

## Toward a Black African Theological Anthropology and Ubuntu Ethics

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### ABSTRACT

*This essay studies the moral values and practical relevance of the South African concept of Ubuntu in the process of rethinking Black African theological ethics and Black African theological anthropology. Toward this goal, we examine the works of three prominent African theologians: Laurenti Magesa, a diocesan priest from Tanzania, John S. Mbiti, an Anglican priest from Kenya, and Bénézet Bujo, a Catholic priest from the Democratic Republic of the Congo.<sup>1</sup> The aim of this comparative analysis is to highlight the importance and implications of Black theological anthropology and ethics to the social and moral life of the individual and the community. This study also aims at articulating a model that is theologically sound, human-sensitive and enriching, and emancipatory. We shall investigate in their ethico-theological writings the intersection of theism, personhood, community, and Ubuntu as an African humanism. The selected African thinkers give the impression that the African perspective on humanity, the social life, and the moral life is more promising, liberating, and dignifying than the Western vision on these issues.*

*The theological anthropology and ethics of Magesa, Mbiti, and Bujo strongly promote interconnected human relations and interactional social dynamics that are based on the Ubuntu moral ethics. This essay suggests that Black African theological anthropology and theological ethics have a strong foundation on the Ubuntu moral virtues and ethical principles that promotes human flourishing and a life in solidarity within the framework of the community and a symbiotic relationship between God, the community, and the individual.*

**Keywords:** *African theological anthropology, African theological ethics, Ubuntu ethics, Black theology, African traditional religion.*

### The Question of “Being” or “Person” In African Philosophical Theology

The African thinking on the person or the African concept of personhood counters the Western traditional thinking on the notion of being. African Theologian Benezet Bujo explains clearly in African traditional society that “The person is not defined as an ontological act by means of self-realization, but by means of ‘relations.’ This means that the human person in Africa is from the very beginning in a network of relationships that constitutes his inalienable dignity.”<sup>2</sup> In Black African anthropology,

individualism is not favored above the community nor is it that which delimits the telos of life. That does not mean, however, the individual or personal subjectivity is absorbed into the community. While the person possesses his or her individuality, it is not at the expense of the community. It is also from this angle that Laurenti Magesa could write that firmly, the “African worldview is that life, relationships, participation and community are holistic realities, blending the spiritual and the material organically.”<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, in the African worldview and religious cosmology, the community plays a substantive role in the life of the individual person. Magesa goes forth to

<sup>1</sup>Magesa’s most influential works include African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life (1997), *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa* (2004), *African Religion in the Dialogue Debate: From Intolerance to Coexistence* (2010), and *What is not Sacred? African Spirituality* (2013); Mbiti’s most important works include African Religions and Philosophy (1969), *Concepts of God in Africa* (1970), *New Testament Eschatology in an*

*African Background* (1971), and *Introduction to African Religion* (1975); and Bujo’s important works include *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality* (2001), *African Theology in the 21st Century* (2003), and *African Theology in Its Social Context* (2006).

<sup>2</sup>Bujo, *Foundations of African Ethics*, 3-4.

<sup>3</sup>Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, 182.

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underscore the rewards in living and operating as a corporate person:

Apart from their community, African people are not fully persons. A person's personality and individuality are guaranteed only insofar as the individual is integrated into the community on the other hand, and the community serves and strengthens the individual on the other. So, the individual does everything in view of assuring the whole community's health and survival. Individuals may not be conscious of this as they work for their family, discipline it, and make sure no taboos are broken; or when they refrain from emotions that might disturb the community... The imperative of building relationships and community is instilled in the individual from birth to death.<sup>4</sup>

From a theological standpoint, Magesa sustains that the Christian Gospel "makes explicit the absolute value of the individual person. Created in the image and likeness of God and imbued with divine breath, a person has value in and for him—or herself. One's value and dignity as a human person are not given by nor do they flow from one's community. They originate from God's own self... People cannot begin to grow toward the full stature of their dignity as the image of God unless it leads them to community."<sup>5</sup> The essence of human being derives directly from God with the purpose to establish the God-human fellowship and communion. God himself is the ground of all that exists. Consequently, "from the point of creation, in the very act of creation, the seal of the Maker, the seal of God's self-disclosure, has been stamped all over the face of the created order."<sup>6</sup> Based on an exegetical reading of Genesis 1:26 and 2:7, it follows that God has equipped man and woman with intelligence, will, reason, a sense of purpose, and a sense of community. This divine presence in people makes them addressable, responsible, and accountable to God. The implication of the divine revelation to human cultures is that it validates and sustains the creation of human communities.

The significant point here is that revelation presupposes personal communication between the living Being who reveals and the living person to whom revelation is made. It would appear that man is a necessity in this situation; for, without a personal mind to appreciate and

apprehend revelation, the whole process would be futile.<sup>7</sup>

In African cosmology, the theological foundation for human origin and God's initiate to create both man and woman does not necessarily imply concurrently the creation of personhood. In his helpful work, *Self and Community in a Changing World*, Kenyan philosopher D.A. Masolo puts forth the sharp contrast between "being a person" and "being human" in African philosophical thought. He also elaborates on the interconnecting process by which a human achieves personhood. In other words, in African thought, a human being is not naturally born a person; one becomes a person after undergoing the rituals of the community and fulfilling its obligations. (The idea of a person is social construct as it in Western postmodernist definition of gender and sexuality.) The theory of dependence and interdependence probably best describes African communitarian philosophical ethics, and it is analogous to African theological anthropology and ethics. In the paragraph below, Masolo offers rational illumination on this conceptual phenomenon.

