Ubuntu: An African Assessment of the Religious Other

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ABSTRACT: The decolonization of Africa, of which the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa is the most recent example, has led to a greater recognition of the wide variety of religions practising on its soil. When confronted with this plurality, and the corresponding plurality of claims to truth or credibility, believers often resort to absolutism. The absolutist evaluates the religious other in view of criteria which violate the self-understanding of the latter. The religious other is thus being colonized by a hegemony (i.e., an enforced homogeneity) of norms and values. This paper deals with an assessment of the faith of others which transcends absolutism without resorting to relativism. More specifically, it aims to show that an African philosophy and way of life called 'Ubuntu' (humanness) significantly overlaps with such a 'decolonized' assessment of the religious other, and that this assessment can therefore also be explained, motivated or underscored with reference to the concept of Ubuntu.

Introduction: A decolonized assessment

The decolonization of Africa, of which the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa is a recent example, led to a greater recognition of the wide variety of religions practising on its soil. When confronted with this plurality, and the corresponding plurality of claims to truth or credibility, believers usually resort to either absolutism or relativism. The absolutist evaluates the religious other in view of criteria which violate the self-understanding of the latter. The religious other is thus being colonized by a hegemony (i.e. an enforced homogeneity) of norms and values. In an attempt to transcend this hegemonic colonization, the relativist, on the other hand, simply surrenders the evaluation of beliefs and practices to subjective arbitrariness.

This paper deals with an assessment of the faith of others which transcends absolutism without resorting to relativism. More specifically, it aims to show that an African philosophy and way of life called "Ubuntu" (humanness) significantly overlaps with such a "decolonized" assessment of the religious other, and that this assessment can therefore also be explained, motivated or underscored with reference to the concept of Ubuntu. Much can and has already been said about the presuppositions and requirements of such an

assessment. However, for the purposes of this paper I would like to concentrate on only three of these, viz.: (1) a respect for the other as a *religious* other; (2) an agreement on criteria, i.e. a common scale in view of which the adherents of different religious traditions may jointly judge these traditions; and (3) an interreligious dialogue or "mutual exposure" (cf. Taylor, 1985:125) of beliefs, which as such respects the particularity, individuality and historicality of these beliefs, and from which this common scale will emerge (if at all). I shall now briefly turn to each of these requirements and the way in which they are met by Ubuntu.

(1) Ubuntu and religion

Ubuntu (a Zulu word) serves as the spiritual foundation of African societies. It is a unifying vision or world view enshrined in the Zulu maxim *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, i.e. "a person is a person through other persons" (Shutte, 1993:46). At bottom, this traditional African aphorism articulates a basic respect and compassion for others. It can be interpreted as both a factual description and a rule of conduct or social ethic. It both describes human being as "being-with-others" and prescribes what "being-with-others" should be all about. As such, Ubuntu adds a distinctly African flavour and momentum to a decolonized assessment of the religious other. In fact, the various overlaps between such an assessment and the African way of life as described/prescribed by Ubuntu, make this assessment nothing but an enactment of the African Ubuntu.

The first important overlap between Ubuntu and a decolonized assessment of the religious other, has to do with a fundamental presupposition of this assessment, viz. a respect for the other as a *religious* other. While Western Humanism tends to underestimate or even deny the importance of religious beliefs, Ubuntu or African Humanism is resiliently religious (Prinsloo, 1995:4). For the Westerner, the maxim "A person is a person through other persons" has no obvious religious connotations. He/she will probably interpret it as nothing but a general appeal to treat others with respect and decency. However, in African tradition this maxim has a deeply religious meaning. The person one is to become "through other persons" is, ultimately, an ancestor. And, by the same token, these "other persons" include ancestors. Ancestors are extended family. Dying is an ultimate homecoming. Not only the living must therefore share with and care for each other, but the living and the dead depend on each other (Van Niekerk, 1994:2; Ndaba, 1994:13-14).

This accords with the daily experience of many Africans. For example, at a *calabash*, which is an African ritual which involves the drinking of beer (cf. Broodryk, 1997a:16), a little bit of beer is often poured on the ground for consumption by ancestors. And, as is probably well known, many Africans also belief in God through the mediation of ancestors (Broodryk, 1997a:15). In African society there is an inextricable bond between man, ancestors and whatever is regarded as the Supreme Being. Ubuntu thus inevitably implies a deep respect and regard for religious beliefs and practices (Teffo, 1994a:9).

