African relational ontology, individual identity, and Christian theology

An African theological contribution towards an integrated relational ontological identity

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African theology has a great deal to contribute to the theological discourse on human identity. Relationships are central to the formation, expression and understanding of who an individual person is. The African philosophy of ubuntu, more accurately expressed as umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu *(a person is a person through other persons), affirms the critical understanding that identity arises out of intersubjective interactions between persons. This paper discusses how concepts of identity in African philosophy and religion can enhance our theological understanding of individual identity. Hence this research presents an African theological approach to identity that is systematized in relation to the doctrine of God, the doctrine of Christian anthropology and the doctrine of salvation.*

Introduction

Research into human consciousness and individual identity is very much in vogue in the academy at present. In a wide range of disciplines scholars are seeking to approach the mystery and complexity of human consciousness and individual identity from different angles, each attempting to add some new insight and further our knowledge of the human self. Theologians are among those who are contributing to this discussion. However, since these discussions are primarily interdisciplinary, with an emphasis on scientific, philosophical and theological discourse, the contributions come predominantly from theologians in the western world.

John Mbiti writes the following telling line in the preface of his groundbreaking book *Concepts of God in Africa*: 'African peoples are not religiously illiterate.'[1] This statement would seem to express an element of common sense. However, the reality is that most theological debates, and particularly interdisciplinary debates in theology and science, are dominated by insights and wisdom that come from Europe and America.

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There are many, including myself, who share Mbiti's perspective that Africa has a valuable corpus of theological insight to offer to the world, particularly in relation to debates on identity and consciousness.

One of the most courageous leaders during the South African struggle for liberation from apartheid, Steve Biko, wrote these words before his untimely death:

> [Members of western society] seem to be very concerned with perfecting their technological know-how while losing out on their spiritual dimension. We believe that in the long run the special contribution to the world by Africa will be in this field of human relationship. The great powers of the world may have done wonders in giving the world an industrial and military look, but the great gift still has to come from Africa – giving the world a more human face.[2]

It is precisely the element of true humanity, or 'humaneness', that this paper wishes to deal with from an African theological perspective. There are few African indigenous knowledge systems that are as well known, and as critically regarded, as the Southern African concept of *ubuntu*.[3]

This paper argues the point that the Southern African ethics of *ubuntu*, as it relates to the concepts of ontological being and identity, can add a new perspective to the debate on true identity and what it means to be a human person in relation to other human persons. It is hoped that this offering will stimulate some thought and conversation, open new avenues of enquiry and research, and go some way towards legitimizing a seldom heard vocabulary in the field of identity and consciousness – namely, the African theological perspective. In particular this paper offers a theological perspective on the Southern African notion of an integrative, relational-ontological identity.

This theology, which goes some way towards dealing with some of the shortfalls of the subjective and objective approaches to individual identity, is expressed most clearly as an 'African theology of relational-ontological identity'.

The content of this theological construct is grounded in the doctrine of God as the source of all true being. Naturally it will also have some impetus for the doctrine of Christian anthropology, since the underlying concepts stem from an African approach to, and understanding of, personhood. Finally, there are some valuable insights to discover in relation to God's purpose for wholeness and salvation for individuals, communities and the Kosmos[4] as a whole.

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An African theology of relational ontological identity and the Trinity

The doctrine of the Trinity is foundational both to the doctrine of God and, as such, to the Christian faith. Even a cursory glance at the central elements of the African view of personhood shows strong correlations between this view and traditional views of God, as expressed in the doctrine of the Trinity. I will list three of the most striking and important areas of overlap below.

Identity in relationship

Mogobe Ramose[5] and Augustine Shutte,[6] two of the world's leading scholars on *ubuntu*, rightly point out that the notion of identity through relationship is central to the African world-view. The African statement that describes personal identity is *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a person is a person through other persons).[7] At the heart of this statement is the Southern African concept of *ubuntu* which means variously: 'humanity', 'humanness', and even 'humaneness'.[8] In short, to be truly human means being in relationship with other persons who give form and substance to one's true humanity.

