"*Ubuntu*" God and *ubuntu* as imago Dei : Trinitarian Theology in the African context.

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Introduction

Although I don't remember the first time I heard the word '*ubuntu*' yet I recall as a child growing up among the Ndebele people of Zimbabwe (descendants from the Zulu ethnic group in South Africa and share the same language and culture) how my great grandmother used the word daily to describe either my own or other's actions, behaviours, words, values, ethics, persons as either expressing *ubuntu* or not-*ubuntu*. I learnt as a child to associate *ubuntu* with relationships with others people. When I carried a parcel for an older person or helped my great grandmother I was praised for practicing *ubuntu* but when I chose rather to go out and play instead of going over to help my neighbours clean up after a wedding, I was chastised for not being *ubuntu*. Thus *ubuntu* was at the center of my upbringing. This was the experience of my siblings and children in my community. My great grandmother repeatedly told us that the reason for living *ubuntu* was because *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* which literally means a person is a person in relation or because of others. To be human was to be related to others in humane ways. Daily life was imbued with *ubuntu*, for example the pot of food was never emptied, a portion was reserved for an unexpected visitor or passing stranger; neighbours could be counted on to assist with wedding or funeral preparations and material resources were freely shared. It was not uncommon when a neighbour was cooking and discovered that they had a missing ingredient for example salt, oil and mealie meal or they had visitors and needed supplies of food to ask for these and the container with the supplies was returned with something inside it, it was never returned empty, a sign of reciprocity in relationships. Elders actively assumed responsibility for all children in the community. Children addressed elders as mothers, fathers or grandparents. I remember my friends and I being disciplined by a neighbor for mischief and he reported us to our families who not only agreed with him but gave us a second round of discipline! So the proverb 'it takes a village to raise a child' comes from a culture of *ubuntu*. References to God and our

ancestors were used in relation to *ubuntu*. The way of *ubuntu* was handed down by our ancestors who learnt it from God. Thus the sources of *ubuntu* were God through the ancestors who we believe live in the spiritual realm with God. So to live *ubuntu* was honouring to our ancestors as well as to God. In African religion pleasing God is always expressed in our relationship to others. We please God when we practice *ubuntu* as *ubuntu* is a way of living that comes from God through our ancestors. The community prospers and thrives in relation to the living out of *ubuntu* by its members. Ancestors warn through series of misfortunes those who violate the principles of *ubuntu* and are honoured and bless those who live out *ubuntu*. So *ubuntu* connects the natural and spiritual world in constant interaction in the daily lives and events of people. In African religion, *ubuntu* is a revelation from God through the ancestors that shapes the identity and lives of individuals and their communities. There is no separation between knowledge of God and daily life the two are intertwined.

I discovered *ubuntu* in other ethnic groups who lived in the same neighbourhood, so *ubuntu* crossed the ethnic divide and made possible a community of diversity. The different ethic groups had a word for *ubuntu* in their language and also *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*. They too believed in the unbreakable connection of *ubuntu*, ancestors and God. *Ubuntu* guided all we did and our interactions with each other. There was a shared sense of values that brought harmony in diversity. This was a great asset in the context of colonialism and oppression, the strong social cohesion made possible an initial united front in the struggle for justice not only in my community but across Africa. However, in our struggle for justice, we marginalized *ubuntu* in favour of other values such as democracy, freedom and rights. These are very important ideals but the missing ingredient is *ubuntu*. Hence our new democracies, economies and rights benefit a few people at the expense of the majority. In Africa, a continent with the greatest natural resources children die of hunger each day. This is not to say we need to get rid of democracy, human rights and legal institutions but rather to ask the question of how can we integrate *ubuntu* into these systems in order to address the problems of poverty and suffering in our communities. The missing ingredient of *ubuntu* is not only in our communities but also in the church, somehow we do not take this rich legacy from our

culture and use it together with our faith to restore our communities. I mentioned earlier that *ubuntu* came to us through our ancestors who received it from God. The question therefore is whether the God of our ancestors is the same God as that of Christians? Is the God who revealed *ubuntu* to our ancestors the same God who is revealed in Scripture and the traditions of the church? We are going to compare the emphasis on community, relationships, solidarity, love, oneness and interdependence in *ubuntu* and the God of African religion with the God of Christianity revealed in the Trinity and the implication for our understanding of the human person made in the image of God. The Trinity is the symbol of the Christian God who one-in-three persons. There is one God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Interestingly the root word for Holy Spirit ruach is feminine. So there is a feminine presence in the Trinity. There is also relationship, communion, oneness, difference and equality in the Trinity. This seems to be more connected with *ubuntu* and this raises the same question asked earlier and that is whether the God of our ancestors who revealed *ubuntu* is the same God as the Christian God?

Before discussing these questions, two issues will be discussed a summary of the characteristics that are common to all African religions and the way in which these religions were received by early missionaries and colonialists.