(2) Ubuntu and consensus

A second important overlap between Ubuntu and a decolonized assessment of the religious other, pertains to the extremely important role which agreement or consensus plays within this assessment. Without a common scale, i.e. without an interreligious agreement or consensus on criteria, the beliefs and practices of the religious other simply cannot be judged without violating them. Ubuntu underscores the importance of agreement or

consensus. African traditional culture, it seems, has an almost infinite capacity for the pursuit of consensus and reconciliation (Teffo, 1994a:4). Democracy the African way does not simply boil down to majority rule. Traditional African democracy operates in the form of (sometimes extremely lengthy) discussions (cf. Busia, 1967:28). Although there may be a hierarchy of importance among the speakers, every person gets an equal chance to speak up until some kind of an agreement, consensus or group cohesion is reached. This important aim is expressed by words like *simunye* ("we are one", i.e. "unity is strength") and slogans like "an injury to one is an injury to all" (Broodryk, 1997a:5, 7, 9).

However, the desire to agree, which—within the context of Ubuntu—is supposed to safeguard the rights and opinions of individuals and minorities, is often exploited to enforce group solidarity. Because of its extreme emphasis on community, Ubuntu democracy might be abused to legitimize what Sono calls the "constrictive nature" or "tyrannical custom" of a derailed African culture, especially its "totalitarian communalism" which "...frowns upon elevating one beyond the community" (1994:xiii, xv). The role of the group in African consciousness, says Sono, could be

> ...overwhelming, totalistic, even totalitarian. Group psychology, though parochially and narrowly based..., nonetheless pretends universality. This mentality, this psychology is stronger on belief than on reason; on sameness than on difference. Discursive rationality is overwhelmed by emotional identity, by the obsession to identify with and by the longing to conform to. To agree is more important than to disagree; conformity is cherished more than innovation. Tradition is venerated, continuity revered, change feared and difference shunned. Heresies [i.e. the innovative creations of intellectual African individuals, or refusal to participate in communalism] are not tolerated in such communities (1994:7; cf. also Louw, 1995).

In short, although it articulates such important values as respect, human dignity and compassion, the Ubuntu desire for consensus also has a potential dark side in terms of which it demands an oppressive conformity and loyalty to the group. Failure to conform will be met by harsh punitive measures (cf. Mbigi & Maree, 1995:58; Sono, 1994:11, 17; Van Niekerk, 1994:4). Such a derailment of Ubuntu is, of course, quite unnecessary. The process of nation-building in post-apartheid South Africa does not, for example, require universal sameness or oppressive communalism. What it does require, is true Ubuntu. It requires an authentic respect for human/individual rights and related values, and an honest appreciation of differences (Sindane, 1994:7; Degenaar, 1996:23).

(3) Ubuntu and dialogue: particularity, individuality and historicality

This brings me to a third overlap between the Ubuntu way of life and a decolonized assessment of the religious other. As said, the common scale which will allow a decolonized evaluation of the religious other, will only emerge through interreligious dialogue or "mutual exposure". Such exposure epitomizes the conduct prescribed by Ubuntu. Ubuntu inspires us to expose ourselves to others, to encounter the difference of their humanness so as to inform and enrich our own (cf. Sidane, 1994:8-9). Thus understood, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* translates as: "To be human is to affirm one's humanity by recognising the humanity of others in its infinite variety of content and form" (Van der Merwe, 1996:1). This translation of Ubuntu attests to a respect for particularity, individuality and historicality, without which decolonization cannot be.

The Ubuntu respect for the *particularities* of the beliefs and practices of others (cf. also Wiredu, 1995), is especially emphasised by a striking, yet (to my mind) lesser-known

translation of *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, viz.: "A human being is a human being through (*the otherness of*) other human beings" (Van der Merwe, 1996:1— italics mine). For post-apartheid South Africans of all colours, creeds and cultures, Ubuntu dictates that, if we were to be human, we need to recognise the genuine otherness of our fellow citizens. That is, we need to acknowledge the diversity of languages, histories, values and customs, all of which constitute South African society. For example: white South Africans tend to call all traditional African healing practices "witchcraft", and to label all such practitioners as "witchdoctors". However, close attention to the particularities of these practices would have revealed that there are at least five types of doctors in traditional African societies. And of these five, witchdoctors are being singled out as bad by Africans themselves, since they use parts of human bodies for medicine. By contrast, the co-operation of the other traditional healers is vital in primary health care initiatives, such as Aids education, family planning and immunisation programmes (Broodryk, 1997a:15; 1997b:63f). In this sense, but also in a more political sense, the Ubuntu emphasis on respect for particularity is vital for the survival of post-apartheid South Africa. In spite of our newly found democracy, civil or ethnic conflict cannot be ruled out. In fact, our multi-cultural democracy intensifies the various ethnic and socio-cultural differences. While democracy allows for legitimate claims to the institutionalisation of these differences, these claims are easily exploited for selfish political gain (Van der Merwe, 1996:1).

