



**REFLECTION ON KING’S “BELOVED COMMUNITY” AND TUTU’  
UBUNTU THEOLOGY AND, IMPLICATIONS FOR MULTICULTURAL  
SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE**

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Abstract

*The theologies of Dr. Martin Luther King and Archbishop Desmond Tutu are both rooted in a shared communal and holistic African and African American spiritual heritage. Along with an unquestioned faith in God, the key organizing principle undergirding their spirituality and their political activism is the inviolable sacredness of the person-community relationship. Grounded in a communal-political spirituality both Dr. King and Archbishop Tutu challenged the United States and South Africa to confront the devastating and dehumanizing effects of segregation, apartheid, and other forms of social and economic injustice. It was also their theologies that promoted the idea that walking the path of compassion and reconciliation is the only means of healing the wounds caused by the devastating disease of social oppression. This paper will outline the essential elements found in the theologies of both men as well as discuss the implications for articulating a Christian-based moral and ethical foundation for multicultural social work practice.*

## Introduction

In the twentieth century two clergymen, both Noble Peace Prize recipients emerged as moral giants in the fight against racism and social injustice. These two men, Dr. Martin Luther King and Archbishop Desmond Tutu both whom stood firmly rooted in their Christian faith, accepted the challenge of restoring a society that was torn asunder by the violence of racism, segregation and discrimination. While King, as the key figure in America's Civil Rights movement is recognized for his leadership in the fight against segregation in the United States, Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu is internationally known as one of the key figures, along with Nelson Mandela and others, for his relentless fight against apartheid in South Africa. While these men are primarily known for their tireless work against racism within their respective countries, each over time recognized that the scope of their struggle needed to expand beyond the borders of their countries. As a result both men, with conviction, and courage began to address broader and international concerns related to human rights.

One of the key concepts in Dr. King's theology was the "The Beloved Community". Identified by many scholars as the cornerstone of his social philosophy the beloved community represented for Dr. King the interdependence of all humanity. It was the violation of this interdependence that he saw as the core of segregation. A segregated society represented a fractured society wherein this need for interdependence is replaced by the dominance of the powerful. Under such domination individual human aspiration is stifled, and human rights are trampled under the heel of injustice. In such a segregated society human relationships are not built upon mutual respect and reciprocity but upon a foundation of distrust and manipulation. Social ties are then marred and broken by acts of both social and physical violence.

For Dr. King it was only within the mutual dependency and cooperation found within his vision of the beloved community that human life could be actualized. And it was through such a community

where all men would come to respect the worth and dignity of others. In this beloved community one would encounter God's call to participate in a divine- human cooperative endeavor to bring about inclusivity, personal well-being and social harmony grounded in agape love and justice. This idea of the beloved community represented a moral mandate that gave Dr. King's direction in his efforts to challenge social injustice. Even though the idea of beloved community was clearly utopian in terms of it representing the eventual moral foundation for the social-political order in the United States none the less it was the ideal that motivated Dr. King in his tireless struggle for civil and human rights. For Dr. King, the beloved community represented not necessarily what society can be, but what it "ought" to be.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu's vision of the desired social order mirrored that of Dr. King's beloved community. Tutu's beloved community was expressed through the concept *Ubuntu*. Archbishop Tutu's Ubuntu theology is based upon a South African cultural world view that emphasizes the essential unity and interconnectedness of humanity and the importance of compassion, empathy, sharing and cooperation in human relationships. Ubuntu describes human identity as being extricable embedded in communal relationships. This self-communal identity is best described in the statement, "I am because we are and because we are I am". While Ubuntu thought represents a South African cultural world view Tutu incorporated the concept Ubuntu into his theological understanding of God's relationship with mankind and with the social order. Another application of Ubuntu thought by Tutu's was revealed in his leadership in the truth and reconciliation efforts in post-apartheid South Africa. The Truth and Reconciliation Councils were a means for dealing with the fear of possible post-apartheid conflict by involving the whole community in the process of meaningfully and proactively confronting the transgression and atrocities committed during the apartheid era. In these Truth and Reconciliation Council meetings, past wrongs and transgressions were acknowledged and brought out into the open so that the truth of what happened could be determined. It was through this venue both the perpetrators

of violence and the victims could acknowledge and share the pain of what occurred. Such sharing would provide, through a process of repentance, forgiveness and most importantly reconciliation the opportunity to establish and build social trust. Building social trust, would allow the participant to engage in the process of social healing and a sense of communal and national solidarity. For Tutu and other South Africans, these actions to promote social healing could only be successful if they were done in the spirit of Ubuntu.

