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Ubuntu Ethics: Toward Racial Reconciliation and Reparations

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Abstract

This paper proposes Ubuntu ethics as a means for reconciliation in societies experiencing racial conflict. Rooted in Christian ethics and theological anthropology, the ethics of Ubuntu played a role in healing the wounds of apartheid in South Africa by bringing Black and white populations to the same table in order to facilitate a process of reconciliation via reparations. Ubuntu ethics begins with the notion that reconciliation has to move from a recognition of the wrongdoing and sinfulness of the perpetrators. Generally, this process involves naming the relationship between the historical oppressor and their descendants. After recognition, the notions of restorative justice and interconnectedness, integral to Ubuntu ethics, represent a concrete path foward. This paper will show that these notions necessitate that reparations, some sort of financial acknowledgement of systemic injustices, be a core element of seeking authentic reconciliation, and that the United States Christian tradition, like the South African tradition, can be a facilitator in this process. As an international student reflecting on the American context, I ardently believe that Ubuntu ethics can add value to the discussion on racial reconciliation in the U.S.

Introduction

One may ask what Africa has to offer the world in terms of philosophical and theological knowledge. Indeed, such a question is not uncommon in the U.S. context, where Africa's rich history and cultural heritage has been ignored and undermined in many ways. However, this hesitation to explore what Africa has to offer ignores the wealth of the continent's wisdom, of which *Ubuntu* is a part. Ubuntu ethics constitutes a possible solution in the struggle for racial reconciliation. *Ubuntu* is an African word that has a root in many African languages and cultures. It refers to the fullness and perfection of all of humanity. *Ubuntu* means that we can all flourish as human beings when we recognize one another's mutuality and interdependence. Ubuntu ethics argues that "a person with *Ubuntu* is open and available to others, [affirms] others,

DEOGRATIAS: UBUNTU ETHICS

does not feel threatened that others are able and good… [is not] diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or [when others are] treated as if they were less than who they are."[1] *Ubuntu* teaches us how to live together while being respectful of the Other's dignity and well-being. Rather than an exclusively punitive or transactional approach to rectifying harms, Ubuntu ethics makes room for a deeper form of racial reconciliation by arguing for restorative justice and systemic reparations.

The History of Racism within Catholic Social Teaching

In order to undertand why Ubuntu ethics, rooted in an African Christian perspective, can offer the western Catholic Church a new outlook to embody in conversations on systemic racism, it is important to begin with a historical analysis on the ways in which Catholic Social Teaching has failed to provide adequate pastoral and scholarly guidance on the themes of race and racial justice. From the beginning, the magisterium of the Catholic Church had ambiguous and even supportive positions on slavery and racism. Indeed, the history of Catholic Social Teaching and papal documents on slavery and racism can be divided into four primary periods. The Early Church favored slavery, a position facilitated by the decisions of the Council of Gangra, Gregory I, the Ninth Council of Toledo, and false interpretations of Scripture. From the beginning of the Church described in the Didache to the council of Toledo in 665, the Catholic Church argued for the moral justification of slavery, assuming that the institution was not contrary to divine law and biblical teaching. In the second period, the Medieval Church, from Pope Urban II (1089) until Pius II (1462), endorsed the enslavement of non-Christians, especially pagans. Church councils and Popes encouraged slavery and racism: Alexander III in the Lateran council of 1179; Innocent III during the fourth Lateran council of 1215; Gregory IX in his letter to the English in 1235; Leo

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[1] Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 29.

