



International Academy of Practical Theology (IAPT)
Practicing Ubuntu: Practical Theological Perspectives on **Injustice**, **Personhood** and **Human Dignity**

Call for Papers and Roundtable Discussions

PRACTICING UBUNTU: Practical Theological Perspectives on Injustice, Personhood and Human Dignity

International Academy of Practical Theology Pretoria, 16–20 July 2015

The twelfth IAPT biennial conference, the second one in South Africa, will be held from 16-20 July 2015 in Pretoria. This time we will not meet in the wine lands of the Western Cape Province as in 2001 (the conference was held in Stellenbosch), but in Gauteng Province, the economic heart and powerhouse of the country and sub-Saharan Africa.

VENUE

Pretoria, the administrative and diplomatic capital of South Africa, is one of the oldest cities in South Africa. Since 2000 it is part of the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, one of the largest municipalities in the country. Pretoria boasts a rich cultural heritage and is home to a number of museums, historic houses and heritage sites. The most famous site is the Union Buildings, a symbol of the troubled political history of this country and the transformation that took place since the inauguration at this venue of Nelson Mandela as the first president of a democratic South Africa on 10 May 1994. The impressive Voortrekker Monument and Freedom Park further testify to the cultural diversity and the divided histories of the people of South Africa. Pretoria is also the educational and research centre of South Africa, with an estimated 90% of all research and development in South Africa conducted here by institutions such as Armscor, the Medical Research Council, the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, the Human Sciences Research Council and educational institutions such as the University of South Africa, the University of Pretoria and the Tshwane University of Technology.¹ Pretoria is within easy reach of Johannesburg, the provincial capital, and one of the 50 largest metropolitan areas in the world.² A visit to Johannesburg offers the opportunity to see important places such as the Apartheid museum, Constitutional Hill and Soweto. OR Tambo International Airport, the largest and busiest

¹ <http://www.tshwane.gov.za/AboutTshwane/Pages/City-of-Tshwane-in-a-Nutshell.aspx>

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johannesburg>

airport in Africa, and Johannesburg are easily reachable from Pretoria with the new high-speed rail link, the *Gautrain*.³

CONFERENCE THEME

In view of the rich political and cultural heritage of Pretoria and the historical and contemporary legacy of injustice that has so powerfully shaped this context, we decided at the Toronto conference to focus on issues of injustice, personhood and human dignity. The political, cultural, social and economic histories of South Africa testify to the many injustices suffered and the numerous challenges to the personhood and human dignity of the peoples of this country. This theme is not only of historical significance. The immense poverty, unemployment, poor health conditions, war and violence – to mention only a few – are examples of unjust situations that continue to undermine the identities, personhood and human dignity of many people around the world. The aim of the conference is to reflect from a practical theological perspective on these issues of (in)justice, personhood and human dignity.

The South African context does not only provide a good context to explore the problems regarding injustice, personhood and human dignity. It also provides an opportunity to explore philosophies and worldviews rooted in the (South) African context that could help to address these problems. In this conference we will explore one such worldview or spirituality that is deeply rooted in the Southern African context, namely Ubuntu.

The notion of Ubuntu is difficult to define or translate. It gained popularity in the 1990s, especially due to the role that it played in the South African Truth and Reconciliation process. Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu often referred to the important role that Ubuntu played regarding forgiveness and reconciliation. His description of Ubuntu is therefore also widely used. In his book "*No future without forgiveness*", Tutu (1999:31) writes:

Ubuntu is very difficult to render into a Western language. It speaks of the very essence of being human. When we want to give high praise to someone we say, "*Yu, u nobuntu*"; "Hey, so-and-so has *ubuntu*." Then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say, "My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours." We belong in a bundle of life. We say, "A person is a person through other persons." It is not, "I think therefore I am." It says rather: "I am human because I belong. I participate, I share." A person with *ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are.⁴

