

IN SEARCH OF MEANING BETWEEN *UBUNTU* AND *INTO*: PERSPECTIVES ON PREACHING IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA¹

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Abstract

This paper attempts to define the somewhat elusive³ notion of Ubuntu, in terms of its openness towards the particularity, individuality and historicity of the other. In contrast to this, the phenomenon of Into is introduced, which basically means: a thing. It is argued that South Africa is presently experiencing a movement from Ubuntu (humanness) towards Into (treating fellow humans as things). The implications of these concepts for preaching in search of meaning in a post-apartheid South Africa are explored, and an Ubuntu model for meaningful preaching is proposed in terms of inter-facing, inter-forming, and inter-flow.

1. *UBUNTU*: AN AFRICAN WAY OF LIFE

The concept of *Ubuntu* has become well known all over the world as being typical of African and specifically South African culture.⁴ It is impossible to do justice to the richness of this concept within the limitations of this paper. It has been described as a way of life, a universal truth, an expression of human dignity, an underpinning of the concept of an open society, African Humanism, trust, helpfulness, respect, sharing, caring, community, unselfishness, etc. In short it means: *humanity*, or *humanness*. It stems from the belief that one is a human being through others – “I am because you are” (cf. Ramose 1999: 49 f.; Shutte 1993:46).

Etymologically speaking, the term *Ubuntu* comes from the Zulu and Sotho versions of a traditional African aphorism, often translated as “A person is a person through other persons”: *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu. Motho ke motho ka batho. Ubuntu* is a combination of *Ubu* and *ntu* – the latter being a common root in most Sub-Saharan

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³ W Mazamiza (1995: 18) claims that *Ubuntu* “defies all manner of definition because it is the very essence of being-in-the-world.” Punt (2004:88) ponders the same issue: “What is ubuntu? A set of values, a worldview, an ideology, or simply a humanist ideal born from the union of, on an experiential and even ontological level, frustrations, needs, and idealism?”

⁴ Actually one cannot speak of African culture in the singular. Africa is a vast continent, incorporating a wide variety of cultures and ethnic groups. Northern Africa differs totally from Southern Africa. The term “Africa” does not denote one homogenous group.

African languages, resulting in variations such as *shintu*, *muntu*, *Bantu*, *wuntu*, *kantu*, *buntu*, etc. *Ntu* as such simply means “human” (Van Binsbergen 2003: 428).

The abovementioned aphorism indeed articulates a basic respect and compassion for others. As such, it is both a factual description and a rule of conduct or social ethic, both *descriptive* and *prescriptive*. It does not only describe humanity as “being-with-others”, but also prescribes what the relational ethics of this “being-with-others” entail. It takes as point of departure the systemic inter-connectedness of a society, and often is defined in terms of its moral structure, ritual embodiment and ideological usage (cf. Louw 2002: 7, 8; Van Binsbergen 2003: 450 f.).

Ubuntu has its origins in pre-colonial African rural settings, which not only operated with the moral values of caring and compassion within community, but also acted out these values through certain ceremonies and rituals. These ceremonies and rituals in fact not only embodied morality, but also created identity. In the African context the reality of becoming a person through other persons is constituted through these ceremonies and specifically initiation rituals: “*Before being incorporated into the body of persons through this route, one is regarded merely as an ‘it’, i.e. not yet a person. Not all human beings are therefore persons*” (Louw: 2002: 8).

Although *Ubuntu* has to a certain extent lost its connection with pre-colonial rural origins (cf. Van Binsbergen 2003: 437 f.), it still is a popular notion in view of the restructuring of post-apartheid South Africa. It has seemingly found a wide spectrum of ideological, economical and political usages. The South African government’s White Paper on Welfare, for instance, leans heavily on the notion of *Ubuntu* when it talks about nation building, transformation and the reconstruction of our society:

Ubuntu is the principle of caring for each other’s well-being...and a spirit of mutual support...Each individual’s humanity is ideally expressed through his or her relationship with others and theirs in turn through a recognition of the individual’s humanity. *Ubuntu* means that the people are people through other people. *Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu*. It also acknowledged both the rights and responsibilities of every citizen in promoting individual and social well-being.⁵

⁵ Republic of South Africa Government Gazette (1996, February 2). *Government Welfare Paper on Welfare No. 16943*. Pretoria, South Africa, 18.

Indeed, *Ubuntu* has become a sort of buzzword: a Google search reveals some (very creative!) corporate and small business links: *Ubuntu* builders; *Ubuntu* communications, *Ubuntu* gymnasiums, *Ubuntu* taxis, *Ubuntu* hairdressers, and so forth. This superficialization, however, does not detract from the fact that, through our understanding of *Ubuntu*, we as Africans could probably also make a distinctively African contribution towards, and within, globalization (cf. Van Binsbergen 2003: 449 f.). It no longer functions on a merely parochial level, but can contribute towards the enrichment of humanity as a whole (Mandela 2005: 82). This sentiment is echoed in the famous quote by Kenneth Kaunda: “*Let the West have its technology and Asia its Mysticism! Africa’s gift to world culture must be in the realm of Human Relationships*” (1967: 22).