Ubuntu's respect for the particularity of the other, links up closely to its respect for *individuality*. But, be it noted, the individuality which Ubuntu respects, is not of Cartesian making. On the contrary, Ubuntu directly contradicts the Cartesian conception of individuality in terms of which the individual or self can be conceived without thereby necessarily conceiving the other. The Cartesian individual exists prior to, or separately and independently from the rest of the community or society. The rest of society is nothing but an added extra to a pre-existent and self-sufficient being. This "modernistic" and "atomistic" conception of individuality lies at the bottom of both individualism and collectivism (cf. Macquarrie, 1972:104). Individualism exaggerates seemingly solitary aspects of human existence to the detriment of communal aspects. Collectivism makes the same mistake, only on a larger scale. For the collectivist, society is nothing but a bunch or collection of separately existing, solitary (i.e. detached) individuals.

By contrast, Ubuntu *defines* the individual in terms of his/her relationship with others (Shutte, 1993:46ff). According to this definition, individuals only exist *in* their relationships with others, and as these relationships change, so do the characters of the individuals. Thus understood, the word "individual" signifies a plurality of personalities corresponding to the multiplicity of relationships in which the individual in question stands. Being an individual by definition means "being-with-others". "With-others", as Macquarrie rightly observes, "...is not added on to a pre-existent and self-sufficient being; rather, both this being (the self) and the others find themselves in a whole wherein they are already related" (1972:104). This is all somewhat boggling for the Cartesian mind, whose conception of individuality now has to move from solitary to solidarity, from independence to interdependence, from individuality *vis-à-vis* community to individuality *à la* community.

In the West, individualism often translates into an impetuous competitiveness. Individual interest rules supreme and society or others are regarded as nothing but a means to individual ends (cf. Khoza, 1994:4, 5, 7; Prinsloo, 1997:2). This is in stark contrast to the

African preference for co-operation, group work or *shosholoza* ("work as one", i.e. team work). There are approximately 800 000 so-called "stokvels" in South Africa. Stokvels are joint undertakings or collective enterprises, such as savings clubs, burial societies and other (often formally registered) cooperatives. The stokvel economy might be described as capitalism with *siza* (humanness), or, if you like, a socialist form of capitalism. Making a profit is important, but never if it involves the exploitation of others. Profits are shared on an equal basis. As such, stokvels are based on the Ubuntu "extended family system", i.e. all involved should be considered as brothers and sisters, members of the same family (Broodryk, 1997a:4, 11, 13-14; 1997b:38f, 70f; Lukhele, 1990).

To be sure, the Ubuntu conception of individuality does seem contradictory. Ubuntu claims that the self or individual is constituted by its relations with others. But if this is so, what are the relations between? Can persons and personal relations really be equally primordial? (cf. Shutte, 1993:56). African thought addresses this (apparent) contradiction in the idea of *seriti*, i.e. an energy, power or force which is claimed to both make us ourselves and unite us in personal interaction with others (Shutte, 1993:55). This idea allows us to see the self and others as equiprimordial or as aspects of the same universal field of force. However, as Shutte observes, this "solution" of the contradiction posed by the Ubuntu conception of individuality, comes at a price:

> ...in the perspective opened up by the African idea of the universe as a field of forces, it is difficult to see how the existing individual can have any enduring reality at all, much less how he [or she - DJL] can be possessed of the freedom and responsibility that is usually reckoned the most valuable mark of personhood (1993:56).

Furthermore, like the Ubuntu desire for consensus, this inclusivist, collectivist or communalist conception of individuality can easily derail into an oppressive collectivism or communalism. This fact has evoked various responses from African authors. For example: while he lauds the "distinctive African" inclination towards collectivism and a collective sense of responsibility, Teffo (1994a:7, 12) is quick to add that the African conception of man does not negate individuality. It merely discourages the view that the individual should take precedence over the community. In the same vein, Khoza (1994:9; cf. also Prinsloo, 1995:4) challenges Ubuntu to create a balance between complete individual autonomy and homonymy, i.e. to broaden respect for the individual and purge collectivism of its negative elements. And Ndaba points out that

> the collective consciousness evident in the African culture does not mean that the African subject wallows in a formless, shapeless or rudimentary collectivity...[It] simply means that the African subjectivity develops and thrives in a relational setting provided by ongoing contact and interaction with others (1994:14).