X; and Pope Paul III. They authorized Christians, Catholic dignitaries, congregations, and laypeople alike to own slaves and to buy and sell enslaved Blacks within and outside the Roman Empire.[2] In the third, counter-reformation period, Church hierarchy from Pope Paul III (1537) to Alexander VIII (1661) began to move away from its prior acceptance of slavery through the use of ambiguous language on just and unjust slavery.[3] The popes did not punish cardinals or bishops who disobeyed their guidance or continued owning slaves.[4] Catholics, Christian congregations, and Church dignitaries did not stop the slave trade in their dioceses and territories. The economy of some dioceses, such as the U.S. dioceses of New Orleans founded in 1793, procured substantial wealth through the slave trade. Some laypeople donated their plantations to the Church, and Black people were forced into slavery to provide free labor to dioceses and parishes to sustain the Church's income.[5] Even after slavery was officially abolished, new, more subtle forms of slavery evolved, such as indentured servitude.[6] Finally, the modern era constitutes the fourth period of Church social teaching on the institution, in which slavery and racism are explicitly condemned. Papal documents condemning the practice began in 1890 with Pope Leo XIII, who was the first pope to condemn slavery unequivocally.[7] More recently, the encyclical letter *Fratelli tutti* by Pope Francis and the pastoral letter *Open Wide Our Hearts* by the U.S. bishops noticeably condemn slavery and racism as sins.[8]

Today, the world is experiencing a daunting period of racism mixed with the fear of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and migration crises. Racism is still one of "the most

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[2] John Francis Maxwell, *Slavery and the Catholic Church, the History of Catholic Teaching Concerning the Moral Legitimacy of the Institution of Slavery* (London: Barry Rose Publishers, 1975), 117-119.
[3] *Ibid*, 76-79.
[4] Diana Hayes, "Reflections on Slavery," in *Change in Official Catholic Moral Teachings*, ed. Charles E. Curran (New York: Paulist Press, 2003), 65-75.
[5] Katie Walker Grimes, *Christ Divided, Antiblackness as Corporate Vice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 110-115.
[6] Joel S. Panzer, *The Popes, and Slavery* (New York: Alba House, 1996), 70-71.
[7] Hayes, "Reflections on Slavery," 65-75.
[8] Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, No. 20.

vicious of all human vices."[9] It constitutes one of the most persistent viruses and represents an evil of humanity that calls for a global response. Racism will not end until hierarchies of power have been dealt with. Like any illness, one must treat the source to heal it, not the symptom. In a church with a deep history of racism, Ubuntu ethics is a newer source of moral authority that recognizes the identity of the oppressed and restores their dignity as children of God. The Ubuntu virtues of mutuality and interdependence break the chain of racial classification in appealing to both the oppressor and oppressed, enabling them to see each other as peers with the same humanity.[10] In this way, the African Christian tradition with its emphasis on racial equality can provide a model for the U.S. context, where historically the faith has failed to be prophetic on these issues.

Ubuntu Ethics: New Source of Moral Authority

Ubuntu ethics is primarily an African philosophical and epistemological concept that is used in all aspects of life. In South African apartheid, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission engaged Ubuntu ethics to bring reconciliation to a country divided by racism. Nobel Prize laureate Desmond Tutu utilized Ubuntu ethics to heal the wounds of racial conflict by recounting the atrocities of apartheid, seeking to facilitate reconciliation and amnesty. Ubuntu ethics refers to the full humanness that we share. For linguistic illustration, the word *ubuntu* has a different meaning in every African language, yet each definition harkens back to the same root of interconnectedness. For example, *ubuntu* is *umunthu* in Chewa, *umundu* in Yawo, *bunhu* in Tsonga, *unhu* in Shona, *botho* in Sotho or Tswana, *umuntu* in Zulu, *vhutu* in Venda, and *ubuntu*

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[9] Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christianity and Crisis* (New York: Winter, 1943), 11.
[10] Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1997), 5.

DEOGRATIAS: UBUNTU ETHICS

in Xhosa and Ndebele.[11] Ubuntu ethics has been useful in struggling toward racial reconciliation between the colonizer and indigenous in many post-independence African countries. Despite the atrocities of colonization, some African leaders such as Nelson Mandela of South Africa, Uhuru Kenyatta of Kenya, and Sam Nujoma of Namibia practiced *ubuntu* when they pushed for reconciliation, rehabilitation, reconstruction, and reparations rather than simply reprisals against white colonizers.

