, Paul appears to renounce these old identity markers completely. The emphasis is that Paul's previous confidence in the flesh, referring to his ethnic Jewish identity, is now counted as of no value ("dung") compared to the new relationship with the Messiah. Consequently, Galatians 3 portrays Paul's earthly descent in contrast with his spiritual descent (birth and adoption) through faith in Christ and the indwelling Spirit as the two primary identity markers of being in-Christ (vv. 7, 9, 23, 25–26) and the Spirit (vv. 3–5, 14; du Toit 2018).

A passage that pertains explicitly to identity is Galatians 3:26–29, where the consequence of the new identity is illustrated. Paul states that in-Christ, all believers are sons of God (v. 26). As a result, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female - for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (v. 28), meaning the acquisition of a new identity beyond ethnic, social, and sexual distinctions. The text is a warrant for both diversity and equality. It does not proclaim the obliteration of distinctions but rather the obliteration of dominance. Hence, oneness in-Christ does not mean undifferentiated identity but practices of equality and mutuality amid our many differences (Cosgrove 2006:278).

Paul's literature portrays a hierarchy of multiple identities; however, the "in-Christ-new creation"[3] became his core identity. From Paul's viewpoint, the identity transformation he has experienced is not simply a social construct but rather a new identity formed by the indwelling Christ and the Spirit.

Ephesians: A transethnic and transnational *ekklēsia*

Ephesians 2:11–19 is critical for defining the identity of a Christian believer. The *hena kainon anthrōpon* ("one new humanity" NIV 2011, "new people" NLT) is one of the most fundamental biblical concepts defining the "communal" nature of the in-Christ identity. It is noteworthy that it depicts the body of Christ in terms of ethnic differences (de Carvalho 2023). "While some scholars consider the new in-Christ identity as a *tertium genus* (third race) … the ideology of a *tertium genus* is a jarring imposition on the language of ethnic reconciliation in Ephesians 2." Jews and Gentiles are not races; only one human race exists. Race is a social concept of relatively recent origin, not a biological phenomenon. The language of race carries inherent prejudices (de Carvalho 2023). The notion arises from the text's reference to creating an *ena kainon anthrōpon* of reconciled Jews and Gentiles to God and each other through Christ, consequently ending their hostility (vv. 14–16).

"The context argues for a new corporate entity, the body of Christ consisting of reconciled and united Jews and Gentiles—*Ekklēsia tou Christou* (v. 16). The corporate

[3] Henceforth, referred to simply as in-Christ.

dimension is central in the text; it is group acceptance and reconciliatory peace that is in view." (de Carvalho 2023) Christ became the foundation and the guarantor of genuine peace, between God and us, and then between other people and us … the church is all one family because God's Holy Spirit dwells in us and makes us one." (Hoehner et al., 2016:1724) "Does the resultant peace depend on eliminating the categories of Jew and Gentile, or is it a peace victorious over their differences? The passage celebrates the latter. Consequently, there is no need to press the metaphor so far as to suggest that converts are stripped of their distinctive identities" (de Carvalho 2023).

Gentiles do not become Jews, nor do Jews become Gentiles. Instead, believing Jews and Gentiles become Christians (Hoehner 1985:626). De Carvalho (2023) stresses that by implication:

> what came to an end was the old separatist distinctions for defining membership of God's people, like biological descent, circumcision, possession of the Law, and dietary restrictions to pave the way for harmonious relations, thus putting an end to the historical religious and sociological hostility. Consequently, Paul is not abolishing ethnic differences but repudiating ethnocentric perspectives as grounds for estrangement and discrimination.