In this paper we will explore the concepts of the beloved community and Ubuntu within the theology of both Martin Luther King and Desmond Tutu. The purpose of the exploration is to discern what significance these concepts have for multicultural social work practice, especially as both men addressed racism, injustice and oppression. Given the social work profession's continued and historical commitment to the human service needs of oppressed and vulnerable populations, it will be suggested that in the work and activism of Dr. King and Desmond Tutu, social workers can find ethical touchstones that can inform a Christian-based moral and ethical foundation for multicultural social work practice.

### **King and Beloved Community**

Dr. Martin Luther King's, "I Have A Dream" speech is considered to represent the essence of Dr. King's hope for a racially transformed society. This speech, delivered August 1963 at the Lincoln Monument in Washington, galvanized the American public behind the Civil Rights movement. In the brief yet profoundly significant speech, Dr. King spoke of a future social order in which human worth will be evaluated based on the content of one's moral character rather than one's racial classification. It was dream for a society, distinguished by its belief in the inherent dignity bestowed on all human beings by God. And most importantly, this dream society supports the building of interdependency among its citizens. This society is what Dr. King in many of his other writings and speeches referred to as the "beloved community". While this speech was inspirational and evoking national hope for the

actualization of King's dream, within a month following this expression of a dream, four girls attending Sunday school at the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist church in Birmingham Alabama were killed in a church bombing. This was not the only or last act of violence or loss of life associated with Dr. King and the Civil Rights movement. Yet even to the time of his assassination in 1968, Dr. King never abandoned his dream, nor his commitment to non-violence response to violence and his fundamental belief in the beloved community.

The concept of the beloved community was the cornerstone of Dr. King's theology, as well as the organizing principle, undergirding his activism. But it was not a concept that traced in its origins to the work and thought of Dr. King. It was a concept that had its origins in the work of philosopher Josiah Royce (1855-1916). Royce's description of the beloved community spoke to a moral principle by which a person's behaviors can be evaluated based upon the extent to which it encourages the establishment and enhancement of the Kingdom of God (Burrow, 2006). While Royce's work called for a form of individual commitment to build the Kingdom of God, the beloved community for Royce did not evoke an impulse to engage in social change to actually bring about the Kingdom of God.

Dr. King embraced this idea of the beloved community not as an abstract theological principle but as concept that could provide guidance in the actual struggle against segregation and discrimination. The principles embedded in this type of community could provide the overall and theological rationale for engaging in the Civil Rights struggle. Baldwin's (1995) analysis of Dr. King's understanding of the beloved community, identifies at least two essential principles which reflect Dr. King's understanding of the beloved community. These principles are: (1) a belief that God created and bestowed in each person inviolable dignity, worth and infinite value; (2) a belief that human fulfillment and the achievement of purpose can only be attained in a community grounded in agape love and guided by the principle of social justice. In addition to these two principles, Dr. King made reference to the "the great world

house” or the “world wide neighborhood”. This metaphor suggested a total integrated human family, unconcerned with human differences and devoted to the ethical norms of love justice and community (Burrow, 2009). These two principles and the metaphor of the great world house formed the substratum of the beloved community.

### *Imago Dei* and The Dignity and Worth of Persons

A key concept in Dr. King’s thought is *imago dei* or the image of God in man (Willis, 2009). It is the image shared by all. Through the act of creation all were created in God’s image. The God’s image resides in all represents the common denominator for all of humanity. It is the *imago dei* that represents our “sameness”, that connects us with our Creator, and that identifies us as a member of the same family. Being created in the image of God creates an understanding that there is “neither Greek nor Jew, male nor female, bond nor free”. Hence for Dr. King, the fact that God has bestowed His image in all, and where there is the mutual possession of the image of God, means that all are inseparably together at the deepest level. It is also through this “connection” that God can mend the broken relationship between men, especially those relationships marred by the reality of racism, oppression, and segregation.

