
The Ubuntu and The Cross: A Critical Review of Desmond Tutu's Christological Vision in African Theology

Moses Kater Wuakera

Philip S Tachin

Rahila Jakawa

Abstract

The debate among Scholars of African Theology is still ongoing about how far African theological concepts like *Ubuntu* should shape Christian doctrine and how to balance culture with doctrinal authority. The idea of the study is to examine the Christological thought of Desmond Tutu through the lens of *Ubuntu* theology, which addresses the limited nature of the integration of indigenous African philosophical thoughts within Christology, particularly in relation to social transformation and reconciliation. The study aimed to evaluate how Ubuntu functions as a mediating framework in Tutu's theology and to assess its relevance for contemporary African contexts, especially Nigeria. Adopting a qualitative, hermeneutical methodology, the research drew on primary texts from Tutu and relevant secondary scholarly sources. Findings revealed that Tutu presents the Cross as both a spiritual and socio-ethical reality grounded in communal identity, justice, and reconciliation. However, the study identified key tensions, including the tendency of Ubuntu to emphasize communal identity over the uniqueness of Christ, to interpret the Cross primarily as a symbol of social reconciliation rather than atonement for sin, and to privilege human-centered ethics in ways that may weaken doctrinal clarity in the study of Christology. The study concluded that despite these limitations, Tutu's synthesis is not wrong but operates from a different

starting point to provide a significant contextual model for African theology. Its uniqueness lies in its critical engagement with Ubuntu as a theological resource with transformative implications for community reconciliation, social justice, and development in Africa and specifically, Nigeria.

Keywords: Ubuntu, Christology, Cross, Desmond Tutu, African Theology, Reconciliation

Introduction

Christian theology in Africa continues to navigate a complex hermeneutical landscape, striving to remain both contextually resonant and doctrinally faithful. This tension is particularly acute in Nigeria, a nation characterized by profound religious pluralism, persistent ethnic fragmentation, and socio-political instability. In such a context, theology cannot afford to remain an abstract, Eurocentric academic exercise. It must engage lived human experiences, confront historical wounds, and offer viable pathways toward communal healing and social cohesion. This study examines the Christological vision of Archbishop Desmond Tutu through the lens of *Ubuntu*, a Southern African philosophical and ethical framework that highlights relational humanity, communal interdependence, and restorative justice. By interrogating Tutu's integration of Ubuntu theology with the doctrine of the Cross, this research seeks to evaluate its theological coherence, practical relevance, and applicability to contemporary Nigerian society.

Ubuntu, often abridged by the Nguni proverb “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*” (a person is a person through other persons), functions as a normative ethical and ontological framework that locates human identity within communal relationships rather than isolated individualism⁹⁵. In recent decades, scholars have increasingly recognized Ubuntu as a vital resource for addressing social fragmentation, advancing

⁹⁵ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1969), 108; Mogobe B. Ramose, *African Philosophy through Ubuntu* (Harare: Mond Books, 1999), 50.

human rights, and fostering reconciliation in post-conflict societies⁹⁶. Its emphasis on shared humanity, dignity, and mutual responsibility aligns closely with African communal worldviews, making it a compelling lens through which to reinterpret Christian doctrines for African contexts.

Simultaneously, the Cross remains the theological and soteriological center of Christian faith. Traditional systematic interpretations of the Cross, particularly in Western theological traditions, have often stressed individual salvation, penal substitution, and juridical atonement. While these models retain doctrinal significance, African theologians frequently argue that they underplay the communal, socio-political, and transformative dimensions of Christ's suffering and death⁹⁷. Desmond Tutu's Christology attempts to bridge this gap by interpreting the Cross not merely as a transaction for personal sin but as a profound act of divine solidarity with human suffering, a catalyst for social reconciliation, and a paradigm for communal healing⁹⁸. However, this integration raises critical theological questions: Does Ubuntu's communal emphasis risk overshadowing the uniqueness of Christ? Does interpreting the Cross primarily as a symbol of social reconciliation dilute its salvific and atoning dimensions? Can African contextual theology maintain doctrinal fidelity while remaining culturally authentic?

This study addresses these tensions by critically evaluating Tutu's Christological synthesis. While Ubuntu is widely

⁹⁶ Thaddeus Metz, *Ubuntu as a Moral Theory and Human Rights in South Africa: Theorizing Communitarianism* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 374–380; Michael Battle, *Ubuntu: I in You and You in Me*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Seabury Books, 2017), 12–18.

⁹⁷ J. Jesse N. K. Mugambi, "The Cross and the African Community," in *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, ed. John D. K. (London: SCM Press, 1998), 142; Emmanuel Katongole, *The Journey of Reconciliation: Groaning for a New World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 140–152.

⁹⁸ Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 31–45; Tutu, *God Is Not a Christian: And Other Provocations* (New York: HarperOne, 2016), 67–72.

celebrated for its ethical and reconciliatory potential, its systematic integration into Christology remains underexplored. In Nigeria, where ethnic rivalries, religious polarization, and systemic injustice persist, the absence of a robust contextual theology that links faith with communal transformation presents both scholarly and practical challenges⁹⁹. This research adopts a qualitative, hermeneutical methodology, focusing on interpretive analysis of Tutu's primary texts alongside contemporary scholarship in African theology, philosophy, and systematic Christology. Hermeneutics, as a discipline concerned with understanding meaning within cultural and historical contexts, is particularly suited for examining the interplay between Ubuntu's communal ethics and the Cross's theological claims¹⁰⁰.