The Ubuntu philosophy stresses the "relational self" and intersubjectivity, and can be described as a (southern) African view on personhood. It refers to the relational nature of being: I am because we are. This worldview features strongly in African traditional communities, and stands in sharp contrast to the very individualistic, consumer-oriented worldview that seem to dominate in many parts of the world. Furthermore, it is a worldview that stresses the interdependence of

³ <http://www.gautrain.co.za>

⁴ Tutu, D., 1999, *No future without forgiveness*, New York: Doubleday, p. 31.

humans and nature, and the living and the dead. Forster (2006:21) gives a very good description of the relation between Ubuntu, personhood and human dignity:

The question 'who am I?' (subjective) is intricately related to 'who you say that I am' (objective) and 'who we are together' (intersubjective). Instead of being a lone subject, or a quantifiable and containable object, we are all 'intersubjects', fundamentally interwoven into a common cosmic identity; human beings that are run through with sacred dignity. It is not just me, it is not just you, it is not just the material reality, neither is it just the spiritual reality; true reality is a sacred interweaving of all these things – true reality is beyond one single quantifiable truth, it is generous. True identity, in this sense, is a dynamic engagement and discovery of mutual identity and shared dignity....⁵

The Ubuntu philosophy is not without its critics. Some critics refer, in addition to the charge of vagueness, to the danger of a "romanticisation of an indigenous past".⁶ Mohale, in the same vein, critiques the use of the Ubuntu worldview in the recently adopted South African Heritage Transformation Charter: "Fairly early into the analysis of the texts, it became apparent that the Heritage Transformation Charter repeatedly used the philosophical concept of Ubuntu and nostalgic elements of an African community-based egalitarian society towards recommendations for the resolution of inequalities in the heritage sector as well as the wider South African society".⁷ Others point out that the Ubuntu philosophy favours a form of collectivism with the accompanying negative consequences for the individual: "In short, although it articulates such important values as respect, human dignity and compassion, the Ubuntu desire for consensus also has a potential dark side in terms of which it demands an oppressive conformity and loyalty to the group".⁸ Praeg also reminds us that we have to distinguish between the *discourse* on Ubuntu and the *work* of Ubuntu.⁹ A practical theological reflection on our conference theme has to account for both these aspects.

Against this background many questions arise:

- What is the possible contribution of theology in general, and practical theology in particular, regarding personhood and human dignity?

⁵ Forster, D.A., 2010, A generous ontology: Identity as a process of intersubjective discovery – An African theological contribution, *HTS Theologies Studies / Theological Studies* 66, doi:10.4102/hts.v66i1.731.

⁶ Louw, D., 2010, Power sharing and the challenge of ubuntu ethics. Paper presented at the Forum for Religious Dialogue Symposium of the Research Institute for Theology and Religion held at the University of South Africa, Pretoria, 26-27 March 2009. <http://uir.unisa.ac.za/handle/10500/4316>

⁷ Mohale, G., 2013, What does Ubuntu solve? Thoughts on the rhetoric used in the making of the Heritage Transformation Charter, *Social Dynamics* 39(3), 481–495, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02533952.2013.850813>.

⁸ Louw, D., 1998, Ubuntu: An African assessment of the religious other. Paper presented at the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy, in Boston, Massachusetts from August 10-15, 1998. <http://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Afri/AfriLouw.htm>

⁹ Praeg, L., 2008, 'An answer to the question: What is [ubuntu]?', *South African Journal of Philosophy* 27(4), 367-385. See also Meylahn, J.A., 2010, Poetically Africa dwells: A dialogue between Heidegger's understanding of language as the house of Being and African Being-with (*ubuntu*) as a possible paradigm for postfoundational practical theology in Africa, *Verbum et Ecclesia* 31(1), Art. #381, 9 pages. DOI: 10.4102/ve.v31i1.381.