Being a person and being a human being are not the same thing. We are human beings by virtue of the particular biological organism that we are. Our biological type defines us as a species among other living things, and it involves, among other things, having the kind of brain that we possess and all the activities that this kind of brain is naturally endowed to perform... This process of depending on others for the tools that enable us to associate with them on a growing scale of competence is the process that makes us into persons. In other words, we become persons through acquiring and participating in the socially generated knowledge of norms and actions that we learn to live by in order to impose humaneness upon our humanness.<sup>8</sup>

The sharp distinction between being a human and being a person is premised on very specific categorical and conceptual notions, as it pertains to human interactions, communal covenant, and reciprocal commitment. The language of participation and collaboration is stressed here as it involves the social obligations of the individual to the community to which he or she belongs. Accordingly, "Being" is a related

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>6</sup> Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 54.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>8</sup> Masolo, *Self and Community in a Changing World*, 154-5.

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category in the sense we recognize that the biological constitution of humans as a necessary but not sufficient basis of personhood, because human beings require gradual sociogenic development to become persons. This relational condition circumstantiates not only the physical existence of things and our development into persons but also our cognitive and moral experience of the world.”<sup>9</sup> Certain thinkers such as Immanuel Kant, construes the idea of the person as the ultimate question in anthropology and that which underscores or leads to other questions and relations; by contrast, in African anthropology, the community is the starting point of life or human existence. The community underlies everything the person is and will be, and correspondingly, what the individual does and will do. The person is inevitably the product of the community.

Furthermore, in his famous article, “Person and Community in African Traditional Thought,” Nigerian Philosopher Ifeanyi A. Menkiti has brilliantly analyzed the (processual) nature of being or personhood in the African worldview; as he has summed up the logic of this communal ritual in this passage:

The fact that persons become persons only after a process of incorporation. Without incorporation into this or that community, individuals are considered to be mere dangers to whom the description “person” does not fully apply. For personhood is something which has to be achieved, and is not given simply because of human seed...As far as African societies are concerned, personhood is something at which individuals could fail, at which they could be competent or ineffective, better or worse. Hence, the African emphasized the rituals of incorporation and the overarching necessity of learning the social rules by which the community lives, so that what was initially biologically given can come to attain social selfhood, i.e., become a person with all the inbuilt excellencies implied by the term.<sup>10</sup>

As a result, the idea of incorporation (into a community) is what engenders the personhood of an individual. Personhood is premised on a set of communal values and prescriptions the individual must fulfill, and personhood is not natural or automatic. It is always dependent upon fulfilling those promises for the good of the community, which sometimes are contingent

upon one’s response and attitude toward the community. Consequently, it is apparent that “Human beings are not only individuals belong to the same species; they also belong to specific and various groups within which they are born and act.”<sup>11</sup> The value and virtues of Ubuntu is communicated through the African system of community.

### The Values and Practices of Ubuntu Ethics

Generally, in African worldview, orientation toward life and human and social dynamics is best translated in the South African concept of Ubuntu. Correspondingly, in African cosmology and *weltanschauung*, the idea of human community and the essence of being human is expressed in the African humanism called Ubuntu. It is closely translated as “A person is a person through other persons.” In South Africa, when the notion is applied to human beings, the word *abandu/batho* is used; when the reference pertains to the way of life, human values, norms, and traditions, *Isi-ntu/sitsu* is used. As a linguistic tem, *Ntuis* used in a number of words such as *Unbuntu*, (PI) *Aba-ntu*, *iSi-ntu*, *Ubun-tu*. It is equated with the ancient Egyptian word for primordial substance. The Africans peoples, however, developed variants of nu-and gave it the following forms: *du*, *nbo*, *-nintfu-*, *-ntu*, *-nu*, *-mwu*, *-so*, *-tho*, *-thu*, and *-tu*, e.g. *Swazi muntfu*; *Sotho: motho*; *Xhosa umntu*; *Zulu umuntu*. *Xitsonga vhuthu*.

As a philosophy of African humanism, the triumph of the spirit and demands of Ubuntu make a pressing appeal to the individual and the collective to foster a life of peace, interdependence, selflessness, and reciprocity towards the preservation of the self and the community. Ubuntu as a way of life provides robust optimistic values and promising ideals to individuals partaking in the harshness and desolation of the modern life:

Whoever is empowered by the spirit of *Ubuntu*, Black or White, African or foreigner embraces the vision of social inclusion and of a non-racial society. There is no doubt that Ubuntu has its reciprocal concept in other languages. However, groups that advocate social exclusion and a racial society echo the language of the colonists, regardless of whether this is conscious nor not.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>10</sup> Menkiti, “Person and Community in African Traditional Thought,” 172-3.

<sup>11</sup> Todorov, *On Human Diversity*, 385.

<sup>12</sup> Aristide, “Umoyawamagama (The Spirit of the Word),” 228.

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In its humanistic orientation, the spirit of Ubuntu tries to rehabilitate the collective self and reinvent the SELF (EGO) and the SUPER EGO that have been victimized and disrupted by the colonial Super Ego. The ideals of Ubuntu are the antithesis of human oppression and exploitation, imperialism and colonization. The thrust of this African philosophy and practical aspects of Ubuntu ethics are effectively articulated in this detailed paragraph:

Good neighbors live in harmony and are ready to come to the assistance of one another. Despite the caricature of violence so often used against Black people, African and African descendants are essentially peace lovers animated by the shared principle of Ubuntu, the seed for the globalization of solidarity. Impoverished by the globalization of the economy, they shall overcome through the globalization of solidarity. Hence economic growth rooted in human growth. Contrary to the colonial system that secretes a classist neurosis *Ubuntu* inspires concrete expressions of solidarity among literate and illiterate people... These concrete expressions of solidarity clearly justify the claim that Ubuntu generates a social self, or a social love rooted in brotherhood.<sup>13</sup>

This is a call to all people to live together in harmony with each other, to seek the best interest of one's neighbor, and to create more future possibilities for everyone. Ubuntu builds bridges of solidarity and not walls of separation. This attitude toward life and people can be construed as a unifying force that helps individuals to cope with and even dispels human anxiety, isolation, and hostility. Ubuntu "is the unifying features that generates a social 'self' or a love story rooted in brotherhood... The psychology of Ubuntu demonstrates how the concept stands in opposition to the principles of colonialism."<sup>14</sup> Ubuntu provides the empowerment and resources to both Africans and descendants of Africans to create a community of love rooted in African humanistic values and religious traditions.