In the South African context of apartheid, the color of one's skin made those who were white the elite of society as a birthright. This racial injustice caused tension and violence that resulted in loss of life, mainly Black life. The considerable gaps between the haves and the have-nots, the owners of the land and the homeless, the educated and the non-educated, the employed and unemployed were the everyday systems that maintained racism. Ubuntu ethicists and reconciliation stakeholders argued that "unless houses replace the hovels and shacks in which most Blacks live and unless Blacks gain access to clean water, electricity, affordable health care, decent education, good jobs, and a safe environment—things which the vast majority of whites have taken for granted for so long—we can just as well kiss reconciliation goodbye."[12] We can choose to face systemic racism and engage with solutions from personal, communal, and institutional perspectives. Ubuntu ethics in the South African context went beyond togetherness to reach the transformation of structures and systems. Each member of society is an agent, accountable for ongoing racial injustice.[13]

At this moment in our world, there is a need for a sincere encounter with our sins and responsibilities. There is a need to do more toward a new perception of racial cohabitation and

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[11] Richard Tambulasi and Happy Kayuni, "Ubuntu and Democratic Good Governance in Malawi, a Case Study," in *African Ethics*, ed. Munyaradzi Felix Murove (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009), 427-428.
[12] Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, 209.
[13] Whitney M. Young, *Beyond Racism, Building an Open Society* (New York: Paperback, 1971), 224-225.

41

mutual recognition. The present situation demands us to "turn history around, subvert it, and send it in a new direction."[14] To heal this world and its peoples requires a new vision and meaning of Black life to bring about a new culture. This is possible through Ubuntu ethics's emphasis on reconciliation via systemic change and reparations.

The Ubuntu Call for Reconciliation and Reparations

Reparations itself is not a new or revolutionary theory, but rather a global practice that started with reparations from the damages of World War I and the Cold War. The Jewish victims of the Nazi holocaust and Japanese Americans also represent two groups who gained reparations from human rights violations during World War II. Reparations take a different form according to the context and need. In the Jewish context, for example, reparations consisted of transferring money and funds from the German government to Jewish survivors.[15] Ubuntu ethics is unique in that it recognizes the simultaneous need for reconciliation and the right to reparations, rooted in a restorative desire for interconnectedness without need for punishment or payback. Before reconciliation was achieved, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission first proposed adopting a new, inclusive constitution. The Commission recognized that "there is a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for *ubuntu* but not for victimization."[16] In South Africa, to fulfill these needs, reparation was practiced at the individual, communal, and governmental levels. Reparation is not compensation,

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[14] Jon Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor* (New York: Orbis Books, 2017), 9.
[15] Ali A. Mazrui, "Africa's Wisdom Has Two Parents and One Guardian: Africanism, Islam, and the West," in *African Ethics: An Anthology of Comparative and Applied Ethics*, ed. Munyaradzi Felix Murove (Scottville: University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2009), 38.
[16] Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, 40.

DEOGRATIAS: UBUNTU ETHICS

but rather it is to be understood as "balm, an ointment, being poured over the wounds to assist in their healing."[17]

As Elizabeth Bound argues, "working for solidarity requires a process that includes addressing injury, loss, and fear, along with recognizing the multiple forms of oppression and domination in which we live."[18] Reparation turns the page to a new chapter in a nation's history by integrating the harmed into the system without need for payback. It draws near to the lamentable history of racism and gives the required honor and dignity to Black people. Reparations is resurrecting bodies to new life by paying back stolen integrity and talent. In a U.S. context, Ubuntu ethics's model that emphasizes relationship and interconnectedness could include empowering those who were victims of slavery and still are victims of racism by imparting education skills, religious power, and a national share of work equity to show an authentic sorrow for past systemic injustices. It should encompass power-sharing by including Black representation in state institutions. For Ubuntu ethics, reparations makes concrete and known the desire to repair relationship and maintain connection. Reparations is the first step in reconstruction of a society working toward the ultimate goal of reconciliation. It also concerns the human memories that will never be fully buried in the past. Dialogue and reconciliation through truth-telling and healing becomes a personal duty and a national priority. When the harm is long-lasting and cross-historical, reconciliation can be slow. Reconciliation and forgiveness are not a one-step journey to walk. Reconciliation is instead a process that requires audacity and stamina. Reconciliation and forgiveness do not have boundaries; instead, they are a path to

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[17] Ibid. 51.

