

## **African perceptions of childhood and its effect on Eucharistic practices that exclude Children**

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### **Background**

This paper is an attempt to challenge the current practice in most Lutheran churches in Southern Africa where baptised but unconfirmed children are excluded from the Holy Communion table.<sup>1</sup> That children in most Lutheran churches in Southern African are not allowed to partake at the holy table is not congruent with the Lutheran Confessions anchored on unmerited acceptance and also an indictment on African Inculturation and contextual hermeneutics. In this paper an attempt is made to (a) critically point to the African cultural construction of personhood as one major reason behind this practice; (b) To anchor this discussion within the Christian tradition especially as it relates to nascent church's representation of Jesus in the gospels. The Gospel according to Matthews is used more extensively for its dependence on Mark and its use of Q material, and (c) demonstrate how the African conceptions of personhood could be an aid and a hindrance in constructing an inclusive theology, in particular Eucharistic theology (d) raise some questions for further discussion.

### **How this was brought to my awareness**

Let me begin with a story I was told by my seminary Missiology teacher: A Lutheran minister from a German Lutheran church came to visit a certain Lutheran congregation in South Africa. The South African minister of this particular church was trying by all means to impress the German visitor by following the liturgy meticulously. But the German visitor was not impressed. He asked the South African minister after the service: "Why are you using this old and boring liturgy? I heard that you have a lively African service here." To this the minister replied, "We must use our liturgy from Germany and be faithful to it." To this the German visit responded, "But we are no longer using that liturgy even though it came from us". To this the South African ministered looking annoyed responded, "Why didn't you tell us that you had changed it?" This is characteristics of many African churches in relationship to how they understand their mandate and call to the local context and their relationship to the missionary tradition they still hold dearly to. One such practice is the exclusion of children from Holy Communion. This is not to say that there are no Lutheran churches in the West that do not open the communion table for children, but in most

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<sup>1</sup> The conclusion is drawn from experience in the Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe and the Lutheran churches in South Africa. I also verified my facts with selected Bishops in South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe, and Nigeria and the leadership of the small Lutheran church in Zambia. The overall situation in Southern Africa can be verified through the Lutheran Communion in Southern Africa. Though this has not been verified, it seems to be the case through out the whole of the African continent. There are exceptions though. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in South Africa N-T is a bit flexible, allowing children to participate with parents in Holy Communion. But also, some congregations still seem to say that the issue is not resolved. From the church's document on Holy Communion posted on their website, this is an issue still under discussion. My information on the churches under discussion was obtained from interviews with ELCSA Bishops L. Sibiyi, P. P. Buthelezi (2008) and the bishop Edward Ishaya of LCCN, Yola Diocese in Nigeria on 10 March 2009.

churches, especially in Southern Africa, it is common that baptised children can not partake in Holy Communion. If one tries to check out the reasons for this practice, and many other practices for that matter, the answer will be that the children must be confirmed first. If one continues to probe why they must be confirmed first, the answer given is that this is how it has been in the past when they received the church from the missionaries. There is usually no proper theology to buttress such practices. Actually in other congregations, in place of Holy Communion children are given sweets as a substitute while in other congregations they only receive a blessing with the laying on of hands. When I asked my daughter (seven years old) why they were given sweets during Holy Communion, she said to me, “because you have your own food for adults.”

While a theological argument could be pursued<sup>2</sup> to address this deficiency, in my view the real issue central, not only of the absence of children at the table, but also all the abuses of children prevalent in Africa today, is the uncritical construction of personhood in Africa. While the communitarian view prevails in how Africans understand the African person and how they want to be understood by others, this view is insufficient in describing the African person. The African personhood is a hierarchical construct which has seen the marginalisation of those people lowest in the hierarchy, as will be shown below.

### Conception of personhood in Africa

Construction of personhood<sup>3</sup> is one cultural indicator as to how a people understand themselves in terms of their internal interaction, roles, responsibilities, privileges and how they relate with outsiders. It is no wonder that African philosophers and their Western missionary ethnographers before them have been interested in the analysis of the African personhood conception as an idea for some time now (Trimier 2003:174). It is largely agreed among these thinkers that the notion of “personhood” or “being a person” in African thought is an acquired hierarchical “status that is dependent upon people’s relationship to their community” (Bell 2002: 61). It is such hierarchy of status, I will argue, that poses challenges in the process of constructing African theologies which take children seriously. It is not only children who have fallen victim to this hierarchical construction of personhood. Women were generally marginalised in the early phases of African theology project as demonstrated by recent responses from African women theologians. With the emergence of colonialism, black people were also marginalised because another kind of hierarchical personhood construction was emerging.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper I seek to investigate how the construction and conception of the personhood in African cultures, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, has influenced the

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<sup>2</sup> I acknowledge Bishop Dr M. D. Biyela who made his historical and theological presentation on the subject at the ELCSA church council in 2008.

<sup>3</sup> The construction and conception of personhood in African thought is an ongoing debate currently as demonstrated by the dominant ‘moral personhood’ (Ikuenobe 2006; Coetzee (2000)). This paper will not necessarily reject this construction, but summarise and use it to show how this construction disadvantages persons at the lower level of this construction.

<sup>4</sup> It must be noted here that when the white people arrived in Africa, for example in Lobengula’s Bulawayo, they were considered lowest in the hierarchy of persons. They only attained a superior position because of their exploits and conquest.

shaping of theology as it relates to children. It is not assumed here that the African, even the Sub-Saharan Africa culture is homogenous. It is however true that there are many areas of cultural continuities in the African continent that could be useful in the analysis of particular aspects of culture in one part. Where necessary therefore, other parts of the African continent will be used in this discussion. I also intend to show in this paper that this hierarchical personhood construction did not necessarily go unchallenged even in a seemingly rigid cultural setup. There are traditional ways in which those in the lower steps of this ladder would try to assert their significance. Of course such struggles for the reconfiguration of the African person becomes more formalised through the works of the academics, thinkers and other 'enlightened' members of the African continent. This paper will particularly focus on the inadequacy of a theology on children in practices in the Lutheran churches in Southern Africa. Before that though, the dominant African personhood construction is explained.