Dr. King believed that God created all persons to live a special type of community, in which they are able to maintain their basic individuality and autonomy yet are interdependent. In such a community what impacts one, impact all. This community would have the type of moral and ethical foundation by which all persons, regardless of their social group membership (race, gender, class, ability age, nationality and sexuality) will be honored and treated with respect, just because they are human beings created in God’s imaged and loved by God.

With this understanding of God's intent and purpose for creating humankind, one can conclude that segregation was seen by Dr. King as a spiritual problem. Given King's understanding of *imago dei*, segregation is based on the supposition that God is created in man's image and that one's race and ethnicity become worthy of worship rather than God. Yet those who are in a sense "theological racist", would deny that they have created God in their image. Rather they would say that God placed His image **especially in them**, and that they are the chosen representatives of God as they are favored by him. They are his chosen people and their ethnic and racial classification has ontological status thus giving them a sense of divinely ordained superiority. It can be seen from this perspective, that racism reflects a distorted view of the relationship between God and man. If that relationship is distorted, then the man-to-man relationship will be equally distorted as well as community relationships. Such a distorted view of God on a societal level gives way to powers and principalities that engage humans in ethnocentric and racist practices. It is these practices that create divisiveness and hostility within God's creation.

### Communal Solidarity

According to Dr. King, God created man with a natural urge toward community, and being in community is what God requires of people. Though this is what God requires, community is not merely an aggregate of people sharing a type of communal space. Keith Cox (2010), in his work *The Beloved Community: Imago Dei as a Catalyst for Social Action*, compares the thought of Dr. King with the Swiss theologian Emil Brunner (1952). Brunner's understanding of *imago dei* includes four basic principles that address the significance of the beloved community for Dr. King. The first and fundamental principle that was previously discussed is that all men possess human dignity. Secondly, based on the state of divinely bestowed dignity, all men are then entitled to commensurate rights or equal treatment. The third principle is that *imago dei* endows all men with the capacity to be the creators of justice. Finally it is that justice coupled with agape love that forms the foundation of the beloved community.



The joining of agape love and justice can bring about thoroughly integrated communities in which persons are intentional about living in accordance with the meaning of agape love. Just bringing diverse groups of persons together in a community does not accomplish the goal of creating communities that approximate the beloved community. The members of the community must be intentional in joining together to live in ways that acknowledges and respect the humanity and dignity of every person. Additionally, they must be willing to work cooperatively to achieve, sustain, and enhance it as far as possible.

Chinulua (1997) further describes King's beloved community as being the communal space where its citizens are transformed by becoming imbued with a passion for peacemaking, justice and love. The soul of such a society is fed and kept healthy by its passion for love justice and peace. As such, the beloved community represented more than a desegregated society. For Dr. King, desegregation (while it gives attention to the elimination of segregation in areas such as public accommodation, education, housing and employment) still frames social relationships between the oppressor and the oppressed in negative terms. Desegregation does not truly speak to nor address the full participation of the oppressed in all areas of civic life. Desegregation is focused on a change in laws, whereas integration required a change in attitudes. King reflected that desegregation alone could not necessarily overcome spiritual segregation or segregation of the heart and mind.

It is important to note that Dr. King was not only concerned about the civil rights of African Americans. He was concerned about all Americans and all of humanity. As referred to earlier, the core to the idea of the beloved community was the social interdependence of human nature. A phrase that Dr. King used which captured this idea and an idea expressed by Desmond Tutu is "we are tied together in a single garment of destiny caught in an inescapable network of mutuality". For Dr. King, injustice within the community impacted the viability of such a community for "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice

everywhere. “ This beloved community is inclusive in that it is truly a “world house”. Given the inclusive nature of the beloved community Dr. King (toward the latter part of his activism) became committed to addressing broader human rights issues in the “world house” including anti- war activism and poverty.

King was not utopian in his thoughts about the beloved community. King was aware that while God created persons with an urge toward community, the beloved community does not happen automatically. Due to man’s freedom and autonomous moral nature man has the capacity for evil. Given King’s realistic understanding of doctrine of human nature he believed that man can only move toward an approximation of the beloved community. Yet as an ideal, the beloved community represented more than the goal of social justice. In striving for the beloved community those formally separated by segregation could possibly experience liberation, reconciliation and redemption.