[18] Elizabeth Bounds, "Gaps and Flashpoints: Untangling Race and Class," in *Disrupting White Supremacy from Within: White People on What We Need to Do*, ed. Jennifer Harvey (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2004), 123-141.

43

building a genuine relationship leading to a new creation in Christ.[19] Ubuntu ethics, with its roots

in authentic relationship and the idea of giving freely without payback or punishment, sees the

necessity of reparations and systemic change if a nation is ever to see racial reconciliation.

Ubuntu's communitarian aspect with its care for Otherness, interconnectedness, and

mutuality considers all beings as sharing the same humanity. Taking mutuality seriously requires

accountability through some reparatory process and an ability to remember and to forgive. This

approach is essential to address the systemic racism that dehumanizes Black people in the U.S.

For a capitalist society steeped in racialized poverty, Ubuntu ethics could instill the attitude of

caring for the less privileged and oppressed in the community: the understanding that all are

interconnected. Laurenti Magesa argues that sharing, care, public witness, and building

relationships are ethical components of leadership in times of severe crises grounded in the

principles of Ubuntu.[20] The spirit of selfishness, avarice, and greed is challenged. The

community has the moral duty to protect others' well-being in their diversity because human

beings, despite skin color, are intrinsically linked, and our humanity is intertwined together.[21] All

recollection of the past should, in any case, lead to the restoration and resurrection of life within

this framework. This is, ultimately, what an Ubuntu framework would have to offer situations of

intense racial conflict such as that currently being experienced in the U.S.

Conclusion

In a time of crisis, dehumanization, and stolen dignity, the U.S. Catholic Church can play

an important role in facilitating social reconciliation by moving away from its history of outright

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[19] Society of Jesus, *Rowing into the Deep: General Congregation 36* (Rome: Curia of the Superior General, 2017), Nos 3, 34.

[20] Laurenti Magesa, *What Is Not Sacred? African Spirituality* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2014), 96-97.

[21] Carlo Petrini, and Sabina Gainotti., "A Personalist Approach to Public-Health Ethics.," *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* (2008). http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes

and ambiguous support for racism and toward a claiming of its global, African tradition and, specifically, a claiming of Ubuntu ethics. Ubuntu ethics recognizes that harmed relationships require acts of accountability that can then lead to reconciliation. *Ubuntu* insists on an understanding of humanity as a community of solidarity in which we share the same values and resources. Reconciliation through Ubuntu ethics is a peaceful and truthful process, where two parties listen to grief-filled memories and seek to heal any loss with restorative justice and concrete reparations that will contribute to the restoration of genuine relationships and cohabitation. The U.S. Church should learn from the role that the South African Christian tradition played in its social context and encourage both individuals and institutions to engage in work to remember and move beyond systemic racism rooted in the country's original sin of slavery.[22] This remembrance leads to a conversion of heart. Whether it be on a personal level, ecclesial level, or institutional level, this conversion concerns all of us. Ubuntu ethics tells us that the social structure that perpetuates our racist origins has to transform. It is in moving from this place that "double healing and conversion can occur."[23]

In the battle against racism, Black people are among the most crucified people. The remembrance and recounting of the stories of wounds and grief, the recognition of social and structural sin, together with the will of reparations, is an ethical approach that can bring about change. From Martin Luther King Jr. to Black Lives Matter, these perspectives have told their struggles in the face of violence and denial of recognition. Ubuntu ethics requires that white Americans recognize the role of African slavery in the foundations of the nation and the economy by promoting systemic change on a path to racial reconciliation. Ubuntu theology recognizes and restores the image of God in each person. From this perspective, both the

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[22] Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 103-110.
[23] United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Open Wide Our Hearts," No. 7.

45

oppressor and oppressed should see their peers as created in the image of God. Ubuntu theology

exists at a crossroads between forgiveness of the past and reparations for the future, posing a

promising ethical response to moral injustice.

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47