



# Ubuntu, koinonia and diakonia, a way to reconciliation in South Africa?

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This article seeks to contribute to the process of reconciliation in South Africa. This is achieved by firstly exploring the meaning of *ubuntu* as a common culture or religion under a large percentage of South Africa's people over the borders of language and other cultural values. In the second part of the article two concepts that play a major role in Christianity are explored, namely *koinonia* and *diakonia*. Again a large percentage of South Africans believe that the Bible is the Word of God in which the right way of living is described. A comparison is made between the core values of *ubuntu* and the way of living that emerges from the use of the two concepts of *koinonia* and *diakonia* in the New Testament. A way that can contribute to reconciliation is suggested from this comparison.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

*Ubuntu* has a tremendous influence on the majority of South Africans. This article explores the essence of *ubuntu*, as well as the relationship between *ubuntu* and power. The following questions are addressed as far as possible: Is *ubuntu* a religion or a culture? What role does *ubuntu* play in instances of corruption, xenophobia, the *Zulufication* of the government and nepotism? What role can *ubuntu* play in reconciliation in South Africa? In the second part of the article, *ubuntu* is compared to the biblical concepts of *koinonia* and *diakonia*. These two concepts are explained by considering New Testament texts and juxtaposed with the conclusions reached in the first section of the article. Can these two concepts be brought into harmony with *ubuntu*? The authors believe that it is possible to find enough common ground to formulate values that can be propagated as values of the rainbow nation and that can contribute to reconciliation.

## What is *ubuntu*?

Poovan, du Toit and Engelbrecht (2006) state that the direct English translation of *ubuntu* is 'humanity' or 'humanness', and adds that non-Africans have no trouble in understanding this concept, given that some of the moral and social values inherent in *ubuntu* can also be found in other cultures.

The true meaning of *ubuntu* cannot, however, be fully translated into English or described in a single definition, because it is a living culture. Desmond Tutu (1997) ventures one definition:

In Africa we have something called 'ubuntu' in Nguni languages, or 'botho' in Sotho, which is difficult to translate into English. It is the essence of being human. It speaks of the fact that my humanity is caught up and is inextricably bound up in yours. I am human because I belong. (p. 78)

In Sotho the word *botho* is used in the phrase *motho ke motho ka batho*, which means that a person is a person through other people (also see Shutte 1993:46).

According to Mbiti (1970:108), 'whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual'.

One would, therefore, say that this contributes to the moral value of the community which firstly grounds itself on the family and expounds itself to the global community at large. The above statement opposes the idea of individualism and emphasises the idea of sharing amongst the community members. Furthermore, a life is valued and the elderly people, thus, play a role in the community by taking part in promoting *ubuntu* values (cf. Mabovula 2011:41). It should be noted that African people value human life; however, for the Africans, human life is well expressed not

1. Although there are writers who contest this notion, the writer of the first part of this article is a minister in a congregation of 500 members in the Diepsloot township and speaks from first-hand knowledge in agreement with many other writers like Chaplin (2014) and Yum (2007), to mention but few, who attest that *ubuntu* has a great impact on the community and is continuously doing so. Although this occurs less in the urban areas but more visibly in the rural areas where members of the community cooperate and live in unity and in peace with one another.



from the individual context but from the communal context. Hence the *ubuntu* principle 'a person is a person because of others' (cf. Teffo 1998:3).

It is important to note that *ubuntu* does not take away the right of the individual. The right of an individual in the community will still remain. This includes the right of a person to voice his or her own views without being suppressed by others. This shows that though one can exist in the community as an individual one cannot live alone as an island without others. However, this does not mean that one loses his or her own identity because of others (cf. Du Toit 2004:33; Louw 2002).

Healthy *ubuntu* can bind people together across the borders of race, colour and gender. Unfortunately, there is also another side to *ubuntu*. When *ubuntu* extends only to the members of a particular group, it leads to xenophobia, nepotism and distrust of anybody outside that group (Smith *et al.* 1999:12).

It is indeed necessary to mention the social values of *ubuntu* to establish a clear understanding of what is meant with the concept of *ubuntu*. There are many good social values connected with *ubuntu*, as indicated by a host of authors, of which Poovan *et al.* (2006:15–27), Mdluli (1987:66–71), Mbigi and Maree (1995:2), and Kamwangamalu (1999:25–26) are but a few. These authors mention and describe five social values of *ubuntu*, namely survival, compassion, solidarity, dignity and respect. This article will not elaborate on the above social values, given the in-depth discussion offered of each by other authors (cf. Poovan *et al.* 2006:15–27).