### **Ubuntu Philosophy: A South African View of Community**

As the concept the beloved community, gained prominence in the civil rights movement, the concept Ubuntu regained prominence in post- apartheid South African. Following the demise of the repressive political regime of apartheid in 1994 and the release of Nelson Mandela who had been incarcerated on Robben Island for 26 years, South Africans were faced with the task of building a post-apartheid society. Remarkably what was seen in South Africa, under the guidance of President Nelson Mandela and men such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu was the emergence of a new non- racist “rainbow nation”. Facing the awesome task of creating such a society composed of eleven ethnic and linguistic groups, (including Afrikaans and English), South Africa put forth one of the most progressive national constitutions in the world. This constitution honored the rights of all people, in its language of “non- racialism, and non-sexism. Throughout the country were signs in public buildings with the phrase “Batho Pele”, which translated to mean “People First” .What marked this transition, or transformation without the violence and reprisal that many feared coming from the hands of the formally repressed black South

Africans, was that the architects of the new South Africa returned to an ethical, social, spiritual and philosophical concept that was a part of the indigenous cultural worldview of South African. This concept is Ubuntu.

To understand the meaning of the word Ubuntu, one can look at its linguistic origins. The term comes from a linguistics group of Sub-Saharan languages known as Bantu. Both words Ubuntu and Bantu can be recognized by the common root *ntu* (human). The prefix *ba* denotes the plural form for humanity. In short the term Ubuntu means personhood or human being or what it means to be human. The Zulu phrase “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” means that a person is a person through other persons. Another phrase which speaks to the meaning of Ubuntu is “I am because we are and because we are I am”. It is a concept that is not unique to South African cultures. Rather, the sense that self identity is formed and understood within the matrix of community life is a belief that is found in other African cultures. Yet it is a concept that became a part of the South African consciousness as the nation recovered from the social devastation thrust upon it through apartheid.

The principle of Ubuntu helped to redefine the meaning of personhood as well as establish the framework for social, political, business and even spiritual relationships within the new South Africa. It was a concept used by Thabo Mbeki, the South African President, after Nelson Mandela, as the basis for an anticipated African Renaissance or the rebirth of the progressive elements in African Culture. In fact, the South African Government’s “White Paper on Welfare”, uses the concept ubuntu to inform a model of social welfare when it stated: “the principle of caring for each other’s well being...and a spirit of mutual support. Each individual’s humanity is ideally expressed through his or her relationship with others and theirs in turn through recognition of the individual’s humanity. Ubuntu means that people are people through other people. It also acknowledges both the rights and responsibility of every citizen in promoting individual and societal well-being” .

Ubuntu as a cultural world view highlights the essential unity of humanity and emphasizes the principles of empathy, sharing and cooperation in efforts to resolve social problems and social conflicts. The guiding principles referred to by Desmond Tutu in his efforts to rebuild community through the Truth and Reconciliation Councils were derived from his understanding of Ubuntu. Barbara Nussbaum, (2003) a proponent of Ubuntu, and who attempts to apply the concept in a corporate environment describes Ubuntu as the capacity in African culture to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, and humanity in the interest of building and maintaining community. Those who ascribe to Ubuntu as a guiding principle state that it calls on us to believe and feel that: your pain is my pain, my wealth is your wealth, and your salvation is my salvation. In essence Ubuntu addresses our interconnectedness, and our common humanity. Ethically Ubuntu speaks to the responsibility we have to each other and that this responsibility flows from our connection and interdependence.

One might raise the question that if Ubuntu speaks to the indigenous African experience of communal responsibilities how does one explain the ethnic warfare, violence, and government exploitation that appears to be rampant throughout the continent of Africa. According to Nussbaum, the eclipse of Ubuntu as the foundation of African societies has darkened the spirit of modern-day African political systems. But Nussbaum along with others strongly believed that Ubuntu must be revived and embraced as a vital part of the African renaissance and Africa's contribution to help a divided, fragmented world.