Cumulatively:

> Paul's gospel of reconciliation presented in Ephesians 2 was not meant to destroy biological, ethnic or social distinctions nor to create a new group without ethnic identity but rather to transform those who are Gentiles into spiritually renewed Gentiles, and Jews into spiritually renewed Jews, in an ecumenical society - equal and united - that transcends ethnic barriers. (de Carvalho 2023)

P. Du Toit (2019b:8) correctly approaches the new identity in-Christ as a theological reality rather than a socially created identity that directs theology. The in-Christ identity is not just an anthropological reality but also a theological reality. "The implication is that this reality transcends human modes of identity but does not transmute them because the term is purely theological, not ontological. This spiritual existence is not just an eschatological dimension; it invites the community into a transformed anthropological reality, a 'new self' (Ephesians 4:24, NIV 2011)" (de Carvalho 2023).

Traditionally, scholars have studied the in-Christ identity through the lens of Social Identity Theory (SIT). Considering the divine element of Paul's integrated social reality, the theory appears inadequate. A refinement of SIT is Social Identity Complexity Theory (SICT) to navigate the intricacies of a high social identity complexity. In SICT, four alternative forms of identity structure exist: intersection, dominance, compartmentalisation, and merger. The overlapping nature and complexity of Paul's identity, which developed into the "dominant" in-Christ identity, imply that it includes but transcends social dimensions of identity (see §2.4–6). P. Du Toit (2014:10) succinctly describes as follows:

> The in-Christ identity is probably most reminiscent of the dominance model in that the new identity in Christ constitutes a new, dominant reality to which all other identities are subordinated to. But other than the dominance model as explained in SICT, ethnic identities are not fully retained but transformed in Christ. Judaeans and Gentiles retain their cultural distinctiveness to a certain extent. In Christ, cultural markers of identity could be retained as long as they are morally neutral (esp. in the case of gentiles) or do not constitute covenantal separation or difference.

Consequently, the *hena kainon anthrōpon* comprises people maintaining ethnic, sociocultural, and gender identity designations. These designations coexist as mere social identities, maintained but redefined in terms of equal status in God's economy and by the dominant in-Christ identity. In the *hena kainon anthrōpon*, Jewish and Gentile peoples retain their ethnic and cultural distinctiveness to a certain extent. Ethnic and cultural identity markers are maintained if they are spiritually neutral. Notably, elements of the Jewish identity were not merely cultural but had theological significance under the Old Covenant with social implications (P. du Toit 2024:7). Consequently, ethnicity is not erased but preserved in a qualified way; it is relativised and redefined by the dominant in-Christ identity. The implication is that self-definition must realign with the dominant identity. Therefore, if a conflict arises, all claims of self-identity must yield to the imperatives of the gospel.

Social impact of Paul's gospel of reconciliation

Although the word reconciliation is used sparingly in the New Testament, the idea is inherently part of Paul's theology. The language of reconciliation is mainly found in the Pauline *corpus* (2 Cor 5:18–21; Rom 5:8–11; Col 1:20–22). Traditionally, the church has viewed Paul's presentation of reconciliation as referring primarily to the relationship between humanity and God while, to some degree, neglecting the implications for relationships among humanity. I argue this is reductionistic because reconciliation's vertical and horizontal dimensions form an inseparable reality. A convincing case in point is a contextual analysis of Paul's discourse flow of Ephesians 2:15. The primary orientation of verses 1–10 is vertical: God's work in Christ, and the primary orientation in verses 11–22 is horizontal: reconciliatory peace with significant social–ethical ramifications.[4]

On the one hand, Paul encourages believers to accept one another and express their love through mutual service, as is fitting for members of the body of Christ (Rom 12:3–8). On the other, he instructs believers to treat outsiders in the same manner: to bless those who persecute them, to avoid seeking revenge, to live peacefully with everyone, and to overcome evil by doing good. Thus, there is no separate standard for behaviour within the church and a different one for public life. Vorster (2018:3) succinctly describes the concept through the metaphor of concentric circles: the inner circle points to a new relationship with God. The second circle indicates the relationship between Christians.

[4] The concept of *apokatallassō* ("reconcile" 2:16) is expressed by a unique compound verb rather than the usual terms *katallassō* and *katallagē*. Thielman (2010:171) states that the variation probably only intensifies the word rather than changes its meaning—verbs with a preposition compounded are "intensified" forms.

