

## HUMAN DIGNITY IN AFRICA: A CHRISTOLOGICAL APPROACH

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### Abstract

*The violation of human dignity is more acute on the continent of Africa than in most other places in the world. In this article the dehumanizing influence of a wide range of factors is considered: amongst others growing inequality, violence, illness and various forms of prejudice. It is then argued that insights from the Christology of John Calvin provide avenues for restoring human dignity in Africa, and that his work on the threefold office of Christ may prove to be particularly helpful.*

**Key Words:** Human Dignity; Africa; Christology; John Calvin; Threefold Office of Christ

### Introduction

Antonie van Ruler is often credited with a saying that goes more or less like this: “I become a Christian so that I can be truly human.” Indeed, the Trinitarian faith that Christians confess has a strong human element. This faith has at its heart and core, the flourishing and wellbeing, worth and value, esteem, honour and dignity of all humans – and indeed the whole of creation. Human beings are created in God’s image. We are saved by Jesus Christ, and we are renewed by the Holy Spirit. This Trinitarian work in our lives is the deepest source and foundation of our dignity.

Nicholas Wolterstorff (2008) rejects the secular rationales of the meaning of human dignity, since they are mostly based on human capacities, for example, the rationales of Immanuel Kant (rational capacities of humans) and Ronald Dworkin (creative capacities of humans with regard to natural creation and self-creation). Wolterstorff (2008) even argues that the most famous theistic rationale for human dignity, namely, that humans are created in the image of God, is an inadequate foundation for human dignity. This is the case because the *imago Dei* concept has – for some – the optimal functioning of an ideal human being with various capacities in mind. He argues that human dignity finds its strongest and most adequate foundation in the love of God. He utilizes Augustine’s identification of three types of love to describe the divine love that is the foundation of human dignity. The love of God is not affection or benevolence, but is an expression of God’s attachment to humans. I appreciate the fact that Wolterstorff bases our dignity in God’s love of attachment, but I disagree with the tension that he identifies between *imago Dei* and the love of attachment, if I interpret him correctly. I would pose the question to Wolterstorff whether we could not perhaps consider the creation of humans in God’s image as an expression of his attaching love to us and his commitment to us. Moreover, I would also challenge him to consider whether the culminating point of God’s attachment to us, namely the giving of Jesus Christ as our crucified and broken saviour, does not offer a Christological definition

of the *imago Dei*, which thus eliminates the identification of the *imago Dei* with the concept of a perfect human being.

I concur strongly with the idea that dignity is not based on our competencies and capabilities, but in the gift of triune love. It is exactly this objective (Thielicke calls it alien) dimension of dignity that ensures that dignity is always inalienable. The fact that we receive our dignity resonates well with the idea of an anthropology of vulnerability and dependence. Where this vulnerability and dependence is recognized, the door is opened for responsible living in the world. This entails that we identify with the most vulnerable in the world and take up their cause. To protect the most vulnerable against all abuses and wrongs, and to enhance and further the cause of the most vulnerable, is one of the deepest motivations for building a human rights culture. Therefore, 'vulnerability language' does not exclude responsible and courageous action, as well as resilience in hopeless and threatening situations. However, vulnerability language reminds us that the best of our efforts do not guarantee the actualization, operationalization and fulfilment of human dignity. It also reminds us that our worth does not only reside in our capacity to act and give. In our total dependency and in our receiving from the other and especially the Other, there resides our dignity (Koopman, 2003a, 2003b, 2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2007c, 2008a).

Returning to Wolterstorff, I would argue that God's dignifying love for us, his attachment to us, is expressed in us being created in his image, and in us being reconciled and saved by his Son, and in us being renewed and perfected by the Holy Spirit. John Webster (2007) provides a helpful exposition regarding this Trinitarian basis of human dignity. He states that firstly our dignity resides in God the creator: "Human dignity has its basis in the loving act of God the creator who summons creatures into being and bestows life upon them, ordering their nature and determining their destiny by calling them to enact their being in fellowship with himself" (Webster, 2007:6). Secondly, he says that our dignity is also based in God the reconciler: "God the reconciler defeats creatures' trespasses upon their own dignity, restoring them to fellowship with himself and re-establishing their destiny" (Webster, 2007:11). And thirdly he says our dignity is based in God the perfecter. "God the perfecter completes the dignity of creatures, gathering them into the fellowship of the saints and empowering them actively to testify to God's protection of human dignity" (Webster, 2007:20).

