

Reflecting the divine image: The crux of *Umunthu* in contemporary Africa – Foundation of true humanity

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to articulate the implications of the nature of the image of God in humans; thereby pointing out that its proper understanding is the basis of true humanity and human relationships and interactions. This will be done by analysing the thrust of the Bible in its own voice when it comes to how humans are to relate and interact with each other. At a minimal level, this article is aimed at “re-humanizing the human” from a theological point of view. The aim is to emphasise that pursuing *Umunthu* divorced from the fundamental nature of humanity, humans, institutions, government and government agencies, become prone to serious dilemmas and problems. In other words, dehumanizing tendencies multiply when there is no proper understanding of what humanity constitutes. The article seeks to argue that the foundations of *Umunthu*, in whatever form it exists or is expressed in Africa, must be within the parameters of theological category based on the proper understanding of the nature of the *imago Dei* and what it means to be human.

Keywords: Divine, functional, *imago Dei*, image of God, substantive, relational, *Umunthu*

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Introduction

The understanding of the nature of the divine image in humanity has been one of the theological debates since the inception of the Church. In the African context, the notion of *Umunthu* is cherished as the basis of human interrelatedness and interconnectedness. The problem, in my view, is that such a high notion has not been backed up by biblical or theological foundations for it to be enriching and rewarding for better implications to be realised. However, such a cherishing has to have its theological backing if this notion is to truly take root in our societies.

This paper was born out of critical reflection on what has been happening in Malawi as well as other countries in Africa, in terms of good governance. A critical question asked was: What is wrong with us as Africans when it comes to governance?

It was out of this question plus others that came especially in the wake of what is called cashgate scandal in Malawi that I started to reflect on the intrinsic nature of humans and what might be amiss for such blatant theft of government funds by government officials to take place.

The working hypothesis for this study is: Pursuing *Umunthu* devoid of the fundamental nature of humanity, humans, institutions, governments and government agencies become prone to serious malfunctioning and maladministration. This paper suggests that there can be no proper relationality and functionality of people without the proper understanding of what *Umunthu* is based on the proper understanding essentially of who and what humans are. If we only go back to the basics of following the divinely laid down moral and ethical principles, some of the problems we face these days would be reduced to minimum. If we understood what it means to be humans, i.e., to be created in the image of God, we would probably function in ways that show what true humanity is all about.

For instance, good governance, which seems to be a problem in Malawi and other African nations, seems to be hinged on the proper understanding of the nature of the image of God in humanity. This implies that if humans properly understood what it means to be created in the image of God, they would treat each other in the manner that God requires of each one of us. However, the

problem lies in the fact that many people do not understand what the *imago Dei*¹ is all about. This paper argues that proper understanding of the nature of the image of God in humanity is the foundation of good governance in our societies. It also argues that such a proper understanding is the foundation of *Umunthu*.

The purpose of this article is to articulate the implications of the nature of the image of God in humans; thereby pointing out that its proper understanding is the basis of true humanity and human relationships and interactions. This will be done by analysing the thrust of the Bible in its own voice when it comes to how humans are to relate and interact with each other. At minimal level, this article is aimed at “re-humanizing the human”² from a theological point of view. The aim is to emphasise that pursuing *Umunthu* divorced from the fundamental nature of humanity, humans, institutions, government and government agencies, become prone to serious dilemmas and problems. In other words, dehumanizing tendencies multiply when there is no proper understanding of what humanity constitutes. The article seeks to argue that the foundations of *Umunthu*, in whatever form it exists or is expressed in Africa, must be within the parameters of theological category based on the proper understanding of the nature of the *imago Dei* and what it means to be human.

Conceptual analysis and methodological approach

There are many definitions or descriptions of the concept of *Umunthu*. Conceptually, *Umunthu* is the undergirding foundation of the African cultures. It is a way of lifestyle that is characterised by the communal nature of Africans (Koster, 1996, cited by Tambulasi & Kayuni, 2005). *Umunthu* is the cradle of African thinking and acting. It implies the unity of purpose for most

¹ *imago Dei* is a Latin for “image of God.”