This manner of being is not foreign to Christianity. The doctrine of the Trinity posits the same relational element to the identity of the three persons of the Godhead, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. McGrath sums up the traditional western view of the Trinity in saying that the Trinity is 'a community of being, in which each person, while maintaining its distinctive identity, penetrates the others and is penetrated by them'.[9] The African understanding of personhood is very much the same. The relationships that exist between persons shape their true identity. When asking an African person who he or she is (*ungubani*?), the answer is always stated in a relational manner. A traditional answer would be one in which the individual identifies himself in relation to his ancestors, grandparents, parents, and wider social grouping, for example, 'I am a descendent of the Jola clan, grandson of the great Mxolisi, child of my grandfather's son Loyiso.'[10] For the African it is the lived experience, and reality, of being in relationship that forms his or her identity. Relationship as identity is an active engagement in the development of the concept of 'self'. Of course this principle is a fundamental aspect of personal identity in the Trinity, in whose image all human persons are created (Genesis 1.27). The identities of the persons in the Trinity are not coincidental in nature – merely revelatory expressions to make God understandable to human persons, as if there was some ontological difference between the true identity of the immanent persons of the Trinity in the Godhead and

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the economic expression thereof in God's self-revelation to humankind.[11] Rather, the very identity of the Son is inextricably linked to the Son's relationship to the Father. Jesus' identity is that of 'the Son of the Father' as it has traditionally been formulated in Christian theology.

In the context of this paper the essential element that needs to be explicated is this last one: relationship is not merely something we observe objectively, or experience subjectively. Rather, relationships are an active lived reality that shapes our true identity and being. This element of our ontological identity can be directly related to the ontological identity of the persons-in-relationship in the Trinity.

Being in interaction

A further interesting observation arises out of McGrath's description of the Trinity as a 'community of being', that is, a collective of distinct persons,[12] rather than the common perception in western society that sees persons as 'beings in community', that is, individuals who happen to relate. I would venture that even some Christian theologians have fallen into the trap of regarding the persons of the Trinity as 'beings in community', three completely separate individuals who happen to be in community. The emphasis in McGrath's theological statement, correctly, rests on community as the primary ontological reality that gives rise to the nature of the beings. In other words the very nature of the beings is found through their being in community.

The relational element of the community is fundamental to an understanding of how identity is shaped. One's truest identity comes not just from a moment of encountering another person (called 'relating'): it comes from a continuum of shared being (called 'having a relationship'). Who I am is shaped by who I am in relationship with. Within the Trinity this form of ongoing engagement is referred to as *perichōrēsis*. It is a shared life that gives rise to both common identity and individual expression: one *ousia* with three distinct *hypostaseis*,[13] a common substance in three subsistances, existing in an eternal self-emptying relationship.

The fundamental unity of the Trinity presupposes that relationship is an essential element of the being of the Godhead. If it were not so, there would be three completely separate Gods who 'relate to one another'. Rather, in the Trinity one finds three persons who have their common being (one divine nature) in interaction. Gaybba describes this model of the Trinity as follows: 'a single undivided substance, existing simultaneously in three different ways, each of which is unceasingly flowing either into or out of the others. The flow is known as the divine *perichōrēsis* or *circumincessio*.'[14]

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Shutte's expression of identity in the African context resonates so strongly with this understanding of God. He writes:

> It is truer to the African idea, however, to see self and other as co-existing, each in the other in the sense of being identified with each other. The fundamental human reality must be seen as a field of personal energy in which each individual emerges as a distinct pole or focus. The field of life is the same in each; in each it is their humanity. All persons form a single person, not as parts for a whole, but as friends draw their life and character from the spirit of a common friend. They have a common identity.[15]

Thus, the African view of personhood, which views persons as fundamentally shaped by being in relationship (not just having relationship), has strong theological ties to the doctrine of the Trinity where true identity comes to the fore in and through relationship, and where relationship is a primary aspect of the being.