The most interesting aspect of the African philosophy of *ubuntu* is that the spirits of the deceased still form part of the community and care must be taken to not anger the spirits of the fathers. Adversity is considered punishment for wrongdoing, and individual prosperity is seen as limiting the overall benefit to the community in that the prospering person is using more than his share.

It should also be noted that this African philosophy of *ubuntu* is characterised by an interconnectedness between the dead, the living and the yet to be born. This connection is vital in the sense that the living can seek advices through rituals from the living dead. The unborn are also recognised in this regard because they will exist in the near future. Therefore, for the living to take part in the order of creation, which is part of *ubuntu* philosophy, requires their responsibility to bear children and take care of them (cf. Nabudere n.d.).

## Ubuntu and power

Mumley (2007) argues that

as *ubuntu* means a person is a person through other persons, it connects the leader to the followers in an interdependent relationship that identifies the leader with the followers' welfare.

In analysing Mumley's explanation one could say that the leader, in this regard, is connected to his subjects. Moreover

the leader should create a space for his or her own followers to play certain roles in the community because at the end the leader is judged according to the ability of his or her followers.

In this regard the servant-leadership factors should be applied, namely love, humility, altruism, incorporation of the followers' vision, trust and empowerment – service that corresponds well with the ideal of *ubuntu* (cf. Winston & Bekker 2004).

A leader can, however, abuse power and in this way oppress his or her followers. This means that although a leader is supposed to serve his or her followers according to the *ubuntu* principles of integrity, trust and love, he or she may well use the power entrusted to him or her for personal benefit and protection. The leader should not fear to empower his or her own followers in fear to lose his or her own influence in the community. One should understand that in the community it is not about the leader only, but it is about the good relationship between the leader and his or her own followers. African leaders continue to be influenced by the idea that power is given to one individual by the ancestors and, therefore, it cannot be shared. The leader in this regard should protect power by all means. Contrary to the western leaders who believe that power can be divided and shared (cf. Mumley 2007).

Nabudere (n.d.) argues that although the power is given to the leader, the power should be returned to the people by empowering them through their cultural heritage, such as the philosophy of *ubuntu*. Nabudere (n.d.) explains that giving power back to the people enables them to confront and do away with the notion of one person as a leader dominating the whole community, as, in the end, people revolt against such a leader to regain power from that particular leader. In his view, the only way the ideal of an African renaissance could be successful is if African leaders adopt the *ubuntu* principles of interconnectedness between a leader and his or her followers.

The issue of transferring power might seem difficult but for the main reason that South Africa did not plunge into a civil war is because of the principle of *ubuntu*. Power was successfully transferred from the White minority to the majority government through the processes of democracy which was guarded by the principle of *ubuntu* (see also Olinger, Britz & Olivier 2007). This could be an example of how the proper application of the principles of *ubuntu* can enable leaders to return power to the people without fear. It would mean that both the leaders and the people are to practise the social values of *ubuntu*, to keep the one from oppressing the other – because I am, because you are.

The report by the South African Institute for Justice and Reconciliation shows that the element of racism continues in South Africa. Though most of the people are still tolerant of one another the socio-economic imbalances in the country, which the ANC leadership struggles to manage, will in turn



spark the tension amongst the citizens of this country who will, in the end, struggle to tolerate one another (see also Cilliers 2010).

As depicted above, it could be argued that most leaders have no desire to share power for fear of losing it, and in this sense power in the hands of a leader only serves to protect the interests of that particular leader, thereby leaving his or her followers vulnerable to abuse. In so doing, the principle of *ubuntu* is lost. Therefore, one would be correct to state that *ubuntu* is about sharing and this relates to the *ubuntu* principle that says a person is a person because of others (see also Louw 2002). Ramose (2002:113), cited by Louw (2002), attests to this when he quotes the Sepedi proverb that says 'Kgosi ke kgosi ka batho' meaning 'the Sovereignty of the King derives from and belongs to its subjects' or 'the King owes his status, including all the powers associated with it, to the will of the people under him'.