² I borrow this expression from Professor Mpalive-Hangson Msiska, the Keynote Speaker at the 2015 Faculty of Humanities Conference held at Chancellor College, University of Malawi. The same insinuation of Professor Msiska is echoed in this article – re-humanizing the human, i.e., helping humans think anew of who they are and how they related to others.

of African societies. It is a term roughly translated “human kindness.” It is an idea from the Southern African region which means literally “human-ness,” and is often translated as “humanity towards others,” but is often used in a more philosophical sense to mean “the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity” (see Ubuntu Documentation online).

According to Michael Onyebuchi Eze (2010: 190-191), the core of *Umunthu* can best be summarised as follows:

A person is a person through other people’ strikes an affirmation of one’s humanity through recognition of an ‘other’ in his or her uniqueness and difference. It is a demand for a creative intersubjective formation in which the ‘other’ becomes a mirror (but only a mirror) for my subjectivity. This idealism suggests to us that humanity is not embedded in my person solely as an individual; my humanity is co-substantively bestowed upon the other and me. Humanity is a quality we owe to each other. We create each other and need to sustain this otherness creation. And if we belong to each other, we participate in our creations: we are because you are, and since you are, definitely I am. The ‘I am’ is not a rigid subject, but a dynamic self-constitution dependent on this otherness creation of relation and distance (See also Eze, 2008).

At Nelson Mandela’s memorial in December 2013, United States President Barack Obama eulogises and spoke about *Umunthu*, (variated as ubuntu, saying, “There is a word in South Africa – Ubuntu – a word that captures Mandela’s greatest gift: ‘his recognition that we are all bound together in ways that are invisible to the eye; that there is a oneness to humanity; that we achieve ourselves by sharing ourselves with others, and caring for those around us.’”

In Malawi, according to the Catholic Diocese of Zomba bishop Rt. Rev. Fr. Thomas Msusa (2008), “The African worldview is about living as one family, belonging to God.” The philosophy of *Umunthu* has been passed on through Chichewa proverbs such as “*Mwana wa mnzako ngwako yemwe, ukachenjera*

manja udy naye” (Your neighbour’s child is your own, his/her success is your success too). Some notable Malawian *Umunthu* intellectuals who have written about this worldview are Augustine Musopole, Gerard Chigona, Chiwoza Bandawe, Richard Tambulasi and Happy Kayuni; and Harvey Kwiyani. These also include Malawian theologian Harvey Sindima whose treatment of *Umunthu* as an important African philosophy is highlighted in his 1995 book *Africa’s Agenda: The Legacy of Liberalism and Colonialism in the Crisis of African values*. *Umunthu* is a worldview that is commonly captured in the expression “I am because we are, and since we are, I am.”

The article is informed by various sources: newspapers, news broadcasts, telecasts, discussions, and online sources. Concerning the inevitability of the Bible in offering the values for human welfare, Aurelius (n.d: 314) is certainly right in his observation that “the Bible is relevant today because it is talking about the listener, everytime.” In her lecture, Einat Ramon (2014: n.p) strongly believes that “the Bible is vital to human life in all areas because it is a book which deals with ethical values which give us directions. The Bible provides moral paradigm for our right living.” Indeed, the Bible says, ‘Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain’ (Psalm 127: 1).³

The paper will now consider theological constructs of the nature of the image of God – discussing the three notable theological views and, where applicable, employing exegetical analysis of some of biblical passages on the *imago Dei*. Later the paper will elucidate implications of *imago Dei* on good governance and proper interrelationships and interactions of people.

³All scriptural quotations are from the NIV Version of the Bible unless otherwise indicated.

Exegetical analysis of creation accounts in Genesis

Nature of the image of God

In the history of the Church, examining the nature of the image of God in humanity has been a big quest. The biblical foundations of humans being created in God's image is firstly depicted in Genesis 1:26-27 which reads:

Then God said, 'Let us make man in our *image*, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the livestock and over the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth. So God created man in his own *image*, in the *image* of God he created him; male and female he created them.