### Community and nature<sup>5</sup>

Even though many aspects of 'community and wholeness' of life that characterized the older African traditional outlook is waning and in a "process of dissolution", this view of reality and the African person still holds sway in many African communities (Oduyoye 2001:33; Hermlink 1959:350). The most dominant construction of the person from this perspective is that which is based on the individual's relationship with the community. In this construction the "notions of consciousness begin with a holistic understanding of the human condition" as articulated in these three categories:

The spiritual nature of human beings

The interconnectedness of all things

Oneness of mind, body, and spirit (Moodley and West 2005:212)

Usually represented in the familiar African adage that '*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*'—(a person is a person because of other people), this construction sees no individual but individual only in relationship to the whole community and the nature around (Moodley and West 2005:213). According to John Mbiti, the prominent proponent of the communitarian ethos:

In traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes his existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. He is simply part of the whole. The community must therefore make, create, or produce the individual; for the individual depends on the corporate group.... Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: "I am, because we are; and since we are therefore I am". This is the cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man" (Mbiti 1969:108-109).

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<sup>5</sup> I do not see any major distinction of personhood construction in the "Force thesis" (Temples), "communalism" (Mbiti), and "Shadow thesis" (Kagame) as suggested by Kaphagawani (1998:170). I see community between people and nature as central to all these positions. Moreover Kaphagawani himself admits that Mbiti and Kagame follow Temples in their communitarian thesis (1998:172).

It is from this perspective of community that an individual becomes a person. As put by Mkhize and others, “apart from” community “personhood is almost inconceivable” (Mkhize *et al* 2004:49). In other words, this communitarian life guarantees one’s attainment of personhood.

Sundermeier sees this understanding developing from the various myths of origins that see particular communities as originating from the same source (1998:17-18). So for example, the Zulu myth would see all Zulu people as emerging from a single “reed” or *Uhlanga* therefore belonging to the “Uhlanga collective” (1998:18). The African “communitarian ethos” thus determines the basic understanding of the person. Other extreme versions of this understanding say that individualism “and self-seeking [are] ruled out...The personal pronoun ‘I’ [is] used very rarely in public assemblies. The spirit of collectivism [is] (so) much ingrained in the” minds of the African people (Kenyatta in Gyekye 2002:298).

In this understanding of the person, there is also interdependence and harmony where “people, animals, and environment exchange their strength, and are in relationship of osmosis” (Sundermeier 1998:18; Oduyoye 2001:33). The natural world is seen here as the ‘extension’ of the African self (Harding 1998:368). In this “Africa world view, there is no gap between the self and the phenomenal world. One is simply an extension of the other” (Harding 1998:363). Community is hence not only between humans but also between humans and the nature in which they live. Citing Dixon, Harding says that in the African worldview, there is;

a narrowing of perceived conceptual distance between the observer and the observed. The observed is perceived to be placed so close to the individual that it obscures what lies beyond it, and so that the observer cannot escape responding to it. The individual also appears to view the “field” as itself responding to him; i.e., although it may be completely objective and inanimate to others, because it demands response it is accorded a kind of life of its own (Harding 1998:363).

According to Parrinder, the “material and spiritual are intertwined, the former as a vehicle of the latter” (1968:27). Harding concludes that once the relationship between the person and nature is disturbed, then the wellbeing of the person is also disturbed. So this creates a balance which must be maintained since any “disequilibrium may result in troubles such as human illness, drought, or social disruption” (1998:363). Humans must find ways of tapping into the potency of the nature which they are part of. When people interact with the spirit world in this understanding, they are not trying to bridge the gap between “man and nature” but to firmly connect with the vitality of this nature to which they have an ongoing relationship. This “universe is not static, inanimate, or “dead”; it is dynamic, animate, living, and powerful universe” (1998:363).

The assumption of such a conception of the person in his or her community with other persons, living and dead, and the relationship with nature is not always harmonious. Of course the African is not always sharing in the “communal values, collective good” and the individual is not always part of the homogenous whole. Even if this was the case, it has serious implications on how such cultural perception can influence theological views on of children who are part of this whole albeit playing a lesser role as humans. The reason is that while this communitarian ethos looks attractive in comparison to generalised Western individualism, the community is not comprised by equal participation of the willing. The community does not necessarily take individual needs as central but the identity of the community as vital. So individuals can be sacrificed for the sake of the community. As in the

animated movie produced by DreamWorks and directed by Eric Darnell and Tim Johnson, *Antz* (1998), what matters is the “colony”. In such community one can find many adults who can afford to be ‘deviant’ and can survive it. But in such a community life, children are insignificant except in that their presence assures the community of its continuity. This position is reinforced by the fact that personhood is not attained at birth, but is accorded by community if one is deemed worth. This I consider to be the weakness of the African culture’s conception of personhood, detrimental to the construction of theologies that are sensitive to the needs of children and other marginalised people in the community.

### **Who said that Africans are communal?**

Many African scholars pride themselves in this communal nature of the person, as they naturally understand it as more representative of the Christian faith in comparison to the individualistic person of the West. They however are rarely aware that this designation did not start with them. There is enough evidence to show that early ethnography (1850-1900) which largely focused on southern and eastern African peoples was dependent upon and shaped by “European concepts of morality and identity on the one hand, and the market for ideas on the other. Ethnography was first written chiefly by missionaries who lived in the colonial periphery” (Thornton 1983:502). This construal of the African person as communal is in effect a Western construction of something opposite to the Western self which has now been adopted by Africans as they reclaimed ‘African’ who had been despised by the West especially during the colonial and Western missionary days. One can note for example that the work of a number of Western ethnographers on African personhood construction was based on their self understanding as Westerners.

### **Placide Temples (1906–1977)**

Temples, a Belgian missionary in the then Belgian Congo from 1933, saw “radical conceptual difference between Africans and non-Africans on the essential nature of beings and entities in general and human beings in particular” (Kaphagawani 1998:170). Temples noted that while Westerners on the one hand “hold a static conception of ‘being’”, Africans on the other hand have a ‘dynamic’ conception of being (Temples 1959:47, 51).

### **Geoffrey Parrinder (1910-2005)**

Parrinder, a British Methodist missionary in Benin from 1933, would use his Western categories as follows, “there is no sharp dividing-line between sacred and secular such as is usually assumed in Europe” (1968:27).

### **Theo Sundermeier (),**

Sundermeier was a Germany Lutheran Scholar who taught theology at Umphumulo Lutheran Seminary<sup>6</sup> from 1971 to 1975. He begins his discussion on the African person by saying “For the Westerner, life means individuality” as contrasted to the African life which is

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<sup>6</sup> The idea has its early roots in German philosophers like Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) who saw the other as the representation of ‘self-consciousnesses’ especially in his analysis of the ontological subordination of women to men (Scarth 2004).

communal (1998:17).<sup>7</sup> These Western thinkers did use their own background to reflect on the African person.