In the light of the topic of this paper, it should be stressed that *Ubuntu* is an expression of African epistemology par excellence: *truth, and therefore meaning, is found primarily in Ubuntu, that is, in communion with the other*. Obviously, any attempt to find meaning in Africa will have to take *Ubuntu* seriously.

Although *Ubuntu* is a somewhat elusive concept which could be explored within a variety of contexts, for example, philosophical, socio-political, economic, etc., I want to focus on the link between religion and *Ubuntu*, and specifically the search for meaning within a religious context, and the possible role that preaching could play in this search. *Ubuntu* or African Humanism is indeed resiliently religious – respecting the religiousness or religiosity of the religious other (76% of South Africans claim to be Christians, but all of Africa is permeated by deep-seated religious beliefs).

This search for meaning, also in a religious context, inevitably brings the *Ubuntu* understanding of agreement or *consensus* into play. African culture seems to have an almost infinite capacity for the pursuit of consensus and, in the process, also *reconciliation*. The African concept of *indaba* entails more than just a meeting: it is dialogue with a view to achieving consensus and ultimately reconciliation. In this *indaba* (which can often take a very long time!) everyone has the right to express an opinion, until they (we) can say: *simunye* (“we are one”). This, however, also has a dark side: *Ubuntu* can degenerate into an oppressive conformity and blind loyalty to the group or clan. Failure to conform might be met with harsh punitive measures. A lively debate towards attaining consensus could solidify into stifling conformity. But the challenge of

Ubuntu remains: to affirm unity and at the same time value and endorse diversity. Louw puts it poignantly:

Ubuntu as an effort to reach agreement or consensus should thus not be confused with outmoded and suspect cravings for (an oppressive) universal sameness, often associated with so-called teleological or ‘modernistic’ attempts at the final resolution of differences.... True Ubuntu takes plurality seriously. While it constitutes personhood through other persons, it appreciates the fact that ‘other persons’ are so called, precisely because we can ultimately never quite ‘stand in their shoes’ or completely ‘see through their eyes’. When the Ubuntuist reads ‘solidarity’ and ‘consensus’ s/he therefore also reads ‘alterity’, ‘autonomy’, and ‘co-operation’ (note: not ‘co-optation’) (2002:11)

In order to achieve the consensus of *Ubuntu*, you of course also need *dialogue* and *mutual exposure*, a genuine reciprocity in which you encounter the difference of the other’s humanness so as to inform and enrich our own. This *reciprocal space* is formed through a respect for the *particularity*, *individuality* and *historicity* of the other (Louw 2002:13 f.).

- The component of *particularity* entails that you accept and appreciate the other exactly as the other, not trying to alter, or manipulate, or recreate the other in your own image.⁶ This means that *Ubuntu* could also be translated as: “A human being is a human being *through the otherness* of other human beings.” This implies: if you try to alter or manipulate the otherness of the other, you yourself end up by being someone other than yourself. You have to *face* the other unreservedly in order to see your own face. *Ubuntu* is the art of interfacing, of finding meaning within the space of interfacing.
- The component of *individuality* differs from the Cartesian model. In the latter the individual can exist prior to, separately and independently from, the rest of society. Society is then only an elongation of a pre-existing entity. *Ubuntu* does not campaign for a form of collectivism either, which is only the bunching together of the above mentioned pre-existing entities. *Ubuntu* rather *defines* the

⁶ Cf. the definition of Louw (6,7): “I would like to define Ubuntu as an African or African inspired version of an effective decolonizing assessment of the other. That is, an assessment of the other which transcends absolutism without resorting to relativism.”

individual in terms of relationships. It represents a sort of *web of reciprocal relations* in which subject and object are indistinguishable. Therefore not: “I think, therefore I am”, but rather “I participate, therefore I am.” Or even: “I dance (with you), therefore I am” (cf. McGann 2002:19). We dance ourselves into existence, together. This is true of all human activities: eating, drinking, working. Indeed, in this understanding of *Ubuntu* we do not find the competitiveness that often characterizes the Western search for meaning, but rather *shosholozza* (“work as one”). In one-ness lies meaning. This web of reciprocal relations implies a paradigm shift “*from solitary to solidarity, from independence to interdependence, from individuality vis-à-vis community to individuality á la community*” (Louw 2002: 15). Does this mean the end of all individuality? No, it may sound paradoxical, but true *Ubuntu* strives to incorporate both relation and distance, both individuality and communality. Nelson Mandela has remarked that there is nothing wrong with an individual enriching himself or herself, as long as this enrichment is to the benefit of society – then you have achieved something that will be much appreciated.⁷ All of this implies that you as an individual are constantly being *formed* by the community, and the community by you. *Ubuntu* is the willingness to form and to be formed; the capacity of inter-forming within the space of interfacing.⁸