Firstly a brief summary of common features in African religions. It is important to note that there is great diversity among African religions but also some similarities. Some of the key common characteristics are as follows:

a. oral traditions – there are no scriptures or written text – religion is in the stories, legends, proverbs, sayings, rituals, practices, beliefs and passed on from generation to generation. All faith traditions started in oral traditions and later were written – the Old Testament was a collection of memories for centuries before it was eventually written down.
b. belief in one supreme God – all African groups have a name for God – Modimo, uThixo, Mwari

c. communal foundations, there is no one founder as in other religions for example Moses in Judaism, Jesus in Christianity and Mohammed in Islam. The religion is formed, developed and lived in community

d. life after death – dead live in the spiritual world. The ancestors are the living dead who during their life time lived an exemplary ethical life. They live close to God and act as mediators between the living and God. They are involved in the lives of the living and communicate regularly through dreams and in some cases illness which are often a warning sign to someone who is violating cultural beliefs. The living initiate contact with ancestors through rituals, seeking blessing or including the ancestors in celebrations and events.

e. Emphasis on community relationships and the promotion of the common good – interdependence, connectedness, reciprocity, solidarity are some of the communal values

f. *Ubuntu* and understanding of *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* as definitive of the human person

The second point is the reception of African religions and cultures by missionaries and colonialists. For many of the missionaries and colonialists, there was nothing of worth in African cultures and religions. Words like heathen, pagan, uncivilized and demonic were used to describe African reality. The goals of missionaries and to some extent colonialists were to convert Africans to Christianity and western culture. The assumption was that conversion led to rejection of African religion and culture. The two realities were perceived to be irreconcilable. It was not possible to be African (rooted in your own culture, history and religion) and Christian. There was no association between anything African and God. The translation of the bible into indigenous language was designed to prove the difference between Christianity and African religions and culture. However the opposite happened! As Africans started to read the bible for themselves, they discovered that many things in the African culture were in the bible and that the God they worshipped had the same characteristics as the God in the bible – kind, good, generous, just, creator, giver of life etc and that ancestors were central aspect of transmission of the law of God and were invoked whenever the name of God was mentioned for example the

God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, even Jesus was introduced through his ancestors. Not only did the bible confirm the good things in our culture but also challenged those aspects of culture that were not promoting life and wholeness through abuse. This process is similar to what Jesus did in the religion of his culture. He pointed out the good and also those parts of his religion that had moved away from God's purpose and needed to be changed. For example the Sabbath was meant to be a day set apart for the renewal of life and relationships in family and community but the religious leaders imposed so many rules that instead of enjoying the Sabbath people were concerned more about breaking the rules. The purpose of God was defeated and Jesus challenged his community to return to the original intention that God had for the Sabbath. He said "the Sabbath was meant for humanity [man]". The movement to bridge the gap between African cultures and Christianity grew and including African Independent churches and many of the mainline churches including Catholic. The Second Vatican council promoted inculturation and the use of indigenous languages in mass to replace Latin. Catholic masses across Africa came alive to African hymns, dances and musical instruments. Christianity was at last planted on African soil. More and more African theologians started to take beliefs from African culture to explain Christian teaching for example the extended family as the church, Jesus as the 'Elder-teacher' or Proto-ancestor. However, some segments of Christianity in Africa continue to believe that African culture is completely different from Christianity and that there is nothing to incorporate – to be Christian is to reject African culture. There is no agreement among African Christians on the role of culture. The Catholic church continues to seek ways of bridging the gap. Many of us witness the integration of African culture in the liturgy and aesthetics of our parishes. This is the beginning and we need to keep going deeper. The 'going deeper' is what I hope to do in this presentation which seeks to answer the question that keeps being raised in this presentation and that is whether the God who revealed *ubuntu* to our ancestors is the same as the Christian God?

We are going to try and answer this question by analyzing the revealed character and qualities of the Trinity as the symbol of the Christian God in relation to the characteristics of *ubuntu* and see if there are any similarities. This way we can be able to see whether the God of our ancestor's who revealed *ubuntu* is the same God as the Trinity in Christianity.

The purpose is not to win points or an argument but to establish a deeper connection with our African roots so that the ground is set for a genuine respectful dialogue between African culture and Christianity in order to address the problems in our communities. The dialogue is for the good of our communities. We see the Trinity acting through the life of Jesus to liberate humankind from sin which is the source of all social fragmentation and injustice similarly we see *ubuntu* as the practice of being human and creating communities that promote the common good. In the African context we need to find a way of bringing these two together.

So let us begin with the Christian God as Trinity and start with a brief summary of what we have already said about the Trinity by way of definition; then move on to the history of Trinitarian theology starting with the early church and the first Christians who passed on to us the legacy of God as Trinity; then the Creeds which contain the official Trinitarian beliefs of the church which are held by most Christians; developments in Trinitarian theology after creeds – highlight some aspects of from St Augustine; since theology has historically been a male preserve, we will discuss contributions from a woman mystic Julian of Norwich on the Trinity; then move to the 20th Century where the inhumanity of the two world wars, colonialism, oppression of the poor and women in the midst of great scientific progress raised questions about God and prompted a renewed interest in the practical relevance of Trinitarian theology and will conclude with a proposal for a theology of *ubuntu* in the African context for the transformation of our communities through specific examples such as violence in particular against women. In the discussions of these different topics there will be constant dialogue with *ubuntu*.