The third circle designates all people's renewed relationship, resulting in the quest for peace. The outer circle signifies a new relationship with creation.

Reconciliation starts with the missional ministry of the church, where humanity is called upon to reconcile with God (Matt 28:19; 2 Cor 5:18). However, the church is also called to engage in public life in ways that make God's gift of reconciliation a reality through various secondary expressions. Secondary expressions should shape the church's social responsibility and depict a unity and social cohesion model that radiates all the values emanating from God's reconciliatory actions towards a stable society. Paul's message of reconciliation provides a framework and a vision for public life that enables individuals to embrace "otherness" and "difference" while promoting a culture of forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace.

Ubuntu as African solidarity and collective consciousness

Ubuntu is an isiNguni word that defines a concept that encapsulates a unified vision of interdependent individuals in an integrated community. It is an ethos of mutual support in which individualism harmonises with social responsibility and communal interdependence—an authentic value system of being African. The strong sense of fellowship and community is expressed by the maxim *"ubuntu ngumuntu ngabantu"* (isiZulu), or *"motho ke motho ka batho"* (setswana), which translates as "I am because of others" (Mzondi 2017:32). In the words of Tutu (1999:35), "I am a human because I belong. I participate, I share." Tutu (1999:31, 34–35) states that when we want to praise someone, we say so–and–so has *Ubuntu*. Conversely, those who deviate from *Ubuntu* to embrace other cultural values are considered to have lost their cultural identity (Mzondi 2009:38). Although expressed differently by African scholars, Mzondi (2017:33) synthesises them into six typical values: community, respect, sharing, caring, belief in a divine world, and a vital moral force. Nyamayaro (2021:123–124) refers to *Ubuntu* as the "essence of who we are as Africans, a lesson we learned from our ancestors, who understood that we are all part of one human family. We need each other, and we are responsible for each other ... *Ubuntu* means: I am because we are, and because we are, you are."[5]

Bolden (cited in Tutu 2014:2) called *Ubuntu* "the gift that Africa will give the world" and, along with others, has called for a more comprehensive application beyond Africa. *Ubuntu* has been applied in Sweden to promote intercultural dialogue. In Denmark, *Ubuntu* is being used in conflict councils to resolve labour disputes (Mzondi 2014:192). From a rural village in Zimbabwe, Nyamayaro (2021) fulfilled her dream of becoming a humanitarian, eventually working at the United Nations as a senior adviser on gender equality and launching "HeForShe," *Ubuntu* provided the rationale for her success.

Ubuntu, as ethnotheology, is not a formal corpus of doctrinal knowledge. African communal tradition is still predominantly oral: storytelling, poetry, music, proverbs, dance, and other such activities keep it alive in everyday life. In *Ubuntu*, there is no

[5] *Ubuntu* is not without stern critiques. Addressing the propensity of xenophobic attacks in Africa, Sule (2022:63) asserts that "*Ubuntu*, in its ontological rendering, has not played significant roles in shaping the socio-political and economic activities on the African continent." Part of the argument is that because communities are kinship-based, there is a definite distinction between insiders and outsiders.

distinction or separation between religion and other areas of human existence. *Ubuntu* is a way of life that integrates the physical and the spiritual—in African ontology, God, spirits, man, animals, plants, and inanimate creation exist in unity. Mbiti (1970:1) adds, "religion permeates into all departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible to isolate it." Without religion, individuals risk isolating themselves from society, and African people find it difficult to exist without it. Consequently, *Ubuntu* is not just a relational, communal philosophy; it encompasses a deep religious meaning; hence, much more than just a "believing way of life," it is a "way of life." This way of life is expressed in the word *Ubuntu* - the prefix *"ubu"* and root *"ntu"*- *"ubu"* refers to the abstract, while *"ntu"* is the ancestor who spawned human society and gave them their way of life (Mzondi 2014:140).