- But the reciprocal space of *Ubuntu* also recognizes the *historicity* of the other, in other words, accepting the fact that the other is in the process of becoming, and never a fixed entity that can be reduced to a static set of characteristics, behaviours or functions. The grammar of *Ubuntu* speaks of being and becoming, of self-realization *through* others, but also self-realization *of* others. Consensus therefore also means “flux” and “contingency”. In this sense knowledge and meaning in Africa are always in progression and linked to a concrete, cultural context. Therefore there can be no universalistic epistemological claim, as knowledge and meaning are found within a cultural relativistic-epistemological

⁷ In an SABC interview with Tim Modise.

⁸ Of course, one must not forget that the African paradigm in which *Ubuntu* operates is also hierarchical and patriarchal, and that the notion of *Ubuntu* could not prevent many incidents of ethnic conflict and even cleansing on our continent. *Ubuntu* should therefore not be romanticized (cf. comments below).

position. In Africa “ontology” and “epistemology” are essentially relational⁹ and communicative notions. Pobee describes the African’s ontology and epistemology as “communitarian” (1992:16). Meaning “flows”. *Ubuntu* implies openness to this inter-flow, and therefore to inter- forming, within the space of inter-facing. Of course, *Ubuntu* could also be, and has often been, romanticized or used to promote political and exclusivist positions that function as a sort of ostracizing and populist ideology. It is quite easy to climb onto the bandwagon of *Ubuntu*. Unfortunately it can be viewed and misused as a magic wand that must lubricate society as a type of *deus ex machina*, glossing over, or side-stepping real conflict (Van Binsbergen 2003: 450). It could serve as a useful, but premature, pacifier. Worst of all: it may be distorted, specifically also in the South African context, to legitimize a new form of “apartheid” or ethnocracy or pigmentocracy, in which culture or race or ethnicity draws new, or redraws old, boundaries between the diversity of people that constitute our society. Mdluli is quite vehement in his critique that *Ubuntu* is presently being abused in the service of political and ideological aspirations, when he states that “*this concept has been reclaimed by the African bureaucratic bourgeoisie to legitimize its own hegemony in the political struggles*” (1986: 60-77). But this goes directly against the grain of *Ubuntu*, as Van Binsbergen also reminds us:

Viewed as a moral and political exhortation and an expression of hope for a better future, Ubuntu... creates a moral community, admission to which is not necessarily limited by biological ancestry, nationality, or actual place of residence. To participate in this moral community, therefore, is not a matter of birthright in the narrower, parochial sense. If birthright comes in at all, it is the birthright of any member of the human species to express concern vis-à-vis the conditions under which her or his fellow humans must live, and to act on that basis. (2003: 435)

Our relatively peaceful political transition in 1994, viewed by many as a miracle, could be ascribed *inter alia* to the African sense of *Ubuntu*. This brought an end to the times when people were stripped of their dignity and had to use *ubulwane* (animal-like behaviour) to uphold the laws of apartheid. According to Maphisa, “*the transformation*

⁹ Cf. Punt (2004:89): “The communal aspect often pointed out in reference to ubuntu seems very important... In many endeavours to define and apply ubuntu, the corporate, collective or communal emphasis of African life is often ascribed to ubuntu.”

of an apartheid South Africa into a democracy is a rediscovery of ubuntu” (1994: 8). The spirit of *Ubuntu* has undoubtedly helped us, specifically in the sphere of *reconciliation* (Van Binsbergen 2003: 440). In short: without *Ubuntu*, there would probably be no “new South Africa”.

2. FROM UBUNTU TO INTO?

The opposite of *Ubuntu* could be called *Into*, which literally means ‘a thing’. We have already noted that certain initiation rituals embody the metamorphosis from being an “it” (not yet a person) into being a member of society, of being a person within humanity. The opposite is also true: once you become severed from the community, or distance yourself from the community, you no longer belong to humanity, and in a sense become a thing without humanness. Then you have a movement from *ntu* (the root word for human) into *Into*.

I want to argue here that South Africa is presently going through such a movement from *Ubu-ntu* into *Into*, in which people often treat one another not as human beings, but as things – knowing quite well that such an argument could be contentious and indeed one-sided.¹⁰

This phenomenon of treating fellow human beings as *Into* is of course nothing new: under apartheid different forms of *dehumanizing-into-Into* were practised and indeed officially legitimized. But certain phenomena in present-day South Africa could also be viewed from this perspective: the alarming crime statistics,¹¹ with some accounts of unspeakable brutality, and an average of 25,000 people being murdered per annum; the stigmatization flowing from HIV and AIDS;¹² the reality of poverty, in which poor,

¹⁰ It could even be construed as a typically Western construct or projection.