It is necessary to understand the nature of the *imago Dei* here because it has a bearing in our current discussion on how we should treat each other, especially in seeking the economic welfare of each other in our nations which comes mainly through good governance. There are various interpretations and interpolations of the image of God in humans (see Millard, 1985: 498). However, due to space, this paper discusses the three notable views of the nature of the *imago Dei* briefly:

1. *The substantive view*

Erickson Millard (1985: 499) notes:

The common element in the several varieties of this view is that the image of God in humans is identified as some definite characteristic of quality within the makeup of the human. Some have considered the image of God to be an aspect of our physical or bodily makeup. The more common substantive views of the image of God isolate it in terms of some psychological or spiritual quality in human nature.

In Millard's view, *imago Dei* is a quality resident in man's nature, notably his ability to reason. This view emphasises reason as a unique feature because *reason* distinguishes man from other creatures. As Millard (ibid) says, "Indeed

man is classified biologically as *Homo sapiens*, i.e., the thinking being.” (See also Cairns, 1953: 58-69).

2. *Relational view*

Some modern theologians do not conceive the image as something resident within man’s nature. Millard (1985: 502) says that some theologians perceive the image as “the experiencing of a relationship.” Man is said to be [in] the image of God when he stands in a particular relationship. According to this view, “the relationship is the image.” Raymond H. Dunning (1998) seems to concur with Millard in his description of the image of God in humanity as man’s relationship to God; man’s relationship to others; man’s relationship to the earth; and finally, man’s relationship to self. In sum, from this perspective, standing in right relationship with God and fellows is what constitutes the *imago Dei*.

3. *Functional view*

This view, according to Millard (1985: 508) has had quite a long history and has recently enjoyed an increase in popularity. Millard (*ibid.*) says,

This is the idea that the image is not something present in the makeup of man, nor is it the experiencing of relationship with God or with fellow man. Rather, the image consists in something man *does*.... In the functional view, little attention is given to the content of the image of God. (See also Berkouwer, 1962:70)

Norman Snaith (1974: 24) says, “Biblically speaking, the phrase ‘image of God’ has nothing to do with morals or any sort of ideals... but everything concerning the function of man.” On his part, John Oswalt (1999: 10-16) says, “Humans are understood to be the very highest order of God’s creation. They are made to be lords and ladies of creation, *functioning in obedient partnership with God*. Humans have real freedom to make genuine choices, and they are held accountable for effects of their choices.”

Implications of the image of God to humanity in contemporary Africa

This paper is a radical call and plea for African government leaders and citizens to take up a moral responsibility. The *imago Dei* implies that both men and women are created equal by God. The views elucidated in this article help us see the *relationship* and *function* as central to the essence of the image. However, the *relationship* and *function* come because humans are *thinking* beings. They are endowed with capacity to *reason, relate, and function* properly. More crucially, they represent what God would do for His people regardless of creed, race, sex, economic and social status. This should be urged to Malawians as well as the national leaders. Since we believe that “*Munthu ndi munthu chifukwa cha anzako*” (One is human because of others) our national policies on governance and socio-economic policies must be critically viewed and reviewed for the betterment of the nation. This call also has to go to the leaders of other African nations as they formulate governance and economic policies—policies that will serve humans in their humane endeavours. The crux of *Umunthu* in contemporary Africa needs such a perception of things and humans. Humans are the ‘bearers of the Divine image’ and they must be treated as God would have them treated. This means that oppression, exploitation, repression, marginalisation, are all affronts to God who created humans and who cherishes them as his Image Bearers.

All this implies that humans should treat each other with a humane attitude, regardless of race, creed, or country of origin as Patricia Tull (2012: 30) says,

To love one’s enemy means neither to cover up the conflict nor to downplay its seriousness, but rather to endure the tension inherent in that conflict without succumbing to hatred.... Loving one’s enemy without resisting would be a cheap, abstract, and treasonable attitude. But to resist without loving one’s enemy can be inhuman, brutal, and violence.... If we can endure the tension, both love and resistance offer the only way out for us Christians.