Archbishop Desmond Tutu's *Ubuntu* theology

Tutu's reconciliatory *Ubuntu* theology is distinctive in its search for an authentically Christian and African identity. It attempts to harmonise *Ubuntu* and biblical reconciliation theology. Tutu's vision of community and the realisation of the "rainbow people of God" were expressed in his Christian and African spiritual heritage.

Battle (1997) spent over a year in residence with Tutu and has extensively researched his *Ubuntu* reconciliation theology. He claims that Tutu's theology of an inclusive community and the realisation of the "rainbow people of God" were expressed in his Christian and African spiritual heritage.

The Rainbow People of God: The Making of a Peaceful Revolution (1994b) is Tutu's theological vision grounded in a profound faith in the God of the Bible, who has created all human beings in the *imago Dei* (image of God). He articulates that reconciliation is the central work of Jesus, who effected reconciliation between God and humanity. This message directs us to "proclaiming God's love for all his people through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord." (p. 63) To achieve reconciliation, we must be instruments of peace as ambassadors of Christ, entrusted with the message of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18–21).

The book *No Future without Forgiveness* (1999) is Tutu's defence of his *Ubuntu* theology of reconciliation and the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The theological theme throughout the book is the firm belief in the God of the Bible, who revealed himself by creating humans in the *imago Dei* and reconciliation through Christ.[6] This theme serves the book's twin motifs of forgiveness and reconciliation. The commission was deeply rooted in the principles and the social values of *Ubuntu*; Tutu advocated restorative justice – the central concern is not retribution or punishment but

[6] Tutu's understanding of reconciliation through Christ is appreciated because *Ubuntu* is consonant with the golden rules in Matthew 22:39, which calls us to love our neighbour as ourselves, and Luke 6:31, which calls us to treat others as we would want to be treated (6:31). Consequently, *Ubuntu* appeals to only the golden rules (Matt 7:12, 22:39). However, it is noteworthy that the pericope in Matthew 22 emphasises another commandment, the greatest commandment, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." (v. 37): Tutu (1994a:70) makes it clear that "These are two sides of the same coin. The one without the other was unacceptable."

healing and restoration in the spirit of *Ubuntu* - which he considered characteristic of *Ubuntu* and the Christian ideals of forgiveness and reconciliation (p. 51).[7&8]

Battle (1997:5) clarifies that Tutu's *Ubuntu* reconciliation theology starts with the biblical account of God's creation (Gen 1:26–27), in which the *imago Dei* defines human identity. In this respect, he stresses that this is the best of Tutu's theological model, emphasising the sacredness of creation and recalling *imago Dei* amid human conflict as an instrument of peace. The implication is that our worth and dignity are intrinsic to who we are in the *imago Dei,* depending on nothing extrinsic, like biological characteristics. – It is then blasphemy to treat humanity as if they were less than this(Tutu 1994a:64; 1994b:92). The implication is that our worth and dignity are intrinsic to who we are in the imago Dei, depending on nothing extrinsic, like biological characteristics. It is then blasphemy to treat humanity as if they were less than this (Tutu 1994a:64; 1994b:92).

Tutu's understanding of the qualities inherent in the Christian community develops around the principle of *Koinonia* (Battle 1997:30, 92). Tutu referred to it in his Nobel Peace Prize speech when describing the ideal relationship of Christians, one to another and, by extension, every human being, that transcends the realms of political and social constructs and traditional differences.