All of the above have been said about the relationship between those in authority and their followers. However, Praeg (2014:14–15) took a very conservative approach when dealing with the issue of power with regard to *ubuntu*. He strongly emphasised that before anyone asks what *ubuntu* is, one should firstly understand that the question 'what is *Ubuntu*?' by itself is a statement, and that statement is about 'power, representation, discursive dominance and subversion.' He further argues that

to speak of Africa is to struggle for power, to assert power, to assert presence. Again the issue of *ubuntu* is never simply to make a disinterested observation about Africans, but a statement we should feel, experience and understand as a challenge, as an exercise as an assertion of the right to be recognised. (Praeg 2014:14–15)

It is the author's view that though Africans need to be recognised in either way or the other, the principle of *ubuntu* does not only protect a particular race, but it grows itself beyond the boundaries of race and individualism. Therefore, in *ubuntu*, oppression by those in power over the followers is not condoned.

## Is *ubuntu* a religion or a culture?

Louw (1999) argues that for the mere fact that *ubuntu* means 'a person is a person because of the other person' shows that it has a spiritual foundation, and adds that this statement reflects the unifying vision or worldview in the life of an African person. Prinsloo (1995) confirms this by calling *ubuntu* resiliently religious. Ancestors are seen as part of the *ubuntu* community and part of the extended family. When a person dies it means the ultimate homecoming for him or her. Therefore the living and the dead depend on each other. Man, ancestors and whatever is regarded as the 'Supreme Being' are inextricably bonded to each other. Respect and regard for religious beliefs and practices are part and parcel of *ubuntu*.

Masango (2006) states that 'enjoyment is part of living as much as *ubuntu* is part of humanity'. The principles of *ubuntu*

shape the spiritual life of a person within the African context. There is a saying that goes 'it takes a village to raise a child'. Related to this Masango further argues that:

In an African village the image and likeness of God is revered, and adding the concept of *ubuntu* would necessitate also connecting it to African spirituality, which forms the values and good character in a person. These concepts have been part and parcel of humanity from the beginning of creation. (p. 931)

In other words, according to Masango (2006), the life lived in a community should be a life lived with others; no one is an island in the African community.

Analysing Archbishop Desmond Tutu's understanding of *ubuntu* as religion, Hailey (2008) argues that:

Tutu's concept of *ubuntu* is one nourished by worship and clearly has a spiritual dimension. In Biblical terms it begins with creation where man is created in the image of God. (pp. 6–7)

According to Battle (2000), cited by Hailey (2008),

Tutu sees *ubuntu* as a theological concept in which man is called to live as people that have been made in the image of God. *Ubuntu* rests on the knowledge that human existence is inextricably bound to God's creation and that a solitary human being is a contradiction in terms. This can be seen in the way that Tutu interprets the Adam and Eve narrative. He suggests that it wasn't good for man to live alone and that the creation of Eve was necessary to make man whole. In other words, people need each other, and 'you and I are made for interdependency'. (p. 4)

'The first of the four vectors of Tutu's *ubuntu* theology', Battle (2000) suggests, is interdependence. Within an *ubuntu* theology an interdependent community is one in which we can only discover who we are through others. Secondly, it recognises individuals as having distinctive identities and that God creating people differently is cause for celebration. Thirdly, it combines the best of African and Western culture to produce a new and distinctive theology.

Although *ubuntu* is seen as a religion by many other authors, it is important that *ubuntu* also be regarded as cultural. It is a part of the cultural heritage that Africans can give to the world and that must be lived by Africans every day. *Ubuntu* is, therefore, both a religion and a culture.

## *Ubuntu* in the South African context

What role does *ubuntu* play in evils like corruption?

Corruption is currently on the lips of almost every South African. Not a day goes by without hearing or reading about corruption on the television news, radio news, in the newspapers and all other social media networks. Many of the top leaders in the country, including the President of South Africa, President Jacob Zuma, have been investigated for corruption. That is not to say that ordinary South Africans don't engage in acts of corruption themselves.



However the question is how Africans define corruption. There are many things that are performed by Africans on a daily basis that are not viewed as corruption, but on knowing of these things the western world would see them as acts of corruption. One of these things is what is called '*pula molomo*', which literally means 'mouth opener'. This means that before engaging in any official African negotiations one needs to first present a gift to those with whom he or she will be negotiating. When one is not an African it would be difficult for that particular person to understand this practice, and the conclusion drawn would be that a bribe was paid.