### Harold Turner ()

Harold Turner was one of the influential scholars on African conceptions of the self. He described religion in Africa as primal (1977). In other words, it was the earlier version of what was now the religion in the Western world. This primal religion had six features, namely:

A “sense of kinship with nature, in which animals and plants, no less than human beings, had ‘their own spiritual existence and place in the universe’ as interdependent parts of a whole” (Bediako 1995:93). As such this physical nature could “enter into a natural totemic spiritual relationship with human beings or become tutelary and guardian spirits’ whilst the environment itself is used realistically and unsentimentally but with profound respect and reverence and without exploitation” (Bediako 1995:93-94; see Temples 1959:46).

That “man is finite, weak and impure or sinful and stands in need of a power not his own” (Bediako 1995:94).

That “man is not alone in the universe, for there is a spiritual world of powers or beings more powerful and ultimate than himself” (Bediako 1995:94).

That “man can enter into relationship with the benevolent spirit-world and so share in its powers and blessings and receive protection from evil forces by these transcendent helpers” (Bediako 1995:94).

The reality of the after life and the “important place of the ancestors or the ‘living dead’” who remain “united in affection and in mutual obligations with the ‘living living’” (Bediako 1995:94).

That “man lives ‘in a sacramental universe where there is no sharp dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual. Accordingly, the ‘physical’ acts as vehicle for ‘spiritual’ power ‘whilst the physical realm is held to be patterned on the model of the spiritual world beyond...’”. There is “one set of powers, principles and patterns” that runs “through all things on earth and in the heavens and welds them into a unified cosmic system” (Bediako 1995:95).

For Bediako these features were relevant in the appropriation of Christianity in Africa since Christianity was originally a primal religion (Bediako 1995:95, 99). In other words, Bediako saw Turner as affirming African culture. However, Bediako, following Kagame and Mulago, did not realise that if at the center of the African worldview is “divine-human encounter” (Bediako 1995:100-101) those who are at the center of such an encounter have more social value, hence high up in the hierarchy of personhood construction.

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<sup>7</sup> Umphumulo was at this period the think tank of Black and African Theology, according to Sundermeier ([http://www.accessmylibrary.com/coms2/summary\\_0286-33401063\\_ITM](http://www.accessmylibrary.com/coms2/summary_0286-33401063_ITM) accessed on 13 March 2009).

This process of 'othering' the African differentiating it from the Western was of course not an innocent or objective process. This process of defining the 'other' in terms of the self or 'othering' (Edward Said) or 'worlding' (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak) was a process of alienation (see Bloom 1999:224). So the Western self would understand itself as individualistic and the 'other', i.e. the African, as communal. The African was here seen as 'exotic' and hence 'fun' to observe. This is not necessarily to imply that the African person did not understand him or herself communally. The African person was more than communal. As African thinkers continued to engage nostalgically with the communitarian self identity, other undesirable characteristics started to reveal themselves.

Many African thinkers adopted the construction of African personhood that had been proposed by Temples, Parrinder, Turner, Sundermeier, and many other Western missionary ethnographers who stayed in Africa and tried to make sense of this African who was different from themselves. Placid Temples (1959) is known to have had very strong following in eminent African theologians and philosophers like John Mbiti and Alexis Kagame. Actually when Mbiti says "We are therefore I am" he is immersed in direct conversation with Cartesian Cogito ergo sum argument by trying to underscore the "extent to which communal life is esteemed in Africa" as opposed to the individualism of the West (see Kaphagawani 1998:173). Desmond Tutu, Geoffrey Parrinder's student, did not believe that black South African Christians will forgive their oppressors simply because they were faithful to their faith. He thought that they would dig from their African communitarian philosophy of *Ubuntu* (Graybill 2002:32). So Tutu could conclude that those people living in *Ubuntu* were "more willing to make excuses for others" (Graybill 2002:32). Tutu was not being simply creative by drawing from his African resources, but was describing the African person the *Ubuntu* way as had been done by his teacher Parrinder who had described the African person this same way twenty years before. This was not necessarily a description of what the African person was, but what the African person was considered to be in comparison to his or her western counterpart.

### **Awareness of the slanted conceptions of personhood in African: Gender**

Other Africans, especially female theologians were growing uncomfortable with this communitarian construction which they felt did not represent their experiences. The early African feminists had clear insight into how the colonial and missionary representation of the African person provided African men with language to perpetuate a male dominated construction of personhood in Africa as opposed to the community of equals these males preached (Cornwall 2005:2). African felt that women were represented as "something of a demarcation line between being human and animal" in this construction of personhood in Africa (Beoku-Betts 2005:24). So while the colonial representation of the African person was opposed by African male scholars, the African males adopted a language of community that concealed the bias of such a representation against women. Women saw that males were first on top in the hierarchy of persons and females at the lowest level of this ranking system. So it is common to hear that,

Woman is fundamentally manacled by the legacy of cultural domination and thralldom. Viewed essentially as a mere object, woman is grossly marginalised by a patriarchal culture which assigns her the "sacred and vital" role of wife and mother in the domestic sphere (Opara in Eboh 1998:333).

In this understanding, the African feminine person saw herself as socially marginalised and oppressed. This oppression was seen to be operative in the girl child who was socialised to grow up into the role of submission to her male counterpart (Eboh 1998:334). It was the experience of African women that they had been allotted their particular spaces of marginalisation. In a typical Zulu family meal, the father would sit alone at the table while the woman would sit with children on the floor. The African man could have many wives while the African woman was expected to be faithful to her one and only husband. This experience made women to find the communitarian construction of the African person problematic.

Among the other issues African women were beginning to raise concerning their culture were concerns about the female body. For example, both feminist scholars and activist from Africa and the West<sup>8</sup> began raise questions concerning female genital mutilation or female circumcision (Shell-Duncan and Hernlund (2001:1). While other African women saw the assistance of their Western counterparts as denigrating to the African person (Abusharaf 2006:18), others felt that genital mutilation and other cultural practices that were accepted by the community but did not seek concert from the individual was becoming unacceptable. There was a growing movement which saw female circumcision as an oppressive construal of the female person in other parts of African (Abusharaf 2006). Here there was interaction between change and conservation of culture taking place around the central theme of community.

African scholars, particularly feminists and their sympathisers sought to produce a discourse that redeems the feminine person. Particularly in theology, African women theologians, locating themselves in the “wider family of Feminist theology” have, in different ways sought to recover the significance of woman in African (Phiri 2004:151). This struggle sees the problem of the oppression of the feminine person being located within the hierarchies of personhood that privileges males. African women theologians made it plain that Black Theology would not be considered to be a liberation theology if it did not take women liberation of women from the domination of men seriously (Phiri 2004:152). It is from such reflections that various regional feminist groupings were formed, e.g., the Circle of Concerned African Theologians was formed in the 1989 with the aim of promoting “African women’s theologies” (Phiri 2004:152, 154).