¹¹ One of the paradoxes of South Africa is that in spite of the political freedom gained through democracy, and in spite of increasing economic growth, violence and crime seem to be on the rise, or at least remain unacceptably high – even if statistics suggest a levelling out in terms of certain crime categories. According to the Crime Information Analysis Centre (CIAC) of the South African Police Service, the (reported) cases of murder were 25,965 per annum during 1994/1995, in comparison to 19,824 in 2003/2004. The (reported) cases of rape, however, increased from 44,751 in 1994/1995 to 52,733 in 2003/2004 – to mention only two categories of crime in South Africa.

¹² In 1998 Gugu Dlamini, an AIDS activist in Durban, was beaten to death by her neighbours after declaring that she was HIV positive on World AIDS Day – a death epitomizing the extreme consequence of the syndrome of silencing and stigmatization surrounding the pandemic.

homeless people are often still treated as less than human.¹³ It seems as if *Ubuntu* is being shattered and fragmented by, and into, *Into*.

An alarming number of recent incidents taking place in post-apartheid South African society could be cited that exemplify this movement into *Into*: a young (white) man, barely 18 years of age, walking into a squatter camp called *Skielik* and shooting indiscriminately, killing scores of (black) people, including a 3-month-old baby and her mother; a so-called “coloured” (brown) South African being refused entrance to his house in Khayelitsha (a predominantly black township); the Forum for Black Journalists chasing away white journalists who wanted to attend a meeting held with recently elected ANC President, Jacob Zuma; a shocking video being made and unashamedly screened by students in a previously white hostel at the University of the Free State, in which black workers are degraded in the worst way possible, and which closes by saying: *In the end this is what we think of “integration”*.

In recent weeks South Africa has been plagued by unprecedented and widespread incidents of Xenophobia. Up to 50 people have been murdered, and 25,000 people (some with refugee status, legal immigrants, illegal aliens, and even people with South African citizenship) have been forced to flee their homes and livelihoods. Many reasons for this extreme form of social ostracization have been offered: that it is a so-called “third force”

¹³ The problem is that South Africa at this stage not only does not have the capital or natural resources to satisfy everybody’s dreams about “a good life”, but also the stark reality that since 1994 wealth has not necessarily been redistributed amongst the South African population, but has been increasingly concentrated in the hands of a minority of people, including the so-called new black “elite” or “middle class”. In 2005 South Africa and Brazil shared the dubious honour of being the two countries with the largest gap between poor and rich – a fact that makes president Mbeki’s reference to “two nations within one South Africa”, namely a rich and a poor nation, understandable. In an address delivered in the National Assembly in Cape Town, 29 May 1998, when he was still the Deputy President of South Africa, he said: *“We therefore make bold to say that South Africa is a country of two nations. One of these nations is white, relatively prosperous, regardless of gender or geographic dispersal. It has ready access to a developed economic, physical, educational, communication and other infrastructure. This enables it to argue that, except for the persistence of gender discrimination against women, all members of this nation have the possibility to exercise their right to equal opportunity, the development opportunities to which the Constitution of ’93 committed our country. The second and larger nation of South Africa is black and poor, with the worst affected being women in the rural areas, the black rural population in general and the disabled. This nation lives under conditions of a grossly underdeveloped economic, physical, educational, communication and other infrastructure. It has virtually no possibility to exercise what in reality amounts to a theoretical right to equal opportunity, with that right being equal within this black nation only to the extent that it is equally incapable of realization. This reality of two nations, underwritten by the perpetuation of the racial, gender and spatial disparities born of a very long period of colonial and apartheid white minority domination, constitutes the material base which reinforces the notion that, indeed, we are not one nation, but two nations. And neither are we becoming one nation. Consequently, also, the objective of national reconciliation is not being realized.”*

at work, perhaps inspired by right wing ideology; or Inkatha (predominantly Zulu political party); lack of immigration policy and adequate border-control; criminal elements in society; perhaps the beginnings of ethnic cleansing; massive demonic possession; and most probably: underdevelopment and unemployment, resulting in a harsh struggle for economic survival. Whatever the case, it is an extraordinary and ironic turn of events, taking place in a country renowned for its dismantling of Apartheid, a period during which many freedom fighters found refuge in exactly the same countries whose people are now being forced to leave South Africa in buss-loads (Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Somalia, etc.), their homes being burnt down and their shops looted and pillaged.

Xenophobia is the exact opposite of Ubuntu; it is Ubuntu reversed in the most ghastly form thinkable. In Ubuntu we face one another; in Xenophobia we turn our faces from one another. But more than this: In Xenophobia the fear of the other becomes hatred for the other, and in the end, the ravaging of the other. Xenophobia cries out against the spirit of Ubuntu. It turns it on its head. It is incomprehensible in the light of our history. It is Into in action, on a massive and destructive scale.