Prozesky (2013:15–17) confirms the abovementioned statement and explains that the: 'Western world belief that Africa is gravely plagued by corruption'. He further argues against the aforesaid statement by saying that 'in Africa community takes precedence'. Therefore, when one analyses his statement one could conclude that Prozesky is of the view that anything that benefits the community cannot be regarded as corruption because corruption benefits few individuals. For that reason Prozesky (2013: 15–17) explains that 'moral absolutism does not have to be a western imposition to others'. It is a fact that corruption is rife in South Africa and one wonders if this is not because of the high level of poverty or moral degeneration that is currently experienced in the country. These acts of corruption continue to exist and are frequent enough that people are used to participating in them as they are part of their daily lives (see also Nicolaidis 2005:58). One would not argue against the surveys that have been conducted in South Africa by bodies such as Transparency International (TI), Global Corruption Perception Index (CPI) and The Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), which recently reported the increase in the corruption activity taking place in South Africa and mostly in the government institutions. This clearly shows that the issue of corruption should be prioritised in order for the government to tackle it. However, a battle against corruption will not be won unless all stakeholders, that includes the public, are involved in rooting out corruption in the country (see also Gareth 2014; Sonneberg 2013; The Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), 2006–2007).

There are many commissions that have been established by the presidency, one of which is the Seriti Commission that is investigating the arms deal procurement processes. This indicates at least some action on the part of the government to curb corruption. It does, however, raise the question of why the element of corruption is still such a visible problem when the government is doing its utmost to eradicate it? It could be concluded that if corruption is being committed by high ranking government officials, then it would be impossible for the government to deal with the corruption issue with a top-down approach, because everyone at the top would want to protect himself or herself. Where does *ubuntu* feature in all this? It is important to note that corruption affects everyone, especially the public, because service delivery is significantly impeded by corruption.

The authors would argue that only if the social values of *ubuntu*, which includes survival compassion, solidarity, dignity and respect are practised, will it be possible for the authorities and the public to win the battle against corruption. When corruption occurs all of the abovementioned social values of *ubuntu* are abused and corrupted. The perpetrators of corruption are the only ones who survive, have compassion only for their fellow corruptors and unite in solidarity to perpetuate the act of corruption, and thereby endeavour to earn respect and dignity from those who do not benefit from their corrupt activities.

## The Zulufication of the government and nepotism

The issue of *Zulufication* was widely raised upon the election of Jacob Zuma as president of South Africa. Duvehage (2014) of North-West University has been most vocal on the topic of so-called *Zulufication*. One of the reasons is that the list of ANC candidates that was submitted prior to the May 07, 2014 national election mainly comprised of friends of President Jacob Zuma, all of whom he believes are of Zulu heritage. Duvehage (2014) goes even further by saying that this *Zulufication* can be seen not only at a national level, but within all the structures of the government and adds that 'without any doubt, there is a "Zulufication" and the "Zumafication" of South African politics'.

It is true that where there is an act of nepotism or tribalism then obviously other cultural groups will be sidelined. It is important to note that when a corruptor is in power it is most likely that he or she will build himself or herself a security wall made up of his or her families and cultural groups for the benefit of themselves at the expense of others. The terms *Zulufication* and *Zulufy* have been recently invented in South Africa since President Jacob Zuma was elected into power. This was in reaction to what is perceived as the persuasion of his idea to put in leadership his family members and those in his cultural group, to be at the forefront in the business sector and also in government sectors. Thus, nepotism or tribalism benefits the few, not the community at large, and that is against the principles of *ubuntu* (see also Rampedi 2012; *Times Live* 2011).

Contrary to the statement above one should take into consideration that nepotism as a form corruption is not a problem of yesterday, nor did it start after 1994. It has been in existence down the ages. It has been widely practiced by those in business and politics with unethical relationships. Davenport (2010) attests to this by noting that 'nepotism was rife in the mining sector before 1994'. This is a confirmation that nepotism is not a new thing.

The above reflects the extent of corruption of any man. *Ubuntu* is not culturally specific and its principles do not allow for exclusionary practices like *Zulufication* as a form of nepotism. *Ubuntu* is in fact about the benefit of the whole community and not just a single group, as is the case with nepotism. This leads to the conclusion that tribalism and





nepotism contradict the principles of *ubuntu*, and the social values of *ubuntu* should serve to address these issues.

## Ubuntu and xenophobia

The traditional African cultural heritage that promotes harmony and a sense of pride is deteriorating in African communities. The efficacy of *ubuntu* is undermined by the growing xenophobic phenomenon in South Africa. One could say that from the way people treat their fellow Africans that this shows that people no longer love one another and that trust amongst the people no longer exists. The social values of *ubuntu*, which include caring, sharing and the respect of life, are no longer adhered to by the people. Hence we see cases of xenophobia reported more often in South Africa (see also Mabovula 2011:40).