Tull (ibid.) further says “we must all call ourselves and one another to ever true humanity and in this as St August said, we pray as though everything depended on God, but work as though everything depended on us.” For instance, Africa can borrow a leaf from what the *Kairos Palestine* advocates.

Calling on the Jewish, Muslim and Palestinian leaders, based on humanity created in God's image, the *Kairos Palestine* (December 2009) strongly urges us to embrace the view that

Every human being is created by God and has been given equal dignity. Hence the obligation for each of us to defend the oppressed and the dignity God has bestowed on them... This is a call to *see the face of God* in each one of God's creatures and overcome the barriers of fear or race in order to establish a *constructive dialogue* and not remain within the cycle of never-ending manoeuvres that aim to keep the situation as it is. Our appeal is to reach a common vision, *built on equality* and sharing, *not on superiority*, negation of the other or aggression, using the pretext of fear and security.

Seeing the face of God in each one of us is a call to recognize that each person is the *imago Dei*, hence need not be dehumanized in any way. The story of Jacob's facing his brother Esau in Genesis 32 and 33 is very interesting. Scholars interpret the passage as a story of reconciliation:

After this night alone, Jacob rejoins those who crossed the river ahead of him: "Jacob walks bravely in front of his family, bowing himself to the ground seven times until he came near his brother." Jacob has learned to humble himself to those he has wronged instead of running away. The story continues with the reconciliation of the estranged brothers: "Esau ran to meet Jacob, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept (Gen 33: 3-4)." Jacob responds, "Truly to *see your face is like seeing the face of God*—since you have received me with such favor (Gen 33:10)." Another version says: Jacob says, "... For *I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God* and you have accepted me."⁴

⁴ This reading came through my discussion with Professor Jesper Svartvik, on March 6, 2014 in Jerusalem, Israel. See also Carl Cregg (2011). (Cf. 1 John 4: 20-21—'how can we love God whom we haven't seen if we don't love our brother whom we can see?').

Seeing *xenos* (i.e., strangers, or aliens, or the poor or the masses) and even our perceived enemies as seeing the face of God is the radical teaching of this intriguing story. We are admonished to see our fellows as ‘imaging’ God. The face of the “other” is the face of God in our midst and we must care for them and not abuse them – that means no harassing, burning them, looting their property, or even killing them. The face of the poor in our midst or those we lead in our nations is the face of God. We should treat such people as God would.

Another important element drawn from the story of Jacob is what we read from that passage: “The sun rose upon Jacob as he passed “Penu-EL” limping because of his hip (Gen 32:31).” Jacob leaves the fords of Jabbok wounded and prepares to face his brother Esau. But, in the words of Henri Nouwen (qtd. by Cregg, 2011:n.p), “the hope is that Jacob, having wrestled with God, leaves Jabbok as a ‘wounded healer,’ not as a wounded wounder. The hope is that he has learned from his injury and use his experience to heal others, not to wound them out of his woundedness.” What an interesting and intriguing expose by Nouwen!

The radical call and implication in all this is the notion of reconciliation. We must be ready to forgive and reconcile when we have wronged each other. The New Testament urges all people to love even their enemies, saying that such an attitude is tantamount to ‘being perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect’ (Matthew 5:48). Jesus’ teaching is what constitutes the unconditional love. Reconciliation should be at the heart of *Umunthu* in Africa. This can be implied as a radical call on all people, especially national leaders to ethical responsibility.

Another implication is that when designing humanities disciplines in our institutions of higher learning, thought must be given when it comes to the fundamentals of true humanity. This means that all aspects of what humans are or need to be, must be acknowledged and included. This will enhance a glorious future for the humanities and sciences.