### **The Violation of Human Dignity in Africa**

Wolfgang Huber (1996) makes helpful remarks about the definition of human dignity: "The concept of human dignity is among the most controversial in the language of ethics and politics. Yet those whose dignity has been disregarded or even trampled on know full well what human dignity means. Its meaning is established by the denial of it" (Huber, 1996:10).

On no continent do we witness such a terrible violation of human dignity than on the continent of Africa. Nigerian scholar, Wole Soyinka, describes this violation of dignity with words like 'anti-humanism' (Soyinka, 2004:xiii), 'reduction in self-esteem' (Soyinka, 2004:6), 'nullification of human status' (Soyinka, 2004:104), 'humiliation' (Soyinka, 2004:104), 'assault on dignity' (Soyinka, 2004:8).

The violation of human dignity in Africa takes on various forms, and an analysis of the different challenges of Africa illuminates these forms. The people of Africa face major challenges, such as economic and political suffering, and many injustices and abuses. We are faced with diseases such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. Africans experience

alienation and injustice in the form of sexism, racism and xenophobia, as well as being subject to violence and crime, natural disasters, abusive cultural practices. Such experiences lead to high levels of hopelessness. The overview that follows is not extensive and penetrating, but aims to give a cursory orientation regarding the challenges we face in Africa. Simultaneously, the various faces of the violation of human dignity become clear (Koopman, 2007b).

Many (South) Africans are victims of the growing gap between the so-called rich north and the poor south, rich neighbourhoods and poor neighbourhoods, rich blacks and poor blacks, rich family members and poor family members. The gap between rich and poor in Africa is the highest in the world. The gap between rich and poor is manifested among various countries in Africa. South Africa alone contributes 30% of the GDP of Africa. This inequality is also witnessed by the fact that whereas South Africa's per capita income was 3,310 US dollars in 1998, Lesotho's was 570 and Mozambique's was 210.

Together with Brazil, South Africa is the country with the biggest gap between rich and poor in the world. In 1993, the richest 10% of the population received 47.3% of the national income, whereas the poorest 40% of the people had only a 9.1% share. At the same time, 71% of the rural population lived on 14% of the land (Barnett & Whiteside, 2006). South African economist, Sampie Terreblanche, is of the opinion that the overall situation, since the advent of democracy, has not changed significantly, especially for the poorest of the poor. He refers to the 2000 Annual Report of Statistics South Africa (SSA), which states that in 1996 at least 41.4% of all households lived in poverty, i.e. they had to live on an income of between 601 and 1000 Rand (Terreblanche, 2002). He quotes various statistics to make the point that unemployment has increased in democratic South Africa (Terreblanche, 2002). He, for instance, refers to the fact that in 1995, 65% of black people between the ages of 16 and 24 were unemployed (Terreblanche, 2002). The economic liberation of black people is mainly limited to a new, growing, black elite. South African theologian, Tinyiko Maluleke, argues that economic liberation has not dawned for the poor masses of South Africa (Maluleke, 1996). He also protests that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), chaired by Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, did not take economic liberation and reparation seriously enough (Maluleke, 1997).

The poverty levels in Africa are the highest in the world with the United Nations stating that 32 of the least developed countries are in sub-Saharan Africa (UNCTAD, 2009). This region's total income is not much more than that of Belgium. The median GDP of the 48 countries in the region, is just over two billion dollars and is almost equal to the output of a town of 60 000 people in a rich country. Even though South Africa contributes 30% of Africa's GDP it only contributes 1% to the GDP of the world (Barnett & Whiteside, 2006). According to Meredith, the average national per capita income of Africans, is one-third lower than the world's next poorest region, south Asia. What is also disturbing is his statement that this income per capita is now lower than it was in 1980, and for some countries in 1960. Africa contributes less than 2% to the world's GDP, less than a country like Mexico. Africa's share of international trade is now half of what it was in the 1980s, amounting to only 1.6%. Africa's share of global investments is less than 1% (Meredith, 2006). Meredith argues that the unfair subsidies that western governments provide to their farmers, as well as their strict tariff barriers exercise a crippling effect on African producers. Agricultural subsidies in these countries amount to 370 billion dollars per annum, i.e. a sum that is higher than the GDP of the whole of sub-Saharan Africa. These policies, subsidies and tariffs lead to low prices and unfair competition between African and western farmers. The subsidies, which are often higher than the value of an entire crop, enable

farmers from the United States (US) to sell products like cotton for one-third of the production costs. The losses suffered by specifically West African countries, due to the subsidies supplied to their US counterparts, is more than the development aid that they receive from the US government (Meredith, 2006).