Academically, this study contributes to African theological discourse by critically interrogating the intersection of culture and doctrine. It highlights both the transformative potential and the doctrinal limitations of integrating Ubuntu into systematic Christology. Practically, it offers a framework for reconciliation, justice, and community restoration in Nigeria, where ethnic and religious divisions continue to undermine national cohesion. By situating Tutu's theology within Nigerian realities, this research seeks to demonstrate how an Ubuntu-informed Christology can address lived struggles without compromising core Christian convictions.

Through rigorous critical engagement, this study argues that while Tutu's Ubuntu-Cross synthesis presents theological tensions, particularly regarding Christ's uniqueness and the atoning scope of the Cross, it offers a vital contextual model for African theology. Its strength lies not in systematic doctrinal replacement but in hermeneutical retrieval: using Ubuntu as a lens to recover the communal, reconciliatory, and

⁹⁹ C. Eze, *Constructive Theology in the African Context* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018), 118; Katongole, *Journey of Reconciliation*, 148.

¹⁰⁰ Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 29–34.

transformative dimensions of Christ's work, while maintaining fidelity to core Christian convictions. In a nation like Nigeria, where division and violence remain pervasive, such a theology is not merely academic; it is urgently pastoral and socially necessary.

Ubuntu in African Theology and Ethics

Ubuntu, as a philosophical, ethical, and theological concept, occupies a central place in African intellectual discourse. Rooted in Bantu linguistic and cultural traditions, Ubuntu articulates a worldview in which human existence is fundamentally relational. The axiom "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*" encapsulates this ontology: personhood is not an isolated achievement but a communal realisation. One's humanity is actualised through reciprocal relationships, shared responsibilities, and mutual recognition. In African theological contexts, Ubuntu has been increasingly employed as a normative framework for ethics, justice, and community flourishing, particularly in post-colonial and post-conflict settings¹⁰¹.

The philosophical foundations of Ubuntu have been extensively articulated by scholars such as Mogobe Ramose, who frames Ubuntu as an epistemological and ontological system that challenges Western individualism. Ramose argues that Ubuntu presents a holistic understanding of reality where the community precedes the individual, not in a repressive sense, but in a constitutive one. Human dignity, in this framework, is not an inherent abstract quality but a relational achievement sustained through ethical conduct and communal accountability¹⁰². In the same way, Thaddeus Metz has developed Ubuntu into a rigorous moral theory, stressing its capacity to ground human rights, democratic governance, and restorative justice without relying on Western liberal

¹⁰¹ Ramose, *African Philosophy through Ubuntu*, 48–65; Letseka, M. In *Defence of Ubuntu* (London: Routledge, 2018), 4–12.

¹⁰² Ramose, *African Philosophy through Ubuntu*, 50–55.

individualism¹⁰³. Metz's work demonstrates that Ubuntu can function as a universalisable ethical framework while remaining culturally grounded.

In theological discourse, Ubuntu has been integrated into African Christian ethics as a resource for reimagining ecclesial life, social justice, and reconciliation. Michael Battle, drawing extensively on Tutu's theology, presents Ubuntu as a spiritual ontology that reflects the Trinitarian nature of God: relational, communal, and self-giving. Battle argues that Ubuntu theology offers a corrective to overly institutionalised or individualised Christian practices by recentring the church as a community of mutual care and shared mission¹⁰⁴. This relational theology aligns closely with African communal worldviews, making it particularly resonant in contexts where kinship, village solidarity, and collective responsibility remain culturally significant.

However, Ubuntu's theological application is not without critique. Scholars such as Edwin M. Conradie caution against romanticising Ubuntu as an inherently harmonious or conflict-free paradigm. Conradie notes that pre-colonial African societies also experienced violence, hierarchy, and exclusion, and that Ubuntu ethics must be critically engaged rather than uncritically adopted¹⁰⁵. Furthermore, feminist theologians like Mercy Amba Oduyoye highlighted how traditional communal structures often demote women, elders, and minorities under the guise of cultural authenticity. Oduyoye argues that any theological deployment of Ubuntu must be subjected to a hermeneutic of suspicion to ensure it does not reinforce patriarchal or exclusionary norms¹⁰⁶. These critiques

¹⁰³ Metz, *Ubuntu as a Moral Theory*, 15–32.

¹⁰⁴ Battle, *Ubuntu: I in You and You in Me*, 94–112.

¹⁰⁵ Edwin M. Conradie, *Integral Ubuntu: An African Contribution to Global Ethical Discourse*, 2nd ed. (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2018), 210–218.

¹⁰⁶ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 88–102.

underscore the necessity of a critical, rather than celebratory, engagement with Ubuntu in theological construction.

The tension between communal harmony and individual rights remains a central debate in Ubuntu scholarship. While Ubuntu accentuates collective well-being, critics argue that it can sometimes suppress dissent, lessen personal autonomy, or justify majoritarian tyranny. Metz addresses this by proposing a “relational communitarianism” that balances communal goods with individual dignity, arguing that true Ubuntu requires mutual respect for personhood, not conformity to group norms¹⁰⁷. This nuanced understanding is crucial for theological applications, particularly in pluralistic societies like Nigeria, where ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity demands a framework that honours both community and individual conscience.