If one looks closely at the personhood construction adopted by these African women, one sees that they retained the communitarian position again. A cursory look into the concerns raised by these feminist scholars and their sympathisers shows that:

- (a) African women had equally contributed to the well being of life and humanity, hence were of the equal value as men,

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<sup>8</sup> I will not get into how Western feminist scholars are accused of monopolising the discourse on female circumcision in Africa due to limited space. The argument in such debate emerges from the fear that Western input could be seen cultural superiority presenting the west as “the arbiter of cultural values and meanings” (Korieh 2005:111ff). Others see the work of Western feminist scholars on female circumcision in Africa as “excessive, essentialising, and paternalistic” (Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2001:2).

(b) Women, men and nature needed each other in formation of true African *Ubuntu* or humanity.<sup>9</sup>

The title and the composition of authors of the book edited by Denise Ackerman, Jonathan Draper and Emma Mashinini (1991), *Women Hold up Half the Sky*, captured these concerns well. By unearthing the role the women played by the Anglican Church in the history of the church in South Africa, women contribution to life was being affirmed. By both men and women contributing to the book, the complementary and communitarian dream was revived again (Phiri 2004:155). This conciliatory language was built on the traditional communitarian relationship among people and their relationship with nature.

### **Persistence of Communitarian view**

The strength of the communitarian understanding of personhood seems not to have waned as African women found some problems with inequality in this African community. A cursory look in *The Bible in Africa*, edited by Gerald West and Musa Dube (2000),<sup>10</sup> one clearly sees how the communitarian understanding seems to pervade African understanding of what it means to be a person in Africa. From example the inculturation hermeneutics of Justin Ukpong is based on these basic African conceptions of reality:

the unitive view of reality whereby reality is seen not as composed of matter and spirit, sacred and profane but as a unity with visible and invisible aspects, the divine origin of the universe and the interconnectedness between God, humanity and the cosmos, and the sense of community whereby a person's identity is defined in terms of belonging to a community (Ukpong 2000:24).

In the same volume, Solomon Avotri sees "aspects of the New Testament, such as emphasis on community, which resonate with African culture" (2000:315-316). Reading Genesis 1:1-10 from the Setswana Perspective, in the same volume, Moiserale Dibeela is categorical and almost nostalgic about the African communitarian cosmology:

The approach (of land ownership) was of communal ownership. As a result it was regarded as anathema for an individual or group or individuals to claim sole ownership of land to the exclusion of others....I believe Setswana religious believe (sic) has an even richer understanding of the concept of land. Batswana believe that the land is the abode of the Living Dead of the Ancestors. As such, it must not be desecrated. We desecrate our land by spilling blood onto it. Such irreligious behaviour results in infertility of land, veld fires, drought and other calamities. To restore our relationship to the earth would normally require a ritual which would involve a cleansing of the community....Such cleansing restores broken relations between peoples within the community, between human community and the environment as well as between creation and the divine (Dibeela 2000:395).

Another scholar from Botswana, Gomang Ntloedibe, contributes in the same volume equally emphasising this communitarian view. She emphasises that "In socially interdependent society of the Batswana, the survival of the whole community is, therefore,

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<sup>9</sup> For example, Madipoane Masenya reads the book of Proverbs as a critique of African culture's veiled permission for men's marital infidelity. She tries to redeem the cultural traits that promote mutual benefit for men and women.

<sup>10</sup> I give the bibliography of the editors at the end and not the individual contributors.

endangered by individual antisocial behaviour....According to Setswana beliefs, the greatest good for all can be achieved if all live according to the basic virtue of harmony, between people and nature, ancestors and Modimo” (Ntloedibe 2000:5000).<sup>11</sup>

This revival of the communitarian African personhood draws heavily from the previous dominant communitarian ethos although Mbiti and his generation are sometimes not cited.<sup>12</sup> Community has become an acceptable view once again. The emphasis is still on the community of people and their relationship to nature. While the previous generation of African scholars was drawing from the work of Western ethnography of the colonial era, the new generation of feminist constructors of the African person bought heavily into that same communitarian tradition but in addition added an emerging Western concern for the environment. To draw from ‘indigenous’ resources in restoring the environment that had been destroyed by the Western industry was economically viable in terms of funding from Western donors. This did not however allow a critical investigation into the African personhood construction. It is at this point that I should ask, what it meant that African person was communitarian. Was it reality described or a nostalgic ideal longed for?

### **Is the African personhood communitarian?**

In order to appreciate the insufficiency of the communitarian ethos as descriptive of all people in Africa, one must look seriously at how this personhood is attained and maintained. As will be shown below, personhood in Africa is attained through particular exploits according to predetermined ways. Individual agency and ingenuity outside one’s socially fixed space is not encouraged, although it can not be completely stopped. As such children, those who have not yet reached adolescence, and hence are not able to do any exploits, are not recognised in this African communitarian view of personhood. It is enlightening to note that in Oduyoye’s appraisal of the communitarian view she classifies children together with the “aged, strangers, the sick and the needy, widows, disabled and others” as members of the African community needing ‘help’ (Oduyoye 2001:34). As such being young is seen in the same category as being ill, disabled and being in need. Such is her communitarian construal of the African person.

Among the very few African scholars, but not a theologian, Stephan Miescher (2005) is one of the few to my knowledge who has given some thought to the image of childhood in African cosmology, especially in Ghana. In this work, Miescher notes that one major task for children as they grew up was to learn about the centrality of the adults and their role in advising and guiding the child as ‘it’ grew (2005:17). Children are closer to the grandfather or mother who should tell them stories that reinforce obedience (2005:17018). Children are closer to the grandparents because they are not yet full beings, but since grand parents are about to attain higher personhood, the children can also benefit from it by being attached to them.

This marginalisation of children in the African communitarian ethos, though observed, is sometimes rationalised (Coetzee 2000:325). African theology has followed the

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<sup>11</sup> The list goes on, for example, the same emphasis can also be seen from Themba Mafico’s contribution in the same volume (2000:488).