Many lives were lost in South Africa in 2008 and many people were displaced as a result of xenophobic attacks. Though many reasons were given for these inhumane acts, one cannot in any way justify any of those reasons because the attacks by themselves are against the social values of *ubuntu*. Xenophobia is the exact opposite of *ubuntu*. In *ubuntu* we are able to look the other in the eye, with xenophobia we look at each other with evil intentions and turn away from the other's need. Xenophobia is driven by fear of the other, fear that turns into hatred and wants to destroy the other. Xenophobia kills the spirit of *ubuntu* in a community (Cilliers 2010).

## What role can *ubuntu* play in reconciliation in South Africa?

Before we compare *ubuntu* with biblical *koinonia* and *diakonia*, we can now, from the perspective of *ubuntu*, answer the abovementioned question.

Reconciliation is needed everywhere not only in Africa. Human beings need reconciliation to enable them to build strong relationships and live in harmony with one another. This practice of reconciliation has existed in the lives of African people for many ages. Over many years African people were seen daily prioritising to solve conflicts in order to reconcile those who wronged one another. In most rural areas the chief and his advisors participate on a daily basis in resolving conflict amongst the community members. This process is normally held at the Chief's compound which is mostly known in the Pedi language as '*kgorong*' (see also Nabudere n.d.).

South African history clearly shows how *ubuntu* played or is playing an essential role in reconciling South African citizens. Looking back at how the policy of apartheid ripped apart the nation and instilled hatred amongst the different groups that constitute the South African nation, the significant role culture has played and is still playing is irrefutable. Gade (2012:485) relates how the negotiators of the South African Interim Constitution of 1993 agreed that to address the divisions and strife of the apartheid era in South Africa, 'there

is a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, and a need for *ubuntu* but not for victimization'.

In this particular instance, the philosophy of *ubuntu* played a major role in bringing the people of South Africa together. As Chairman of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Tutu can also attest to this. He maintained throughout that he employed both his Christian values as well as his cultural values to succeed in uniting the South African nation after the fall of apartheid.

*Ubuntu* calls for peace and reconciliation. It propels the idea of forgiveness and, moreover with its social value of compassion, helps one not to engage in any form of revenge. Thus, it practically gives one strength and wisdom to gear up for building up peace and healing to those affected by social injustices (see also Murithi 2006:29).

One should note that the principles found in *ubuntu* are not unique; as indicated earlier, they can be found in a variety of forms in other cultures and traditions.

It is the writers' argument that The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa would not have been seen as a success if the principles and the social values of *ubuntu* were not used as the guidelines. As mentioned above *ubuntu* is about forgiveness, reconciliation and, moreover, about telling the truth in order to restore human dignity and for the perpetrator and the victim to find peace with one another (see also Swanson 2007).

The abovementioned statement makes it clear that the principles of *ubuntu*, which include forgiveness, are also found in the Christian worldview in that forgiveness and truth are always at the forefront of Christian values. According to this principle of forgiveness, the victim should be the first to forgive the one who has done him or her wrong. Not that this absolves the perpetrator from admitting to the wrong and seeking forgiveness. This is one example of how *ubuntu* can play an important role in reconciling and bringing peace amongst South African people.

There is no doubt that even for the first democratically elected President of South Africa, Dr Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, after suffering many terrible and inhumane circumstances under the apartheid government in South Africa, it was the philosophy of *ubuntu* that taught him to forgive and to reconcile with his oppressors.

Oppenheim (2012) demonstrates that:

Mandela's own words attest to how *Ubuntu*, at the core of Mandela's faith, is made of this same glimmer of humanity: 'I always knew that deep down in every human heart, there is mercy and generosity. No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than it's opposite'. (p. 387)

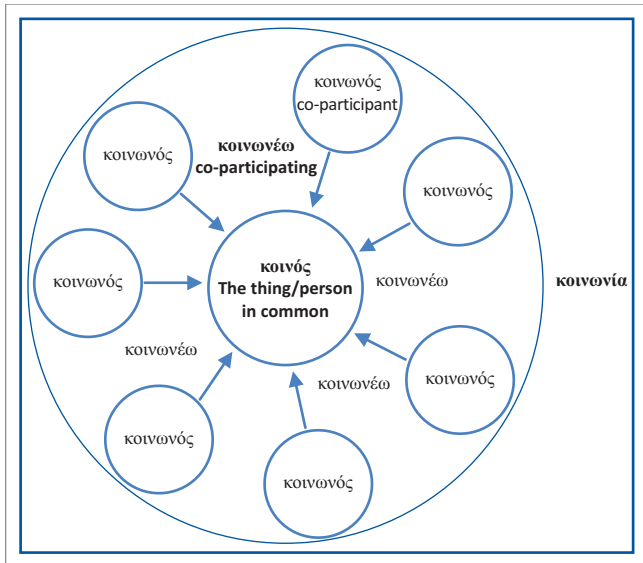


FIGURE 1: κοινωνία.