Let us start with the early Christians in the first century, how did they come to understand the Trinity and how did it affect or not affect their social relationships? Are there any elements of *ubuntu* in this revelation of God and impact on social relations?

We have already made reference to Trinity in our discussions so far so this will be a summary. As mentioned every time we make the sign of the cross we are proclaiming our faith in God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Three Persons in one God. The word Trinity

is not found in the bible. It was introduced by one of the church fathers Tertullian in the 3rd century, to describe the three-natured oneness of God. We have one God who is three persons. Each member of the Trinity is different yet connected to the other two in an unbreakable union that makes them one. Their identity is found in their relationship for example the Father cannot be Father without the Son and the Son cannot be Son without the Father and the Spirit cannot be the Spirit without the Father and the Son. Their identity is found in their relationships to one another and they live in a communion of love, interdependency, difference, equality and oneness. In Jesus, the Trinity reached out to humanity to save and restore our humanity made in the image of the Trinity. So the communion in God and identity based on relationships is reflected in *ubuntu*. God as our ancestors taught is indeed the source of *ubuntu* because *ubuntu* is found in God. We cannot define the Trinity without communion, relationship, love, oneness and solidarity with humanity. *Ubuntu* helps us to understand the Trinity and the Trinity as we will see later develops and enriches *ubuntu* so that it is renewed and strengthened to respond to problems in our communities.

So now we are going to look at how the revelation of God as Trinity emerged in the early church among the first Christians who were Jews that believed in Yahweh as the only God.

It was actually through their experience of Jesus his life, death and resurrection that these Christians knew that they had encountered God in Jesus. Similarly they encountered God in the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and in their daily lives as one who reveals God and Jesus to them and transforms their lives. They worshipped God through Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit. So from their individual and communal experiences of encountering God in Jesus and the Holy Spirit, the early church came to the revelation that God is one coexisting in three Persons. The awareness that Jesus is also God is seen in the first sermon preached by St Peter in Acts 2:29 where he calls Jesus 'Lord' the same word used to refer to God in the Old Testament. Similarly one of the first hymns of the church found in Phillipians 2:6-11 which begins with the words that refer to Jesus as God, v 6 "though he was God..". This growing understanding of Jesus as God is also seen in the opening

verse of the gospel of John: “In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God” (v1). John was the last gospel to be written and reflects the deepening of the church’s understanding of the Trinity for example Jesus says that whoever has seen him has seen the Father. There are also traces of the development of Trinitarian theology in the earlier gospels for example: (a) the baptism of Jesus in Mark 1:10, 11 – voice of the Father referring to Jesus as the “beloved Son” and the Spirit descending upon Jesus; (b) the baptismal formula in Matthew 28:19 “baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

The early stage of Trinitarian theology did not go deep into the relational aspects of the Trinity which are developed much later in history but what is interesting is the impact of Trinitarian faith on the lives of these first Christians.

For now though our interest is on the impact of Trinitarian theology on the lives of these first Christians. How did their lives change because they worshipped one God who is in three persons? What we see in the early church is the formation of faith communities described in Acts 2:44-47: “And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need. They worshiped together at the temple each day, met in homes for the Lord’s supper and shared their meals with great joy and generousity – all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people.” The first thing that these Christians did was to build communities that met regularly, shared meals, celebrated the Eucharist, studied the teachings of the apostles together and shared their material possessions. This is a description of *ubuntu*! The *ubuntu* in God inspired communities of *ubuntu*. These were radical communities, they broke down the division that existed in their communities which separated people of different classes and races. We see this in early letters of St Paul in Galatians 3:26-28: “For you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes. There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. And now that you belong to Christ, you are the true children of Abraham. You are his heirs, and God’s promise to Abraham

belongs to you." Paul was not saying that people cease to belong to their races but that their belonging to their races or classes was no longer a definition of who they were because it divided them from others and that in Christ our differences do not divide but make us one community.

Leadership was shared across these divisions, women were leaders for example Lydia led the church in her home, couples like Priscilla and Aquilla were teachers and men like Steven were the servers that prepared the food and served the needy in the church. They turned the world upside down but right way up! It was not long that persecution rose against the Christians. Many were killed and forced to leave their homes. Wherever they went they preached the gospel and the church grew. Interestingly, the name Christians was not something that Christians called themselves but was a name given to them by because of their witness as followers of Christ in Acts 11:26.

The phenomenal growth of the church resulted in the development of formal leadership and movement from the home as the site of the church to larger buildings. Another development was the increase in the number of non-Jews in churches. Many of whom were Greeks. These two developments had a great impact on the church. Formal leadership structures and buildings replaced communitarian egalitarian practices. Women were excluded from leadership as seen in the later letters of St Paul where women are told to be silent in church 1 Timothy 2:11-15. The movement from the home to large buildings also saw the replacement of married male leaders by celibate male priests. These are significant changes that changed the course of the church.