I concur. An oppressive communalism constitutes a derailment, an abuse of Ubuntu. By contrast, true Ubuntu incorporates dialogue, i.e. it incorporates both relation and distance. It preserves the other in his otherness, in his uniqueness, without letting him slip into the distance (cf. Macquarrie, 1972:110; Shutte, 1993:49, 51).

Ndaba's emphasis on the "ongoing-ness" of the contact and interaction with others on which the African subjectivity feeds, points to a final important ingredient of the "mutual exposure" prescribed by Ubuntu, viz. respecting the *historicality* of the other. Respecting the historicality of the other means respecting his/her dynamic nature or process nature. The flexibility of the other is well noted by Ubuntu. Or, as is sometimes claimed: "For the

[African] humanist, life is without absolutes" (Teffo, 1994a:11). An Ubuntu perception of the other is never fixed or rigidly closed, but adjustable or open-ended. It allows the other to be, to become. It acknowledges the irreducibility of the other, i.e. it never reduces the other to any specific characteristic, conduct or function. This accords with the grammar of the concept "Ubuntu" which denotes both a state of being and one of becoming. As a process of self-realization *through* others, it enhances the self-realization *of* others (cf. also Broodryk, 1997a:5-7).

Conclusion: The uniqueness of Ubuntu

By highlighting the overlap between Ubuntu and a decolonized assessment of the religious other, I meant to show exactly why Ubuntu might be used to explain, motivate or underscore this decolonization, or why Ubuntu could add a distinctly African flavour and momentum to it. However, my argument will only hold water if what has been described here as a distinctly African philosophy and way of life, does in fact exist as such. Do Africans in fact adhere to Ubuntu or, at least, aspire to do so? And if so, is Ubuntu uniquely or exclusively African?

These are controversial issues. For example: in the South African province of KwaZulu-Natal, where Ubuntu is claimed to be part of every day life, violent ethnic and political clashes still occurs frequently—and this is surely not the only example of such clashes on the continent of Africa! How can this be reconciled with Ubuntu?

The apparent anomaly posed by the occurrence of such violent conflicts, significantly fades once one concentrates on the many counter examples. African examples of caring and sharing, and of forgiving and reconciliation abound. Ask any South African. The relatively non-violent transition of the South African society from a totalitarian state to a multi-party democracy, is not merely the result of the compromising negotiations of politicians. It is also—perhaps primarily—the result of the emergence of an ethos of solidarity, a commitment to peaceful co-existence amongst ordinary South Africans in spite of their differences (cf. Van der Merwe, 1996:1). Ubuntu, argues Teffo (1994a) rightly, pervasively serves as a cohesive moral value in the face of adversity. Although the policy of apartheid greatly damaged the overwhelming majority of black South Africans,

> ...there is no lust for vengeance, no apocalyptic retribution...A yearning for justice, yes, and for release from poverty and oppression, but no dream of themselves becoming the persecutors, of turning the tables of apartheid on white South Africans...The ethos of ubuntu...is one single gift that African philosophy can bequeath on other philosophies of the world...(Teffo, 1994a:5).

Maphisa agrees:

> South Africans are slowly re-discovering their common humanity. Gone are the days when people were stripped of their dignity (*ubuntu*) through harsh laws. Gone are the days when people had to use *ubulwane* [i.e. animal like behaviour] to uphold or reinforce those laws. I suggest that the transformation of an apartheid South Africa into a democracy is a re-discovery of *ubuntu* (1994:8).

Ubuntu is thus both a given and a task or desideratum in African societies. It is undoubtedly part and parcel of Africa's cultural heritage. However, it clearly needs to be revitalised in the hearts and minds of some Africans (cf. Teffo, 1995:2; Koka, 1997:15).

In what sense, if any, is Ubuntu then uniquely African? Is Ubuntu only part of the *African*

cultural heritage? Just how distinctly African is the flavour and momentum that Ubuntu could add to the decolonization of the religious other? Is the ethos of Ubuntu in fact the "one single gift that African philosophy can bequeath on other philosophies of the world" (Teffo)?

It would be ethnocentric and, indeed, silly to suggest that the Ubuntu ethic of caring and sharing is uniquely African. After all, the values which Ubuntu seeks to promote, can also be traced in various Eurasian philosophies. This is not to deny the intensity with which these values are given expression by Africans. But, the mere fact that they are intensely expressed by Africans, do not in itself make these values exclusively African.

