Chapter 4
Ubuntu and the Shaping of an African Postcolonial Christian Identity

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores some connections between umunthu (a Malawian translation of Ubuntu) and the Christian faith in the hope that a dialogue between these two key themes of contemporary African life contributes to emerging postcolonial theological discourse in the world, especially at a time when African Christians are increasingly becoming the most visible and vocal in world Christianity. To do this, the chapter begins by reflecting on how the author's community in southern Malawi understands umunthu and the implications that growing up surrounded by this Ubuntu-shaped community has had on his own religious identity and thought and his understanding of the world. Following this, it explores umunthu in the context of postcolonial Christian Africa and the African diaspora. In the end, it calls for African Christians to find innovative ways to let ubuntu shape their Christianity.

INTRODUCTION

My intention in this essay is to explore and highlight the connections between *ubuntu* and the Christian faith in the hope that such a dialogue contributes to emerging postcolonial theological discourse in the world, especially at a time when African Christians are increasingly becoming the most visible and vocal in world Christianity. To do this, I begin by reflecting on how my community in southern Malawi understands *Ubuntu* or *umunthu*[1] and the implications that growing up surrounded by this *Ubuntu*-shaped community has had on my own religious identity and thought and my understanding of the world. I am carrying out this reflection as a Malawian theologian currently working in England, but I am also informed by the experience of having lived and worked in Europe and North America for almost 20 years. Thus, I have had a long-term exposure to cultures that are shaped by ideologies and philosophies that are radically different from *Ubuntu*. In addition, as a Christian theologian, I have observed the growing

presence of African churches in Europe and North America. This phenomenon is often characterised by theological misunderstandings since the faith of African Christians is shaped in a different worldview from that of their Western neighbours. In suggesting *Ubuntu* as a theological framework that allows Africans to contribute to world theologies, it is my hope that African Christians will be encouraged to explore and celebrate the African nature of their faith. Life generally advances when a cross-pollination of ideas happens at the confluence of two or more cultures, and because of this, I have wondered how *Ubuntu* helps move humanity as a whole.

Ubuntu in Southern Malawi

I am a son of a Lhomwe father (of Nguru heritage) and a Yao mother. While my father grew up in a Lhomwe household, he does not speak Chilhomwe at all. I have never heard him speak Chilhomwe. According to him, as a young boy, he spoke *Chichawa*, a mixture of Chichewa and Chiyao widely spoken in southern Malawi. My mother was born in Zimbabwe and, thus, her childhood languages were a mixture of Chichewa, Chiyao (her mother's language) and Chishona (the major language of Zimbabwe). When she returned to Malawi, she had to learn to speak Chichewa properly. She chose to keep Chishona and let go of Chiyao. I was born a few years after her return, and though her Chichewa was alright at that time, she did not speak Chiyao, but she never lost her Chishona. Thus, by the time I was born, both my parents had already lost their languages. On a larger scale, both Chiyao and Chilhomwe, the two main languages of my home area, had become secondary to Chichewa. Most people spoke Chichewa. Even though the community was shaped by several cultures, our *lingua franca* was Chichewa. Consequently, I grew up speaking Chichewa. I never bothered until adulthood to learn both Chilhomwe and Chiyao.

While both Chilhomwe and Chiyao had their own words for *Ubuntu* (*makhalhelho* and *umundu* respectively) it was the Chichewa word that was always used. When we talked about *umunthu*, we always understood it in its Chewa sense. The word *umunthu* in Chichewa comes from adding a prefix *u-* to the noun *munthu* (which, in its various linguistic forms, is translated 'person') and is built around the very important Bantu root *-ntu*.[2] The singular noun is *munthu* (person) while the plural is *anthu* or *wanthu* (persons/people) and it is in some dialects and languages spelt *bantu* (the 'b' is either silent or pronounced like a deep 'w'). Even though *umunthu* is generally understood to be a Chewa philosophy—the word itself being Chewa—it is spread across Malawi, especially in the Central, Eastern and Southern regions (partly because Chewa peoples were present in these regions long before the British colonisation of Malawi). Besides, upon gaining independence from Britain, the first President of Malawi, Kamuzu Banda, made Chichewa—his language—the national vernacular. That means for most of the population, Chichewa was the main language of communication. As a result, when we say *umunthu*, most of the Malawians will understand what we are talking about. Furthermore, the Chewa *umunthu* forms only a small part of the wider Bantu cultures, languages, and philosophy that exist in most sub-Saharan Africa. Almost all of Malawi' population is of Bantu origin. Among other Bantu peoples, *Ubuntu* is known by other names: umunthu in Chewa, *ubuntu* in Xhosa and Zulu, *utu* in Swahili, *obonto* in Kiisi, *umunhu* in Shona, *ubunhu* in Tsonga, *numunhu* in Shangaan, *botho* in Sotho, and many others.

It was also clear that in spite of the many cultural nuances, *Ubuntu* meant the same thing whether it was Chewas, Lhomwes, or Yaos speaking. It always had the double meaning, "personhood" on the one hand and "humanity" or "humaneness" on the other. Between the two, 'personhood' was the more common meaning of *Ubuntu* largely because "humanity or humanness" was always connected to the shared sense of personhood. It was used largely as a descriptor or a qualifier, as something that a person had or

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