The second development as already mentioned was the change in the demographics/population of the church from a majority of Jews to a new majority of non-Jews mostly Greeks. This also impacted the church significantly because the Greeks came from a different cultural context and brought new questions from their experiences. This was the first cross cultural experience of the church! One of the questions that was of great importance was on the nature of Jesus – it was not enough for them to hear that Jesus is the saviour – they wanted to know what Jesus possessed in himself that made

him Saviour. Another problem came from their understanding of perfection as meaning incapable of change – to be perfect means to be in a state where you could not change because change was the characteristic of imperfection. So if God is perfect how could God change to be human like in the incarnation. This caused great confusion and debates in the church. There were many questions about Jesus and the Trinity. The arguments came to a critical point when one of the priests Arius openly taught that Jesus was not God because he came from God. He used verses in the gospel of John to prove his point for example John 14:28 were Jesus said that the Father was greater than him. He directly opposed the teaching of his Bishop whose name was Alexander. This conflict was threatening to split the church because each side had a large following and could prove their arguments using the bible. The emperor Constantine intervened to restore peace and called the bishops to resolve the issue at the first council in Nicea in 325. Arius was condemned and the Nicean Creed was drawn up in response to his teachings. Basically the creed states clearly that Jesus is God equal in everyway to the Father. Similarly the Holy Spirit was also described as God equal to the Father and Son. The first step in formulating Trinitarian belief was taken. In the formulating of the creed, the church had to borrow terminology from Greek language to describe fully the nature of the Trinity. For example the word *homoousios* was used to explain the heart of the trinity namely that the Father and son shared the divine nature. This is not a biblical term but one that came from the local language. This is important for us to realize that words from our culture are capable of describing theological terms and that is why *ubuntu* is being discussed here as a term that can be used in theology.

The creed of Nicea was brief and did not cover all the aspects of the Trinity and in 381 another council was held in Constantinople to formulate a comprehensive theology of the Trinity that became the official doctrine of the church. The Greek fathers Gregory of Nyassa, Basil and Gregory were responsible for the final formulation of the Creed. Behind the scenes was their sister Macrina who worked with them but is rarely mentioned in the history books. The formula for the creed *mia ousia, tres hypostases* which means one common divine nature and three distinct persons or identities. The distinctiveness of the members of the Trinity lay in possession a distinct characteristic

that was unique to that person and not shared by the others; the father was unbegotten; the Son begotten and the Holy Spirit spirated. Yet they were united by the same divine nature that they shared equally. Their differences did not create a hierarchy, the fact that the Son and the Spirit came from the Father did not make the Father above or superior to them because without them, the Father would not be Father. So their relationships to one another was what bound them to an unbreakable union. So difference, equality, communion, sameness and unity characterize the Trinity. Community does not erase difference it unites differences through the sharing of an essential characteristics. *Ubuntu* in God means that difference is identified and acknowledged in relation to the other so that difference does not separate but contributes to communion and oneness. *Ubuntu* in God holds together communion and difference. Difference is not a threat to community because in God difference exists in unity with communion. This challenges some definitions of community that believe that difference is a threat to community and unity. More importantly difference does not create inequality or hierarchy in God and therefore should not do so in human relations that reflect the *ubuntu* of God. All are equal. *Ubuntu* in God is radical!

The creeds finalized the basic beliefs on the Trinity acceptable in the church. However Trinitarian theology continued to develop after the creed and we will see some of the developments through a discussion on two contributions from St Augustine. These contributions are the emphasis on the oneness of God over triunness and the resolution of the relationship between the Spirit and the Son.

Firstly the emphasis on the oneness of God over the triunes by St Augustine was in response to the danger of emphasizing the threeness and difference in the Trinity that could lead to the perception that there are three gods instead of one. To safeguard the oneness of God, St Augustine developed models of the Trinity that have been referred to as psychological because of their use of examples from human experience. He argued that there are triads of properties that a single individual possesses such as: memory, understanding and will or mind, knowledge and its love. Similarly, the one God possesses within Godself the Trinity so that all the actions of God are Trinitarian that is done by all

members of the Trinity without division. The reality though is that in salvation history it is Jesus who becomes human not the Father and the Spirit. Despite this weakness, St Augustine's emphasis on the oneness of God over the triunness has dominated western theology. That is why it is difficult for many of us to think of God in Trinitarian terms. The emphasis on the oneness to the exclusion of the communion and relational aspects contributed to the development of individualism in western society. To be made in the image of God was defined as to be in possession of reason, will and freedom. The relational aspects of God that are essential to the Trinity are not included in the definition of the person made in the image of God. This is an example of how our image of God affects what we think we are as human beings. In this context where the individual is autonomous, there is no room for community and therefore no *ubuntu*!

The other contribution made by St Augustine as mentioned earlier is the clarification of the relationship between the Son and Holy Spirit which was missing in the Creed. St Augustine argued that scripture shows that the Spirit is from the Father and the Son. Based on his argument the church held a council in Toledo in 589 and added the phrase 'and the Son' also known as the filioque to the Creed to describe the spiration of the Holy Spirit. This addition aimed at establishing the relationship between the Spirit and the Son is important because it creates interdependence and connectedess in the Trinity. The emphasis on relationality is central to the Trinity in the same way that it is essential to *ubuntu*.