According to Dr Fanie du Toit of the South African *Institute for Justice and Reconciliation*, these incidents painfully remind us of the fact that, in the light of our history, the potential for racism is still very much alive in our South African society and that it could surface in various forms at any given time.¹⁴ The fact that South Africa is going through a time of political uncertainty – especially in terms of the leadership of the ANC – causes competing people or groups who could be quite tolerant otherwise to turn against each other. A recent poll done by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation clearly shows that more people have lost their confidence in the ability of public bodies such as parliament, the police and the justice system to govern the country. One of the results of this “institutional glue” coming undone is the fact that racial tension seems to be flaring up.

According to Dr Zonke Majodina, the deputy chairperson of the *South African Human Rights Commission*, there indeed are numerous charges being filed with the Commission, coming from all levels of the South African society: higher education, journalism, the

¹⁴ In an SABC interview.

private sector, the farming community, the tourism industry and the justice department.¹⁵ Experiences of racism seem at present to be permeating the very fibre of our society and this challenges our young democracy in a major way. *It would seem as if we as South Africans are no longer willing to enter into the reciprocal space of Ubuntu, where we can face one another; where we can experience mutual formation; and where our ideological points of departure can be challenged within the flow of African epistemology.* Rather than facing, we turn away (from the poor, the stigmatized, etc); rather than forming and being formed, we retreat into enclaves of ethnicity, culture and language; rather than having our stringent ideologies being constantly deconstructed and humanized, we caricaturize the other – and in 25,000 cases per annum we obliterate them.

It seems as though people are no longer viewed as *people*, but as commodities, as irritating objects, as *things*. A chilling expression of this can be found in the art of Willie Bester, one of South Africa's most prominent protest artists. In one of his works, entitled *Who let the dogs out?*, he depicts¹⁶ an incident during which a police dog unit (six policemen) “used” three illegal immigrants for the purposes of dog training: the dogs were simply let loose on the unprotected immigrants in a space from which they could not escape. Even more appalling: one of the policemen took a video-clip of the whole incident, showing in explicit detail the mauling and wounding of the men. Bester incorporated this voyeuristic element into his artwork. One could say: the policemen turned their faces away from (the humanness) of the other, and the effect was the face that can be seen in Bester's depiction, the face of a human being who has been degraded into a *thing*:

¹⁵ In a public statement to journalists.

¹⁶ Making use of metal objects, welded together.



How should we understand these perversities taking place in our society, renowned for its spirit of *Ubuntu*? Perhaps we have underestimated the devastating impact of apartheid on this society, even up to now. Perhaps we did not bury racism deep enough – and now we see resurrections of it everywhere. Three hundred years of racism cannot be deleted within the span of a mere fourteen years. Perhaps we have even misused the notion of *Ubuntu*, also pursued by the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, as a premature pacifier, which has had the ultimate effect of creating a spirit of denial among us, as Van Binsbergen claims (2003: 451). Or as Jody Kollapen, the chairperson of the *South African Human Rights Commission*, hinted recently at a news conference in Johannesburg: perhaps the political transition of South Africa was too quick and too smooth, and perhaps even Nelson Mandela was too generous with the notion of

forgiveness during our time of transition in 1994! I must admit, I find this hard to swallow...

Whatever the case, I believe we need to revisit the basic truths of *Ubuntu*, for instance, the call for true dialogue and openness towards one another. If preaching is to find meaning that makes a difference in South Africa, it will have to contribute towards the restoration of *Ubuntu* as humanness, as humanity towards humans. It will have to raise a prophetic voice against all forms of *Into*. And in order to do this, it will have to revisit the hermeneutical womb of *Ubuntu*, the relational potential of the inter-connectedness of human beings, and the meaningful face of the other.

3. AN “*UBUNTU* MODEL” FOR INTER-MEANINGFUL PREACHING?

Preaching that takes the principles of *Ubuntu* into account will be challenged on different levels. In terms of *content* it will obviously have to tackle issues such as human dignity and reconciliation; and it will have to be prophetic in addressing societal ills (albeit in different form than during the days of apartheid, with preachers like Desmond Tutu, Beyers Naude and Allan Boesak). But it will also have to adapt to a different *methodology* in order to achieve preaching that makes a difference in post-apartheid South Africa, a methodology that indeed finds meaning within the paradigm of *Ubuntu*. In this paper I am limiting myself to some preliminary remarks on the latter. I believe that it is indeed not possible in the South African context to preach meaningfully on issues such as human dignity and reconciliation as counterparts of prevailing societal ills, without the abovementioned *Ubuntu* methodology or paradigm.¹⁷

Another delimitation that should be stated here concerns the role of the *biblical text* in preaching that strives to find meaning. Obviously, preaching operates *inter alia* on the basis of Scripture, with the belief that meaning is somehow¹⁸ found in dialogue with the texts of the Bible. In this contribution I am focusing on the *most appropriate space*¹⁹