Generally, the concept of Ubuntu bears a positive connotation or value; however, some critics have associated it with the patriarchal system in African society that it is responsible for the sustenance of the "deep-seated patriarchy throughout sub-Saharan Africa and its indifference to the insensitivity to gender justice."<sup>15</sup> Other African thinkers such as South

African theologian Desmond Tutu defers from this position.

In his excellent work, *God is not a Christian*, Tutu provides a succinct but critical reflection on the ethics of *Ubuntu*. He writes, "We need other human beings for us to learn how to be human, for none of us comes fully formed into the world. We would not know how to talk, to walk, to think, to eat as human beings unless we learned how to do these things from other human being is a contradiction in terms."<sup>16</sup> The individual needs other human beings to be fully human, and to grow both socially and spiritually. As observed in the paragraph below:

The completely self-sufficient human being is subhuman. I can be me only if you are fully you. I am because we are, for we are made for togetherness, for family. We are made for complementarity. We are created for a delicate network of relationships, of independence with our fellow human beings, with the rest of creation... To be human is to be dependent.<sup>17</sup>

Arguably, there is a link between theology and anthropology considering the teachings and symbolic meanings of Ubuntu. One can infer that the principles and virtues of Ubuntu have deep roots in African religious traditions. In some degree, one can also construe *Ubuntu* as a theological and moral virtue an individual possesses in the same manner someone can love relationally and be moved by compassion grounded on the virtues of *Ubuntu*. Some of God's immanent virtues are communicated exclusively through the ideals of Ubuntu, as outlined in the subsequent paragraph:

Ubuntu speaks of spiritual attributes such as generosity, hospitality, compassion, caring, sharing... Ubuntu teaches us that our worth is intrinsic to who we are. We matter because we are made in the image of God. Ubuntu reminds us that we belong in one family—God's family, the human family. In our African worldview, the greatest good is communal harmony. Anything that subverts or undermines this greatest good is ipso facto wrong, evil. Anger and a desire for revenge are subversive of this good thing.<sup>18</sup>

While it is possible to appropriate a theistic foundation to this African theo-philosophical tradition, other African thinkers have proposed a non-theistic, but a secular approach to the Ubuntu tradition. As many would consent to this

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 251-2.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 258.

<sup>15</sup> Magadla & Chitando, *Practicing Ubuntu*, 12.

<sup>16</sup> Tutu, *God Is Not A Christian*, 23.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 22, 24.



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reasoning, Ubuntu occupies a prominent place in traditional African society; conceivably, one can interpret Ubuntu as an ethical system or philosophical worldview that has shaped social interactions, and communal dynamics in the African world. Many African thinkers have sustained this perspective on the value of Ubuntu for human flourishing and building strong and effective communities in the modern world:

Ubuntu was coveted more than anything else—more than wealth as measure in cattle and the extent of one’s hand. Without this quality a prosperous man, even though he might have been a chief, was regarded as someone deserving of pity and even contempt. It was seen as what ultimately distinguished people from animals—the quality of being human and so also humane. Those who had Ubuntu were compassionate and gentle, they used their strength on behalf of the weak, and they did not take advantage of others—in short, they cared, treating others as what they were: human beings.<sup>19</sup>

The telos of creating a society grounded on the theo-ethical values and socio-philosophical benefits of Ubuntu is promising to social change and communal wholeness and shalom, and to a dynamic fellowship between the individual and the community characterized by harmony and shared interest. Ubuntu virtues, nonetheless, are best cultivated within the camaraderie of the community. The individual is bound to the community, and that it is the prize of freedom and mutual accountability that glues the individual to the community. Not only the community has the human resources and potentiality to sustain the individual, which will eventually contribute to personal or individual growth, the community promotes self-agency and fosters human flourishing toward the common good.

In addition, the freedom of the individual is not the antithesis of the freedom of the community or vice versa; in fact, it is the goal of the community to enrich the freedom and liberty of the individual if it does not transgress the good and freedom of the community. One could say that freedom as an essential virtue maintains both the existence and longevity of both the community and the individual. American Ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr alludes to the imperative of freedom as a critical human

component that could foster human agency, self-expression, and human maturity.

Actually, the community requires freedom as much as the individual; and the individual requires order as much as does the community. Both the individual and the community require freedom so that neither communal nor historical restraints may prematurely arrest the potencies which inhere in man’s essential freedom and which express themselves collectively as well as individually. It is true that individuals are usually the initiators of new insights and the proponents of novel methods. Yet there are collective forces at work in society which are not the conscious contrivance of individuals.<sup>20</sup>

To complement Niebuhr’s claim, in the African thought, the freedom of the individual is not prized or proclaimed for self-interest; rather, if the community is free, it categorically and naturally transmits in the experience of the individual. Black African society puts more emphasis on the group interest than that of the individual, more on group solidarity than on the activity and the desires of the person; the autonomy of the individual is not esteemed apart from the collectivity of the community.<sup>21</sup> The ethics of mutual reciprocity and interdependence are stressed here. The African communitarian tendency can be construed as a way of life that is deeply rooted in the individual’s experience in the world: “it is the way a person feels and thinks in union not only with all other people around him but indeed with all other beings in the universe: God, animal, tree, or pebble.”<sup>22</sup> The obligations of the individual to the community are designed to enrich the life of the individual; as a corporate person, the life of the individual is dynamically converged in the communal life. Consequently, one can remark that The order of a community is, on the other hand, a boon to the individual as well as to the community. The individual cannot be a true self in isolation. Nor can he live within the confines of the community which “nature” establishes in the minimal cohesion of family and herd. His freedom transcends these limits of nature, and therefore makes larger and large social units both possible and necessary. It is precisely because of the essential freedom of man that he requires a contrived order in his

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 22-3.