Another interesting term that was developed to deepen our understanding of the relationships within the Trinity was perichoresis which is a Then the term perichoreses was developed to describe the inter-relationships within the Trinity that are so deep that they can be described as the mutual indwelling of the other in the other so that the Son is indwelt by the Father and the Spirit vice versa there is a deeper connection that makes the three inseparable. Here we see *ubuntu* fully expressed in God where difference, equality and profound unity and oneness make a dynamic unit. None is compromised in the perichoresis. Surrender to the other and being taken in by the other does not result in the loss of difference but its deepening and expression in communion. The Son is fully Son

in relation to the Father and the Spirit. It is the communion that is the custodian of the difference. This is the full expression of *ubuntu* that our ancestors were trying to express when they said *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*.

Trinitarian theology discussed so far came from theologians, church fathers who studied in monasteries, theological institutions and later in universities. However this was not the only context where Trinitarian theology developed. Mystical experiences were also sources of Trinitarian theology. Mystics had direct experiences of God through visions and revelations and they came from all sectors of society not only priests and religious. Mysticism was truly an inclusive democratic opening up of spiritual knowledge of God by God to people from all spheres of society particularly women. For women mysticism gave them a 'voice' and access to power and authority in church and society, previously denied to them. As mystics, women were spiritual guides, teachers and healers, workers among the poor and prophets who challenged corruption in church and society. It is not surprising that mysticism drew many women and flourished in the 12th and 13th centuries. Further mysticism produced ethics of justice and compassion that came from "within, from the interior life of virtues in relationship with the world, yielding the fruits of responsibilities and deeds" (Lanzetta 2005:2). The quest for God was for "the sake of outer *theosis*, love for the world and an ethical concern for the spiritual integrity of others" (:2). The fruit of mysticism was ethical, practical and transformative.

Although each mystic had their own unique experience of God, there were some common features found among women mystics such as: an emphasis on the suffering of Christ and I desire to experience the suffering which lead some to extreme measures like Catherine of Siena who sucked the pus of lepers and starved herself to death; use of female language to express their experiences of God for example birth pains as the pains of Jesus in bringing salvation, breastfeeding as his nurture of new Christians. So the female body which was seen as incapable of incarnating God or an avenue for expressing God was experienced by mystics as a genuine channel of God's revelation. God could be known, experienced and described through women's unique biological experiences of pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding. The mystical experience brought the voices and

experiences of women into the theological realm. Some of the women mystics wrote theological books based on their experiences for example Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Siena and Julian of Norwich. The writings of Julian of Norwich as mentioned earlier in the introduction will be discussed particularly her revelation of the Trinity. Below are a few quotations taken from her book, which incidentally is the first book to be written in English by a woman:

> I contemplated the work of all the blessed Trinity, in which contemplation I saw and understood these three properties; the property of the fatherhood, the property of the motherhood and the property of the Lordship of one God (*Showings* :293).
>
> I saw and understood that the high might of the Trinity is our Father, and the deep wisdom of the Trinity is our Mother, and the great love of the Trinity is our Lord (*Showings*:294).
>
> …our true mother Jesus, he alone bears us for joy and for endless life, blessed may he be so he carries us within him in love and travail, until the full time when he wanted to suffer the sharpest thorns and cruel pains that ever were or will be and at the last he died.[..] The mother can give her child to suck of her mild but our precious mother Jesus can feed us with himself [..]with the blessed sacrament(*Showings*:298).

Julian's revelation of motherhood in the Trinity, complimented fatherhood because fatherhood is dependent and related to motherhood. Further, the reference to wisdom in relation to mother is consistent with the feminine representation of wisdom that we see in the book of Proverbs Chapter 8 where wisdom is described as a woman. The reference to Jesus as mother is an interesting feature which is called gender reversal, because of the fluidity in the use of language. So when Julian refers to Jesus as our mother she is not denying the maleness of Jesus but expanding it to include the feminine. Jesus' actions of giving new birth and sustaining the new life of the believers can only be described in the language of women, so to say that Jesus is mother is valid as it refers to his actions. The flexibility in language that Julian uses indicates the truth than God embraces and transcends gender. No one gender can fully describe God, both are needed to reflect God fully as seen in Genesis 1:26-27 when God creates human beings as both female and male reflecting God's image. All of humanity is included in God reflecting once again *ubuntu* as inclusion of all differences.

How does mysticism relate to *ubuntu*? Well mystics like the ancestors had a direct experience of God that revealed the nature of God and a new way of living that led mystics to be active in the world on behalf of the poor and suffering. Some mystics lived alone but others founded communities in order to live out the revelation that they received from God. To know God is to love and work for the well being of others particularly those that are vulnerable and to also challenge social injustice. The qualities of mysticism reflect *ubuntu*.