<sup>12</sup> This does not mean that Mbiti is not cited in this volume. He is actually cited almost thirty times.

same trend from its early proponents who saw community in Africa as more 'Christian' than the individualism of the West. But the marginalisation of children, for example, from Holy Communion, is a demonstration that children are thought of as human enough to handle 'holy things'. Such practices are revealing more of a hierarchical than the well taunted communitarian personhood in Africa. Yes people and nature are in a community, but this community is not a 'circle' but a cone. Personhood is construed hierarchically. To this kind of construction I turn to now.

### **Hierarchical nature of personhood**

Having used 'personhood' in the sections above, it is proper that I make clear what I mean by this. By personhood I refer to those "attributes, capacities, and signs" of what it means to be 'properly' a social person in a particular society (Herdt 1982:103). Herdt notes that such construction is "ideological" in that these 'attributes, capacities, and signs' "maybe imposed upon (or denied), in whole or in part, not only particular human actors but also categories of collectivities of human actors or nonhuman entities" (1982:103). In our case, we have already seen that early personhood construction was predominantly male dominated hence denying full personhood to women. Herdt shows that in many patriarchal societies, only males are considered to have the capacity to "attain complete personhood" (1982:103). It is the argument of this paper that where some members of the group are ontologically subservient to other members, communitarian becomes misleading terminology. As has been observed by Arlette Ottino in other peoples, this personhood construction should rightfully be called "hierarchical" (Ottino 2000:274).

In the hierarchical construction, personhood is "acquired along an evolution undertaken over an entire lifetime, of which ancestorhood represents the culmination. It is not attained at birth, but through the fulfilment of a number of requirements which include procreation in marriage, and reproduction through the procreation of one's own children" (Ottino 2000:274). In addition to procreation, this full personhood is attained by discharging one's duties to his or her immediate family, "the senior generations and the deceased forebears" (Ottino 2000:275). Ottino makes an important observation that the "progression of the individual to the state of personhood is a common feature of hierarchically ordered societies, in which identity cannot be separated from the attributes attached to the position and the functions of the person within society, at successive stages in life" (Ottino 2000:275).

This hierarchical conception seems to more descriptive of the African construction of personhood if one takes seriously the social positions occupied by men relative to women and women relative to children and able bodied people relative to physically impaired people, etc. This also applies to human beings' relationship with the natural world and its objects. Yes, the whole natural world is sacred but there are other spaces and objects that are more sacred than others. These natural spaces are hierarchically arranged in such a way that those objects with higher concentration of sacredness are at the top of this hierarchy. Spiritual and human beings at the upper part of the hierarchy have special access to the most sacred spaces at the upper part of the hierarchy in the arrangement of the natural world and its objects as shown in the diagrams below.

The same applies to the natural world and its objects. Attendant to the unity of the material and the spiritual and the seen with the unseen in the African cosmology and the human and the non-human is also the hierarchy of existence. As has been noted by Geneva

Smitherman, the African “universe is hierarchical in nature, with God at the head of the hierarchy, followed by lesser deities, the “living dead” (ancestral spirits), people, animals, places” (1977:75; see also Anderson 2005:144-145).<sup>13</sup> What Smitherman does not, in his analysis, include that there is also, among the ‘living dead’, a hierarchy, so is among the people, animals etc. Not identifying these sub-hierarchies misses one major weakness of the African construction of personhood that makes children lesser persons since in most African cultures, there is no human being who has his or her full personhood at birth. All people attain their personhood in time, especially as they ‘prove’ their worth in age. “Personhood does not follow automatically simply because one is born of human seed. Rather it must be earned” (Mkhize 2004:49; see also Menkiti 1984; Anyanwu 1981 in Mkhize.). As Gyekye puts it, the individual’s social status is measured by:

A person’s sense of responsibility, expressed, in turn, through his/her responsiveness as sensitivity to the needs and demands of the group.

What a person has been able to achieve through his/her own exertions – physical, intellectual, moral.

The extent to which a person fulfils certain social norms such as having a marital life and bringing up children (Gyekye 2002:304-305).

As such persons have their value in the hierarchy whose climax is the spiritual state of being or ancestorhood. As such children are at the lowest level of personhood such that at some point before the initial rites are done to introduce the child to the ancestors and the family, the child is not a person. One can trace such developments of conception of personhood attainment processes from the ‘it’ status of the child to maturity of personhood accompanied by the above noted expectations (Gyekye 2002:304). To move from the ‘it’ status, the child must undergo some rituals of personhood attainment while the mother who was defiled by this thing born must undergo ritual of cleansing. To these rituals of personhood attainment I now turn.

### **Rituals of personhood attainment**

Rituals in many African societies are designed to “change one’s status of social position” (Nasimiyu-Wasike 1992:40). As personhood is one of the statuses to be attained as one “goes along” (Mkhize 2004:49), children who are born without this personhood must undergo particular rituals to attain it. Actually, Menkiti (1984) who has been the leading scholar in this analysis maintains that “children are not fully human” (in Mkhize 2004:49) contrary to those scholars who feel that this denies African children personhood contrary to the African spirit of community (Gyekye 1992; Mkhize 2004). Coetzee is defensive in saying that such a conception of “a person, however, must not be considered as eliminating or writing off children or infants as persons even though they are not (yet considered as moral agents...”, the reason being that even though children are not actually morally capable, “they are potentially so” (2000:325). Coetzee makes a comparison between a colt which will grow to be a horse and a child who will grow to be human being. But if one would take the well

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<sup>13</sup> See Mwakikagile (2000:97) whose claims that that there was no hierarchical structure among the Kikuyu. Space does not allow further engagement with this position which is based on Mwakikagile’s overly positive presentation of his culture against the disturbances brought by colonial rule.

known Karanga culture where a family bull can grow to become the incarnation of the family ancestor, this bull will have more 'personal' value in the family than the child.

In most of these African cultures, children at birth are not full beings. The "developmental process of acquiring personhood in the community usually progresses from the status of an 'it' as a child through full personhood or elderhood to the status of an ancestor in the spiritual world" (Ikuenobe 2006:64). When African thinkers say that "man is part of nature, but transcends it" (Ikuenobe 2006:64), it is a deliberate hierarchical comparison of personhood value starting from the gods, older men, younger men, older *woMen*, younger *woMen*, and lastly children.<sup>14</sup> "Personhood is not always automatic in African societies, as it generally is in the West, but rather contingent upon such factors as gender, social position, age, and the production of offspring" (Neisser and Jopling 1997:43). In other words, personhood is only "conferred as a consequence of living out a" life considered by society as 'proper' (Neisser and Jopling 1997:43). This is the reason why in many African cultures, newly born infants and children up to adolescence will need to go through various personhood attainment rituals in order to become fully human as shown below.