Humanity exists to represent God in all matters patterning to life (responsibility and care for each other).⁵ In this case, whatever humans do must be in conformity to what God requires for the harmonious living. And this must hold true to the modern and new republican state of Malawi and other African states, especially in the way they treat their people. Humans were endowed with the capacity *to reason, relate, and function* properly as they are the only beings to fully represent what God would do for his people regardless of creed, race, sex, and status. This admonition should be strongly urged to national leaders of African states as they design and implement governance policies.

Various religious groups have an ethic of loving others that could help our people in Africa to live together in harmony. This religious ethic should inform the way we relate with each other in Africa. In any case, these ethical and religious truths are ingrained in African ontology from which we could tap the very essence of *Umunthu* as I pointed out in the introduction.

Some of the quotable theological and ethical expressions from various traditions that are at the heart of *Umunthu*, courtesy of *World Religions: Love and Peace* (n.d) are:

1. “Do not to others what you do not want done to you”—African Traditional Religions.
2. “Lay not on any soul a load that you would not wish to be laid upon you, and desire not for anyone things you would not desire for yourself”—Bahauulla—Bahai Faith.
3. “Treat not others in ways that you yourself would find harmful”—Udana-Varga, Buddhism.
4. “In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the law and the prophets”—Jesus, Christianity/Judaism.

⁵ When Abel was killed by his brother, God asked Cain, ‘where is your brother Abel?’ (Genesis 4:9-10).

5. “Do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you”—Mahabharata, Hinduism.
6. “Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself”—Prophet Muhammad, Hadith.
7. “One should treat all creatures in the world as one would like to be treated”—Mahavira, Jainism.
8. “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor, this is the whole torah”—Hillel, Judaism.
9. “Do not do unto others whatever is injurious to yourself”—Shayast, Zoroastrianism.
10. “Regard your neighbor’s gain as your own gain, and your neighbor’s loss as your own loss”—Tai Shang Kan Ying Pien, Taoism.

These ethical expressions are at the base of true *Umunthu*. Looking at them, these issues are all theological in nature manifesting themselves ethically as humans relate to each other.

Conclusion

The implications of understanding *Umunthu* from a theological perspective are very foundational to human and national development agenda in our countries. It is important to do everything possible to overcome misunderstanding and the implications on the nature of the *imago Dei* on a societal and national level in order to avoid making policies that ultimately lead to bad governance.

The issue of bad governance in Africa is complex and needs real socio-economic solutions based on biblical love ethic. The substantive view of the *imago Dei* should compel all of us Africans as concerned parties especially national leaders, to “come and let us *sincerely* reason together,” embracing the spirit of forgiveness when wrongs have been committed against each other. The relational view of the *imago Dei* should impel all of us as concerned people, especially national leaders in Africa to “come and let us *honestly* relate together as one people” (Africans), which necessitates the spirit of reconciliation between us. The functional view of the *imago Dei* should thrust

all of us concerned parties, especially the national leaders, in Southern Africa to “come and let us *work* together” necessitating the resolving of our differences for a better future.

Let me finish with what Munib Younan (2003: 124) says concerning how we should live in this millennium. He says

We must search our souls and evaluate ourselves. Have we been serving God and humanity or merely our own narrow self-interests? And we must kneel together and ask for God’s forgiveness. We must ask, ‘What do you, LORD Almighty, want us to do?’ And we must be responsive with the prophet Samuel: ‘Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.

Younan, writing for the Jews and Palestinians, urges us also to earnestly seek forgiveness for wrongs committed against each other and seek reconciliation. And this is what we all look to and the world looks to such a time when Africans will live in peace in the midst of each other. *Pax Africanus* is what Africans look up to. This is the cradle of good governance and it is what African communities should aspire for. This is the true humanity—*Umunthu*.

It is high time Africans tried to apply God’s word, i.e., the whole counsel of God—Torah reinforced by the Neviim and admonished in the Kethubim—in our national policy formulations. We are all urged to earnestly seek forgiveness of atrocities committed against each other and resort to reconciliation. This is the true reflection of humanity’s divine calling on earth – reflecting the divine image. That posture will bring out the real notion of “Umunthology” in Africa.

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