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South African and
Swedish Perspectives

Karin Sporre &
H Russel Botman [eds.]

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TRINITARIAN ANTHROPOLOGY, UBUNTU AND HUMAN RIGHTS

BY NICO KOOPMAN

T he thesis of this article can be formulated as follows: A relational trinitarian understanding of anthropology and the notion of *ubuntu* can pave the way for the creation of a human rights culture.

This thesis will be unfolded as follows. Firstly a brief outline of the development of trinitarian thinking in the 20th–21st century is given (1). Secondly the significance of relational trinitarian thinking for anthropology is sketched. The potential of such trinitarian thinking as well as the limitations thereof for anthropology are briefly outlined (2). Thirdly the relationship between trinitarian anthropology and *ubuntu* is described (3). In the fourth instance a brief description of the author's understanding of a human rights culture is given (4). Lastly an attempt is made to spell out what the possible implications of a relational trinitarian approach to anthropology as well as the notion of *ubuntu* for the building of a human rights culture are (5).

Trinitarian thinking in our days

The epistemology that developed after the Enlightenment with its emphasis on the empirical support for truth claims, lead to the marginalisation of thinking about the Christian doctrine of the trinity. According to the North American theologian, Ralph Del Colle in his *The Triune God,* trinitarian thinking cannot be reconciled with the Enlightenment criterion that knowledge and truth be empirically, i.e. as it appears to us and as we experience it, verified. In this regard Immanuel Kant claims that we cannot know things in themselves but only as they appear to us (Del Colle, 2001, p134).

Del Colle however portrays that Karl Barth from Reformed and Karl Rahner from Roman Catholic perspectives revalued trinitarian thinking in the twentieth century. Barth viewed the Father as the Revealer, the Son as the Revelation and the Spirit as the Revealedness. Rahner's trinitarian thinking culminates in this axiom: The economic trinity is the immanent Trinity and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity. Thereby he claims that God's revelation to

us, i.e. economic Trinity, and his essence, i.e. immanent Trinity, do not differ (2001, pp135–137). The British theologian, Colin Gunton, also refers to the resurgence of trinitarian thinking in the twentieth century. Besides the work of Barth and Rahner, he stresses the work of the Orthodox theologian, Lossky. More recent treatises represent many of the main traditions of Christendom, namely Roman Catholic (Kasper Hill), Orthodox (Zizioulas), Lutheran (Jenson), Reformed (Moltmann) and Anglican (Brown), (Gunton, 1993, p1).

Del Colle points out that trinitarian thinking in the most recent times are under the influence of the three Greek church fathers, the so-called Cappadocians (Basilius the Great, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus) who emphasised the interdependence of the three Persons in the Trinity.[1] They described the relationship between the three Persons in terms of origin whereas the Latin church fathers do the description in terms of identity. Firstmentioned emphasised the diversity or plurality in the Trinity and lastmentioned the unity. Gregory of Nyssa described the Father as the Unbegotten, the Son as the Begotten and the Spirit as the Proceeding. Though they emphasise this diversity within the Trinity they also hold on to the unity. This they achieve by describing the relationship of the three Persons in terms of *perichoresis*. This means that there is a coinherence of the Persons in each other. In everything the one Person does the other two are involved (2001, pp129–132).

In a recent study on the trinity the North American theologian William Ury argues that recent theology indeed pays more attention to the social trinity. He nevertheless is of the opinion that many of these attempts still show a bias to the unity model of the Trinity. "Siebels modal perichoresis, Bracken's 'occasions' of an evolving Trinity, Schoonenberg's Rahnerian statement that the Three 'face one another as persons in the history of salvation', A.Kelly's 'sheer Being-in-Love' without any hint of community, or specified relationality, are all statements couched in a radical monotheism but a questionable trinitarianism" (2002, pp 264–265).

Ury reckons that recent attempts at constructing a social Trinity do put emphasis on relations within the Trinity, but that it neglects the idea of the self-cons-

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1   Gunton also acknowledges that the concept of relation in the Trinity mainly originates in the thinking of eastern theologians, specifically the Cappadocians, especially Basil. He does, however, argues that some western theologians also adhered to this relational view of the Trinity. Calvin, in opposition to some western theologians like Jerome and Augustine, and in conjunction with western theologians like Tertullian and Hillary of Poitiers, shows affinity to a relational view of the Trinity (1993:95–96).