### After birth

Brian Morris says that in Malawi, children are not full human beings at birth, so a particular birth ritual called *kutenga Mwana* has to be performed to the child to prepare them for personhood which only becomes attainable at adolescence (2000:75). In this Malawi culture, Morris says, sexual intercourse is performed while the woman is closing her legs and the newly born child is held between the mother and the father. The semen and the vaginal fluids are used to anoint the child so as to link the child through this semen with his or her ancestors (2000:75). It is only when this semen that links the ancestors and the living is smeared on the child that he or she attains some level of being a 'person' (2000:76). In some African cultures, e.g. among the Babukusu of Kenya, the child is given his or her temporary name at birth while awaiting the one he or she gets when they attain their full personhood at adolescence (Nasimiyu-Wasike 1992:47).

In other African societies, for example the Karanga in Mberengwa Zimbabwe, the newly born child is supposed to have a ribbon tied on his or her neck or waist or have some 'mud' smeared on his or her head. If this is not done, there is a belief that the child may die. But since the child who dies at this age is not a full being, he or she is not buried by the male members of the family but female members. Even in Christian families where the minister maybe asked to be join the female members of the family in a 'private' ceremony for the dead child, families usually have women alone burying the child. Of course this sends two messages. The first is the confirmation that the child was not yet a full person, so they can be buried by members of the inferior members of the family. Secondly, the woman who has lost the child must feel guilty as she is given the responsibility to do the mourning process alone.

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<sup>14</sup> There are of course exceptions to this rule for example if the young child in the family becomes the family ancestral medium, the matrix change immediately.

## Initiation as personhood attainment

A common derogatory joke in South Africa among the Xhosa people these days is: “how can we be ruled by a boy?” This is in reference to the presidential aspirant Mr Jacob Zuma who is a Zulu and therefore likely to be uncircumcised. All Xhosa males are supposed to be circumcised and this makes them ‘men’ and not ‘boys’. As has been observed by Victor Turner, in many African societies circumcision, normally carried around puberty, was and still is, for some, “the attainment of full manhood” (1970:152). It is an important developmental stage to personhood in many African constructions of the person. Ambe Njoh sees circumcision as the transition into manhood, hence “arguably the most important of all the rites” (2006:59). The reason, according to Njoh is that in many African societies, it was believed that “manhood is attained through the shedding of blood” (2006:59). In South Africa, during the process of this initiation the candidates are secluded in appointed sites and smeared with white clay as an identification mark. The neophytes are exposed to harsh conditions, bathing in cold water, denied food, and other strenuous activities like running. It is said that through this process they are being introduced to the real life of hard work and difficulty associated with being a full human being in Africa (Njoh 60).

Children are not only absent or marginalised in African thought. It has become apparent that even in mainstream Christian theology, children have not been given much special descriptive and analytical space. In *The Child in Christian Thought*, edited by Marcia JoAnn Bunge (2001), we have one of the first comprehensive books focusing on children in Christian theological thought. Bunge states with concern that even though churches encourage parents to instruct children in the faith, there is “absence of well-developed and historically and biblically informed teachings about children in contemporary theology” and this is the reason why “churches often struggle to create and to sustain strong programs in religious education and in child-advocacy ministry” (Bunge 2001:4). My approach in this paper follows the “child-advocacy ministry” in the Lutheran churches in Southern Africa where they are denied Holy Communion based on church practice I suspect feeds upon African conceptions of personhood. I give a brief overview of conception of childhood in the Greco-Roman world after which I will use Matthew’s gospel to propose what could have been Jesus’ attitudes towards children and its implication for the churches in Africa.

Let the children...but Jesus said, “Let the children come to me, and do not prevent them; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” Matthew 19:14

There is ample evidence that the earliest Christian communities had to deal with the issue of the presence of children in their midst in relationship to Jesus’ call of discipleship, particularly in Matthew. When Jesus called people to follow him, did he mean children also? Was Jesus not too serious to be bothered by ‘insignificant’ beings like children? Would the children be able to obey the commandments required by this call in Matthew? In other words, were children not a hindrance to the kingdom of God?

This discussion must be located within the wider milieu of childhood perception operative in first century Palestine before specific focus on the particular periscope is done. This can then be critically compared with the African conception of personhood discussed above in order to draw some conclusion on what this could mean for the possibility of children participating in all the graces in the church of Jesus Christ.

## Greco-Roman views of children

Generally, children's value in the Greco-roman world was that of economic value upon which the elderly would depend in old age (Gundry-volf 2001:31). Even the state saw children as indispensable for its own "economic, cultural, and military purposes" (Gundry-volf 2001:31-32). This positive view of children had its negative side though. Childhood was seen negatively as a state of immaturity to be outgrown (Gundry-volf 2001:32). As such children were seen as not yet fully human, hence "mentally deficient and ignorant" speaking "nonsense" and irrational, "capricious, foolish, and quarrelsome" (Gundry-volf 2001:32). According to the Roman philosopher Cicero, children had nothing apart from potential and childhood as something not to be desired (*De Republica*, p. 137.3 ed. Ziegler frag. Incert. 5; in Gundry-volf 2001:32).

In the Roman Empire in the second century CE, we can glean from the *Reflections* or *Meditations* of the emperor Marcus Aurelius, ruling from 161 to 180 CE (Wiedemann 1989:5). In these reflections Aurelius, is confronted with high rate of human mortality including the death of his own four children who had died as youngsters (Wiedemann 1989:6). As a stoic, he saw children and adults' life as equally worth. In the light of death Aurelius would say, "That then will be the difference between the most advanced in age, and the one who has died before his time?; What advantage did those who clung greedily to their lives have over those who died young?" (Wiedemann 1989:7). In this view, children were looked upon as simply younger than but "not different from adults" (Wiedemann 1989:7). Of course it was only in terms of reasoning that Aurelius saw children as inferior to philosophizing adults. As such, foolish and ignorant adults were also seen as children (Wiedemann 1989:8). This lack of reasoning in children, said Seneca (c. 4 BC – CE 65). Just as he would admonish those who have done wrong,

with pain and ill, not because he was wronged, but because they have done wrong, so that they should stop doing wrong; for that is how beasts are controlled by being beaten. We are not angry with them when they throw their riders, but we restrain them so that the pain overcomes their obstinacy (Wiedemann 1989:27).

This shows how children, even though philosophically could have been thought of as equally human to adults, practically, they were treated like animals in terms of control and discipline. This Roman influence could have found resonance with older Jewish traditions like harsh treatment of children as discipline (Heb. 12:5-11). The main purpose of education and the stress put on it in Greco-roman world shows how ignorance was associated with childhood and the need to remove it so that the children could grow.