Indeed, many people in South Africa and on our continent are excluded from the benefits of globalization. The North American theologian, Mark Amstutz, outlines the achievements of the global market economy. He cites the statistics of the World Bank on the improvement of living conditions in the thirty-seven poorest countries of the world (most of them in Africa) between 1965 and 1985 as proof of the success of the market economy:

1. The annual crude death rate per thousand declined from 17 to 10.
2. Owing largely to a decline in the fertility rate, the annual crude birth rate per thousand people declined from 43 to 29.
3. Average life expectancy increased between from 47 to 60 years for men and from 50 to 61 years for women.
4. Infant mortality for children under one year declined from 127 per thousand to 72 per thousand.
5. The child death rate for children aged 1 – 4 declined from 19 per thousand to 9 per thousand.
6. Average daily caloric supply per capita also increased – from 2,046 to 2,339.
7. Finally, the average percentage of children in primary schools increased from 74 to 97 and in secondary schools from 21 to 32 (Amstutz, 1995:822).

Many Africans are refugees due to civil war and economic and social breakdown in their countries. In 2000, there were 12 million refugees in Africa. This number constitutes 40% of the total number of refugees in the world (Meredith, 2006). It is situations like the one in Zimbabwe that cause people to flee their countries and seek for new futures, especially in countries like South Africa. Meredith describes the shocking state of the Zimbabwean economy as follows:

By the end of the 1990s Zimbabwe is in dire straits. The unemployment rate had risen to more than 50 per cent. Only one-tenth of the number of pupils leaving school was able to find formal employment. Inflation had reached 60 per cent. The value of wages in real terms had fallen over ten years by 22 per cent. On average, the population of 13 million was 10 per cent poorer at the end of the 1990s than at the beginning. More than 70 per cent lived in abject poverty. Hospitals were short of drugs and equipment; government schools were starved of funds; state corporations were bankrupt; the public transport system was decrepit; fuel supplies were erratic; scores of businesses had closed. Harare, once renowned as one of the cleanest cities in Africa, was noted for debris on the pavements, cracked cement pavings, broken street lights, potholes, uncollected refuse and burst pipelines. Street crime was endemic (Meredith, 2006:634-635).

Africa is a continent with various major diseases like malaria, tuberculosis and especially AIDS. Although the HIV/AIDS pandemic is growing in various parts of the world, like India and China, it is mainly manifested in Africa, specifically in sub-Saharan Africa. Of the 39.4 million people who were living with HIV/AIDS during 2004, 25.4 million are living in sub-Saharan Africa. In 2004, 3.1 million people in sub-Saharan Africa became newly infected with HIV. Of the 3.1 million deaths in 2004, 2.3 million were African. In 2004, a total of 17 million Africans had already died of AIDS and as a result there are

12.3 million orphans living in sub-Saharan Africa (Barnett & Whiteside, 2006). Barnett and Whiteside (2006) give one of the best outlines regarding the causes, growth, and effects of HIV/AIDS, and also its impact on family, social and economic life, as well as the treatment and prognosis of HIV/AIDS in various countries and regions of the world. They also describe the impact of other diseases such as malaria that killed one million Africans in 2004, of which 90% were children (Barnett & Whiteside, 2006).

The levels of racism in South Africa and the rest of the continent are still very high. Despite progress in this regard, racism between black and white is also still prevalent on both subtle and explicit levels. Tinyiko Maluleke refers to the story of the teenager, Happy Sindane, who has white physical features and who was brought up by black foster parents. He gained public attention when he started to search for his biological parents whom he assumed were white. According to Maluleke, the eventual finding that he was not white was not based on scientific DNA testing, or the texture of his hair or the tone of his skin. His blackness was confirmed in the media, since he demonstrated the typical stereotypes that are held consciously and subconsciously about black people, by both white and black journalists. He is namely unhygienic, delinquent, criminal, cheating and immoral. The public debate about the status of Happy Sindane reflects, according to Maluleke, existing racial prejudices and practices in South Africa (Maluleke, 2005). Furthermore, Meredith observes that in Zimbabwe, the policies of Robert Mugabe have dashed any hope for racial harmony in that country and have caused mutual mistrust and suspicion (Meredith, 2006).

It should also be noted that religion plays a major role in many conflicts in Africa, amongst others in Nigeria. Moreover, even in countries like South Africa, where there is a strong culture of respect, dialogue and cooperation among various religions, people are nevertheless exposed to the religious fundamentalism, absolutism, moralism and judgementalism of some fellow-Christians and some people of other religions.