In Nigerian contexts, Ubuntu’s ethical implications are highly relevant but also complex. Nigeria’s pluralistic landscape, comprising over 250 ethnic groups and multiple religious traditions, presents both opportunities and challenges for communal ethics. While Ubuntu’s emphasis on shared humanity and restorative justice offers a compelling alternative to retributive legalism and ethnic polarization, its implementation requires careful contextualization¹⁰⁸. Nigerian communal life is often shaped by patronage, corruption, and sectarian loyalty, which can distort Ubuntu’s ideals. Therefore, theological engagement with Ubuntu in Nigeria must be critically adaptive, distinguishing between authentic relational ethics and culturally compromised practices.

Despite these tensions, Ubuntu remains a vital theological resource. Its emphasis on human dignity, mutual responsibility, and restorative justice aligns closely with biblical

¹⁰⁷ Metz, *Ubuntu as a Moral Theory*, 120–135.

¹⁰⁸ Clifford G. Christians, "Ubuntu and Communitarianism in Media Ethics," *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies* 25, no. 2 (2004): 235–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02560054.2004.9653296>.

themes of covenant community, forgiveness, and reconciliation. When critically engaged, Ubuntu can serve as a hermeneutical lens that enriches African Christian ethics without replacing doctrinal foundations. The challenge lies in maintaining this balance: utilizing Ubuntu to illuminate the communal dimensions of Christian faith while safeguarding the theological uniqueness of Christ, the centrality of grace, and the transcendent nature of salvation.

Christology in African Thought

Christology in African theological discourse has evolved significantly over the past century, shifting from missionary-imposed formulations to contextually rooted expressions that engage African worldviews, historical experiences, and socio-political realities. Early African Christology, pioneered by scholars such as John Mbiti, Kwame Bediako, and John S. Pobee, sought to articulate the identity and work of Christ in terms that resonated with African cultural categories. Mbiti's famous assertion that "I am because we are" was extended into Christological terms, presenting Christ as the ultimate relational being who fulfils and transforms African communal ontology¹⁰⁹. Bediako's work on Christ as the "Supreme Ancestor" and Pobee's exploration of Christ as "Chief" and "Elder Brother" attempted to bridge African traditional religious concepts with biblical revelation, demonstrating continuity rather than discontinuity between African heritage and Christian faith¹¹⁰.

These early contextual Christologies were groundbreaking in their attempt to decolonize theological discourse. However, they also faced criticism for potential syncretism, over-culturalization, and insufficient engagement with classical doctrinal formulations. Scholars like Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen and

¹⁰⁹ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 170–185.

¹¹⁰ Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 112–130; John S. Pobee, *Towards an African Christology* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1976), 45–68.

Thomas R. Schreiner caution that while contextualization is necessary, it must not compromise the universal and transcendent claims of Christ's divinity, atonement, and resurrection¹¹¹. Kärkkäinen argues that African Christology must remain in dialogue with global theological traditions, ensuring that cultural relevance does not eclipse doctrinal orthodoxy¹¹². This tension between contextual authenticity and doctrinal fidelity continues to shape contemporary African Christological discourse.

In recent decades, African Christology has increasingly cherished the socio-political and communal dimensions of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. The Cross, traditionally interpreted through juridical and penal frameworks in Western theology, is re-read in African contexts as a paradigm of solidarity, suffering, and liberation. Emmanuel Katongole argues that the Cross in African theology is not merely a salvific transaction but a cosmic event that exposes systemic injustice, identifies with the downgraded, and inaugurates a new communal reality grounded in grace and reconciliation¹¹³. Similarly, John Gathoko highlights how African churches often experience the Cross as a source of hope in contexts of poverty, violence, and political oppression, where Christ's suffering becomes a mirror of communal lament and a promise of transformative justice¹¹⁴.

This shift toward a communal and socio-political Christology reflects broader trends in global theology, particularly liberation theology, feminist theology, and postcolonial theology. However, African Christology maintains distinct characteristics,

¹¹¹ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christology: A Global Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 65–82; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Christology: A Theological Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 110–125.

¹¹² Kärkkäinen, *Christology*, 75–80.

¹¹³ Katongole, *Journey of Reconciliation*, 140–152.

¹¹⁴ John Gathoko, *African Christian Identity and Violence: A Church-Qua-Violence Critique of Christian Ethics in Africa* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 56–65.

particularly its emphasis on kinship, ancestral continuity, and restorative reconciliation. It is attested that African Christological discourse frequently draws on narrative theology, oral tradition, and communal worship practices to articulate how Christ's work impacts everyday life. This praxis-oriented approach contrasts with highly systematic Western models, offering a theology that is lived, embodied, and culturally embedded.

Nevertheless, the integration of communal and socio-political themes into Christology raises doctrinal questions. Critics argue that overemphasizing the Cross as a symbol of social transformation can inadvertently downplay its atoning significance. The classical doctrines of substitution, propitiation, and redemption, while sometimes culturally distant, remain central to Christian soteriology. Scholars like A. E. Orobator caution that African Christology must avoid reducing the Cross to a mere ethical metaphor, ensuring that its salvific and eschatological dimensions are preserved¹¹⁵. This requires a careful hermeneutical balance: recognizing the Cross as both a historical event of divine reconciliation and a continuing paradigm for communal healing and justice.

In the Nigerian context, Christological discourse is particularly urgent. Nigeria's history of colonial exploitation, military dictatorship, ethnic conflict, and religious polarization has created a society in desperate need of theological resources that address both spiritual and social brokenness. Nigerian theologian, Ogbu Kalu, has stressed the need for a Christology that speaks to systemic injustice, corruption, and intercommunal violence¹¹⁶. The Cross, in this context, is not an abstract doctrine but a lived reality that confronts power, exposes violence, and offers hope for restoration. However, as

¹¹⁵ Teddy C. Sakupapa, "Ecumenical Ecclesiology in the African Context: Towards a View of the Church as Ubuntu," *Scriptura* 117 (2018): 1-15, <https://doi.org/10.7833/117-1-1384>.