The abovementioned statement of Mandela conforms implicitly to the ideology of *ubuntu*, that is 'I am because you are' as in 'I only am, because you also are', 'my *ubuntu* is also your *ubuntu* in the collective whole'. It is the author's conviction that reconciliation is only achievable if the principles of *ubuntu* are honestly practised.

## Koinonia, diakonia and ubuntu

How does the biblical concept of *koinonia* and *diakonia* relate to what has been said about *ubuntu* in the previous part of this article? Firstly, a short description of *koinonia* and *diakonia* is given with reference to other researchers. Secondly, a comparison with *ubuntu* follows, and the meaning of *koinonia* and *diakonia* is discussed in greater detail.

### Koinonia

The use of the *koin-* word group in the New Testament can be illustrated with Figure 1 (adapted from Kloha 2012:25).

The *κοινωνός* is the participant and the subject or object of the *κοινωνέω* (Mt 23:30, 1 Cor 10:18, 2 Cor 1:7, 2 Pt 1:4; Allen & Ross 2012:115). The *κοινός* is the thing or person the *κοινωνός* participates in. *Κοινωνέω* is the action that is done by the *κοινωνός*. 'Participating together' (*κοινωνέω*), 'the thing in common' (*κοινός*), and

those who participate together (*κοινωνός*) in that set of situations and relationships, is *κοινωνία*. Put another way, *κοινωνία* is used in the NT to describe the entire event, the totality of all the elements in the diagram—it is the entire diagram. (Kloha 2012:26)

Thus Figure 1 represents *κοινωνία*.

The *koin-* word group is translated as fellowship, sharing, partnership, participation and communion. In the New Testament, its meaning can range from the everyday use to the sacred, from a partnership in a fishing enterprise, to

being at one with the mind of God (Marjerison 2000:13).<sup>2</sup> Hunsinger (2009:346) emphasises that *koinonia* is in the first place a gift of God and nothing that man can produce out of his own. God calls his children to nurture the *koinonia* that he gave them through the reconciliation work of Jesus Christ and the unity worked by the Holy Spirit (Snyder 2004:75–76). The Holy Spirit unites them with God and each other in the body of Christ (1 Cor 12; Ef 2:18–20; Davis 2007:53). This fellowship has its origin in the *koinonia* between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (Kariatlis 2012:51; Oldewage 2014:30–32). *Koinonia* in the New Testament, therefore, describes not only a sociological unity, but a theological and ontological unity (Clasen 2008:39; Kariatlis 2012:53; Kearsley 2008:18).<sup>3</sup>

*Diakonia* can be described as service to another person or to the congregation under the command of God and to the honour of God (Mk 10:45). This service is done with the gifts of the Holy Spirit and is used by God to show his grace and power that exceeds all that we can think of (1 Cor 12:1–5). The service addresses another person's need, the community or the congregation (1 Pt 4:10; Mt 25; Breed 2014a:2–6) and it asks of the *diakonos* to be prepared to denounce all self-interest (Jn 12:24–26; Breed 2014b:2–5). Jesus Christ reigns through the *diakonia* of God's children; through their *diakonia* his kingdom comes on earth as in heaven. Christ's promise is that God will honour the one that serves Him (Arndt, Danker & Bauer 2000; Breed 2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2014a, 2014b; Breed & Breed 2010; Collins 1990, 1992, 1995, 2002a, 2002b, 2005, 2010, 2012; Du Plessis & Breed 2013, Gooder 2006; Hentschel 2007; Latvus 2008, 2010).<sup>4</sup>

## Comparison of ubuntu and koinonia and diakonia

A comparison between *koinonia*, *diakonia* and *ubuntu* follows below. Markers of *ubuntu* from the first part of the paper will be compared to biblical *koinonia* and *diakonia*.

*Ubuntu*: 'a person is a person through other people.'