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<sup>20</sup> Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, 4.

<sup>21</sup> Qtd in Masolo *Self and Community in a Changing World*, 231.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 231-2.

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community.<sup>23</sup> To put it differently, the life of the individual is meaningless apart from his or her lived-experience within the structure of the community:

The individual is related to the community (in its various levels and extensions) in such a way that the highest reaches of his individuality are dependent upon the social substance out of which they arise, and they must find their end and fulfillment in the community. No simple limit can be placed upon the degree of intimacy to the community, and the breadth and extent of community which the individual requires for his life.<sup>24</sup>

As noted in our preceding analysis, we inferred that the idea of community (communitarianism) is the foundational concept in African anthropological ethics; by contrast, in Western worldview, the individual (individualism) is favored. However, what is that constitutes the African communal system? What is a community? Who are eligible members of the community? In the African way, the community constitutes four entities: God, the ancestors, the community, and the individual. The community includes both the visible (the living) and invisible members—the deceased ancestors. It is possible, however, to construe this African dynamic in the light of the biblical notion of corporate identity and existence:

This emphasis on the group's role in the formation of the individual is a radical departure from the individualism that has marked European-American theological anthropology since the time of Augustine. However, it should be noted that the corporate understanding of the human person in African traditional thought is very similar to the understanding of the human person in the Hebrew writings of the Bible and may shed some light on why enslaved Africans found the biblical writings both familiar and compelling.<sup>25</sup>

### Bujo: on Being Human and Corporate

The corporate unity defines the essence of humanity both in the African and biblical world. What does it mean to be human in the African worldview? According to African theologian Benezet Bujo, "To be human always means sharing life with others in such a way, as Ratzinger puts it, 'the past and the future of

humanity are also present in every human being.'"<sup>26</sup> The emphasis is always on the relationship of the individual to the community or the interconnectedness between the community and the person. Consequently, the demise of the individual is contingent upon his/her rapport to the community.

Bujo articulates some key elements pertaining to the Black African theological anthropology and ethics, which welcomes our attention. First, he accentuates the value of the community to the individual and their relationship with God:

It must be recalled that African ethics does not define the person as a process as coming into existence in the reciprocal relatedness of individual and community where the latter included not only the deceased but also God. This means that the individual becomes a person only through active participation in the life of the community. It is not a membership in a community as such that constitutes the identity: only common action makes the human person a human person and keeps him from becoming an "unfettered ego."<sup>27</sup>

Second, he emphasizes the importance for the members of the community to work in solidarity for the preservation of communal life and integrity, as life in the context of the community is foundational in African ethics.

The main goal of African ethics is fundamentally life itself. The community must guarantee the promotion and protection of life by specifying or ordaining ethics and morality...The life which issues from God becomes a task for all human beings to accomplish: they must ensure that this initial gift of life reaches full maturity, and this is possible only when people act in solidarity.<sup>28</sup>

The actions of the individual member of the community matters, as they could potentially contribute to the success and growth of the community or could hinder human flourishing within that group. Communal solidarity not only sustains the corporate life, it completes each individual member of the respective community. On the contrary, however, when a member of a community transgresses or commits an evil act, the entire community suffers, which could lead to the lost membership and privileges of the community, as well as could result in "to the

<sup>23</sup> Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, 4.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>25</sup> Evans, *We Have Been believers*, 102.

<sup>26</sup> Bujo, *Foundations of An African Ethic*, 3-4.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

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lost or reduction of its life.”<sup>29</sup> As Bujo also underscores:

Life in the community demands alertness and the maintenance of one’s own individuality...The individual can enrich in the community only when he is made a person by its individual members, so that he is in his turn can share in the process by which others become persons. No one is dispensable in this process; the individuals are not exchangeable.<sup>30</sup>

Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye strengthens the preceding claim about the communitarian nature of African societies when he asserts forthrightly, “A harmonious cooperative social life requires that individuals demonstrate sensitivity to the needs and interest of others, if that society is to be a moral society. The reason is that the plight or distress of some individuals in the society is likely to affect others in some substantial ways.”<sup>31</sup> Within this framework, the goal of social arrangement is to maximize life and the welfare of every member of the community, and that “arrangement will have to include rules the pursuit of which will conduce to the attainment of communal welfare. In this connection, such moral virtues as love, mercy, and compassion will have to be regarded as intrinsic to satisfactory moral practice in the communitarian society.”<sup>32</sup> In other words, the underlined moral virtues are learned and cultivated within the fellowship of the community.

Arguably, as previously noted in our analysis, the African communitarian society is linked to its religious ethos. This view on theological anthropology is also accentuated in the writings of LaurentiMagesa and JohnS. Mbiti, who have demonstrated cogently “the dynamic and interdependent relationship between the individual and the community.”<sup>33</sup>

### God and the Human Community

#### LaurentiMagesa

In the thought of Magesa, the central themes of African cosmology coincide with the religious sensibility and values of the African people:

[The] African view of the universe contains the following major themes: the sacrality of life; respect for the spiritual and mystical nature of

creation, and, especially, of the human person; the sense of the family, community, solidarity and participation; and an emphasis of fecundity and sharing in life, friendship, healing and hospitality. Created order other than humanity must be approached with care and awe as well, not only because of its communion with God, but also because of its own vital forces and its mystical connection with the ancestors and other spirits.<sup>34</sup>

African moral theology or religious ethics are community—oriented which involve primarily four entities: God, the individual, the ancestor, and the community. The ultimate objective of community-centered moral codes is to safeguard the community and to hinder individual transgression that could jeopardize the welfare and fellowship of the community. More importantly, the preservation of life is the *raison d’être* of these censored principles and social mores. Consequently, when someone sins or transgresses against a tradition, he/she acts against the will of the community, and therefore, damages communal fellowship and shalom. As Magesa has pointed out:

In African Religion, wrongdoing relates to the contravention of specific codes of community expectations, including taboos. Individuals and the whole community must observe these forms of behavior to preserve order and assure the continuation of life and its fullness. To threaten in any way to break any of the community codes of behavior, which are in fact moral codes, endangers life; it is bad, wrong or “sinful.”<sup>35</sup>

While some individuals have suggested that the moral vision of the peoples of Africa is predicated upon the taboos, beliefs, and the narratives or stories the people had created, their sense of sin or transgression ultimately orients them toward the one God who sees and knows everything. In the passage below, E.A. Adegbola presents God as the ultimate source of morality, and implies that God keeps a record of human conduct, and that he is also a vigilant watcher of evildoers

Everywhere in Africa, morality is hinged on many sanctions. The most fundamental sanction is the fact that God’s all-seeing eyes scan the total areas of human behavior and personal relationships. God is spoken of as having eyes all over “like a sieve” (*Al’aju-k’ara bi-ajere*).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 90, 93.

<sup>31</sup> Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity*, 72.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Hopkins, *Shoes that fit our feet*, 95.

<sup>34</sup> Magesa, *African Religion*, 52-3.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 166.

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Those who do evil in the dark are constantly warned to remember that God's gaze can pierce through the darkness of human action and motive.<sup>36</sup>

Consequently, a possible aim of traditional African religion is to reconcile the transgressor with God, as well with the ancestors, the spirits, and the community. One must always remember that "Existence-in-relation sums the pattern of the African way of life. And this encompasses within it a great deal, practically the whole universe...The African is full conscious of the wholeness and cohesiveness of the whole creation of God, within which interaction is the only way to exist."<sup>37</sup> One must be cautious, however, not to appropriate all African ethical or moral codes to theism; while the African world is generously religious, that does entail that all things have to have a theistic premise.

In the context of theological ethics or the moral vision of African traditional religion, in the words of Magesa, "God stands as the ultimate guardian of the moral order of the universe for the sole, ultimate purpose of benefitting humanity. Humanity, being central in the universal order, is morally bound to sustain the work of God by which humanity itself is, in turn, sustained. Humanity is the primary and most important beneficiary of God's action."<sup>38</sup> The function of ethics is thus to assess a way of life based on certain guided theological, religious, and moral principles, as revealed by God.<sup>39</sup>

Because religion pervades every dimension or aspect of the African, therefore, there is no contradiction between the secular and the religious. All is executed within the boundary of the community. Magesa has contended that any system—secular and/or religion—should be able to provide a plausible response to the purpose of human existence and the meaning of life in this world. The human experience and the purpose of human existence in Black Africa are integral to the life of the community and the religious ethos of such community.

For any religious orientation, the most important principles that determine the system of ethics revolve around the purpose or goal of human life. Within this horizon African communities shape and direct their manner of living in terms

of what is or is not acceptable to them. Human experience and responsibility are judged in light of this goal, which does not change. From the dialectic between the established goal and human responsibility to realize it existentially and experientially arise values and norms of behavior, what Africans would general call "customs," in the most morally-laden sense of the word. These customs help the community and individuals within it to keep the goal of life in sight, to strive toward it, and to have a basis with to deal their shortcomings in this endeavor. For African Religion, all principles of morality and ethics are to be sought within the context of preserving human life and its "power" or "force."<sup>40</sup>

Religion not only provides orientation and direction to life, it influences the individual choice and collective decisions. The attitude toward the religious life and the demands of religion compel the African to interpret his surroundings and social interactions within this ideological paradigm. To act otherwise or contrary to religious orthodoxy or piety is to undermine that which sustains the reciprocal relationship between God, the ancestors, the community, and the individual. By interpreting the African experience in religion through the Christian framework, Magesa could posit that the transformative aspect of the Christian Gospel "makes explicit the absolute value of the individual person. Created in the image and likeness of God and imbued with divine breath, a person has value in and for him—or herself. One's value and dignity as a human person are not given by nor do they flow from one's community. They originate from God's own self.... People cannot begin to grow toward the full stature of their dignity as the image of God unless it leads them to community."<sup>41</sup> On the contrary, SwailemSidhom helpfully explains that human conduct is patterned after invented social norms. Accordingly, there is a sense to say that like religion, human morality is a human invention or social construct:

There is no doubt that the pattern of life within any given society is an expression of a particular view of man held by that society. The shape of political life, for instance, rests on a particular view of man. The practices of religion are as much the outcome of its doctrine of God as of its estimate of man. There is a sense in which the doctrine of God can be viewed as an

<sup>36</sup>Adegbola, "The Theological Basis of Ethics, 116.

<sup>37</sup>Sidhom, "The Theological Estimate of Man," 102,104.

<sup>38</sup>Magesa, African Religion, 46.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid: 29.

<sup>40</sup>Magesa, African Religion, 31-2.

<sup>41</sup>Magesa, Anatomy of Inculturation, 194.



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expression of a certain view of man. Evidently, wherever we may turn, the question of who man is cannot be avoided.<sup>42</sup>

What is undeniably clear in Magesa's theological reasoning is his focus on the sanctity of life and the urgency placed upon us to uphold the dignity of the person within the life and context of the community. Magesa's accent on the imperative of the community in defining the life and well-being of the individual is shared by other African theologians, such as John S. Mbiti. Mbiti develops this central thesis about African theological ethics and theological anthropology in two important volumes: *African Religions & Philosophy*, and *Introduction to African Religion*.