¹¹⁶ Ogbu Kalu, *African Christianity: An African Story* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2008), 145-160

in broader African theology, Nigerian Christology must navigate the tension between contextual relevance and doctrinal integrity, ensuring that cultural adaptation does not compromise the gospel's core claims.

The development of African Christology thus represents an ongoing dialogue between tradition and context, doctrine and practice, universal truth and particular experience. It challenges Western theological hegemony while remaining accountable to biblical revelation and historic Christian faith. As this study will demonstrate, Desmond Tutu's Christological vision, filtered through Ubuntu, exemplifies this dialogical approach, offering both profound insights and necessary cautions for contemporary African theology.

Theological Synthesis and Debates on Ubuntu and the Cross

The integration of Ubuntu theology with the doctrine of the Cross represents one of the most significant and contested developments in contemporary African Christology. Desmond Tutu's theological vision stands at the center of this synthesis, offering a model where Christ's suffering, Ubuntu's communal ethics, and restorative justice converge into a coherent framework for social transformation and reconciliation. Tutu's Christology does not treat the Cross as a purely metaphysical or juridical event but as a lived reality of divine solidarity with human suffering, a catalyst for communal healing, and a paradigm for ethical discipleship¹¹⁷. This approach has been widely celebrated for its pastoral sensitivity, contextual relevance, and peacemaking potential, particularly in post-apartheid South Africa and conflict-affected African societies.

Tutu's theological method is deeply rooted in his ecclesial experience, political activism, and African communal worldview. In *No Future Without Forgiveness*, he articulates a vision of reconciliation that transcends legalistic justice,

¹¹⁷ Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, 31–45; Tutu, *God Is Not a Christian*, 67–72.

stressing truth-telling, mutual recognition, and restorative healing. For Tutu, the Cross is the ultimate expression of God's refusal to retaliate against violence, instead choosing to absorb suffering and offer forgiveness. This theological stance aligns closely with Ubuntu's emphasis on relational restoration over retributive punishment¹¹⁸. Tutu's Christology thus presents the Cross not as a transaction that secures individual salvation alone, but as a communal event that inaugurates a new way of being human, grounded in grace, empathy, and shared responsibility.

Scholarly responses to Tutu's synthesis have been largely positive but critically engaged. Michael Battle, a close collaborator and theological interpreter of Tutu's work, argues that Ubuntu and the Cross are mutually illuminating: Ubuntu provides the ethical grammar for communal reconciliation, while the Cross provides the theological foundation for divine grace and forgiveness¹¹⁹. Battle avers that Tutu's Christology avoids both Western individualism and African romanticization by presenting salvation as a communal reality that transforms social structures and interpersonal relationships. This view is supported by scholars like Charles Villa-Vicencio, who notes that Tutu's theology offers a viable alternative to punitive justice models, particularly in transitional societies¹²⁰.

However, critical voices have raised important theological concerns. Edwin M. Conradie acknowledges the pastoral and ethical strengths of Tutu's Ubuntu-Cross synthesis but warns against the risk of doctrinal dilution. Conradie argues that when Ubuntu's communal emphasis becomes the primary lens for interpreting the Cross, there is a tendency to reduce Christ's

¹¹⁸ Desmond Tutu, "Ubuntu and Reconciliation," in *The African Voice: Essays in Honor of Desmond Tutu*, ed. M. Battle (Cape Town: David Philip, 2003), 112–125.

¹¹⁹ Battle, *Ubuntu: I in You and You in Me*, 94–112.

¹²⁰ Charles Villa-Vicencio, *The Theology of Reconciliation* (London: SCM Press, 2003), 88–102.

work to social ethics, thereby neglecting the atoning, eschatological, and transcendent dimensions of salvation¹²¹. Similarly, the researcher cautions that an overemphasis on communal reconciliation can inadvertently overshadow the uniqueness of Christ's person and work, potentially leading to a form of theological syncretism where Christ becomes one mediator among many in a pluralistic moral framework.

These critiques highlight a central tension in African contextual theology: how to maintain doctrinal fidelity while pursuing cultural relevance. Thaddeus Metz addresses this by distinguishing between Ubuntu as a moral theory and Ubuntu as a theological resource. Metz argues that Ubuntu can enrich Christian ethics without replacing Christological foundations, provided it remains subordinate to biblical revelation and historic Christian doctrine¹²². This nuanced position is echoed by Emmanuel Katongole, who accentuates that reconciliation in Christian theology must be grounded in the Cross's transformative power, not merely in human moral effort. Katongole warns against "cheap reconciliation" that bypasses truth, justice, and repentance, noting that true healing requires both divine grace and human accountability¹²³.

In the Nigerian context, these debates take on urgent practical significance. Nigeria's ethnic and religious divisions, political corruption, and systemic violence demand a theology that addresses both structural injustice and interpersonal brokenness. An Ubuntu-informed Christology offers a compelling framework for peacebuilding, placing so much value on restorative justice, community dialogue, and mutual responsibility. However, as scholars like C. Eze and J. N. K. Mugambi aver that Nigerian society also requires a robust theological foundation that upholds the uniqueness of Christ,

¹²¹ Conradie, *Integral Ubuntu*, 210–218.

¹²² Metz, *Ubuntu as a Moral Theory*, 380–390.