From the perspective of the use of the *koin-* word group in the New Testament, this principle can be rephrased as: a person is a new person through his or her *koinonia* with God through the work of Jesus Christ, being reborn by the Holy Spirit. The believers receive a new identity through his or her unity with Christ, but everyone, also those who are not united to Christ, is a person in the eyes of God. We can again rephrase: a person is a person because he or she was created by God, in his image, and God calls everyone to live in community with him through Jesus Christ.

2. See Marjerison (2000:13–17) for a detailed discussion of the sub-domains that the *koin-* word group is used in the New Testament.

3. See De Mare, Piper and Thompson (2011:xxxiii) for an alternative opinion; they see in *koinonia* nothing but an 'atmosphere of impersonal fellowship,' and a 'form of togetherness and amity that brings a pooling of resources'.

4. Whilst it is not possible to discuss the meaning of the *diakon-* word group in detail now, these works can be read for the confirmation of this definition.



But *koinonia* also involves unity with the people of God, that is, the body of Christ. As far as this saying of *ubuntu* expresses the truth that no one is an island and that people need each other, it corresponds with what *koinonia* expresses in the New Testament. However, it is important to notice what Bridges (2012) explains:

Biblical community goes much deeper than sharing common goals, though it ultimately involves that. Biblical community is first sharing of a common life in Christ. It is when we grasp this truth that we are in a position to begin to understand true community. (n.p.)

Whilst Christians should cherish the unique depth of biblical *koinonia*, they should also seek to live in peace with everyone (Rm 12:18). Christians can, from the perspective of *koinonia*, seek to promote the principle of the interdependence of all the people of South Africa without relinquishing the uniqueness of *koinonia* in the church.<sup>5</sup> Common ground can be sought to enable the people of South Africa to live together in peace, and that common ground can be propagated as a building stone for the rainbow nation.

*Diakonia*: In 1 Peter 4:10 the congregation is addressed by Peter during a time of suffering as strangers and exiles (1:1). He states that every individual (ἕκαστος) has received a gift and as stewards (οἰκονόμος) they must serve (διακονέω) each other with the manifold grace of God. It is clear that the *koinonia* in the congregation should be expressed by the *diakonia* of every member to the congregation (Breed 2014a:4–6). But the identity of the individual does not dissolve into the identity of the group. Each individual will be held responsible as steward of God (Green 2007:145, 146).

What is true and corresponds with *ubuntu* is that being part of the community becomes part of the identity of the individual. The individual cannot say that he or she does not belong to the community or that he or she does not need the other members of the congregation.<sup>6</sup>

*Ubuntu*: 'Though one can exist in the community as an individual one cannot live alone as an island without others.'

*Koinonia* and *diakonia* define a person in the first place in his or her relationship to God in Christ through the work of the Spirit. A person's relationship to God will become clear from the way he or she lives and from his or her relationship to the other children of God (1 Jn 3:14–17) and to the world. The way Christians live should invite other people to become part of their *koinonia* with God (1 Jn 1). The common ground between *ubuntu*, *koinonia* and *diakonia* is that a person cannot think of him or herself as a being that is totally separate from the community and live selfishly. The Christian who is also part of the culture of *ubuntu* will be able to live this principle of *ubuntu* in the light of *koinonia* and *diakonia*. Christians and non-Christians will be able to find each other on the common

ground that we are all part of South Africa and that we should, from our different viewpoints, seek the unity of the community. The diversity of people in South Africa should be propagated as an asset that could enhance the wellbeing of everyone if every person or every group contributes their unique gifts for the good of all the others.

*Ubuntu*: 'The spirits of the deceased still form part of the community and care must be taken to not anger the spirits of the fathers. Adversity is considered the punishment for wrongdoing.'

According to the Bible there are no direct *koinonia*, *diakonia* or any other contact between the living and the deceased. But, remembering the holy lives of the deceased and following in their footsteps is part of the Christian faith (Heb 11; Allen 2010:539–543), as is thinking of the deceased children of God who are with him at the moment (Heb 12:23; Cockrill 2012:654–657). The angels of God are sent out by God to minister (διακονία) to the children of God (Heb 1:14). The only other spiritual beings that play a role are the devil and his angels; they have been conquered by God's children through Jesus Christ. The child of God has nothing to fear because of God's love. There is no punishment left for the child of God, because of Jesus' payment for their sins (Yarbrough 2008:250–254). There is no judgement except the judgement of God at the end of time. Even adversity flows from God's love to teach His children. Therefore, John can write:

So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. 17 By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the Day of Judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. 18 There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. (1 Jn 14:16–18, ESV)

This is an impossible terrain to find common ground between *koinonia*, *diakonia* and *ubuntu*, except if the one can influence the other. It will be good to talk to each other in South Africa about our different views. Misunderstanding each other is a real possibility when people act out of fear and others cannot understand a group's motivation. On the other hand, a person who acts from the certainty of God's love can seem as if he or she doesn't care about important matters. New Christians who grew up with the views of *ubuntu* will have to find a way to get rid of their fears and to make the total peace which lies in God's love, forgiveness and his total care and reign over everything, part of their lives.