### John S. Mbiti: God as the Ground For Communal Life and Harmony

In the writings of John S. Mbiti, the critical reader may arrive at the conclusion that that the African understanding of humanity is more promising and dignified than the Western perspective of life and human being. The understanding of life in the African cosmology is linked to the religious sensibility of the African people and their theological viewpoint about the God-human-relationship. African anthropology in Mbiti is deeply rooted in the theological premise that God created both man and woman, male and female for relationship, community, and mutuality. While Africans believe that God is Creator of everything including the universe, nonetheless, "of all that created things man is the most important and the most privileged."<sup>43</sup> The belief of the supremacy of humanity over everything else is by virtue that God has created him/her as the pinnacle of creation. Mbiti has lucidly reasoned that man (both the male and female gender) "was the perfection of God's work of creation, since nothing else better than man was created afterwards."<sup>44</sup> Therefore, man is the center of the universe and the link between earth and heaven. Mbiti writes informatively about the religious universe and the place of man and woman in it:

Man, who lives on the earth, is the centre of the universe. He is also the priest of the universe, linking the universe with God its Creator. Man awakens the universe, he speaks to it, he listens to it, he tries to create a harmony with the universe. It is man who turns parts of the

universe into sacred objects, and who uses other things for sacrifices and offerings. These are constant reminders to people that they regard it as a religious universe.<sup>45</sup>

This passage is critical because it provides a better interpretation of African theological anthropology, and the dignity of man/woman as God's special creation according to this tradition. The doctrine of man in African cosmology is associated with his special function or role in the universe, as so ordained by God himself.

In the African view, the universe is both visible and invisible, unending and without limits. Since it was created by God it is subsequently dependent on him for its continuity. God is the sustainer, the keeper and upholder of the universe...As the Creator of the universe, God is outside and beyond it. At the same time, since he is also its sustainer and upholder, he is very close to it. Man, on the other hand, is at the very centre of the universe.<sup>46</sup>

The idea that the universe is both "unending and without limits" (in respect to the manifold roles of man woman in the universe) is comparable to the notion of the "openness of the world," as found in the work of the German phenomenologist philosopher Max Scheler. In his groundbreaking study *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos* (1928), translated in English as *Man's Place In Nature* (1961), Scheler employed the phrase "openness to the world" to recognize the unique place of human beings in the domain of animal life, and to encapsulate the relationship between humans and the universe, and their place in the cosmos; openness to the world means to expound on "the unique freedom of man to inquire and to move beyond every regulation of his existence."<sup>47</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, using logical reasoning, explains with great clarity the philosophical implications and the theological underpinnings of the concept:

This relation is implicit in the awareness of the contingency, conditionedness, and transcendibility of all finite contents...This means that the relation of human exocentric existence to the infinite unconditioned is always given only through the mediation of a finite content. But it may be said conversely that every human relation to finite objects implies a

<sup>42</sup>Sidhom, "The Theological Estimate of Man," 113.

<sup>43</sup>Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 32.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 79.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 36.

<sup>46</sup>Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 35, 38-9.

<sup>47</sup>Pannenberg, *What is Man?* 3.

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relation to the infinite and therefore has in the final analysis a religious foundation and that from the transcending of all finite realities it always return to the reality given in each instance...It is also true that this infinite is always given in the context of the moment's experience of finite reality, whether it is given merely implicitly or in explicit religious thematization but then always in relation to contents derived from finite experience. The way of human beings to the (divine) reality in which they can ultimately ground their exocentric existence and thereby attain to their own identity is thus always mediated through the experience of the external world. This is especially true of the relationship with the other human beings, that is, with beings whose lives are characterized by the same question and experience.<sup>48</sup>

Like Mbiti in his referenced passage above, Pannenberg presupposes this web of relations, which characterizes the human experience in the world, has a divine origin. Complementarily, Stanley Grenz stresses the theological significance of the openness to the world concept and the spirit of interdependence that marks the relationship of the human spirit and life to God and other individuals in society. He deploys the idea of "infinite dependence" to make sense of this viable bond; hence, he could write intelligently the following passage:

The connection between "openness to the world" and "infinite dependency is obvious.

Because we have no niche in the biological framework, we simply can find no ultimate fulfillment in any one "world" or environment we create for ourselves. This human incapability to be fulfilled by any structure of the world, in turn, drives us beyond the finitude of our experience in a never-ending quest for fulfillment. We are, therefore, dependent creatures. But our dependency is greater than the finite world can ever satisfy.<sup>49</sup>

He goes on to underscore the centrality of God in the human quest for meaning, joy, dignity, and satisfaction in this world of uncertainty:

Infinite dependency readily points in the direction of God as the final answer to the human quest.... In short, anthropology itself suggests that our existence as humans presupposes an entity beyond the world upon

whom we are dependent and toward whom we directed for ultimate fulfillment...We are designed to find our meaning and identity in relation to, and only in relation, God.<sup>50</sup>

As could be pointed out, both Mbiti and Magesa advance the notion that God is the telos of human existence, and it is he who gives human life meaning and makes life in this world of anguish worth living. "The affirmation that God is the origin of our essential humanity means that God is the source of value for all creation. Neither other human beings nor the human community has the ultimate prerogative to determine the value of anyone or anything that God has made."<sup>51</sup> Seemingly, the claim of theocentrism undermines the value and important role of the community or the individual; correspondingly, it appears to belittle self-agency and self-expression. God is the primary giver and architect of human hope, grace, and faith; yet, through the community serving as the divine tangible venue, God willingly and freely dispenses the noted qualities so that both the individual and the community could achieve fulfillment and foster meaning in this life.

Furthermore, God created the human community through which human goodness and dignity, values and virtues could be cultivated socially and channeled relationally. Observably, the claim is that it is God's design for the individual to experience life in fullness within the context of the community; the community completes the individual as God has intended it to be. In other words, to refuse to do life together within the community of faith is to reject God's plan for self-growth and the underlying divine goal for the individual and the (Christian) community.