¹²³ Katongole, *Journey of Reconciliation*, 148–152.

the reality of sin, and the necessity of grace¹²⁴. Without these doctrinal anchors, reconciliation initiatives risk becoming mere conflict management strategies rather than transformative spiritual movements.

The scholarly consensus, therefore, leans toward a critical integration rather than uncritical adoption. Ubuntu should function as a hermeneutical lens that illuminates the communal and ethical dimensions of the Cross, not as a replacement for Christological doctrine. This requires theological humility, doctrinal clarity, and pastoral wisdom. Tutu's synthesis, while not without limitations, demonstrates how African theology can engage cultural resources without compromising core Christian convictions. The challenge for contemporary African Christology is to continue this dialogical project, ensuring that Ubuntu enriches rather than eclipses the gospel, and that the Cross remains both a symbol of divine love and a paradigm for communal transformation.

Reconciliation, Justice, and Social Transformation

The practical outworking of Tutu's Ubuntu-Cross synthesis is most visible in its emphasis on reconciliation, justice, and social transformation. In African theological discourse, reconciliation is not merely the cessation of hostilities but the active restoration of broken relationships, the healing of historical wounds, and the establishment of equitable social structures. Ubuntu provides the ethical grammar for this process, while the Cross provides the theological foundation. Together, they offer a paradigm for restorative justice that transcends punitive legalism and embraces communal healing.

Tutu's role in South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) exemplifies this theological vision. The TRC was not designed to punish perpetrators but to uncover the truth, facilitate confession, and promote forgiveness. Tutu's

¹²⁴ Eze, *Constructive Theology in the African Context*, 118–125; J. N. K. Mugambi, *Theology and Reconciliation in Africa* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2021), 225–240.

theological framing of the TRC drew heavily on Ubuntu and the Cross: Ubuntu valued the shared humanity of victims and perpetrators, while the Cross modelled divine forgiveness and the refusal to retaliate. This approach was groundbreaking in post-conflict theology, demonstrating how Christian faith could inform national healing without compromising justice¹²⁵. Scholars like Desmond Tutu and Antjie Krog have noted that the TRC's success lay in its willingness to prioritize truth and relational restoration over retribution, aligning closely with Ubuntu's ethical priorities¹²⁶.

However, the TRC model has also faced criticism. Scholars such as Richard A. Wilson and Mahmoud Mamdani argue that the TRC's focus on interpersonal reconciliation often overlooked structural injustice, economic inequality, and systemic violence¹²⁷. Mamdani, in particular, contends that political reconciliation without economic redistribution amounts to "cheap forgiveness," which fails to address the root causes of conflict. This critique is highly relevant for African theology, which must ensure that reconciliation initiatives do not become tools for maintaining unjust status quos. True reconciliation, from a theological perspective, requires both interpersonal healing and structural transformation¹²⁸.

In Nigerian contexts, the need for a robust reconciliation theology is urgent. Nigeria's history of colonial exploitation, military rule, ethnic sidelining, and religious polarization has created deep societal fractures. Contemporary conflicts, such as farmer-herder violence, Boko Haram insurgency, and

¹²⁵ Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, 110–130.

¹²⁶ Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow, and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 85–102.

¹²⁷ Richard A. Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 145–160; Mahmoud Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 270–285.

¹²⁸ Katongole, *Journey of Reconciliation*, 150–160.

political corruption, demand theological responses that address both spiritual and material brokenness. An Ubuntu-informed Christology offers a compelling framework: it stresses restorative justice, community dialogue, and mutual responsibility while grounding these efforts in the Cross's transformative power. Nigerian churches have significant potential to lead reconciliation initiatives, provided they adopt theologically sound and contextually sensitive approaches.

The Cross, in this framework, is not merely a symbol of forgiveness but a paradigm for transformative justice. It exposes systemic violence, identifies with the sidelined, and inaugurates a new communal reality grounded in grace. Stanley Hauerwas highlights that Christian reconciliation must be rooted in the church's distinctive witness, not merely in secular conflict resolution techniques¹²⁹. Equally, Nicholas Wolterstorff argues that justice and reconciliation are inseparable in Christian theology, as both flow from God's character and are enacted through Christ's work¹³⁰. These perspectives reinforce the need for a theology that integrates Ubuntu's communal ethics with the Cross's salvific and justice-oriented dimensions.

Practically, this means Nigerian churches and faith-based organizations must move beyond superficial peacebuilding to address structural inequality, political corruption, and historical injustice. Reconciliation initiatives should include truth-telling, restorative justice processes, economic empowerment, and theological education that grounds peace in the gospel. Mugambi asserts that sustainable peace requires both spiritual transformation and social restructuring, ensuring that reconciliation is not merely rhetorical but embodied in lived justice¹³¹.

¹²⁹ Stanley Hauerwas, *A Cross-Shaped Gospel: Christian Ethics and the Suffering of the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 78–95.

¹³⁰ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 120–135.

¹³¹ Mugambi, *Theology and Reconciliation in Africa*, 225–240.

The challenge for African theology is to maintain this balance: utilizing Ubuntu to foster communal healing while ensuring that reconciliation is grounded in the Cross's transformative power. This requires theological clarity, pastoral wisdom, and institutional commitment. When properly integrated, Ubuntu and the Cross offer a powerful framework for social transformation, addressing both the spiritual and material dimensions of human brokenness. In Nigeria, where division and violence persist, such a theology is not merely academic; it is a pastoral and social necessity.