The mystical movement among women gradually decreased in part because of the clampdown on mystics whose experiences did not fit the official teaching of the church. A massive witchhunt undertaken by the church resulted in the burning of thousands of women as witches and deviants. However the legacy of mysticism survives and today there is a growing interest in the writings of women mystics. Mystics combined knowledge of God with actions in service of others in their communities. They practiced *ubuntu*!

So far we can see how developments in Trinitarian theology either by scholars like St Augustine or mystics like Julian helped to deepen our understanding of the mystery of God in the Trinity. The next growth and interest in Trinitarian theology came in the 20th and 21st Centuries. Two movements contributed to this revived interest in the Trinity. The first movement aimed at restoring the Trinity to its central role in theology, faith and practice. The two pioneers for this movement were Karl Barth representing the Protestant theology and Karl Rahner representing Catholic theology. Barth emphasized the the two sources of Trinitarian theology namely Scripture and Christ, he rejected the legacy of philosophical definitions of the Trinity. Rahner on the other hand sought amongst many other things to return Trinitarian theology to salvation history because as he argued, the Trinity was revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The action of the three members of the Trinity revealed the true nature of God as one in three persons. God is revealed in actions that liberate and promote the good of humanity. The revelation of God in acts of liberation is significant because it deepens our understanding of the Trinity as a communion that acts outside of itself in liberating the other. Therefore God is a liberator

and promoter of justice and good. *Ubuntu* in God therefore includes liberation and the promotion of the welfare and good of the other. It is not passive but active! To be made in the image of God means to be a liberator and promoter of the common good in other words to practice *ubuntu*!

The second development of Trinitarian theology in the 20th century was interested in the response of the Trinity to social injustice and human brutality as seen in the two world wars, colonialisation, oppression of the poor and women. The question was: How does faith in God Trinity enable us to do justice in our world were injustice is so pervasive? This led to the development of Social Models of the Trinity that is Trinitarian theology in the service of justice.

The social models of the Trinity went back to the creeds particularly the emphasis on relationality, communion, oneness and difference in God and included perichoreses which as we discussed is a description of the reciprocal relationships of indwelling where each member is indwelt by the others in a dynamic living and loving connectedness. This is what Jesus meant when he said "I am in the Father and the Father is in me" or " If you see me you see the Father" and that the Spirit reveals Jesus. The communion of God consists of these deep indwelling relationships where difference, equality and communion are sustained. The total self giving of the other does not result in loss of distinction but rather in its preservation. This as we saw is the heart of *ubuntu*, to give oneself to the community is not to cease to be an individual but in fact is the full expression of difference in community.

Social Models of the Trinity also incorporated changes in western understanding of what it means to be a person. A new social personalism was emerging that described a person as a social being in relation to others. Gretz describes social personalism as follows:

> Social personalism might be described as the realization that the self is not ultimately merely a 'what', an essence, but a 'who'. Moreover, this 'who' emerges communally rather than in isolation; that is, it emerges together with other 'whos' and from within a conversation of persons-in-communion, but ultimately from a conversation with Another, who thereby constitutes the identity of the 'who' as a person-in-relationship (2001:12).

This is a western way of saying *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*! That is a 'person-in-communion' and 'person-in-relationship'.

Another theologian who develops this idea using the Trinity is Zizioulas. He goes back to the theology of the Greek fathers who formulated the Creed. He applies their Trinitarian theology into the understanding of a person

> The [Greek] Fathers developed and bequeathed to us a concept of God who exists as a communion of free love and out of which unique, irreplaceable and unrepeatable identities emerge i.e. true persons in the absolute ontological sense. It is of such a God that man is meant to be an 'image.' There is no higher and fuller anthropology than this anthropology of true and full personhood (1995:58).

From this Zizioulas identified three characteristics of a person that is sacredness, relatedness and uniqueness

- The sacredness of persons: "Nothing is more sacred than the person since it constitutes the 'way of being' of God Himself" (Zizioulas 1995:56).
- The relatedness or social nature of persons that is persons cannot exist in isolation because "God is not alone; He is *communion*" (:56). Since God exists in communion human beings are social and communal.
- Lastly, the uniqueness of persons which makes them unrepeatable and irreplaceable: "persons can neither be reproduced nor perpetuated like species; they cannot be composed or decomposed, combined or used for any objective whatsoever" (:57).

These three characteristics of personhood reflect and deepen our understanding of *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*. The uniqueness of each person is not a threat to *ubuntu* because we see in God that it is what makes the communion a real communion. The witness of the Trinity is that "uniqueness flourishes within a true community of mutual relations" (Fox 2001:254). Robert Vosloo describes otherness as an ethic of hospitality that "challenges 'enclosed' identity which isolates people from each other" (2004:69). He explains further that "otherness is sustainable only through an ethic of hospitality based on *perichoresis*" (:88). According to Cunningham the Triune God calls us to "difference and to oneness" and to "differentiation and convergence"(1998:271). Persons therefore

are sacred, social and unique. It is in communities and relationships with others that persons discover themselves as sacred, social and unique. This is the depth of meaning in *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*.