### Desmond Tutu and Ubuntu Theology

Desmond Tutu, the clergyman and devote Christian appropriated and embraced Ubuntu thought and identified the natural synergy between Christianity and Ubuntu. In this sense Tutu has created a synthesis of the African spirituality of Ubuntu and Christianity forming an Africanized relational spirituality (Battle, 2009). For Tutu Ubuntu is a "theological concept in which human beings are called to

be persons because they are made in the image of God and created by God to be interdependent.” For Tutu, evidence of the relationship of Ubuntu to the Christian narrative is found in the creation story of Adam and Eve. Here there is a clear indication that man has the need for and is created for interdependency. According to Tutu relationships are central to acquiring our humanity and we are created by God to be more cooperative than competitive. We are meant to be with each other and for each other. That is what it means to be human. For Tutu, a meaningful solitary existence is a contradiction and a self-sufficient existence is counter to man’s need for interdependency.

For Tutu, God’s redemption story reflects Ubuntu. Unity, love and reconciliation are the goal of the universe. As Tutu believes, the unity of the entire creation was God’s intention from the very beginning of creation. For Tutu, the primal state of the universe was harmony, unity and fellowship. It was sin that destroyed this unity and created a state of alienation especially within the community of mankind. As Tutu understands Scriptures, he would say people were created by God for togetherness and for fellowship. From this point of original sin there has been cosmic movement toward the restoration of this original unity and reconciliation (Battle 2009). Because of sin and brokenness, creation cries out for reconciliation and restoration. Jesus was sent by God to bring unity, harmony and to restore human community and brotherhood in which sin destroyed. From this perspective, apartheid represents the state of sin and brokenness. For this ideology of racial separation says that people are created for separation, alienation, division, disharmony, and disunity.

Tutu’s understanding of *imago dei* is similar to Dr. King’s beloved community. Tutu said that each person is not just to be respected but to be revered as one is created in God’s image. For both King and Tutu the *imago Dei* denotes the onto-relational theological reality with universal moral binding power. For both of them, the *imago Dei* reflects infinite value of a person as a child of God. The *imago dei* also means a fundamental solidarity among human beings as children of the same God. In that the

same image of God resides in all human beings then all are interrelated. Here the *imago dei* constitutes a universal human identity, deeper than any racial ethnic, and/or cultural identity. God is the source of both individuality and community. In God everyone is unique, yet at the same time interrelated. Each person derives a sense of personhood from others in a network of reciprocal, caring and supportive relationships. There is clearly a distinction between a Western and African-African American understanding of *imago dei*. In a Western context *imago dei* highlights the individual and inner spiritual nature. In an African and African American context, *imago dei* emphasizes both the individual and communal dimensions of human existence, as well as the sense of social responsibility that emerges from this interconnection.

### **Desmond and King: A comparison**

For both King and Tutu the gospel cannot be neutral to injustice and oppression. Neither King nor Tutu separated their theological principles from social issues. Each believed that God sides with the poor and oppressed. The world cannot be ethically neutral because God is a moral God. What happens in all domains of human life has equal significance for God. Both King and Tutu had the firm conviction that God is moral and that the universe is governed by a moral order; and that right and wrong do matter. God is not only concerned about individual salvation but also the redemption of socio-political systems and economic conditions- God is not neutral who abstains from mundane realities of human conflict; but is compassionate, involved and active (Lee, 2006).

God is the liberator God of Exodus and God continues to set people free from all kinds of bondage so that nothing can thwart God's goals. God, as revealed in Jesus, profoundly cares about the plight of the poor, dispossessed and powerless. The resurrection of Jesus proclaims that right will prevail. Goodness love and justice are not illusory but are moral realities of God. Both proclaimed through their words and actions that the Gospel is subversive of all injustice and evil. There is the reality

of hope and reforming possibilities of human beings; and society and man is endowed with potential to be good in spite of the existence of evil. By turning the perpetrators into evil demons we absolve them from any responsibility to be good or moral and no hope for moral rehabilitation

For both Dr. King and Archbishop Tutu the organizing principle for their vision, ideas and practice was community. For Tutu, a new South African must not only represent a nonracial, just and democratic society. More significant for Tutu, the spirit of Ubuntu facilitates bringing the white Afrikaans, the Black South African and the Indian South African together into an interdependent society. It would be through this interdependence with others that all would experience the fullness of God's creation and the fulfillment of mankind. For Tutu as for King, no one can be a human alone, for a human being can only be a human being in community. Thus being intertwined in a communal network of relationships, the suffering and dehumanization of one impacts others; and the one who dehumanizes is dehumanized.