ciousness of the Persons. This self-consciousness, however, does not coincide with the notion of individualism and autonomy of the modern understanding of self-consciousness. Just like the German word *individulität* that refers to individuality that only receives self worth in a social context, the words that the church traditionally applied to person, namely *prosopon, persona, subsistentia* and *exsistentia*, include individuated characteristics within a larger framework of relationality (2002, p 268). If this type of self-consciousness of the Persons are not accepted in trinitarian thinking, the risk exist, according to Ury, that important trinitarian notions be made vague, amongst others the reality and implications of divine selfdonation within the Trinity and alterity as essence of the Trinity (2002, p 265). Moreover an underemphasis of the self-consciousness of the divine Persons leads to a de-personalization of God with a concomitant de-humanization. It causes a tri-theism which feeds a rampant individualism on the human side (2002, p 267).

It is not the purpose of this article to critically evaluates Ury's claims about the weaknesses of recent doctrines of the social Trinity, but his warnings is a reminder to look critically at attempts to construct such doctrines and especially to show caution in attempts to develop anthropologies in terms of such trinitarian doctrines.

In the light of these developments in trinitarian thinking Del Colle suggests that trinitarian thinking ideally should develop along the following lines: Firstly the emphasis on the diversity in the Trinity and the consequent relationship between the three Persons should be upheld. Various theologians support Del Colle in this regard. They describe the relationship between the three Persons in the Trinity as one of interdependence. In the second instance the focus on diversity should be done in the acknowledgement that there exists no discrepancy between the immanent Trinity (the essence of God) and the economic Trinity (as God revealed Himself). The emphasis on diversity and relationships does not nullify the unity of the triune God. Del Colle lastly suggests that since human beings are created in the image of God they do also reflect this unity of person, on the one hand, and openness to relationships on the other hand (2001, pp127–128). The various examples of work on the Trinity in different ways, and with more and lesser measures of success, strive to take criteria like these into consideration.

Trinity and anthropology

The notion of relationality and interdependence in God paves the way for the understanding of human beings as relational and interdependent creatures. This link between God and humanity can be made since we are created in God's image, as del Colle suggests (2001, p 137). The Scottish theologian Kevin Vanhoozer qualifies that when we use the image of God notion to describe humanity we should take heed to view relatedness, communicative activity and interdependence as the essence of the image of God notion. Rationality is not the dominant feature of this notion as modernistic thinking claims (*Human being, individual and social*, p 177).

In this vein Gunton states that image of God firstly describes our relationship with God:

> To be in the image of God is to be created through the Son, who is the archetypal bearer of the image. To be in the image of God therefore means to be conformed to the person of Christ. The agent of this conformity is God the Holy Spirit, the creator of community. The image of God is then that being which takes shape by virtue of the creating and redeeming agency of the triune God (1993, pp 116–117).

Image of God also denotes our relationship with other human beings and with the nonhuman world:

> The human person is one who is created to find his or her being in relation, first with other like persons but second, as a function of the first, with the rest of the creation. This means, first, that we are in the image of God when, like God but in dependence on his giving, we find our reality in what we give to and receive from others in human community (1993, p 117).

The South African theologian, Adrio König reckons that this essential relational characteristic of human beings is also manifested in the biblical notion of covenant. Covenant refers to the partnership of humans with God as well as to the partnership, interrelatedness and mutual dependence among human beings and between humans and nature (1991, p 98).

The idea of human beings as essentially interdependent creatures is in opposition to the modernistic understanding of human beings as autonomous rational individuals. The modernistic anthropology of a selfconscious, autonomous, independent, rational individual was questioned from various circles. In the nineteenth century behavioral psychology started pointing to the determination and limitation of individuals by internal instincts and environmental

conditioning. Freudian psychologists refer to the determining influence of the unconscious dimension of the human personality. Twentieth century sociobiology suggested that human DNA determined every aspect of our social lives. Marxists pointed out that underlying ideologies determine individuals. Poststructuralist philosophers like Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault even suggest that habitual forms of language limit the freedom of individuals since language dominate history, culture and politics. The human "I" according to them is not a free rational speaking subject but an "effect" of language (Van Hoozer 2001, pp169–170).

In the same vein the South African theologian, Jaap Durand indicates that in philosophical circles the idea developed in the middle of the nineteenth and even more so in the twentieth century that everything, specifically human beings, cannot be explained in the rational terms that the modernistic thinking of people like Descartes (selfconscious selfknowing being), Kant (autonomous rational individual) and Hegel (selfknowing subjective spirit) suggest. Under influence of thinkers like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche philosophical schools like personalism developed in the twentieth century. This school questions the selfsufficiency of the reason and emphasised that knowledge can be acquired through concrete nonsystematic thinking which experiences the things that it investigates. Dialogism emphasises the fact that humanity is not constituted by the monological individual but through dialogue with the fellow human being. Martin Buber is a representative of this stream. Durand also refers to the existential philosophical stream that dominated the middle of the twentieth century and which emphasised that human beings form themselves through decisions and actions in an actualisation process of selftranscending. Jean Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers are famous representatives of this school (1981, pp128–130).