However, although compassion, warmth, understanding, caring, sharing, humanness *et cetera* are underscored by all the major world views, ideologies and religions of the world, I would nevertheless like to suggest that Ubuntu serves as a *distinctly African rationale* for these ways of relating to others. The concept of Ubuntu gives a distinctly African meaning to, and a reason or motivation for, a decolonizing attitude towards the other, including and especially the religious other. As such, it adds a crucial *African appeal* to the call for the decolonization of the religious other—an appeal without which this call might well go unheeded by many Africans (cf. also Mphahlele, 1974:36; Ndaba, 1994:18-19). In this, and only in this peculiar sense, Ubuntu is of Africans, by Africans and for Africans.

Amid calls for an African Renaissance (cf. Teffo, 1997:19-21), Ubuntu calls on Africans to be true to themselves. It calls for a liberation of Africans—not so much from the colonizing gaze of others, but from colonization *per se*, i.e. from the practice of colonization, whether of Africans or by Africans. May we heed its call.

Notes

(1) An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion (22-25 Nov. 1997, San Francisco, USA).

(2) Many definitions of Ubuntu have already been given, all of which relate closely to the one given here (cf. Broodryk, 1995:5ff; 1997a:1-2; 1997b:27ff; Prinsloo, 1995:2; 1996:1-2; Sindane, 1994:1-2; Teffo, 1995:1-2). The South African Governmental White Paper on Welfare officially recognises Ubuntu as: "The principle of caring for each other's well-being...and a spirit of mutual support...Each individual's humanity is ideally expressed through his or her relationship with others and theirs in turn through a recognition of the individual's humanity. Ubuntu means that people are people through other people. It also acknowledges both the rights and the responsibilities of every citizen in promoting individual and societal well-being" (Government Gazette, 02/02/1996, No.16943, p.18, paragraph 18—quoted by Broodryk, 1997a:1).

(3) For an explanation of the Ubuntu conception of "extended family", cf. Broodryk (1997a:14; 1997b:70f). However, not all Africans agree on this point. According to some, Ubuntu does not apply to ancestors.

(4) The word "calabash" is also used to refer to the beer container.

(5) In fact, Ubuntu is often defined in religious terms. Cf. for example Koka (1996:2-3).

(6) Viz.: (I) a *ngaka ya ditaola* (who uses "divine bones" to diagnose ailments and to assist him in deciding which herbs to prescribe); (ii) a *ngakatjhitja* (who also treats ailments through prescribing herbs, but without the assistance of "divine bones"); (iii) a *senohe*/*isangoma* (who treats mentally disturbed patients, a "psychiatrist"); (iv) a *monesapula* (a "rainmaker"); and (v) the "witch-doctor" (who uses body parts for "medicine" and kills through poisoning, lightning or by sending a *thokolosi* to do so on his/her behalf). Cf. Lenaka (1995:6).

(7) Who, for the traditional African, include both ancestors and descendants (cf. Teffo, 1994a:8).

(8) Macquarrie is not specifically describing the Ubuntu conception of individuality, but the existentialist conception thereof. However, in this and in many other respects, Ubuntu philosophy overlaps with Existentialism.

(9) Cf. also in this regard a practise called *Ledima*, where neighbour farmers assist a particular farmer with collecting the harvest, after which the host treats them to slaughtered cows and beer (cf. Broodryk, 1997a:14).

(10) Cf. also Broodryk (1997a:10).

(11) Well, almost any South African. Some of us, usually those still clinging to apartheid philosophies, prefer to overlook these manifestations of Ubuntu.

(12) Some African authors also suggest that African articulations of these values are far older than Western articulations thereof—even that the latter have their roots in the former (cf. for example Ndaba, 1994:12; Koka, 1997:16). However, this somewhat controversial issue falls beyond the scope of this paper.

(13) Cf. in this regard also Prinsloo (1995:2), Ndaba (1994:10, 11), Mbigi (1995:6), Teffo (1994b:4; 1995:2), Koka (1996:2-4, 8; 1997:14), Maphisa (1994:1), Broodryk (1995:31-37) and Sindane (1994:4).

(14) Cf. also Teffo: "The Africanness of Ubuntu is how we localize or express it...Ubuntu will assist us in developing a social approach that suits our situation in relation to our varied cultures and values" (1995:1).

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Top of page

ΠΑΙΔΕΙΑ

Home