Methodological Approaches to Christology Scholarship in Ubuntu

The methodological framework for studying the intersection of Ubuntu and Christology requires a nuanced, interdisciplinary approach that bridges theology, philosophy, ethics, and cultural studies. Hermeneutics, as a discipline concerned with interpreting texts within their historical and cultural contexts, provides a foundational methodology for this inquiry. Anthony Thiselton contends that hermeneutics must move beyond mere textual analysis to engage the lived realities of communities, ensuring that theological interpretation remains contextually grounded and spiritually transformative¹³². This approach is particularly relevant for African theology, where oral traditions, communal practices, and historical experiences shape theological understanding.

In contemporary African theological scholarship, hermeneutical methods are frequently employed to uncover how Ubuntu and Christology are read within particular cultural and doctrinal frameworks. Researchers utilise thematic coding, narrative synthesis, and comparative studies to trace how Ubuntu appears across theologians, communities, and traditions. Sakupapa notes that African theology often employs a hermeneutics of retrieval, seeking to recover indigenous ethical resources while critically engaging them with biblical

¹³² Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, 29–34.

revelation¹³³. Strengths of this hermeneutical approach include its cultural resonance, emphasis on lived theology, and ability to bridge academic and ecclesial discourse. By prioritising contextual interpretation, scholars can avoid imposing foreign theological frameworks on African communities and instead allow indigenous concepts to shape doctrinal understanding. This is particularly valuable in Nigeria, where pluralistic identities and historical trauma demand theological responses that are both authentic and transformative.

However, hermeneutical approaches to Ubuntu-Christology scholarship also face significant weaknesses. One major critique is the lack of empirical grounding. Much of the literature remains theoretical, relying on elite theological texts rather than grassroots voices. Future research must incorporate ethnographic methods, interviews with faith communities, and case studies of reconciliation initiatives to trace Ubuntu-Christology praxis beyond academic formulations. Without empirical data, theological claims risk becoming detached from lived realities, undermining their pastoral and social relevance.

Another methodological challenge is the tension between contextualization and doctrinal fidelity. Scholars like Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen caution that hermeneutical flexibility can sometimes lead to doctrinal drift, particularly when cultural concepts are uncritically adopted. Kärkkäinen advocates for a “dialogical contextualization” that maintains accountability to biblical revelation and historic Christian doctrine while remaining culturally sensitive¹³⁴. This requires methodological consistency: scholars must clearly distinguish between cultural retrieval and theological replacement, ensuring that Ubuntu serves as a hermeneutical lens rather than a doctrinal foundation.

¹³³ Sakupapa, "Ecumenical Ecclesiology in the African Context".

¹³⁴ Kärkkäinen, *Christology*, 75–80.

In Nigerian contexts, methodological pluralism is essential. Nigeria's ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity demands approaches that are both contextually adaptive and theologically coherent. There is a need for interdisciplinary methodologies that integrate theology, sociology, political science, and peace studies. This ensures that theological research addresses both spiritual and structural dimensions of conflict, offering holistic solutions rather than fragmented analyses.

Ultimately, the study of Ubuntu and Christology requires a balanced methodological framework: hermeneutical sensitivity to cultural contexts, empirical engagement with lived realities, doctrinal accountability to biblical revelation, and interdisciplinary collaboration for holistic analysis. When properly integrated, these methods enable African theology to address contemporary challenges without compromising core convictions. In Nigeria, where division and violence persist, such methodological rigour is not merely academic; it is a pastoral and social necessity.

Gaps in the Ubuntu and Christology and Research Implications

Despite significant scholarly progress in African theology, several critical gaps remain in the study of Ubuntu and Christology. First, there is an underdeveloped systematic Christology that integrates Ubuntu. While Ubuntu is widely discussed in ethical and social terms, its role in shaping a coherent, doctrinally grounded Christology remains under-examined. Conradie argues that most Ubuntu-Christology studies focus on ethics, reconciliation, or social justice, with limited engagement with classical Christological claims such as the hypostatic union, atonement, and eschatology¹³⁵. This gap risks reducing Christology to social ethics, neglecting its theological depth and salvific scope.

¹³⁵ Conradie, *Integral Ubuntu*, 210–218.

Second, contextualization challenges in Nigeria and similar pluralistic societies remain largely unaddressed. Nigeria's over 250 ethnic groups, multiple religious traditions, and complex political realities demand a theology that is both culturally sensitive and doctrinally coherent. However, current scholarship often treats African contexts as monolithic, failing to account for regional, ethnic, and denominational diversity. Scholars like Eze and Katongole appreciate the need for context-specific theological analyses that address Nigeria's unique challenges, including ethnic polarization, religious conflict, and systemic corruption¹³⁶. Developing such a theology is highly beneficial but requires interdisciplinary collaboration, grassroots engagement, and historical awareness.

Third, there is a significant deficit in empirical and practical research. Most Ubuntu-Christology studies remain theoretical, relying on elite theological texts rather than grassroots voices. Future research must incorporate ethnographic methods, interviews with faith communities, and case studies of reconciliation initiatives to trace Ubuntu-Christology praxis beyond academic formulations. This empirical turn will ensure that theological claims are grounded in lived realities, enhancing their pastoral and social relevance.

The implications of these gaps are profound. Without systematic Christological engagement, Ubuntu risks becoming a moral philosophy rather than a theological resource. Without contextual sensitivity, African theology may fail to address Nigeria's pluralistic realities. Without empirical grounding, theological scholarship risks academic detachment. Addressing these gaps requires methodological innovation, interdisciplinary collaboration, and theological humility.