The biblical concepts of *koinonia and diakonia* share the concept of community with *Ubuntu* (John 15:12; 1 Cor 5:7, 12:12, 25–27; Gal 5:22–23, 6:2; 1 Tim 5:4; 2 Cor 5:18–20; Eph 2:14, 4–32; 1 Peter 4:7; Rom 14:17–19; Luke 10:30; Matt 5:43–44). The concept resonates in the Old Testament with the Hebrew term *hesed*. This term, like *Ubuntu*, is polysemous and conceptual and thus cannot be easily translated into English. Like *Ubuntu*, it embraces spiritual and communal interests. *Hesed* encompasses God's covenantal love and faithfulness to humanity and between humans (Douglas et al., 2014 LTW s.v. *"hesed"*). How do the biblical concepts of *koinonia* and *diakonia* relate to *Ubuntu*? Breed and Semenya (2015:6) define it as follows:

> Koinonia and diakonia define a person in the first place in his or her relationship to God in Christ through the work of the Spirit. A person's relationship to God will become clear from the way he or she lives and from his or her relationship to the other children of God (1 Jn 3:14–17) and to the world. The way Christians live should invite other people to become part of their koinonia with God (1 Jn 1). The common ground between Ubuntu, koinonia and diakonia is that a person cannot think of him or herself as a being that is totally separate from the community and live selfishly. The Christian who is also part of the culture of Ubuntu will be able to live this principle of Ubuntu in the light of koinonia and diakonia.

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7 *Ubuntu* appeared in "The Interim Constitution of South Africa, Act 200 of 1993." The Interim Constitution recognised that despite past injustices, there "is a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, and a need for *ubuntu* but not for victimisation" (postamble Act No 200 of 1993).

8 Tutu's synthesis of *Ubuntu* and Christian ideals at the TRC has attracted criticism. Kobe (2021:4) argues that "the most remarkable example of the lasting effects of the settler-colonial church was witnessed at the TRC."

The challenge of conceptualising *Ubuntu* as a Christian theological concept is its underlying African spirituality. The issue is that *Ubuntu* is not just ethnophilosophy but also ethnotheology. This means that *Ubuntu* is rooted and integrated into a holistic African religion and spirituality in a socio-cultural-religious context where there is no distinction or separation between religion and all other areas of human existence (see § 5.3). Mbiti (cited in Bediako 1999:330) poignantly points out that the fivefold categories of African ontology—God, spirits, man, animals, plants, and inanimate creation exist in unity, so to break up that unity or destroy one or more of these modes of existence is, in effect, to destroy them all. The concern is the lack of biblical support for the community interface with the ancestors and other cosmological divinities, spirit beings, and inanimate creation, which occupies a central place in ATRs. In ATRs, the ancestral community – the living dead – is in fellowship and spiritual connection with the living community. Mbigi (cited in Mzondi 2017:41) offers a descriptive definition of the ancestral worldview that succinctly typifies the challenge:

> The ancestral spirit will constantly come back to look after the living relatives as an invisible energy centre. The ancestral spirit may enter and occupy people, places, animals and trees. Ancestors are always alive, without bodies, and still play a major part in our social life. We have to venerate them because they can act for either good or evil on behalf of those who are still living in bodies. The belief in the spirit and reincarnation is central in our African way of life, consciously and unconsciously. Spirit possession by ancestors is a common event and sight in our life. As blacks we live and act in a religious and spiritual world. Our social and religious systems are strongly interrelated, so that it is difficult to discuss one without the other.

The concerning contention is that for Christian theology to be African, it cannot neglect African religion and spirituality. Bediako (2004:89) articulates the conundrum by stressing that the centrality of the Bible and the uniqueness of the biblical God left African theology without the "wider spirit-world of African primal religions - divinities, ancestors, natural forces - unaccounted for." Integrating this "omission" with African Christian theology requires biblical investigation.

African and Christian theology: Disputations

Early Christianity flourished in North Africa, Egypt, parts of the Sudan, and Ethiopia. It was a dynamic form of Christianity, producing great scholars and theologians like Tertullian, Origen, Clement of Alexandria, and Augustine (Mbiti 1970:2). The African continent had a religious experience before Christianity and Western missionaries arrived. Bediako (1999:21, 314) qualifies that African theologians have consistently shown God's continuity from the pre–Christian African past into the Christian present. Mbiti (1975), regarded as the father of African theology, clarifies that, in many ways, African religion prepared the way for the conversion of the African peoples to Christianity. Idowu (cited in Bediako 2004:30) believes that the African understanding of God is "hardly distinguishable from the Biblical account of God." Idowu further asserts that the "problem of theology in the African Church comes to focus on finding 'the bridge' between the old and the new in the African religious experience." The contention is that for Christian theology to be indigenously African, it must maintain a

continuity with the fundamental element of African self–identity without neglecting the African religious, spiritual, and cultural heritage from the past.