- What is the relation between (Christian) theological and secular interpretations of these notions? How do we bring our particular understanding of these concepts in the public sphere?
- What does it mean to practice Ubuntu in the ecclesial context?
- How does Ubuntu challenge our practical theological anthropologies?
- How do we engage with secular notions of human dignity and personhood in the public sphere?
- What are the implications of an anthropocentric approach to justice, personhood and human dignity regarding ecological justice?
- What is the relation between culture and theology? How do we relate the African worldview of Ubuntu with our westernised theological anthropologies?

The theme opens many opportunities for descriptive, interpretative and normative research. It challenges us as practical theologians to reflect critically on the theory and practice of the restoration of human dignity and the search for justice and reconciliation in South Africa, Africa and the world in the light of the (Southern) African notion of Ubuntu.

PLENARY SESSIONS

We invited three prominent speakers to address aspects of our conference theme in the three plenary sessions. We also invited a respondent for each of the plenary speakers.

Plenary session 1: Practising Ubuntu

Prof Raymond Simangaliso Khumalo (University of Kwazulu-Natal).

Respondent: Prof Puleng LenkaBula (UNISA)



R. Simangaliso Kumalo is Associate Professor of Religion and Governance at the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics, University of KwaZulu-Natal. He is the Director for Research and Postgraduate Studies and the Director of the UJamaa Centre for Community Development and Research in the same School. He holds a PhD in Theology. He is also the founding Director of the John Langalibalele Dube Annual Lectures at UKZN. He teaches courses in Practical Theology, Political Theology and South African Social History at the same institution. Prof Kumalo is a regular commentator both

on radio and television on issues around religion and politics. He is a respected academic who has presented papers in over 20 international conferences. He has authored 4 books: *From Forests to Deserts, Models of Ministry in Communities of the Poor; Methodist with a white history and a black future* (2009); *Pastor and Politician: Essays on the life and Legacy of John Dube, the first President of the ANC* (2012); and *Religion and Politics in Swaziland*. He is an author of over forty academic articles in journals and books and an ordained minister of Religion.

Plenary session 2: Injustice and human dignity

Prof Pamela Couture Emmanuel College, Victoria University, University of Toronto, Canada).

Respondent: Prof Emmanuel Lartey (Candler School of Theology, Emory University, USA)



Pamela D. Couture is the Jane and Geoffrey Martin Chair in Church and Community at Emmanuel College of Victoria University in the University of Toronto. She is the author of three books: *Blessed Are the Poor? Women's Poverty, Family Policy and Practical Theology* (Abingdon Press, 1991); *Seeing Children, Seeing God: A Practical Theology of Children and Poverty* (Abingdon Press, 2000) and *Child Poverty: Love, Justice and Social Responsibility* (Chalice Press, 2007). Since 2007 she has been researching local religious peacebuilding among the Luba people in North Katanga, Democratic Republic of Congo and is completing a manuscript written in the genre of creative non-fiction. She will draw upon this research for her presentation on human dignity and injustice.

Plenary session 3: "Practicing Ubuntu": God, Morality, and Personhood: a Bottom-Up Approach?

Prof Wentzel van Huyssteen (James I. McCord Professor of Theology and Science Emeritus, Princeton Theological Seminary)

Respondent: Prof Friedrich Schweitzer (University of Tübingen, Germany).



Prof Wentzel van Huyssteen recently retired as the James I. McCord Professor of Theology and Science, Princeton Theological Seminary. He was the first appointee in this chair and served in this position for 26 years. He received numerous awards for his groundbreaking work in the field of Theology and Science. He published on a wide range of topics in his field. Some of the more important publications concerning the theme of our conference are: *The Shaping of Rationality: Toward Interdisciplinarity in Theology and Science*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999;