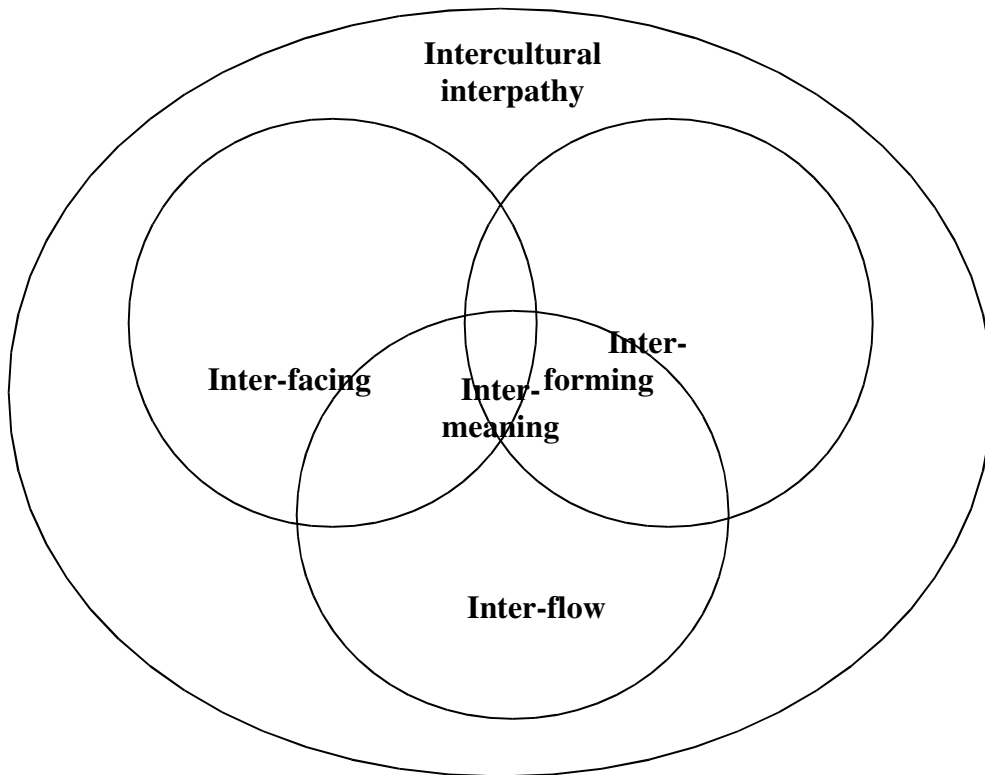
¹⁷ Strangely enough, I found no indigenous homiletical work done in this regard. What is offered here must therefore be seen as a preliminary and experimental hypothesis about the relationship between preaching and *Ubuntu*.

¹⁸ I am not entering the discussion here about where this meaning is supposed to be located: in the text, the readers, the hermeneutical encounter? For a detailed account in this regard, cf. Smit 1987: 7-104.

¹⁹ This space could and should, of course, also include *liturgy as a space where meaningful interaction takes place*; what is intended here, however, are spaces even preceding that, spaces for boundary-crossing dialogue and reciprocal enrichment, which should eventually lead to, amongst other things, worship services where meaning is discovered and celebrated in community.

within which any dialogue or encounter with the biblical text could take place, or as defined above: the hermeneutical womb of *Ubuntu*, which embodies the relational potential of meaningful inter-connectedness. It is exactly this relational potential of *Ubuntu* (as opposed to a philosophical or ideological understanding of it) that in my opinion offers the space for the development of a unique (South) African Homiletics.

The term *space* has already been used to describe the reality of *Ubuntu*. It is now necessary to refine this further, and in so doing also to introduce the notions of *interculturality* and *interpathy*. It could be said that *Ubuntu* represents a *space for intercultural interpathy*. The inner workings, or rather the constitutive (secondary) spaces of this primary space for intercultural interpathy, I describe as *inter-facing*, *inter-forming* and *inter-flow*. It is important to note that these secondary spaces can be distinguished, but not separated – they are intrinsically interwoven. Where they do intertwine, *inter-meaning* is constituted. Perhaps this *Ubuntu model for inter-meaningful preaching* could be graphically illustrated as follows:



The notion of *creative and respectful space* is not new to the South African scene. The *Institute for Justice and Reconciliation*, which has in the past five years undertaken several interventions in communities across the country, aimed at creating and fostering dialogue between former enemies and ordinary citizens who endeavour to build a common future after generations of violent conflict, has developed an approach that aims at creating so-called “safe spaces” (cf. Du Toit 2003: 212-217). These spaces originate in relationships where *honesty* is a sine quo non, but held in tension with *respect*. In other words: differences are put on the table and not hidden or masked, but these differences may never lead to disrespect of the other. On the other hand, *acknowledgment* of past and present transgressions is held in tension with *responsibility* – a deep confession coupled with the sincere desire to act and to transform that which was and still is wrong in our society. In this way, through mutual adherence to these four basic values, a framework for dialogue in a “safe space” can be created: honesty, but with respect; acknowledgment, but with responsibility (cf. also Cilliers 2007: 14)