Research implications include the need for doctrinally grounded contextual Christology, peacebuilding frameworks that integrate Ubuntu and the Cross, seminary curriculum

¹³⁶ Eze, *Constructive Theology in the African Context*, 118–125; Katongole, *Journey of Reconciliation*, 148–152.

reform that stresses both cultural retrieval and doctrinal fidelity, and empirical studies that trace Ubuntu-Christology praxis in Nigerian communities. Scholars must also engage in critical dialogue with global theological traditions, ensuring that African theology remains both contextually relevant and doctrinally accountable.

In Nigeria, where division and violence persist, addressing these gaps is not merely academic; it is a pastoral and social necessity. Theological research must move beyond theoretical formulations to offer practical, transformative frameworks that address both spiritual and material brokenness. By integrating Ubuntu's communal ethics with the Cross's salvific power, African theology can offer a compelling vision for reconciliation, justice, and social transformation.

Synthesis and Theoretical Positioning for The Study

This literature review frames a research trajectory that addresses both the promise and limitations of integrating Ubuntu into systematic Christology. The study is theoretically positioned within dialogical contextual theology, as articulated by Stephen B. Bevans, who articulated that mutual accountability between cultural context and biblical revelation¹³⁷. This approach avoids both cultural imperialism and theological isolationism, instead fostering a critical dialogue that honours indigenous wisdom while maintaining doctrinal fidelity.

Ubuntu is grounded in this framework as a relational ethics with real social implications, rather than as a standalone systematic theology. It functions as a hermeneutical lens that illuminates the communal, reconciliatory, and transformative dimensions of Christ's work, without replacing Christological doctrine. This positioning ensures that Ubuntu enriches rather

¹³⁷ Stephen B. Bevans, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019), 145–160.

than eclipses the gospel, maintaining theological coherence while pursuing cultural relevance.

The study also interrogates how Christology can be contextualized without sacrificing central doctrinal claims. Drawing on Kärkkäinen's global Christology and Conradie's critical Ubuntu theology, it argues for a balanced approach that respects both cultural authenticity and doctrinal integrity. This requires theological humility, pastoral wisdom, and methodological accuracy, ensuring that contextualization serves rather than supplants biblical revelation.

Nigeria's socio-political realities are positioned as a critical testing ground for reconciliation, justice, and community formation through theology. The study stresses that theological research must address lived experiences, promote healing, and build communal trust without neglecting hermeneutical and systematic approaches. This ensures that African theology remains both contextually resonant and doctrinally faithful.

The theoretical positioning of this study is thus dialogical, critical, and praxis-oriented. It seeks to bridge academic scholarship and ecclesial practice, ensuring that theological research addresses real human struggles while maintaining doctrinal accountability. By integrating Ubuntu's communal ethics with the Cross's salvific power, the study offers a compelling framework for reconciliation, justice, and social transformation in Nigeria and beyond.

Conclusion

The reflection on Christian theology in Africa underscores the ongoing challenge of remaining both contextually relevant and doctrinally faithful. Nigeria's realities, religious pluralism, ethnic tensions, and socio-political instability demand a theology that engages lived experience, promotes healing, and builds communal trust, without neglecting the theological principles of hermeneutical and systematic approaches. This study has critically examined Desmond Tutu's Christology through the Ubuntu framework, evaluating its relevance to

contemporary Nigerian society and its consistency within Christian theology.

The findings reveal that while Tutu's synthesis presents theological tensions, particularly regarding Christ's uniqueness and the atoning scope of the Cross, it offers a vital contextual model for African theology. Ubuntu's emphasis on communal identity, restorative justice, and relational healing enriches Christological discourse, provided it remains subordinate to biblical revelation and historic doctrine. The study concludes that theology in African contexts should integrate Ubuntu without losing the uniqueness of Christ. Scholars and church leaders must hold both community and salvation together, ensuring that the Cross remains both relational and redemptive.

Practical recommendations include strengthening doctrinal teaching in churches and seminaries to prevent reducing Christ's work to a mere social symbol. Contextual theology must remain rooted in lived experience, engaging African realities such as conflict, injustice, and broken relationships. Ubuntu can be carefully applied as a tool to speak to these wounds in ways that resonate with daily life. Additionally, reconciliation practices must be promoted within Nigerian communities, with churches and faith-based groups applying insights from Ubuntu and the Cross in practical peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and community healing.

Academically, this study contributes to theological scholarship and social thought in Nigeria by bringing Ubuntu into direct conversation with Christology in a way that speaks to real human struggles. It offers a fresh theological lens for understanding the Cross within Nigerian realities, provides a critical balance between contextual relevance and doctrinal fidelity, contributes to practical theology and nation-building, and demonstrates how theology can respond to ongoing societal fractures by framing the Cross as a paradigm for holistic transformation.

The debate remains active: How Christ is understood within specific cultures, how far African concepts can shape Christian doctrine, whether contextual approaches preserve or dilute core teachings, and how to balance culture with doctrinal authority. This study affirms that critical integration, not uncritical adoption, is the path forward. By maintaining theological humility, doctrinal clarity, and pastoral wisdom, African theology can offer a compelling vision for reconciliation, justice, and social transformation in Nigeria and beyond.

Sources.