Since human persons are created in the image of God, it is not surprising that an appeal to the self (personal subjective experience), or an appeal to the other (a momentary objective encounter) will never reveal true identity.[16] What is required is the ongoing continuum of inter-subjective relationship in community. As Shutte says, *ubuntu ngumuntu abantu* could also be translated 'I participate, therefore I am'.[17]

An African theology of relational ontological identity and Christian anthropology

One of the deficiencies in some contemporary western theology is its tendency towards individualism. While there is no doubt that the individual human person is important in God's economy, the over-emphasis on individual salvation, personal experience of God, and understanding individual identity in Christ has led to an aberration of Christian anthropology. This aberration has led to two dominant problems in modern western theology: first, the misunderstanding that there can be a separation between our creation as human persons and being in relationship with God. One cannot be fully human without being in relationship, and to be in relationship with God also demands being in relationship with those whom God has created. Second, the overemphasis on the individual person as the central focus of God's creative and redemptive work in the Kosmos.

Traditional Christian theology maintains that true human identity is a result of being created in the image of God.[18] In other words, true human

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identity comes from being related to God, who is the true source from which persons originate, and thus the true source from which we derive our identity. This identity is fundamentally linked to the relationship with God who shapes our true identity. König writes of this relationship:

> our relationships are extremely important. They are essential to our humanity . . . we can only come into our own in relationships . . . The anthropology developed here deliberately bases our humanity on our relationship with God. To be human means to be in the presence of God.[19]

Not only does our relationship to God give us our true identity, but also our relationship with those with whom God has created us to be in relationship gives us a further insight into our true identity. Kasenene writes that in African tradition, *Muthu u bebelwa nunwe*, 'A person is born for the other'. This shows that according to African philosophy, a person is a person through, with and for the community.[20]

Since God is most truly God (as Trinity) in relationship, we cannot be truly human, truly ourselves, until we are truly in relationship with other persons. Kwame Gyekye relates the African proverb that says, 'When a man descends from heaven, he descends into a human society.'[21] This African emphasis on the ontological necessity of community is an essential element of being created in the image of God. Relationship is not only our God-given destiny: it is the source of our true identity. Du Toit best sums up this element in African thought, when he writes:

> In Africa, a person is identified by his or her interrelationships and not primarily by individualistic properties. The community identifies the person and not the person the community. The identity of the person is his or her place in the community. In Africa it is a matter of 'I participate, therefore I am'[22] . . . *Ubuntu* is the principle of 'I am only because we are, and since we are, therefore I am'.[23]

The other essential element for Christian anthropology is that true identity arises not only from a harmonious relationship with other living human persons, but also through harmonious relationships with God, the ancestors, and all of creation. As Ngubane notes, wholeness means much more than just a healthy body and good relationships with one's neighbours, it 'pertains to all that concerns the person including the perception of a harmonious, co-ordinated universe'.[24]

This emphasis on harmony and wholeness with the material world, and the spiritual world, under God, is surely the 'eternal shalom' that is

spoken of in the Isaiah 11.6–9. Adrio König speaks of such a harmonious relationship with God in terms of a covenant relationship,[25] and a respectful, loving relationship with all persons and creation in terms of recognizing the image of God in all such created beings.[26] His summation of this twofold relational anthropology has a great deal of synergy with the relational ontology expressed in the African view of 'humanness' – *ubuntu*. König writes about Christian anthropology saying: 'The theological concepts of God's covenant relationship and the image of God provide us with an integrated concept of true humanity as constituted by relationships: relationships with God, humanity and nature.'[27]

An African theology of relational ontological identity and soteriology

Finally, African relational ontological identity relates to God's desired goal for all humanity. This common goal is the goal for all persons; namely, fullness of life in true relationship with God and all of creation. When one considers traditional soteriology it is evident that salvation was never intended to be only a private spiritual affair in which the individual believer is released from the burden and guilt of personal sin. This individualistic, moral, oversimplification of salvation is another aberration of popular western theology that stems from the negative elements of radical dualism between faith and life; in short, the root of such a perspective is individualism.