Bediako (2004:21; cf. 1999:310) appeals that, like "Paul, they [African theologians] have assured us that our Christian conversion is not an introduction … to a new God unrelated to the traditions of our past, but to one who brings to fulfilment all the highest religious and cultural aspirations of our heritage." The implication is that the coming of Christianity was akin to what was already on the ground and that the God of Christianity is the same as was worshipped in ATRs. According to, Sharkey and Weinandy (cited in Magezi and Magezi 2016:7), the "contention against Bediako is that God solely reveals himself salvifically in Judaistic religion" as a preparation for the gospel in a salvific sense. Foday-Khabenje's (2023) reflection on ATRs as a preparation for Christianity is apt, as he points out the reality that although Christianity emanated from Judaism, most Jews have not embraced the gospel of Christ. Magezi and Magezi (2016:1) argue that God's general revelation in all pre-Christian traditional religions is not preparation for the gospel. Adding his voice to the discussion, Tachin (2018:34) states that the theological argument is not about the knowledge of God that is intuitive or evident in nature (Rom 1:20) but that there is a difference between the natural knowledge of God and the redemptive knowledge of God. Scripture attests that creation reveals God, and he can be known (Ps 19:1; Rom 1:19–20), but it also affirms that sin has been a significant inhibitor to this knowledge, so it is a distorted experience of God by the futility of the human intellect (1:21). "God's design for natural revelation" was for it "to be only a pointer to the Creator rather than soteriological" (Kato 1971:123).

Developing a Christology relatable to the ancestral worldview also requires biblical investigation. The approach addresses Christ's foreignness in African spirituality by generating a point of contact to bridge Christology to the African religious experience. A Christology relatable to the ancestral worldview associates Jesus as a proto–Ancestor or Great Ancestor. The attempt to compare the relatable characteristics of Jesus as a proto–Ancestor with the ancestors is inadequate; ultimately, Christ is very different because he is infinitely superior in every characteristic – ancestors are incomparable to the unique God-man as a sole intermediary to Jehovah, who provided the ultimate universal and final redemptive sacrifice (Falconer 2024).

Bujo and Nyamiti (cited in Magezi and Magezi 2016:1) "also designate the ancestral category to Christ because they view the traditional African ancestors as the forerunners of Christ." In Bujo's view, Jesus Christ is "the ultimate embodiment of all the virtues of the ancestors, the realisation of the salvation for which they yearned." Kunhiyop (2008:138) articulates the following response:

> It can be said that Jesus has come to fulfil our African ancestral cult and has taken the place of our ancestors, replacing them with himself. Because Christ fulfilled all laws, including those related to our ancestors, the rituals associated with veneration of our ancestors are now null and void. Christ has assumed all the functions our ancestors fulfilled in traditional beliefs. He is the only mediator between God and humanity (1 Tim 2:5) and he is able to sympathise with us and intercede on our behalf in all areas of life.

The positions presenting Jehovah as the same as the God worshipped in ATRs, – establishing ATRs as preparation for Christianity in continuity from pre-Christian Africa into the present, and formulating contextualised Christology from an ancestral worldview – are divisive, fuelling the emotive controversy of syncretism, religious relativism, and universalism.

There are opposing views: The discontinuity camp maintains that becoming a Christian means becoming a new person with a different identity from one's original cultural identity (see §3.6). The opposing faction sees conversion as comprising substantial continuity. Others attempt to find a middle ground between the two positions. However, this middle ground is challenging to pinpoint as African scholars pursue and articulate it to varying degrees.