More recently the famous North American philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre, has indicated that the emphasis on an anthropology of dependence is a highly neglected theme in western moral philosophy (1999, p 3). MacIntyre argues that there is no human being who does not experience dependence and vulnerability in his or her life:

> From Plato to Moore and since there are usually, with some rare exceptions, only passing references to human vulnerability and affliction and to the connections between them and our dependence on others ... Dependence on others is of course often recognized in a general way, usually as something that we need in order to achieve our positive

goals. But an acknowledgement of anything like the full extent of that dependence and of the ways it stems from our vulnerability and our afflictions is generally absent (1999, pp 1–3).

This notion of dependence indeed reflects a certain vulnerability. Human beings are dependent upon others and are therefore also vulnerable. Within the Trinity this interdependence and vulnerability also exist. The North American theologian, Stanley Hauerwas, views God as the God of sacrifice, of weakness and suffering who draws people to Him not by coercive power but by sacrificial love. According to Hauerwas this genuine weakness lures people from their pretentious attempt to make their lives meaningful through power and violence. This weakness also entails that they do acknowledge that their attempt to eliminate the suffering of sick and disabled people – instead of being present to them, being available for them and personally caring for them – is merely a demonstration of their quest to affirm their own significance through power (1986, p 13; 1987, p 592).

The Dutch theologian, Hans Reinders, links the ideas of interdependence and care. With an appeal to the feminist ethicist, Joan Tronto, he argues that the one fundamental feature of human beings should not be independence, but care. Care is the result of the acknowledgement that we can never be fully autonomous, that we need each other, that we exist in a condition of interdependence (1996, pp 16–17).

Trinitarian anthropology and unbuntu

The African definition of life and of humanity in terms of *ubuntu* coincides with the trinitarian understanding of human beings as interdependent, vulnerable and caring creatures. According to archbishop Desmond Tutu *ubuntu* refers to that worldview which teaches that to be human is to be fellow-human being. Humanity is not defined by the modernistic formula: I think, therefore I am, but by the formula: I belong therefore I am. *Ubuntu* entails a life and anthropology of reciprocity, communion, care, responsibility and hospitality (1999, p 51).

Tutu also warns against the romantisizing of *ubuntu. Ubuntu* can easily become collectivistivistic in the sense that it does not make room for individuality and especially for difference of opinion. Where *ubuntu* becomes collectivism it is an instrument of oppression (1997, pp 50–53). When *ubuntu* is evaluated in terms of Christian trinitarian thinking it becomes clear that an emphasis

on relationship that nullifies the uniqueness and integrity of the individual is strongly objected.[2] In the same vein the nullifying of individual freedom is objected. The notion of *perichoresis*, for instance, implies a non-forced cooperation and solidarity between the Persons of the Trinity.

A different kind of caution about attempts to link trinitarian views of humanity and *ubuntu* thinking about humanity should be raised. The two notions coincide in the sense that both understand humanity in terms of individuality in the context of relationality. However, in the Christian tradition the Trinity is viewed as the *basis* of all relations, that is relations between human beings and God, amongst human beings and between humans and nature. The notion of *ubuntu*, as a prevalent human view and way of life amongst many people in Africa, serves as a *vehicle* for enhancing the embodiment of the relationality and quality of life that is suggested by a trinitarian anthropology. As such it is open to critique and correction by this doctrine. This statement does, of course, not deny that *ubuntu* thinking also enables us to discover more of the wealth of this doctrine. To apply the wellknown hermeneutical theory of Gadamar to this context one can say that our knowledge and experience of ubuntu forms part of our "fore-understandings" or "fore-concepts" which, if we use it positively, i.e. so that they do not dominate the understanding process, we can come to a better understanding of trinitarian anthropology (Habermas 1982, p 235,261).