Next we will discuss quotations from theologies that applied Trinitarian theology in the struggle for justice for the poor and for women. The branch of theology that deals with the plight of the poor and works towards concrete economic and political liberation is called liberation theology. It started in Latin America, Brazil, El Savadore, Peru countries rich in natural resources but with high levels of poverty due to inequality and oppressive governments. Liberation theology has also spread to Africa and in South Africa during the apartheid era liberation theologians using contextual theology issued the Kairos document urging Christians to be part of the struggle for justice. In other parts of Africa liberation theology is challenging issues of poverty, war and injustice. We will discuss three quotations, the first one from Gustavo Guiterrez the father of liberation theology who describes the condition of the poor; the second quotation from Leonardo Boff who applies Trinitarian theology in response to the plight of the poor and the third from Steve Biko who called Africans to own their uniqueness as a people and return to *ubuntu*.

First Guiterrez

> In Latin America and Caribbean, the challenge comes not in the first instance from the non-believer, but from the 'non persons', those who are not recognised as people by the existing social order; the poor, the exploited, those systematically and legally deprived of their status as human beings, those who barely realise what it is to be a human being. The 'non-person' questions not so much our religious universe but above all our economic, social, political and cultural order, calling for a transformation of the very foundations of a dehumaninising society (1999:28).

The above quotation makes it clear that liberation theology addresses the poor in their material, economic, psychological and political condition. It sees sin and salvation as both spiritual and concrete. Sin as spiritual and concrete as seen in forces that keep the poor suffering like economics and politics and salvation as changing these systems in real life so that the poor can live well. It is concerned about this world and the next world. It is a theology that comes out of the experiences of poverty and hardship not textbooks.

This is a description of political and economic systems that are without *ubuntu* because they do not consider the welfare and wellbeing of all persons. Sin is the absence of *ubuntu* and salvation restoration of *ubuntu*.

The next quotation will be taken from Leonardo Boff, a liberation theologian who applies Trinitarian theology to the struggle for justice for the poor and oppressed

> In the Trinity there is no domination by one side, but convergence of the Three in mutual acceptance and giving. They are different but none is greater or lesser, before or after. Therefore a society that takes its inspiration from Trinitarian communion cannot tolerate class differences, dominations based on power (economic, sexual or ideological) that subjects those who are different to those who exercise that power and marginalizes the former from the latter (1988:151)

The vision of human society based on the Trinity is one of justice, equality, new economic and political systems that deal with concrete needs of the poor so that the whole community benefits.

The last quotation is taken from Steve Biko who may not be seen as a theologian but he was because he brought back the pride of people who had forgotten that they were created in the image of God, that they culture and history was worth celebrating! Below is a quotation from him

> Merely by describing yourself as black you have started on a road towards emancipation, you have committed yourself to fight against all forces that seek to use your blackness as a stamp that marks you out as a subservient being[1].

In this quotation Biko called on Africans to return to their cultural roots and reclaim their dignity and identity in community. This call as we know in history was instrumental in building resistance against forces of oppression through a reclaiming, owning, valuing and celebration of culture and blackness. *Ubuntu* became a tool of resistance and restoration of black pride and identity.

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[1] Steven Biko

Read more at http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/s/stevenbiko205078.html#OYiutfRfM03iJ858.99

The next group that was oppressed is women. The struggle for women's dignity and equality started outside the church and later women studying theology took the same struggle into the church, challenging beliefs and practices that defined women as inferior to men. They also started to recover suppressed voices of women in scripture and the history of Christianity as part of recovering women's voices today. Some women theologians have left the church because they believed that the bible and tradition are steeped in sexism and oppression of women that there is no hope of change. These are the radical group. Other women theologians chose to stay in the church because they believed that change is possible because God takes sides with those who are oppressed and liberates them. So this group engages with scripture, tradition and the teachings of the church in a three way process of identifying and challenging oppression, recovering women's voices and developing transformative alternatives that reflect the nature of God as a communion of equal persons engaged in liberating actions for all oppressed groups. These women theologians are found everywhere. In Africa women theologians have organized themselves into a group called The Circle of Concerned Women Theologians. This is how one of leaders Professor Isabel Phiri describes the theology of African women theologians,

> African women's theologies are a critical, academic study of the causes of women oppression; particularly a struggle against societal, cultural and religious patriarchy. They are committed to the eradication of all forms of oppression against women through a critique of the social and religious dimensions both in African culture and Christianity. African women's theologies take women's experiences as its starting point, focusing on the oppressive areas of life caused by injustices such as patriarchy, colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism, capitalism, globalisation and sexist. It sees a need to include the voices of all women, not just theologians, because it acknowledges that the majority of African women are engaging in oral theology (2004:156).

In 2002 at the height of the AIDS epidemic in Africa, The Circle of African Women Theologians carried out research on the impact of HIV on women and produced liberating theologies that challenged social and cultural forces that made women vulnerable to infection such as violence, some cultural practices for example widow cleansing and inability of women to negotiate safer sex with their partners. One of the

challenges of Circle theology is to make the books available for women everywhere in Africa so that they can be empowered through their faith to face the challenges of being a woman in contemporary African society. Some African women theologians are applying principles of *ubuntu* in theologies promoting justice in communities.