A case in point is African churches reflecting various degrees of inculturation, which are forming new, entirely Indigenous churches with appreciated liturgy reforms, for example, preaching less formally and presenting in a more spontaneous oral form that ministers to the needs of the Africans. Worship includes aspects of African religious experience, exuberant, loud indigenous worship, and the adoption of local hymnology and instruments that include expression associated with movement and action, such as playing percussion instruments, clapping hands, dancing, and rejoicing. Communicating the Word of God in Indigenous languages provides dimensions of perception that are non-existent in English (Kgatle 2023).

As previously stated, Africans are divided into diverse ethnic groups, cultures, and languages, making it impossible to refer to Africa as a monolithic whole. The implication is that ATRs cannot easily be defined, as many regions and communities have different concepts of God and religious practices, even though they may share some familiar characteristics (Foday–Khabenje 2023), hence the plural when referring to ATRs. African Independent, Indigenous, Instituted, Pentecostal, and Evangelic churches constitute Africa's fastest-growing churches. African diversity is directly proportional to the diversity of these churches. Thus, achieving consensus on what a contextual African variant of Christendom should look like challenges Christian theologians in Africa. This includes agreeing on which positive elements of African cultural heritage are compatible with orthodox biblical theology. Mburu (cited in Foday-Khabenje 2023) accentuates the challenge further by pointing out that many African Christian theologians assert the Bible's centrality. Still, their interpretation and application are dubious because of the dominant influence of African traditional worldviews on biblical interpretation.

A contextual appreciation of the cultural and spiritual heritage relevant to Africa encourages the recognition of the kingdom of Christ and God as a spiritual kingdom. This understanding lays the foundation for an ecclesial pneumatological community and creates connections that pave the way for the conversion of African peoples to Christianity. However, Kato (1975) sounded the alarm about the theological pitfalls of syncretism. He affirms that Christianity, to be genuinely African Christian theology, allows the Bible to judge African culture and never allows culture to take precedence; otherwise, it will isolate African Christianity from its Bible-based historical context (Kato 2004:138, 134). Kato is not against culture; like any other culture, it exists in a fallen world, and is thus tainted by sin and needs to be redeemed. He points out that Africans do not have to embrace all religious and cultural beliefs and practices to be genuinely African. He championed an African Christian identity, using the phrase

"Christian African" rather than "African Christian" to prioritise the in-Christ identity over ethnic identity (Kato 1975:175–177, 182).[9]

The alarm raised by Kato was echoed by Smith (2025) in his keynote address. Smith lamented that African biblical studies had become increasingly dominated by reader–response hermeneutics, prioritising cultural accommodation over the author's intended message as the only locus of meaning. This approach starts from the African worldview and adjusts biblical concepts to fit it. This hermeneutical lens threatens African Christian theology. Smith, like Kato, proposes that the literal approach to interpreting the Scriptures is the only valid methodology to form theology in any context. Kato points out that the error in attempting to decolonise Christianity is lumping Christianity with Western culture and repudiating both (Kato 2004:133). Most certainly, calling forth a brand of liberal theology and calling it African theology is not the solution; getting rid of the Western cloak is not to cloak Christianity with ATRs.

Conclusion

The article's preamble affirmed that cultural diversity is not necessarily divisive. However, the high level of ethnolinguistic and cultural diversity in Africa is susceptible to divisiveness, leading to conflicts based on ethnopolitical differences.

The Pauline literature offers insights into the complex issue of the development of Christian identity. Paul's hierarchy of multiple identities, which formed his emerging Christian identity, is prescriptive. Paul's diverse identities developed into a dominant in-Christ-new-creation identity. The new identity constitutes a reality in which all other identities are subordinated. Therefore, ethnic and cultural identity markers are maintained if they are spiritually neutral. Consequently, ethnicity is not erased but preserved in a qualified way; it is relativised and redefined by the in-Christ identity.