John Suggit writes the following about the biblical understanding of salvation as more than just spiritual and individual:

> The biblical story therefore is the account of the way by which God restores to human beings the freedom which they were created to enjoy. The word redemption, which strictly means 'buying back' or 'ransoming', is a useful term to describe the overcoming of the alienation which separates human beings from themselves, from God the source of their life, and from others. By God's redemptive love they discover their true being, and they belong to God.[28]

African relational ontology shows that true identity, the identity intended for humans by God, cannot be seen individually. In fact in concurrence with what is said about biblical redemption above, it cannot be seen apart from the primary relationships for which salvation is intended. Thorpe sums up the eschatological intent of God's creative process in the African world-view of *ubuntu* (being truly human):

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> Health, balance, harmony, order, continuity are all key words. They
> not only describe a desirable present condition for individuals and
> the community, but also represent the goal towards which people
> constantly strive. This ideal needs to be maintained not only within
> the visible community but equally in relation to the invisible com-
> munity, conceptualised as spiritual powers (e.g., the ancestors).[29]

In this context salvation is not only a private, individual, spiritual affair.
Neither is it a separation from true living in this world (or in the next).
Salvation must take cognizance of self and others, self and God, self and
the created world. True salvation comes from being in community, from
being truly the self that God has created one to become through being in
community. Communities, by their very nature, are made up of persons
of different age groups, genders, personalities and so on. There will be
persons who help one to grow through affirmation, nurture and care, and
others who help one to grow through conflict, disappointment and
struggle. This is part of becoming truly human.

   A further valuable corrective that this understanding of African
relational ontology brings to salvation is that salvation, as the true
realization of the self that God intends one to become, is seldom realized
in a momentary experience. Rather, such salvation, as expressed in African
thought on true humanness, is brought about by true, sustained relation-
ships and growth in true identity. Setiloane writes that in the African
context, 'the essence of being is participation in which humans are always
interlocked with one another . . . the human being is not only a "vital
force", but more a "vital force" in participation.'[30]

   Du Toit concurs with this notion when he writes,

> For Africans, to be human is to participate in life and respect the
> conditions that make life possible. To participate in life means
> ultimately to participate in the fellowship of the community . . .
> African society emphasises solidarity rather than activity, and the
> communion of persons rather than their autonomy . . . That
> personhood is identified by an individual's interaction with other
> persons does not eliminate personal identity . . . It simply says that
> my personal identity comes to the fore in my interaction with, and
> place in, my community.[31]

Thus, true identity comes to the fore through interaction in community.
There is no doubt that some applications of this concept can be
oppressive rather than liberative, and that in the wrong community, or a
community that does not 'respect the conditions that make life possible'

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there is great possibility for abuse. However, in the context of true *ubuntu* mutual respect and interdependence is the true foundation for relational identity. In this context my relationships with others raise me up, rather than put me down; they offer me life, rather than demanding it from me.

Conclusion

This paper set out to add a new voice to the interdisciplinary conversation on consciousness and human identity. It has shown how African religion and philosophy can aid in our theological understanding of what it means to be fully human. What makes this perspective so unique is that it is the first time that an African theological approach to identity has been systematized in relation to the doctrine of God, the doctrine of Christian anthropology and the doctrine of salvation.

I am certain that if space and time allowed it would be possible to extrapolate many more valuable theological elements from this African theology of relational-ontological identity. However, the point that has been made here is that the African theological perspective offers a valuable contribution towards theological discourse of individual identity and consciousness.

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Notes

1 J. S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1970), p. xiii. See also J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd edn (London: Heinemann, 1990).

2 S. Biko, *I Write What I Like* (London: Heinemann, 1978), p. 46.

3 Of course the concept of *ubuntu* is expressed throughout Africa in various ways. East African theologians often refer to *mtu ni watu* (meaning, 'person is people'), and some of the earliest theological understandings of 'bantu philosophy' with an understanding of communal ontology emerged from Congo. See, for example, A. W. Wolfe, 'Man's relation to man in Africa', *American Anthropologist* (New Series) Vol. 61 No. 4 (August 1959), pp. 606–14.

4 In this paper the word 'Kosmos' will be used instead of 'cosmos'. Ken Wilber chooses to use the word Kosmos to describe the non-dual universe, rather than the 'anaemic, depth-denying and surface bound "cosmos" of modern science that has not allowed room for spirit and consciousness in its deliberations' (*Sex, Ecology, Spirituality: The spirit of evolution*, Boston: Shambala, 2002, p. 71).