Alone in the World? Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006. [The Gifford Lectures]; "What Makes us Human? The Interdisciplinary Challenge to Theological Anthropology and Christology" in *Toronto Journal of Theology* 26/2, 2010, 143-160; "When Were We Persons? Why Hominid Evolution holds the Key to Embodied Personhood", in *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie* 52, 329-349, 2010; "Post-Foundationalism and Human Uniqueness: A Reply to Responses" in *Toronto Journal of Theology* 27/1, 2011, 73-86; "The Historical Self: Memory and Religion at Çatalhöyük," in Ian Hodder (ed.), *Vital Matters: Religion and Change at Çatalhöyük* (forthcoming 2013, Cambridge University Press); "Should Theology take Evolutionary Ethics Seriously? A Conversation with Hannah Arendt and Maxine Sheets-Johnstone," in Len Hansen, Nico Koopman, Robert Vosloo (Eds.), *Living Theology: Essays presented to Dirk J. Smit on his Sixtieth Birthday* (Bible Media: Wellington, South Africa, 2011); "Construction and Constraint: What do the Laws of Nature teach us about Moral Laws?", in Michael Welker and Gregor Etzel Müller (Eds.), *Concepts of Law in the Sciences, Legal Studies, and Theology* (Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, Germany, 2013).

CONFERENCE PAPERS AND ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS

IAPT invites its members to propose a contribution to this biennial conference. We think our conference should showcase not only important content, but also presentation modes that are more effective than the traditional reading of written papers. We ask proposals in the following format:

Individual research papers (single or joint authors).

This format entails a 45 minute time slot. We encourage you strongly to use presentation styles conducive of interaction and discussion. Rather than reading your entire paper, please focus on the mutual exchange of ideas. We advise to limit the presentation to 20 minutes and to leave 25 minutes for discussion. If you have a proposal for this option, please submit the title and abstract. We specifically invite papers exploring the many and rich dimensions of our main theme.

There are currently 30 presentation slots (5 X 2 X 3). But adjustments can and will be made depending of the number of proposals. We'll see with the outcome of the call for papers.

Roundtable discussions

The Executive has approved the proposal of the local hosting committee that we set aside two roundtable discussions on "Approaches to Practical Theology". We understand approaches as comprehensive frameworks for ordering Practical Theology, as stated in the description of the Academy in the By-Laws: "...the Academy is interested in investigating and developing comprehensive frameworks for ordering practical theology itself" ([By-Laws](#) II.A). These comprehensive frameworks entail different (but also sometimes overlapping) constellations of theological, ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions. As all of us know this issue was central in the purpose why the Academy was founded. We are about to ask four scholars to participate (15 minutes each) and with ample time for discussions. The four participants will represent the current diversity among Practical Theologians as to methodological approaches. The names will be made known as soon as they have formally accepted the invitation.

As decided by the IAPT-membership, a publication on the conference theme is once again planned, including a number of chapters based on papers presented at the conference. Papers closely linked to the conference theme may be included in the volume. This conference especially invites papers related to the main theme.

We do however know that important research by members on other matters needs to come to the table. Members are invited to submit such research. Additional themes that are thought of are:

- Practical Theological Methodology
- Practical Theological Training and ministry
- New Developments in Practical Theology
- Practical Theology and Liberation Practices
- Current research within your own field(s)

Guidelines for paper submissions:

- Member presentations only;
- One presentation per member;
- Presentations fitting in the general framework as outlined above;
- New material only; new developments and papers that have not been read already at another conference.

On behalf of the Hosting Committee and the Executive I kindly invite you to consider submitting a paper for our conference.

I kindly ask that you submit a 150-word abstract by end November 2014. We will try our best to get back to you by end January 2015. This should give you ample time to apply for research money at your Institution. You can submit your proposal through our website at <http://www.ia-pt.org/2015-conference/abstract-submission/> or you can send it directly to my email address: malannelup@gmail.com

More detail on registration fees and accommodation will follow soon.

We hope to see you in Pretoria in 2015!



Malan Nel (Prof)
Local Hosting Committee
IAPT

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