The question can also be posed whether we do need trinitarian foundations if we have *ubuntu*. What difference does the faith or theological perspective make? The German theologian, Michael Welker, is of opinion that faith does indeed have a unique contribution to make with regard to the development of an anthropology, specifically with regard to what he calls a sustainable model of personhood. The way in which this contribution is determined is important. Faith, namely, should not only be viewed as an objective reality which implies that the only role of human beings is to be passive and empty whilst God as the "ultimate point of reference" or abstract entity who inhabits the "beyond", is the active partner. He reckons this vacuous understanding of faith, which is a strong tendency amongst many Christians due to the fear of people seeking certainty within themselves, leads to a reductionist view of both God and humans. This view of faith became the key to all epistemological and moral worth and the

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2   In this connection Reinhold Niebuhr's classical description of the destructive effect that the morality of the group may have on the individual, needs to be remembered *(Moral man and immoral society).*

foundation of personhood. In opposition to this view he is of opinion that St. Paul's and Luther's understanding of faith provides a more adequate model. According to them faith has both subjective and objective dimensions. This understanding of faith paves the way for a dynamic and dialogical relationship between God and humans (with their uncertainty, distance from faith, lack of faith, or enmity towards faith). It also coincides with the reflection theory of self-consciousness which teaches that there is only an arbitrary distinction between the active and passive predominations in a dialectical relationship of giving and receiving (Welker 2000, pp 105–111).

This understanding of faith also rejects a totalitarian understanding of religion. According to Welker such a totalitarian approach relates all and everything to God and God to all and everything in such a way that nothing becomes clear. He agrees that faith sees the possibility that everything can in principle be related to God, but then it is important to ask where that relationship becomes clear. This clarity comes from that understanding of faith which acknowledges that faith does not exclude the rational and affective human experiences, that it is permeated by knowledge, that it is open to and in dialogue with the questions of certainty and truth posed by other sciences, that it needs to pursue in conversation with non-Christian religions and secular positions the question of what it means to be the image of God (2000, pp 109–112). Welker reckons that not only faith or theology's quest benefits from this approach, but also those sciences that hold themselves accountable to the classical religious and philosophical standards for a complex concept of the person (2000, p 113).

Welker's dialogical, dynamic and creative approach of the relationship between God and humans and of the interhuman relationships deserves serious consideration in the quest of theologians to determine the unique contributions of faith suppositions in the quest for adequate understanding of human beings.

Towards a human rights culture

In an Afrikaans newspaper a writer in the letter column describes South African society as follows: The country with the most noble Constitution for the most barbaric people (*Die Burger* 26 January 2000, [my translation]). This writer lashed out against the fact that in spite of the very good principles in the Bill of Rights in the South African Constitution we experience the highest levels and cruelest forms of crime. At the launch of the Moral Regeneration Movement on initiative of the South African government on 18 April 2002, the South

African theologian Cedric Mayson describes the stance of morality and human rights in South African society as follows:

> It has the ring of a prophet of ancient Israel, especially Amos. Murder! Robbery and theft! Rape! Women and child abuse! Domestic violence! Drug trafficking! Fraud! Embezzlement of public funds! Crooked business dealings! Racism! Muggings! Hijacks! Gangsters! Abusing the Bill of Rights! Laziness! Collapse of the family! Land hunger! Lack of will to resist evil! The growing gulfs between haves and have nots! Slow delivery! Perverted religion! Backbiting! Greed! Selfishness! Moral collapse! Corruption from police to parliament! ... (quoted by Richardson 2002, p 3)

Creating a human rights culture implies that the noble principles that South African society adhere to on paper be embodied, that South Africans become a people of integrity, who practise what they preach, a people whose proclaimed and practiced moralities are integrated, a people who give content to the human rights that they in theory adhere to. The explanation that the North American philosopher, Alan Gewirth, offers about what can happen to human rights, further our understanding of a human rights culture. He states that rights can either be fulfilled, infringed, violated or overridden (1984, p 92). A human rights culture, I believe, comes into existence where rights are fulfilled, not infringed or violated and as far as possible, not overridden.[3]

In creating a human rights culture a Trinitarian approach to anthropology and ubuntu can play an important role, as the last section of this paper strives to illustrate.

Interdependent human beings and a human rights culture

A few suggestions are made on how the notion of dependent, vulnerable and caring human beings contributes to the realisation of a human rights culture. But firstly some comments on the inadequacy of the so-called modern anthropology to create such a culture.