5 M. B. Ramose, *African Philosophy through Ubuntu* (Harare: Mond Books, 1999), p. 49.

6 A. Shutte, *Philosophy for Africa* (Rondebosch: UCT Press, 1993), p. 46.

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7 See also D. A. Forster, 'Identity in relationship: The ethics of *ubuntu* as an answer to the impasse of individual consciousness' in *The Impact of Knowledge Systems on Human Development in Africa*, ed. C. W. du Toit (Pretoria: Research Institute for Religion and Theology, University of South Africa, 2007), pp. 245–89.

8 These translations are agreed to by the following scholars: J. Broodryk, 'Is ubuntuism unique?' in J. G. Malherbe (ed.), *Decolonizing the Mind* (Pretoria: Research Unit for African Philosophy, UNISA, 1995), pp. 5f; M. J. Bhengu, *Ubuntu: The essence of democracy* (Cape Town: Novalis Press, 1996), pp. 1–12; N. B. Pityana, 'The renewal of African moral values' in M. W. Makgoba (ed.), *African Renaissance: The new struggle* (Sandton: Mafube and Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1999), pp. 144–5; L. J. Teffo, *Résumé of Ubuntu/Botho* (Pretoria: Ubuntu School of Philosophy, 1995), pp. 1–2.

9 A. E. McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p. 325.

10 Please refer to D. A. Forster, 'Validation of individual consciousness in strong artificial intelligence: An African theological contribution', unpublished PhD thesis, University of South Africa, section 5.7.1, for a more detailed discussion of this notion.

11 This phraseology was coined by Karl Rahner, the German theologian who said the 'immanent Trinity *is* the economic Trinity and vice versa' (quoted in B. Gaybba, 'Trinitarian experience and doctrine' in *Doing Theology in Context: South African perspectives*, ed. J. de Gruchy and C. Villa-Vicencio (Johannesburg: David Philip Publishers, 1994), p. 83.

12 McGrath, *Christian Theology*, p. 325.

13 The terminology of this phrase was coined by Tertullian to show clearly that reference to the distinction of the three persons of the Trinity does not divide the one common substance that they share (Gaybba, 'Trinitarian experience', p. 78).

14 Gaybba, 'Trinitarian experience', p. 78.

15 A. Shutte, *Ubuntu: An ethic for a new South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2004), pp. 52–3.

16 J. Slater notes that until the fourteenth century Augustine's formulation of the self as the image of the Trinity occupied high importance in western theology ('Self-realization in contemporary theology: Towards a vision of Christian wholeness', unpublished DTh thesis, Pretoria: University of South Africa, 2002, p. 75).

17 Shutte, *Philosophy for Africa*, pp. 46–51.

18 A. König, 'The broken human image of God' in *Doing Theology in Context*, ed. de Gruchy and Villa-Vicencio, p. 102.

19 König, 'The broken human image of God', p. 104.

20 P. Kasenene, 'Ethics in African theology' in *Doing Ethics in Context: South African perspectives*, ed. J. de Gruchy and C. Villa-Vicencio (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1994), p. 141.

21 K. Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 155.

22 Here du Toit references Shutte, *Philosophy for Africa*, pp. 46–51.

23 C. W. du Toit, 'Technoscience and the integrity of personhood in Africa and the West: Facing our technoscientific environment' in *The Integrity of the Human Person in an African Context: Perspectives from science and religion*, ed. C. W. du Toit (Pretoria: Research Institute for Theology and Religion, University of South Africa, 2004), p. 33.

24 H. Ngubane, *Body and Mind in Zulu Medicine: An ethnography for health and disease in Nyuswa-Zulu thought and practice* (London: Academic Press, 1977), p. 28.

25 König, 'The broken human image of God', pp. 103–5.

26 König, 'The broken human image of God', pp. 105–9.

27 König, 'The broken human image of God', p. 111.

28 J. Suggit, 'Redemption: Freedom regained' in *Doing Theology in Context*, ed. de Gruchy and Villa-Vicencio, p. 113.

29 S. A. Thorpe, *African traditional religions* (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1991), p. 111.

30 G. M. Setiloane, *African Theology: An introduction* (Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers, 1986), p. 14.

31 Du Toit, 'Technoscience and the integrity of personhood', p. 33.