Many citizens in African countries, who feel threatened by citizens (refugees and immigrants) of other countries, in their struggle for daily socio-economic survival, engage in practices of subtle and explicit xenophobia. This is increasingly the case in South Africa, which is to a large extent the economic engine room of Africa.

This country and continent are plagued by various forms of sexual violence and sexism. Maluleke refers to the fact that South Africa has the highest rape figures in the world, namely 119 reported rapes per hundred thousand people. The sexual injustice is amongst others expressed in the silence of men in the controversial debate whether a rapex might be developed as a measure to limit HIV infection through an act of rape. A rapex is a so-called female condom that is inserted into the vagina as part of a woman's daily security routines. During sexual intercourse it hooks onto a rapist's penis and must be surgically removed (Maluleke, 2005).

Besides misogyny, homophobia is another face of sexism in Africa. Leaders like Robert Mugabe and former Namibian president Sam Nujoma even expressed their homophobic convictions publicly, and thereby, perhaps unintentionally, encouraged homophobic practices in their countries.

This continent is also exposed to high levels of crime and corruption. Sampie Terreblanche attributes the escalation of violent crime in South Africa largely to the systemic violence of apartheid. According to Terreblanche, the use of systemic violence, especially during the 46 years of apartheid, has been deeply ingrained in impoverished South Africans, inclining them towards violent and criminal behaviour. The violent defence of, as well as resistance against apartheid, fed a culture of violence. During the resistance against apartheid, the laws of an illegitimate government were defied. Many people who had

already been marginalized and criminalized by poverty and coercive labour patterns then became involved in organized violence and criminality. Moreover, in this period the police mainly concentrated on protecting an illegitimate political system, often by violent means. Consequently, a culture of lawlessness, criminality and violence, for example, in the form of gang violence, could flourish in underprivileged communities. By the time of the birth of a new post-apartheid society this subculture of lawlessness, criminality and violence had become thoroughly entrenched. It paved the way for an escalation of violent crime in South Africa. The violent system of colonisation with its accompanying impoverishment and dehumanization has had the same impact in terms of violent crime in other countries on the continent. However, it should be emphasized that apartheid and colonialism are not the only causes of violent crime. Human selfishness, greed and pride, in the context of growing consumerism are crucial causes of criminal violence (Terreblanche, 2002).

Various environmental problems are experienced on the continent of Africa, amongst others various forms of pollution, de-forestation, desertification, extinction of various life forms, and the exhaustion of crucial natural resources. What raises concern is the fact that these ecological challenges do not receive adequate attention in crucial visionary documents, such as the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights, and the more recent South African Bill of Rights, as well as the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), which articulates the heart of the agenda of the African Union (AU). Even when the South African Bill of Rights mentions ecological considerations, it is not for the sake of the integrity of the environment itself, but for the sake of humans.

Barnett and Whiteside (2006) reckon that the natural disasters in Africa, specifically floods and droughts, will increase since Africa is vulnerable to climatic changes. Moreover, these processes will increase desertification, which will lead to less agricultural activities on a continent where there is already high levels of starvation, famine and malnutrition (Barnett & Whiteside, 2006).

Abusive cultural practices constitute another major challenge in African contexts.<sup>1</sup> Potential abusive cultural practices include the following: Female circumcision, which violates the dignity of women, despite the claim that it teaches youngsters about the suffering dimension of life. Newer forms of polygamy do not take seriously the consent of the first wife, or the covenantal character of monogamous marriages, nor the wellbeing of the extended family. Single women who want to get married should at least be taken care of economically. Other abusive cultural practices include incest that is justified as a means to avoid mixing blood with presumed inferior outsiders; sorcery that is motivated by greed, jealousy and hatred and that demonizes persons for various reasons; women who are often forced to give birth to more children than their health can tolerate, for the sake of reflecting prosperity and wealth, since children will eventually take care of the parents.

All these challenges may cause, as can be expected, a sense of hopelessness amongst many people. This hopelessness is especially expressed by the fear that things might not get better for our children. Many Africans experience a lack of access to formal education. Africa is the only continent where school enrolment is decreasing and where illiteracy is still commonplace. Two in five Africans and half of all African women are illiterate (see Meredith, 2006). Due to socio-economic and related factors, many youngsters experience a sense of hopelessness, as they may not be able to complete their schooling, and even if they pass, their results might not be good enough to enter higher education or the job market. The desperate situation of school children contribute to problems like drug abuse, the for-

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of these practices see Bujo (2001:162-175).

mation of violent gangs, the imitation of bad role models, teenage pregnancies, unruliness and violent behaviour from a relatively young age. The violation of dignity on our continent is overwhelming and Africans face a tremendous task to overcome this problem.