- Bediako, Kwame. *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 112–130; John S. Pobee, *Towards an African Christology* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1976), 45–68.
- Bevans, Stephen B. *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019), 145–160.
- Christians, Clifford G. "Ubuntu and Communitarianism in Media Ethics," *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies* 25, no. 2 (2004): 235–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02560054.2004.9653296>.
- Conradie, Edwin M. *Integral Ubuntu: An African Contribution to Global Ethical Discourse*, 2nd ed. (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2018), 210–218.
- Eze, C. *Constructive Theology in the African Context* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018), 118; Katongole, *Journey of Reconciliation*, 148.
- Gathogo, John. *African Christian Identity and Violence: A Church-Qua-Violence Critique of Christian Ethics in Africa* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 56–65.
- Hauerwas, Stanley. *A Cross-Shaped Gospel: Christian Ethics and the Suffering of the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 78–95.
- Kalu, Ogbu. *African Christianity: An African Story* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2008), 145–160.
- Kärkkäinen, Veli-Matti. *Christology: A Global Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 65–82; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Christology: A Theological Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 110–125.
- Krog, Antjie. *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow, and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 85–102.
- Mbiti, John S. *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1969), 108; Mogobe B. Ramose, *African Philosophy through Ubuntu* (Harare: Mond Books, 1999), 50.
- Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 88–102.
- Metz, Thaddeus. *Ubuntu as a Moral Theory and Human Rights in South Africa: Theorizing Communitarianism* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017),

- 374–380; Michael Battle, *Ubuntu: I in You and You in Me*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Seabury Books, 2017), 12–18.
- Mugambi, Jesse N. K. “The Cross and the African Community,” in *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, ed. John D. K. (London: SCM Press, 1998), 142; Emmanuel Katongole, *The Journey of Reconciliation: Groaning for a New World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 140–152.
- Ramose, *African Philosophy through Ubuntu*, 48–65; Letseka, M. *In Defence of Ubuntu* (London: Routledge, 2018), 4–12.
- Sakupapa, Teddy C. “Ecumenical Ecclesiology in the African Context: Towards a View of the Church as Ubuntu,” *Scriptura* 117 (2018): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.7833/117-1-1384>.
- Thiselton, Anthony C. *Hermeneutics: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 29–34.
- Tutu, Desmond. “Ubuntu and Reconciliation,” in *The African Voice: Essays in Honor of Desmond Tutu*, ed. M. Battle (Cape Town: David Philip, 2003), 112–125.
- Tutu, Desmond. *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 31–45; Tutu, *God Is Not a Christian: And Other Provocations* (New York: HarperOne, 2016), 67–72.
- Villa-Vicencio, Charles. *The Theology of Reconciliation* (London: SCM Press, 2003), 88–102.
- Wilson, Richard A. *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 145–160; Mahmoud Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 270–285.
- Wolterstorff, Nicholas. *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 120–135.

Reimagining Ancestral Cosmology in Contemporary Nigerian Christianity: A Theological Analysis

Moses Kater Wuakera

Abstract

This study examines the place of ancestral cosmology within contemporary Nigerian Christianity and the theological questions arising from its renewed presence in the lives of many Christians. Although Christianity has expanded rapidly in Nigeria, many believers still interpret life, death, illness, protection, and destiny through inherited African categories. Yet most churches either reject these assumptions completely or accept them without adequate theological reflection. This has produced a divided religious consciousness in which many Christians profess biblical faith publicly while privately retaining traditional understandings of the spiritual world. While previous studies have focused mainly on inculturation and contextual theology, little attention has been given to the constructive reinterpretation of ancestral cosmology within Christian thought. This study addresses that gap by investigating how ancestral ideas may be reimagined within Nigerian Christianity without weakening central Christian doctrines. The study adopts a qualitative, hermeneutical approach. It draws on biblical texts, African theological literature, and selected Nigerian cultural narratives. The works of John Mbiti and Kwame Bediako provide the major framework for dialogue between African religious consciousness and Christian faith. The study finds that ancestral cosmology, when critically interpreted in the light of Scripture, can function as a theological resource rather than a doctrinal threat. It deepens

understanding of identity, community, and the relationship between the visible and invisible worlds. The study concludes that Nigerian Christianity requires a more integrated expression of faith that is both genuinely Christian and authentically African.

Keywords: *Ancestral Cosmology, Nigerian Christianity, African Theology, Inculturation, Identity, Spirituality*

Introduction

The rapid expansion of Christianity in Nigeria over the past century has transformed the country's religious, cultural, and socio-political landscape. Nigeria is now home to one of the largest Christian populations in Africa, with vibrant Pentecostal, charismatic, evangelical, and historic mission churches shaping public discourse, moral formation, and community life¹³⁸. Yet beneath this remarkable numerical growth lies a persistent and unresolved theological tension: many Nigerian Christians publicly confess allegiance to Christ, participate actively in ecclesial life, and affirm biblical doctrines, while privately interpreting existential realities, illness, infertility, death, misfortune, dreams, protection, and destiny, through inherited African cosmological frameworks¹³⁹. This divided religious consciousness is not merely a sociological curiosity; it represents a profound theological challenge that demands careful scholarly attention, pastoral sensitivity, and doctrinal clarity.

For many Nigerians, reality is not sharply bifurcated into the sacred and the secular or the material and the spiritual. Instead, the African worldview traditionally perceives existence as an integrated continuum encompassing God, ancestors,

¹³⁸ Ogbu U. Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 45–62.

¹³⁹ I. A. Chukwudebelu and G. C. Molokwu, "African Contextual Theology: A Holistic Response to Neo-Traditionalism in Igbo Society," *Journal of Media Culture and Communication* 2, no. 25 (2022): 22–24.