This meant that children in the Greco-roman world did not have any rights at all, hence the brutal experiences they underwent in the hands of their fathers who had "absolute power over them" (Gundry-volf 2001:33). Gundry-volf says the father had actually "power of life and death over his children" hence the widespread disposal of unwanted children and babies, especially girl children, in public square (2001:33).

## Children in Jewish first century Palestine

Although the search for the 'historical Jesus' is usually central to the study of Jesus as a child (e.g. Nelson-Pallmeyer 2001), yet this is almost an impossible one, it is possible to try and approximate Jesus' attitudes to children as passed on in Christian communities of the gospels, as will be shown below through the use of Matthew's gospel. Jesus could have grown the ordinary life of an ordinary Jewish family in a country occupied by the Romans (Nelson-

Pallmeyer 2001:140). Children were seen in this context also inferior to elderly people as can be deduced from such common sayings: “Let the children be fed first. For it is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs” (Mark 7:27) (see also Verhey 2002:178).<sup>15</sup> It would seem as if children were ranked better than dogs, but ranked such low still. In turn, a Jewish child would be considered better than a non-Jewish grown up. Just like in the African conception, the young child (boy) would not attain full personhood before the circumcision, eight days after birth. They would also go through religious education that prepared them for a full Jewish life of obeying God and following prescribed traditions.

Gundry-volf shows that among the Jewish families of the first century Palestine, there were some indications of love for children (2001:31-32). In some Midrashim, it was explained that a parent who was crawling on his hands and feet playing with his children loved them because if a “man loves to have children, he acts like a fool” (*Midrash Ps. 92, 14.206b* in Gundry-volf 2001:34). In this sense abundance of children was seen as blessings from God. However, still children needed strict discipline as they were considered “ignorant” and “capricious” (see 2 Kings 2:23-24; Isa. 3:4; Wisd. 12:24-25; 15:14; Prov. 22:15; Sir. 30:1-13) (see Gundry-volf 2001:35). In rabbinic literature, to be “deaf, dumb, weak-minded, and under-age” were words used to describe someone negatively (*Erub. 3.2; Shek. 1.3; Sukk. 2.8; 3.10* in Gundry-volf 2001:35). In the Talmud one description of behaviour that destroyed a man went as follows: “Morning sleep, mid-day wine, chattering with children and tarrying in places where men of common people assemble” (*M. 'Abot 3.10*).

### Children in Gospels

As has been observed by in Gundry-volf, children are presented in the gospels in “five main ways” (2001:35). 1. Jesus blesses the children brought to him and teaches that the kingdom belongs to them, 2. He makes children models of entering the kingdom, 3. He makes children models of greatness in the reign of God, 4. He admonishes his disciples to receive little children as he does, and 5. He endorses the service as ultimate service and as a way of receiving Jesus himself and the Father who sent him (in Gundry-volf 2001:36). Of special significance for this paper is the fourth admonition of welcoming children put at par with welcoming Jesus as presented in Matthew’s gospel.

### Children in Matthew

The gospel of Matthew opens with a gruesome presentation of a deceptive king who commands the ‘wise men’ (μαγοι) to go and search for a child who is to be king so that he could go and ‘worship’ him (Matt. 2:8). The wise men went and paid true homage to newly born child (2:11). Lingering in the story is the image of vulnerability of the child. God intervened through a dream so that the child’s life could be spared (2:13-14). But while the child Jesus was spared, multitudes of other children were massacred in the wake of the king’s anger from being ‘duped’ (2:16). It was only when those who wanted to have the child killed

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<sup>15</sup> Earlier and older traditions could have been even harsher. Israelite neighbors could have practiced child sacrifice and there are hints from some Old Testament pericopes that some Israelites could have followed this pattern (Eichrodt 2003:148). Of course the Old Testament Levitical and Deuteronomic laws prohibited such practices as replaceable with animal sacrifice.

had themselves died that again through a dream God instructed the child's return to Israel (2:20).

When he had grown up, Jesus used children illustrations in his preaching and teaching. In Matthew 11:16-17 he says, "But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market places, who call out to the other children, and say, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.'" Here Jesus was comparing the responsiveness expected when children are playing their games to the lack of response exhibited by those who had first heard John and then those who were hearing Jesus. In children's games, the expected response the other child's gestures of intention to play was to play the complementary part of the game. Non response would have been a sign of lack of friendship.

Apart from using children as examples of responsiveness, Jesus also uses children as examples of reception of the kingdom. His disciples had asked him (18:1): "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He took a child to himself in response (18:2). To demonstrate the seriousness of what he wanted to illustrate, he used the  $\alpha\omega\mu\eta.\nu$  (amen) formula: "Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven" (18:3). Here the child is also used as the example, not only of reception but of humility (18:5). In the same context Jesus pushes his agenda for children by encouraging, not only the emulation of children, but the reception of children into the kingdom: "And whoever receives one child such as this in my name receives me" (18:5). This would seem out of place with the use of children as illustration in the previous verses. But in Matthew, this deliberate highlighting of the significance of children for the kingdom is clear. Actually, in 18:6 Jesus is even more controversial in claiming that these little ones, by implication, children, believe in him. For that reason: "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea" (18:6).

Towards the end of his ministry, it is the children who expressed the messianic identity of Jesus by singing aloud in the temple area "Hosanna to the Son of David" to the indignation of the chief priests and the scribes (21:15). Even if it is Matthew's narrative ploy to put such words on the mouths of children we will never know. What we can know with certainty is that in Matthew, children have discovered what is hidden to the learned and trained teachers of the law. The Matthean Jesus even finds scriptural sanction for this: "Out of the mouths of infants and nurslings you have brought forth praise" (Psalm 8:2 in Matthew 21:16).

Jesus' positive representation of children in Matthew is a very strong narrative feature meant to draw the readers' attention as this is done obvious patriarchal environment where for example children and women are not counted as people in the feeding of the five thousand (14:21) or four thousand (15:38) (Verhey 2002:171-175). It is not easy to ascertain whether there were parents who took "children's bread and throw it to the dogs" (15:26). But this is possible since even in the audience's calling for a curse upon it self for wishing Jesus dead, they called the blood of Jesus to be upon them and upon their children (27:25). In God's anger against them, they wanted their offspring to be condemned as well.

It is in this context of Jesus' positive portrayal of children in Matthew that we get the periscope for our detailed reading (19:13-14).

Let the children come to me (Matthew 19:13-14).