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3   "A right is *fulfilled* when the correlative duty is carried out, i.e. when the required action is performed or the prohibited action is not performed. A right is *infringed* when the correlative duty is not carried out, i.e. when the required action is not performed or the prohibited action is performed. Thus someone's right to life is infringed when the prohibited action of killing him is performed, someone's right to medical care is infringed when the required action of providing him with medical care is not performed. A right is *violated* when it is unjustifiably infringed, when the required action is unjustifiably not performed or the prohibited action is unjustifiably performed. And a right is *overridden* when it is justifiably infringed, so that there is sufficient justification for not carrying out the correlative duty, and the required action is justifiably not performed or the prohibited action is justifiably performed", (Gewirth 1984, p 92).

The anthropology of dependence ensures that not only first generation individual political rights (so-called blue rights) be actualised, but that second generation rights that focus on economic and related social liberation (so-called red rights) and third generation rights that focus on development in the context of ecological integrity (so-called green rights) be adhered to in practice. In this regard MacIntyre comments that where the notion of interdependence, of the mutuality of giving and receiving, is adhered to, there is no room for the politics of competing interests. There consumerism makes room for an ethos of care, and there the gap between rich and poor (on local and global levels) eventually begins to disappear (1999, pp 144–145).

It is also remarkable to note how the South African theologian, Frans Kekana's, definition of *ubuntu* reflects the concrete practicing of these various types of human rights.

> ... the human relations to land, treatment of visitors and/or strangers as an indistinguishable part of the family or household, sharing of land another edibles which has given rise to the African idiom 'a person is a person through other persons', the inalienable right of every person to land, food health, education and work in such a way that hardly any one ever starves or feels lonely, interpersonal relations in which community concerns take precedence over the individual, parent-child relations where children respect parents and the elderly, and are protected from scandals and abuse. (quoted by LL Pato 1997, p 60).

An anthropology of vulnerability also enhances a human rights culture. Where rights are to be prioritised, where rights are in conflict, where the access to appeals to rights are measured, the guiding question would be this: how is the most vulnerable in society affected by the choice that will be made. In fact, the quality of a human rights culture, of development and civility in a society is measured by the answer we give to this question.[4]

From within Christianity it can be argued that where the dependence on others, specifically on God, is seen as essential part of humanity there the fear for receiving disappear. There people recognise that the value of human beings does not only reside in what we can give, but more so in that we receive. There the protestant confession of justification by grace, of salvation without merit

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4   In his wellknown study on justice the moral philosopher John Rawls states this point remarkably. "All social primary goods – liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the bases of self-respect – are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any or all of these goods is to the advantage of the least favored" (*A theory of justice* 1971, p 303).

or any giving or contribution from the side of the human being, is cherished. And where we learn to receive, we learn to claim the godgiven rights of others and may I even say of ourselves. Justified people in this sense can then be also just people. The justified ones may seek justice in the world. The implication of this exposition for the opposition of human rights by some mostly protestant Christians with an appeal to the doctrine of justification by grace and faith is hopefully clear. These Christians use the doctrine of justification by grace as an argument to prove that Christians cannot claim rights, because they are sinful and can only depend on the privileges that God in his grace bestow upon them. The revaluation of this central Christian doctrine might enhance the commitment to the creation of a human rights culture amongst Christians who adhere to last-mentioned view.

Lastly, where one's own and the dependency and vulnerability of others are recognised, there basic rights to equality and freedoms of different kinds are more readily adhered to and concretely embodied. In this regard the feminist theologian, Harriet Harris, states that a relational anthropology does not only pave the way for a social critique of structures and attitudes which foster distorted relations, that is relations of domination and exclusion, but its emphasis of vulnerability and interdependence also helps to rediscover trust among human beings as a central aspect of moral life that has mostly been overlooked by great moral philosophers who, according to her and feminist scholar, Annette Baier, who she also refers to, "were for the most part 'clerics, misogynists, and puritan bachelors who had minimum adult dealings with women" (*Should we say that personhood is relational?* 1998, p 230).

Above-cited examples hopefully illustrate the potential of a Trinitarian anthropology in a context where ubuntu is cherished for the creation of a human rights culture.

It is my contention that an anthropology of vulnerability and dependency will help establishing a culture where human rights will be fulfilled and not fiercely violated as we see in almost all facets of life, the personal and social, and in all contexts, the local South African context, other local contexts as well as in the global context. With regard to last-mentioned context the current war in Iraq that indirectly involves all powers of the world, proves that where humanity is defined in terms of power, domination and independence, there human rights are violated – even by those who have long traditions of human right bills – there life is destroyed, there the powers of death and evil reign supreme.

The notion of an anthropology of dependence and vulnerability, therefore, is not merely a question of theorizing and intellectual gymnastics. It is indeed a life and death issue that deserves urgent attention.

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Die Burger 26 January 2000.

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