This space for cultural openness could also be described in terms of *interculturality*.²⁰ This concept emerged towards the end of the twentieth century and denotes a set of processes through which relations between different cultures are constructed on a basis of equality and mutual respect. It focuses on the meaning of (Christian) spirituality within culture as well as the mutual exchange of paradigms between the two, a sharing with the intention to empower within a relationship of reciprocity.

The concept of interculturality could in turn be refined from the perspective of *interpathy*.²¹ The term denotes more than just sympathy. It is an inclusive compassion

²⁰ The following serve only as indication of the vast body of literature on this concept:

Bennett, Milton (1998). Overcoming the Golden Rule: Sympathy and Empathy. In: Ders.(Ed.), *Basic Concepts of Intercultural Communication. Selected Readings*. Yarmouth & London: Intercultural Press, pp.191-214; Bhabha, Homi K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge; Brislin, Richard W. & Yoshida, Tomoko (Eds.) (1994). *Improving Intercultural Interactions. Modules for Cross-Cultural Training Programs*. Thousand Oakes, London, New Delhi: Sage; Brocker, Manfred & Nau, Heino H. (Hrsg.) (1997). *Ethnozentrismus. Möglichkeiten und Grenzen des interkulturellen Dialog*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgemeinschaft; Cesana, Andreas (Hg) (1999). *Interkulturalität – Grundprobleme der Kulturbegegnung. Mainzer Universitätsgespräche. Sommersemester 1998*. Mainz, Trier: Gutenberg Universitätsverlag; Demorgon, Jacques (1999). *Interkulturelle Erkundungen. Möglichkeiten und Grenzen einer internationalen Pädagogik*. Europäische Bibliothek interkultureller Studien Bd. 4. Frankfurt am Main: Campus.

²¹ First used by David W. Augsburger in his *Pastoral Counseling Across Cultures*, Philadelphia, Westminster, 1986. According to him interpathy is "an intentional cognitive envisioning and affective experiencing of another's thoughts and feelings, even though the thoughts rise from another process of knowing, the values grow from another frame of moral reasoning, and the feelings spring from another

that is not only directed towards individuals, but also cultures and values. It operates on the basis of an unbiased, unconditional love, taking the ethics of love into systemic paradigms. Interpathy goes far beyond a condescending attitude of a “superior” culture sympathizing with an inferior one, or giving handouts on the grounds of misguided compassion. It does not romanticize either – viewing African culture, for instance, through a rosy tourist lens of tribal drums, wooden artefacts or colourful traditional dresses. Interpathy, as mode of interculturality, operates on the basis of mutual respect, openness to the other, reciprocal understanding, compassion and enrichment. It adheres to a *porous hermeneutics*, in which the supposed boundaries of epistemologies are revisited frequently and criss-crossed in a spirit of genuine teachability.

Within this space of intercultural interpathy, processes of inter-facing, inter-forming and inter-flow take place. I now briefly explore the homiletic potential of each of these processes.

3.1 Preaching as inter-facing

It would seem as if though many South Africans are still suffering from an *enclave mentality* and are at present indeed retreating into certain comfort, but also exclusive, zones of ethnicity, culture, language, etc. A sad example of this enclave mentality is the incapability of churches within the Reformed tradition to unite after decades of efforts to achieve this. Previously hopeful signs in this regard seem to be fading away – in spite of intense and perhaps even desperate attempts by the leadership on all sides.

Preachers in this context will have to be *embodied border-crossers*, not only moving out of their studies into the world(s) of the congregation, but also across cultural and ideological borders. If we hope to achieve meaningful, contextual preaching in post-apartheid South Africa, we will have to find, or create, spaces for facing and interfacing. Harry Sawyerr argues that (the creation of) community offers the best possible bridgehead “by which the Christian gospel could be effectively transmitted to the African peoples” (1987: 23). Perhaps “meaning” for us does not necessarily lie in the (re)discovery of some abstract or intellectual truth, but in recognizing the faces of our fellow South Africans, and in doing so also our own faces. Perhaps “meaning” goes hand

basis of assumptions.” (56)

in hand with such a border-crossing experience and not with a philosophical unravelling of “truth”.