King and Tutu believed that segregation and apartheid was a sin because both ideologies separated people into artificial racial categories. To abolish segregation and apartheid was not an end in and of itself; but it was a way toward the ultimate goal of unity and love in God which could be achieved through the type of reconciliation expressed in 2 Corinthians 5: 17-21.

*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! As this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sin against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

## **Ethics and Multicultural Social Work Practice**

Both Dr. King and Archbishop Tutu dedicated their lives to bringing healing to a society fractured and broken by the hammer of racial oppression. They further displayed considerable compassion and concern for those who were the victims of racial oppression. The actions of both men were grounded in a Christian world view; in which they were motivated by an obligation to do the will of God in bringing about a society that reflected God's love and compassion for His creation. It was because of their desire to do God's Will, their work was driven by an ethical mandate to do what they could to contribute to building a social order, in which all could live in peace and harmony regardless of race, ethnicity, gender and social class. Such a mandate is compatible with the core values of professional social work.

Whereas an individual professional social worker may attribute their calling to the social work profession, as reflective of their faith commitments; contemporary social work derives its core values from a secular- based code of ethics, and its practice theories from the social and behavioral sciences. Historically social work's moral justification was grounded in a Christian worldview that emphasized the values of love and justice (Lieby, 1985, Reamer, 1998, Sherwood, 2007). Contemporary social work, though grounded in a secular worldview, continues to maintain an ethical framework that provides a moral justification for its concern for the oppressed. This movement from a theological justification for the core values of social work, in part represents the professionalization of social work. In striving for and maintaining professional status, social work has had to be assured that its knowledge base and its ethical foundation could withstand the scrutiny of the various forms of contemporary theoretical and ethical analyses. Yet Sherwood (2007) questions whether the loss of a theological and philosophical foundation for social work ethics can support a compelling argument for a sustained moral obligation to help the poor and the oppressed.

What is being suggested is that the theological perspectives of Dr. King and Archbishop Tutu have the potential of contributing to developing a faith-based ethical perspective for multicultural social



work practice. Based on the work of Dr. King and Archbishop Tutu, what is being modestly proposed is an ethic of reconciliation which can expand social work's response to those impacted by racism and discrimination.

### Theoretical Perspectives in Multicultural Social Work Practice

The social work profession has recognized cultural competent practice as an ethical and professional responsibility. While it can be said that cultural awareness and sensitivity is a minimal expectation for a professional social worker, the desired goal of professional social work education is to establish in the professional social worker a level of cultural competence. According to Green (1999), a culturally competent social worker must:

- be aware of their own cultural bias
- be aware of cultural differences and critical cultural values important to clients
- understand indigenous models of helping
- be able to identify and utilize cultural resources
- be able to maintain cultural integrity in the designing, utilization, and implementation of social services.

Understanding and valuing a client's cultural background and cultural world view, is both an ethical and professional mandate. Teaching and training social workers to develop cross-cultural knowledge, skills and values has primarily focused on providing factual and descriptive data about the culturally different client's worldview and how they view and operate within their social and emotional world from their unique, cultural and ethnic perspective. Additionally there is an examination of the historical, economic, and political factors that support, sustain and maintain these cultural, ethnic and racial differences. This examination is supplemented by an understanding of the socio-political impact of those differences as factors that contribute to the client's experiences of disempowerment, and social

injustice, e.g. issues of poverty, access to jobs, and involvement in the criminal justice system, etc. The outcome of such an approach to teaching diversity has been to provide frameworks for social work practitioners that would enable them to understand the culturally different client in their multiple environments.

There are several perspectives and practice models that inform cultural competence practice. Anderson and Carter (2003) edited a concise yet comprehensive work that summarizes some of the major perspectives and frameworks that form the theoretical foundations for culturally competent social work practice interventions. Viewing the *Strengths Perspective* and the *Empowerment Perspective* as the core and integrating perspectives, the following perspectives and frameworks reflect ways in how social workers understand and work with the culturally different client.