In Ephesians 2, Paul further defines the collective/communal nature of the in-Christ identity as a *hena kainon anthrōpon* (v. 15), one of the most fundamental biblical concepts defining the *ekklēsia* in ethnic difference. Paul presents the communal in-Christ identity as ending old separatist distinctions and paving the way for reconciliation, thus ending historical, religious, and sociological hostility. Paul's presentation does not destroy ethnic differences; instead, it repudiates ethnocentric perspectives as grounds for estrangement and discrimination. Paul was the architect of a church in which divisive ethnicity is overcome, giving way to a new reconciled humanity—equal and united—that transcends divisive ethnic barriers and typifies unity in diversity. Living out the in-Christ identity has significant socio-ethical relevance. The social implications offer a framework of hope and a vision of public life that enables people to cope with "otherness" and "difference" and promotes a culture of forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace.

Ubuntu's insistence that personhood is constituted through community only parallels, to some degree, the biblical affirmation that Christian community develops around the

[9] The cultural and religious challenge posed by the Greco-Roman gods and the veneration of Emperors, which resembled worship in the second-century, continues to exist in contemporary society. It is important to remember that we are not the first Christians to turn against objects, practices and spiritual affinities inconsistent with Apostolic teachings (Acts 8:9–25, 16:16–18, 17:16–31, 19:23–34).

biblical principle of *Koinonia*. The challenge of conceptualising the communal aspects of *Ubuntu* and the Christian theological concept of Koinonia lies in the fact that its underlying African spirituality remains in tension with biblical pneumology that undergirds *Koinonia*. *Ubuntu* in traditional settings is inherently inclusive, often assimilating external religious practices into communal life. Christianity, by contrast, proclaims universality in Christ with the exclusivist claim that affirms Christ as the sole mediator (1 Tim 2:5) and that reconciliation with God through Christ is the only foundation for renewed community.

Tutu's *Ubuntu* reconciliation theology is distinctive in seeking an authentically Christian and truly African identity. It attempts to harmonise *Ubuntu* and [Paul's] biblical reconciliation theology towards a reconciled society. He affirms that reconciliation is the central work of Jesus, who effected reconciliation between God and humanity. Tutu's understanding of *Ubuntu's* qualities shows appreciation for the biblical principle of *koinonia*. Tutu's *Ubuntu* reconciliation theology develops from the account of God's creation, in which the *imago Dei* and creation's sacredness define humanity and are instruments of reconciliation and peace. This peace transcends the realms of political and social constructs and traditional differences.

Despite the contentious issues raised in the article, embracing *Ubuntu* as a cultural, communal resource to promote intercultural reconciliation can be both authentically Christian and African. A nuanced understanding develops from Tutu's *Ubuntu* reconciliation theology, which aligns with Paul's principles of reconciliation. This approach is viable if it does not syncretise with African socio-cultural-religious praxis that conflicts with orthodox biblical theology. The key idea is that Africans need not adopt all religious and cultural beliefs to be genuinely African. Apart from promoting intercultural reconciliation, *Ubuntu* is a natural bridge for contextualising Christianity in Africa. This is a contextualisation that presents the story of the gospel to people influenced by the *Ubuntu* worldview, which resonates with Africans as a missional vehicle.

Mzondi (2017:87, 96) succinctly articulates the article's conclusion, citing Krog, who describes African evangelical leaders as operating with two souls, "a tendency simultaneously adheres to the *Ubuntu* values of respect, community, sharing, care and security/*isithunnzi*, as well as Western values." These church leaders consider themselves Christians, who are not *"abantu bamasiko"* – a people who adhere to cultural practices and customs. Mzondi describes these leaders as embracing elements of *Ubuntu* that benefit the community yet exclude "the role and authority, mediation, and healing attributed to ancestors and substitute with the God of Christian Bible," who, unlike the God of mainstream church, sincerely sympathises with the plight of oppressed masses in South Africa.

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