I find a remarkable resemblance between the South African concept of “facing the other”, and the sterling work that John McClure has done in his homiletic expositions of “the round-table pulpit”, and “other-wise preaching”.²² I cannot do justice to the fullness of McClure’s thought within the limitations of this paper, but could easily identify with corresponding themes between what I am proposing here and what McClure advocates: the fact that “truth”, being proclaimed in a propositional and apodictic way by a “specialist individual” should be viewed with the utmost suspicion, as it could easily serve certain interpretative, ecclesiological and even destructive ideological purposes. We no longer need “lone rangers”, but the community as the primary hermeneutical space or agent for the gospel (Newbigin 1989: 222-223). There seem to be similarities between Emmanuel Levinas’s²³ understanding of the “other” (which has strongly influenced McClure), and *Ubuntu’s* insistence that we cannot do without one another. Truth, and therefore meaning, is multi-faceted; we could say: it quite literally has many faces. These faces are not ideal or fictitious, but those of real life people. Truth “happens”, also when people face one another. Or else it remains faceless and therefore meaningless.

3.2 Preaching as inter- forming

Facing the other in our search for meaning in South Africa is of paramount importance, but even here we should not underestimate the role that *power* still can play. Interfacing can easily become a power play – an interfacing with masks on, the masks of furthering one’s own agendas and guarding vested interests. One may face the other without in fact revealing one’s true face.

In contrast to this, interfacing must take place with the willingness for inter-forming, the willingness to be fundamentally changed in the process. Interfacing is not about manipulating the other towards your own image, it is not mere mirroring of one’s own

²² Cf. his books: *The Round-Table Pulpit. Where Leadership and Preaching meet*. Nashville: Abingdon Press (1995); *Other-wise Preaching. A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics*. St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press (2001).

²³ Works by Levinas include *Beyond Intentionality. Philosophy in France Today*. (ed A Montefiore) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1983; *Totality and Infinity* (trans A Lingis) Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press 1969; *The Levinas Reader: Emmanuel Levinas* (ed S Hand) Cambridge: Blackwell 1989, etc.

face, but of being open to be transformed in the encounter with the other. *Interfacing is not about cloning, but about kenosis*, about giving and losing yourself for the sake of the other and, in the process, also finding and discovering yourself.

Border-crossing in search of meaning in the South African context can be a risky, even outright dangerous affair. When we truly want to encounter the other, we have to enter the world(s) of the marginalized, that is, the spaces where the victims of the *Into syndrome* dwell. We can only achieve a meaningful understanding, and as preachers only preach meaningful sermons about human dignity, when we leave our comfort zones and barbed-wired security enclaves, and, in the spirit of *kenosis*, encounter the victimized and dehumanized other not only to transform *their* plight, but to be transformed *ourselves*.

From our South African experience, “meaning” is to be found in relationships, specifically also relationships with the seemingly “meaningless” members of society, the victimized and ostracized. “Meaning” lies in giving up and giving away, in the enrichment of forming and being formed, in inter-facing that implies inter-forming.

3.3 Preaching as inter-flow

In accordance with the African epistemology that underlines the contingency of meaning, however, every achieved “state of formation” will have to be critiqued ideologically. This we have learned the hard way. “*Meaning*” may never solidify into a monument. During the dark days of apartheid, this is exactly what happened: preaching (of those who sought to supply the “theological” sanction for apartheid) operated from a fixed and secure biblical “truth”. It stood above critique and took on the form of a dehumanizing myth that transformed history into nature, and contingency into stringency (cf. Cilliers 1994: 33).

Preaching in post-apartheid South Africa will have to demythologize whatever new, destructive myths may appear on the scene. This will have to be an ongoing process, a perpetual inter-flow, in which supposed fixed beliefs and notions on all sides of the South African spectrum can be scrutinized and held up to the light.

The biblical text has an important role to play in this scrutiny, but not only in the hands, and through the perspectives, of a select few or an exclusive clan. The *ecumenical church*, in the broadest sense of the word, also has an important role to play in this

regard. In 1994, the birth-year of our democracy, I wrote the following about *ecumenical hermeneutics*:

Within the community of the *una sancta catholica* there are enriching and controlling powers active like nowhere else. Here, we can continue to hear other voices, the voices of our brothers and sisters, their suffering under, and interpretation of reality, their despair and hope. Here our myths can be relativized, revealed as precisely what they are: human-made constructions for our own prosperity. Here, in the creative cooperation of many interpretation models, our unilateral fixations and omnipotent fantasies can be brought to light...Because, it is especially within the creative play of the ecumene that a hermeneutic of imagination can grow, where we can learn and see concretely in the lives of our brothers and sisters that Scripture does not provide simple answers to our existential, as well as socio-political, questions - but an arsenal of possibilities; that God's will is not locked up in the Bible, theology or in tradition, as in an archive of certainties, but that God's will, indeed, must be *sought*, namely in the community of believers with their divergent opinions. We need precisely an *alternative* to our opinion if we want to come closer to the truth (1994: 71-72).

This seems to be truer – more (inter-)meaningful – to me today than ever before.

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