### **Restoring Human Dignity in Africa – Insights from Christology**

In this last part of the paper I argue that the Christological insights of John Calvin provide insights for the challenging task of the restoration of dignity on the continent of Africa. Calvin's employment of the threefold office of Christ is specifically investigated, and the potential of his Christological work, in relation to contemporary discourses on human dignity in Africa, is specifically explored.<sup>2</sup>

According to Cornelis van der Kooi (2008),<sup>3</sup> Calvin gives priority to the priestly office of Christ. He argues that Calvin combines elements of the theories of atonement of Anselm and Abelard. Calvin concurs with Anselm's view that as the One who is fully God and fully human, Christ is indeed the mediator who takes our guilt upon himself. In line with Abelard, Calvin states that the retributive death of Christ on Calvary shows the love of the Father who embraces all his people in Christ. Christ the priest reconciles humans with God and with each other. As priest, he overcomes our trespasses against our own dignity and the dignity of others.<sup>4</sup>

The restoration of dignity in the framework of Christ's priestly work entails that brokenness will be healed, and that alienation will be overcome. Africa, with its various forms of brokenness and alienation needs the dignifying work of Jesus Christ the priest.

Christ's royal or kingly (royal-servant) office plays an important role in the restoration of human dignity (Van der Kooi, 2008; Edmondson, 2004). The royal office portrays Christ's work as that of uniting the world with God, of making us one with God and each other. And in this union with God we enjoy all the blessings that he has in store for us. Christ as the one who sits on the throne in a position of the highest authority, as the one who comes again, as the one whose coming judgement is not a threat, but good news for the world, assures us of this coming blessed life. This prospective fulfilment of the promises of God gives hope in contemporary situations of despair and hopelessness.

As prophet, Christ proclaims God's truth and will for the world. The kingdom of God and its righteousness is the heart of this truth. Christ is the prophet who proclaims and who embodies what he proclaims. On a continent with so many injustices and abuses the confession about the kingship of Christ serves towards the restoration and actualization of dignity in Africa.

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<sup>2</sup> Calvin was not the first person to employ the notion of the threefold office, but he used it more extensively and systematically than any other theologian and he more than anyone else paved the way for the use of this notion in Reformed and broader ecumenical contexts. Though various objections are made to the idea of the threefold office from a variety of theological circles, this notion remains very helpful to describe the Person and work of Christ, and to draw on both Old and New Testament resources in this regard. For helpful discussions on the origins of, objections to and potential of the notion of the threefold office of Christ, see Wainwright (1997:99-186) and Hall (1993).

<sup>3</sup> For other helpful contemporary expositions of Calvin's Christology, specifically of his use of the threefold office, see Edmondson (2004) and Wainwright (1997).

<sup>4</sup> A more detailed reading of Calvin might shed light on the question whether the rescue theory of atonement of Irenaeus also is accommodated in his portrayal of Christ's priestly office. This rescue theory with its emphasis on the delivery from evil powers that exist in personal and structural forms might have relevance for Africa's quest for the restoration of dignity.

The threefold office of Christ seems to inform the Christology of the three articles of the Confession of Belhar, 1986. The kingship of Christ can be compared to the confession of the unity of God's people in article 1. The priestly office resonates with the confession of the reconciliation between God and humans and reconciliation between humans themselves, in article 2 of Belhar. And the prophetic office resembles the confession regarding the compassionate justice of God in article 3.<sup>5</sup> These Christological insights pave the way for the concrete involvement of churches in activities like the building of social cohesion and solidarity (kingly office, article 1 of Belhar on unity), embrace and participation (priestly office, article 2 on reconciliation), compassion and justice (prophetic office, article 3 on justice).

### Conclusion

Human life in Africa is not flourishing as the triune God intends it to, but through this priest and king and prophet, he brings great possibilities to this poorest and most excluded of continents, to this so-called fourth world of sub-modernity. He wants to bring life in abundance, life of quality, life of joy, life of dignity (John 10:10). Through this Christ comes the kingdom of dignity, that is of justice, peace and joy (Romans 14:17).

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<sup>5</sup> For my ideas on the meaning of these three articles of Belhar for the restoration of dignity in public life, see Koopman (2002a, 2002b, 2007a, 2008b (A book on reconciliation in South Africa and Korea.)).



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