God designed us to enter into relations with others—to participate in the community of God. This divine intention is that we live in harmony with creation, that we enjoy fellowship with one another, and that we participate in the divine life. Through community, we in turn find our identity as children of God...As we live in love—that is, as we give expression to true community—we reflect the love which characterizes the divine essence. And as we reflect the divine essence which is love, we live in accordance with our own essential nature, with that for which God created us. In this manner, we find our true identity—that form of

<sup>48</sup> Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, 70.

<sup>49</sup> Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 131.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 142-3.

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the “world” toward which our “openness to the world” is intended to point us.<sup>52</sup>

Hence, African theological anthropology is best understood in terms of being in close proximity with God, the universe, and the ancestors, leading to a better appreciation for life and the guiding roles of the community in the world. It also compels us to treat the land with gentleness and sensibility, and to care for the environment in which we live. As Mbiti explains, “Because man thinks of himself as being at the centre, he consequently sees the universe from that perspective. It is as if the whole world exists for man’s sake. Therefore, African people look for the usefulness (or otherwise) for the universe to man. This means both what the world can do for man, and how man can use the world for his own good.”<sup>53</sup> Interestingly, the ecological issue is often overlooked in modern theological discourse.

In our previous conversation, we have already pointed out the idea that the universe is deeply religious—from the perspective of the African people. We have also illustrated that in the African worldview, there is no division between the religious and the secular, the profane and the sacred. Everything is relational and integrated. The bond between the African and the universe may be construed as a relationship of reciprocity and interdependence. Giving the religious or theological motif that undergirds his rapport to the universe, the African exploits the universe and makes use of it “in physical, mystical, and supernatural ways.”<sup>54</sup> Mbiti expounds further on this dynamic by asserting:

He sees the universe in terms of himself, and endeavor to live in harmony with it...The visible and invisible parts of the universe are at man’s disposal through physical, mystical, and religious means. Man is not the master in the universe; he is only the centre, the friend, the beneficiary, the user. For that reason, he has to live in harmony with the universe, obeying the laws of natural, moral and mystical order. If these are unduly disturbed, it is man who suffers most. African peoples have come to these conclusions through long experience, observation and reflection.<sup>55</sup>

This anthropocentric perspective on life and about man’s place in the world is grounded on a

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 207, 180.

<sup>53</sup> Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 38.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

theocentric explanation of humanity and the cosmos as a religious entity. It is in this context, Mbiti could make this valiant declaration: “Man is at the very centre of existence, and African peoples see everything else in its relation to this central position of man. God is the explanation of man’s origin and sustenance: it is as if God exists for the sake of man.”<sup>56</sup> The providence of God is linked to his mothering function and divine nurturing: “He [God] was the parent to them and they were his children. He supplied them with all the things they needed, like food, shelter and the knowledge of how to live...God supplied them with cattle, or other domestic animals, fire and implements for hunting, fishing or cultivating the land. God allowed or told them to do certain things but forbade other things.”<sup>57</sup>

God’s presence among his people is what constitutes the good and happy life in African traditional theology.<sup>58</sup> African theological anthropology begins with God and ends with God; without excluding God’s other creations, man/woman is primarily the recipient of divine blessings since the African people, according to Mbiti, “believe that even though individuals are born and die, human life as such as no ending since God is its Protector and Preserver.”<sup>59</sup> Stanley Grenz supports Mbiti’s conviction when he writes: “At its core the human identity problem is religious [and theological] in nature.”<sup>60</sup> Moreover, in African theology, the doctrine of God lies in the absolute sovereignty and lordship of God over all things and human history.

God rules over the universe. In this aspect he has names like King, Governor, Ruler, Chief, Master, Lord, Judge and Distributor. In their prayers people acknowledge God to be the Ruler and Governor of the universe...To speak of God as the Ruler of the universe means that there is no spot which is not under his control; nothing can successfully rebel against him or run away from him.<sup>61</sup>

John Mbiti’s view of God in respect to theological anthropology has been criticized by both Western and African thinkers. His critics have contended that he has imposed Western

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 90.

<sup>57</sup> Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, 79-80.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 96.

<sup>59</sup> Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 44.

<sup>60</sup> Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 127.

<sup>61</sup> Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, 46.

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categories and concepts into African indigenous theology and African doctrine of God. For Mbiti, the theological categories have previously existed in the oral stories and languages of the African people before they made their way into Western theological texts.

Moreover, another equally important feature of black African anthropology is the idea that God created the community for individuals to belong and share life together. As we have observed in our previous conversation, the nature of the African community is essentially linked to the human nature as defined by God; in African theological view of humanity, it is also true that the role and destiny of the individual is within the structured life and framework of the community. Mbiti admits that the life of the individual becomes meaningful and worth living only within the life of the community he or she belongs. The individual exists corporately, and “owes existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. He is simply part of the whole. The community therefore make, create or produce the individual; for the individual depends on the corporate group.”<sup>62</sup> The notion of “social man” or “corporate individual” can be applied implicitly and efficiently here as the individual recognizes whose he/she is, and fulfills his or her responsibilities to the community. It is only in this manner can he or she be deemed a genuine and living being in the African outlook of the corporate person.