Matthew 19:13-14 is preceded by a series of teachings on family life especially the sanctity of marriage and why it must not be dissolved. The conditional clause, μη. εωπι. πορνει, αφ (except for adultery or fornication) seems to be weakened by the following complaint by his disciples that this would be a difficult expectation for all wishing to be disciples (19:10) and that “not all can accept (this) word, but only those to whom that is granted” (19:11). He then gives possibilities that some may actually choose not to marry if they feel it would disturb their commitment to God (19:12).

It is only after this discussion that children are brought into the narrative. The children are said to have been brought (προσηνε, ξησαν) to Jesus so he can lay his hands on them and pray for them; they had not come alone (19:13). They are passive when they are brought to Jesus, but they get the blessing according to the wishes of those who brought them to Jesus. There are other incidents in which the initiative of family and friends brought healing and blessings on those brought to Jesus. This would be the way this experience could be understood in African communitarian life. If one member of the family is sick, the whole family partakes in the traditional healer’s treatment, including those who are not well. Actually there is no one who would be considered ‘well’ in a family of a member who is unwell.

Those who are closest to Jesus, his disciples, those who had been with Jesus for some time, who thought they knew what he stood for, are the ones who stopped the people from bringing children to Jesus (19:13). The chiasmic contrast between εωπιη’φ αωτοι’θ (to put [his hands] on them) and εωπετι, μησαν αωτοι’θ (rebuked or warned them) is compelling (19:13). At the beginning there is a possibility that the children will get a blessing if Jesus lays his hands on them, but on the other end, there are those who are stopping them from receiving this blessing. The irony is that those who are prohibiting the children are closest to Jesus in terms of understanding the mysteries of the kingdom. So the needy children with their longing parents are juxtaposed to the rigid and conservative disciples who are stopping them. There is a group here of people who are trying so hard to make sure that following Jesus is too systematized that it becomes predictable who should be in and who should be out. The criteria used to determine those who should be in is that of age and sometimes gender and other times ethnicity. Jesus rejects all this. He reverses the norms and suggests that actually it is the least in ordinary understanding who qualify, more than the ones who are expected to qualify according to ordinary human gradations.

Once Jesus placed his hands on them and blessed them, he left that place having accomplished the task for the day (19:15). Just after this, his disciples are still confused of what had just happened, one potential disciple came to inquire about possibilities of being a disciple too (19:16). He is schooled in the construction of ‘moral personhood’: “Teacher, what good must I do to gain eternal life?” The ι[να] clause there shows that he strongly believes that people must do some certain good in order to attain eternal life (19:16). Jesus responds in a tricky way by rejecting that there is not any good people are able to do. But if they insist, they must try the commandments (19:17). He says: “Why are you asking me about what is good? There is only one who is good; but if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.” The use of ‘but if’ (ετω δε.) is commonly used in Matthew to show the other side of the argument if one has not appreciated the other side. For Jesus there is only one who is good, the rest can die trying. The young man thinks that through his meticulous following of the details of the commandments he can earn the kingdom of God.

He actually claims to have obeyed all the commandments (19:22). Jesus demonstrates to him how he has not actually followed the commandments since he is very rich in the context of extreme poverty. If he is serious with following Jesus he needs to share his wealth (19:21). He can not do and Jesus is vindicated in saying that he is not good enough for the kingdom.

### **Children's participation in the graces of the church**

A more obvious entrance into the discussion into the possibilities of children participating in the Holy Communion in Southern African Lutheran churches would have been to follow a more theological trajectory. This would try and argue the theological merits and demerits of children participating in Holy Communion. Efforts would also have been made to seek to investigate how children were treated in the early church in spite of the meagre evidence. Then conclusion would be made on such basis. That approach would still be legitimate had the churches in Africa under this study was basing their practices on any theological position. As far as I am aware these churches ground their practice on tradition; how things have been before. Theirs is maintenance of a tradition whose origins can be traced to the missionary days. Unfortunately, the missionaries who introduced this and other practices are no longer there to explain why they did what they did. In any case most home churches of these missionaries have now changed their practices for their own reasons, most of them not on the basis of any new theological discovery but simply in response to the individual rights ethos governing the Western world currently. So what should be done in the African set-up where skewed communitarian position still prevails? I propose three things from the above study why children could participate in Holy Communion:

### **Jesus' understanding of humanity of children**

When Jesus encouraged the reception of children, he was obviously disturbing how his contemporaries construed personhood. We see Jesus not only redefining personhood in terms of ethnicity, but also in terms of gender and age. For Jesus it is being human that affords children the same status as grown ups. In this understanding Jesus seem to suggest that people do not necessarily become more acceptable before God as they grow older. They are acceptable first before God because they are God's people.

### **Christian community as a fellowship of equals before God**

Because of the above state of humanity, all people were presented by Jesus as equals before God. For this reason, Jesus would be annoyed when he overheard his disciples arguing over who would be the greatest. For Jesus, this demonstrates their lack of understanding of the nature of the kingdom which makes all people equal before God. Being equal according to Jesus does not mean to be the same. Jesus recognises the presence of males, females, young and old. These are not qualitative differences according to Jesus, they are quantitative. Actually, if the elderly people want to understand what it is to be a member of the kingdom, they should become like children. They should not necessarily be childish, but they should adopt a trusting and open attitude to God. As such, children's participation in the Holy Communion would not be dependent upon their age but upon their membership to this community and fellowship of equals. It is not an individualistic attitude that accords children this privilege; it is the fact that the community is incomplete without them. No meal will be a family meal without the children participating.

## **Grace should determine who we are not personal achievements or abilities.**

Because of their age, there are things children are not able to do. This is the same for old people who have become too old to help themselves. They are accepted before God in all the available graces as a result of who they are and not what they are able or not able to do. Children are not able to give a rational account of their faith. This is the case for many people who have not studied much theology. Children are not able to show respect to the elements of Holy Communion the same way adults can do. These shortcomings are not as grave as the sinful life adults bring to the Holy Table. Still the adults can come to find forgiveness of sin even if there is a clear record of what they have done that would disqualify them before God. In other words, if older people come to the Holy Communion despite their failures and shortcomings (even encouraged to come in spite of them), what stops children to enjoy God's grace? Obviously it will not because of their shortcomings because they are not worse than those of the adults. Their shortcomings are not a result of what they have done but what they can not do. Jesus would welcome children to himself and allow them to enjoy his blessings in order to fulfil his mission of being sent to all people and to make them disciples—all people. As disciples, all are allowed to enjoy all that Jesus would deem benefiting for his followers including his body and his blood.

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