In the area of Trinitarian theology though, the leading theologians are mainly Catholic women theologians in the North and Latin America as well as the East. I am a new comer into Trinitarian theology and hope to contribute an African perspective of *ubuntu*. The insights and quotations on Trinitarian theology from women's perspectives will be from Elizabeth Johnson and Anne Carr and conclude with a quotation from Roberto S Goizueta.

Elizabeth Johnson argues that the problem is the way in the church has used the dominance of male language in the Trinity to subordinate and marginalize women. This language is used: exclusively as if this is the only language for God, whereas Scripture has many descriptions and names of God taken from experiences of both women (giving birth) and men (warrior); literally as if God can be reduced to human categories, God embraces and transcends gender for example God is father but not male; and patriarchaly resulting in the masculization of God and the church. Johnson starts her Trinitarian theology from the experience of the Spirit in the lives of Christians and recovers the tradition of Wisdom, the feminine person in God and names the Spirit – Spirit Sophia. She reverses the order of the Trinity by starting with the Spirit. The power of Sophia-God is "the liberating power of connectedness that is effective in compassionate love". God liberates humanity from all forms of oppression as the starting point of genuine community. There is no community without liberation, equality and justice. This is a vision of *ubuntu* that was discussed earlier and Johnson gives it a solid theological foundation. She maintains that ultimately God is beyond all human formulations and exists as Holy Mystery.

Similarly, feminist theologian Carr's Trinitarian theology starts with the qualities of *perichoresis* as evident in the following quotatation:

> The mystery of God as Trinity, as final and perfect sociality, embodies those qualities of mutuality, reciprocity, cooperation, unity, peace in genuine diversity that are feminist ideals and goals derived from the inclusivity of the gospel message. The final symbol of the God as Trinity thus provides women with an image and concept of God that entails qualities that make God truly worthy of imitation, worthy of the call to radical discipleship that is inherent in Jesus' message (1990**:**156-7).

Again we see the emphasis on relationality, equality, reciprocity that are found in the Trinity as the basis of human relations. In such communities women and men flourish and discover their uniqueness as individuals. Their uniqueness transcends gender roles because it allows each person to develop in relation to others by practicing values that promote justice and equality. Many people are living full lives without conforming to gender roles for women and men for example priests, sisters and religious. There are different ways of being a woman or a man and these are found in relationships with others. Vocation is found in community and is an expression of the unique call of each person in service of the community and the community in sustaining the uniqueness of each person's call. The Trinity embodies oneness as diversity committed to humanity or the 'other'.

The *ubuntu* aspect of liberation theology is expressed by Goizueta in the following quotation,

> The human person is defined, above all, by his or her character as a relational being. Yet this relationality is not merely some static 'essence' of the person, but an active relating in and through which the person defines him or herself, in interaction with others. Relationship is not something that 'happens to' someone, something one 'experiences' in a passive way, or something one 'possesses' ; it is something one does, the most basic form of human action since through relationship, we discover and live out our identity as intrinsically relational beings"

This is *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*!

Conclusion – is the God who taught *ubuntu* to our ancestors the same God as the Christian God in the Trinity? Is there *ubuntu* in God? I think based on our discussions on the Trinity and the emphasis on God as communion, relationship of perichoresis there is no doubt in my mind that the God of the Christian Trinity is the same God as that of our ancestors.

Ubuntu is expressed it its fullness in the Trinity and therefore in our context we can apply Trinitarian theology to revive *ubuntu* and make it a practice and way of understanding who we are that brings liberation and change of concrete realities of our people.

Trinitarian *ubuntu* defines the human person as relational, communal, equal to all yet distinctively individual and unique. One's uniqueness if found in relation to others and in being for others in community. The community nurtures, encourages, fosters and is not threatened by difference within or outside – it is a hospitable place for strangers and difference. Similarly the individual can only grow to their fullness in relationship to others and within a community in which they actively engage and promote the values of equality, justice, solidarity and love. Just as the Trinity was revealed in the process of liberating humanity, so too is our humanity. When we act in liberating good and justice for others then we become humane. *Ubuntu* ngumuntu ngabantu comes from God who dwells in relationships of self giving and surrender that do not diminish uniquess or dissolve it. These qualities of self giving and sacrifice for the common good are what makes us human. The people who have shown us the best qualities of *ubuntu* such as national figures like Steve Biko, Nelson Mandela, Gandhi, Juliuas Nyerere, Kenneth Kaunda etc have sacrificed their lives for the common good. In our own families and communities we have benefited from the sacrifice of our parents, siblings, neighbours and friends.

So as we reflect on the problems in our society, crime, corruption, violence against women and children let us return to *ubuntu* and the church needs to take *ubuntu* into its theology of God and what it means to be a human person made in the image of the Trinitarian God of *ubuntu*.

(Summary taken from unpublished doctoral thesis by Nontando Hadebe, 2013. *Trinitatian Theologian response to Gender Challenges in the context of HIV and AIDS in Southern Africa)*

Bibliography