*Ubuntu*: Power is given to one individual by the ancestors, therefore, it cannot be shared.

*Diakonia* and *koinonia*: Power is given by God. The leader has to seek his power in the Lord and His great might, therefore, in *koinonia* with God (Eph 6:10). *Diakonia* and power is a radical combination. Power is gained by giving up the right to be first and by becoming everyone's servant (Mt 20:26–28; Breed 2014b:3, 4). God's power was illustrated mightily when Jesus showed the depth of God's love by giving

5. Ludeke (2001:85, 86) shows that in the independent churches of South Africa *ubuntu* has been christianised and *koinonia* enculturated, but that the danger exists that they only share and give warmth without the depth of true *koinonia* in Christ.

6. See in this connection 1 Corinthians 12 and Du Plessis and Breed (2013).





away all power and allowing his enemies to crucify Him (Koester 2005:153), thereby conquering all other powers in the universe (Jn 12:31, 32). Power flows from the radical self-crucifying love in obedience to God, the sender of his *diakonoi*. The Christian does his or her *diakonia* in obedience to God. The power that flows from the *diakonia* comes from God (1 Cor 12:4–6; Breed 2014b:l, 7). God can do far more than anyone can think or pray (Eph 3:20). Power can also be described as power that comes from the *diakonia* of the Word of God. This power is available to everyone who is led by the Holy Spirit. Even a small child can use the Word and exercise God's power. The power of a leader resides in his *diakonia*, and in *koinonia* with Jesus, the Father and the Holy Spirit. The leader is not (may not) exercising power (1 Pt 5:1–4), he or she is serving the followers; God's blessing gives the power to his or her service and gives him or her honour amongst the subjects (Jn 12:26; Breed 2014b:5). This power is unlimited and cannot be preserved (guarded) by the leader for him- or herself except by serving in obedience to God.

Something of this nature of leadership is found in the *ubuntu* saying: *Kgosi ke kgosi ka batho* meaning 'the Sovereignty of the King derives from and belongs to its subjects' or 'the King owes his status, including all the powers associated with it, to the will of the people under him'. *Ubuntu* is sharing of power, meaning service of the leader to his people.

The difference between the philosophy of *ubuntu's* perception of power and that of the biblical *diakonia* is significant, and it would be difficult to work out an agreement between these two opposite perceptions. Something of an agreement lies in the obligation of the leader to serve the people.

## Conclusion

Some of the social values of *ubuntu* are shared by the New Testament concepts of *diakonia* and *koinonia*, but the centre of gravity, that holds a community together according to these different cultures or religions, differs radically. The centre of gravity in *ubuntu* is people, the living dead and the yet-to-be-born. Power is a limited entity and comes from the will of the people. Fear of punishment is a big motivating factor when it comes to not breaching *ubuntu*.

The centre (*koinos*) of gravity in *diakonia* and *koinonia* is God the Father through Jesus Christ by the work of the Spirit. Power comes from God only and is used in responsibility to God. Fear of punishment should play no role in the motivation of a leader; the fact that he or she is loved and empowered by God should rather motivate the leader to reign as a servant with boldness.

From a Christian perspective there are many connections with *ubuntu* that can be explored to refine the wonderful social values that are part of the culture of *ubuntu*. There are also some beliefs in *ubuntu* that are radically against the Christian faith.

Whilst the majority of the people in South Africa are either Christians or believe in the values of *ubuntu*, it would be worthwhile to explore the possibility of seeking corresponding values and formulate values that can be propagated as the values of the rainbow nation. Everyone can then consider and live out these values from their own perspective and faith.

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### Authors' contributions

K.S. (North-West University) wrote the first part of the article on *ubuntu*; G.B. (North-West University) wrote the last part on *koinonia* and *diakonia* and the comparison with *ubuntu*.

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