Only in terms of other people does the individual becomes conscious of his own being, his own duties, his privileges and responsibilities towards himself and towards other people... Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: “I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.” This is a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man.<sup>63</sup>

Mbiti summarizes this mysterious union in this catchy language: “I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.”<sup>64</sup> The concept of the “collective person” is also convenient here. It bears the notion of human solidarity and the responsibilities and duties of the individual toward the community. This philosophical perspective on social anthropology is also

grounded on the concept of mutuality and reciprocity. This supportive statement on the dynamic between the collective person and his role in advancing the cause of the community is further developed in the detailed paragraph below:

“Collective Person” is the deepest and the most profound level of community. To a certain extent, it is the evolutionary outcome of both the life-community and society. What most distinctively characterizes the collective person is its sense of solidarity. Each member of the community is not only fully responsible for his or her actions, but is also co-responsible for the actions of others and of the community. In contrast to the life-community, each member is self-aware of him or herself as an individual, as a fully realized person. Yet, in contrast to society, the individual is caught up in a network of relations with others. The sense of solidarity in the collective person is that of an “unrepresentable” solidarity. Every member of the collective person is absolutely unique. No one can stand in for anyone else and each bears responsibility for others and for the group.<sup>65</sup>

Solidarity is a pivotal characteristic and virtue of the communal life, which the collective person must sustain for the best interest of every member of the community:

Solidarity assumes two distinct types of responsibility: a responsibility for one's own actions and a co-responsibility for the actions of others. Co-responsibility does not compromise the autonomy of the individual. Every person is fully responsible for his or her actions... Solidarity assumes the manner in which we have shared our lives and feelings with one another in a community, but also the necessity for a person to act to end evil and injustice. The presence of evil in one's community demonstrates that every member ought to love more fully and act so that evil is not possible. At the level of the collective person, this call to responsibility is felt uniquely by each person, revealing the uniqueness of one's role in and for the community... Sharing a community with others and sharing the responsibility for the community with others is the context in which the person is formed and realized.<sup>66</sup>

In *Things Fall Apart*, Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe chronicles the fall of the ambiguous

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 106.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>65</sup> Davids and Steinbock, “Max Scheler.” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.



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protagonist Okonkwo, a member of the Umuofia village, who acts outside of the will and design of the community. As a result, he has isolated himself from the fellowship and life of the community, and his life has become empty and ineffective. He even challenges what is deemed sacred or religious by his clan members; as the narrator reports:

His life had been ruled by a great passion—to become one of the lords of the clan. That had been his life-spring. And he had all but achieved it. Then everything had been broken. He had been cast out of his clan like a fish onto a dry, sandy beach, panting. Clearly his personal god or *chi* was not made for great things. A man could not rise beyond the destiny of his *chi*...Okonkwo had yielded to despair and he was greatly troubled... Okonkwo's gun had exploded and a piece of iron had pierced the boy's heart. The confusion that followed was without parallel in the tradition of Umuofia. Violent deaths were frequent, but nothing like this had ever happened.<sup>67</sup>

The religious sensibility of the community is put in perspective against the crime of Okonkwo. The violation of the moral and ethical codes of the community is accentuated in this passage in the novel:

The only course open to Okonkwo was to flee from the clan. It was a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman, and a man who committed it must flee from the land... That night he collected his most valuable belongings into head-loads. His wives wept bitterly, and their children wept with them without knowing why...And before the cock crowed Okonkwo and his family were fleeing to his motherland.<sup>68</sup>

As seen in both passages above, in the African worldview, a life of solitude and isolation is not a fulfilled life. The religious and communal significance of the life of the individual to the community is stretched and desirable. It is from the vantage point of the religious tradition and the communal life we should grasp Mbiti's important thesis about the vital connection between the individual, the community, and God: "Just as God made the first man, as God's man, so now man himself makes the individual who becomes the corporate or social man. It is a deeply religious transaction."<sup>69</sup> On a complementary note, the

correlation between God, the ancestors, the community, and the individual prioritizes existential solidarity and interconnectedness:

The cultural matrix of the African tended to affirm the infinite worth of the African as a human being in relation to other human beings and under the auspices of a benevolent creator God. The community (the no longer living, the living, and the yet to be born) was affirmed as the basic social unit and the social framework in which the individual was defined. All creation, including nature, was seen as infused with the spiritual presence of God.<sup>70</sup>

### Conclusion

As observed in the writings of our three interlocutors: Mbiti, Magesa, and Bujo, Africana theological anthropology and theological ethics is grounded on the Ubuntu philosophy and moral virtues. The spirit of Ubuntu is a spirit of liberation that empowers the oppressed community to effectual shalom and freedom. What remains true about the philosophy of Ubuntu is its theological foundation and its stress on the divine desire and God's desiring goal to establish relational and dynamic communities with human beings whom he had created; through the community, the individual will find fulfillment and satisfaction in God.

In his fascinating text, *Theology for the Community of God*, theologian Stanley J. Grenz makes an insightful observation about the theological understanding of humanity in relationship with God the Creator:

Christian anthropology is an extension of the doctrine of God. In our doctrine of humanity we speak about human beings as creatures of God. We may encapsulate our human identity as God's creatures in three postulates: We are the good creation of God, we are marred through our fall into sin, but we are the object of God's redemptive activity...God created us with great value, for he designed us for community. And he desires we reflect his own image.<sup>71</sup>

Complementarily, Christian ethicist David Tracy describes the goal of life as the search of a "common good, a common interest in emancipatory reason and a common commitment to the ideal of authentic conversation within a commonly affirmed pluralism and a commonly experienced conflictual

<sup>67</sup> Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 124, 131.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>69</sup> Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, 106.

<sup>70</sup> Evans, *We Have been believers*, 5.

<sup>71</sup> Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 125.

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situation.”<sup>72</sup> In his reflection on the doctrine of God, Paul Tillich accentuates relational love as the underlying virtue that defines God, and man to man relationship; as Tillich has further remarked:

We are, we know that we are, and we love this our being and knowing. This means we are self-related and self-affirming. We affirm ourselves in knowledge and in will. On the other hand, love and knowledge transcend ourselves and go to the other beings. Love participates in the eternal; this is its own eternity. The soul has transtemporal dimensions. This participation is not what is usually called immortality, but it is the participation in the divine life, in the divine loving ground of being.<sup>73</sup>

Black African theological anthropology and theological ethics is a set of values grounded on the theology of relationality and interdependence; within the moral framework and ethical vision of the South African concept of Ubuntu, both the individual and the community will achieve harmony, peace, and solidarity.

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<sup>72</sup> Qtd in Hopkins, *Being Human*, 17.

<sup>73</sup> Tillich, *History of Christian Thought*, 121.