The *Ethnocultural Perspective* for example, draws the social worker's attention to the value orientation of the ethnically different client and the unique cultural worldview of a particular client population. What is significant about ethnocultural practice models is that they sensitize the social worker to understand the realities of the client perspective as they seek to adjust and adapt to a culturally different world

The next perspective presented by Anderson and Carter (2003) gives attention to the realities of marginalization, oppression, and powerlessness experienced by those who are members of racial and ethnic minority groups. This *Oppression Perspective* generates those practice models that focus on supporting the racially or ethnically different client in developing a sense of resiliency in the face of oppression. This goal can be achieved by the client becoming politically and culturally empowered, and developing an ethnic and cultural identity that can act as a buttress against oppressive environments.

The final perspective presented by Anderson and Carter is the *Vulnerable Life Situation Perspective*. This perspective addresses those client populations who, because of their ethnic or cultural identity and

experience of marginalization, find themselves in disempowering life situations such homelessness, poverty, and abuse. Such life situation renders these clients as being “populations-at-risk.”.

Other social work perspectives that give attention to practice with racial minority clients has emerged from the work of Canadian, British and Australian social workers (Hick, Fook, Pozzuto, 2005; Lundy, 2004; Yee, 2005). Grounded in structuralism, Marxist, and other critical theories, these theorists and practitioners focus on anti-racism as the key theoretical platform to challenge anti-oppressive practices. Racism is understood as the primary social structure of oppression reflecting a “system of domination [that] maintains power by everyone’s inability to seriously challenge, notice, or even question how the status quo works” (Yee, 2005, pg 89). This literature suggest that theoretical orientations that support cultural competency, ethnic sensitivity, and multiculturalism tend to objectify the culturally, racially, and ethnically different not as real people but as the “other”; clients or what may euphemistically be called “those people”. Additionally, these multicultural perspectives, according to these anti-racist theorists, never challenge the power differential and social distance between the social worker and the client. Thus multicultural and cross-cultural theorist are not really engaged in changing the pre-existing racialized and racist formulations of difference that are etched in the social structure. In spite of the intervention of the “culturally competent” or “multicultural” practitioner, such racist formulations remain virtually intact. Theories of cultural competence, according to these anti-racist theorists, do not necessarily call for the practitioner to critically interrogate their social location, their belief system or worldview.

For anti-racist theories the culturally competent social work practice models are not really about change of the basic structure of society. Social workers who use this conceptual framework of multiculturalism and cultural competence have compromised their ability to fully understand the lived experience of racism of the racially different client. In other words, according to the anti-racist theorist,

the culturally competent social worker wants to maintain a society which supports and grants them privilege. In many respects the critique issued by the anti-racist theorist, is as much an ethical critique as it is theoretical. In essence the cultural competent perspectives that they employ fail to address the immoral and unjust systems that perpetuate racism and oppression. These cultural competence perspectives may help clients become more empowered but they ignore the need to make the society less oppressive.

Cross cultural and anti-racist social work practice clearly enable a social work practitioner to address issues of racial, ethnic, and cultural “difference” in a social work practice context. These theories, perspectives and practice models provide a solid framework for understanding the socioeconomic, political and psychosocial dynamics of racism and oppression. The question becomes to what extent these approaches to culturally competent practice support, augment or enhance a Christian perspective on culturally competent practice? Another question is how can Christian social workers incorporate these multicultural and culturally competent theories from their position of faith? For example, would the concept of “empowerment” or “strength” mean something different for a social worker practicing from a Christian perspective than for a non-Christian social worker? Does one’s strength solely come from the mobilization of inner psychological resources or tapping the psychological reservoirs of resilience? Or does one’s strength to cope with problems of living come from God?

By using a worldview analysis, as a means of understanding worldview perspectives (Colson & Pearcey, 1999; Pearcey, 2004; Potter, 1997; Sire, 2004), it can be clearly seen that the Christian worldview is distinctly different from other theoretical perspectives. There are obviously a different set of assumptions and presuppositions undergirding a Christian worldview as compared with non-Christian worldviews if we understand a worldview as a “set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true,

partially true or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic makeup of the world” (Sire, 2004, p. 19).

If we examine much of social work theories of cross-cultural practice (or any theories emerging from the socio-behavioral sciences) we see that they are grounded in a relativist, secular and naturalistic worldview. In a worldview analysis of multiculturalism, Colson & Pearcey (1999) state:

*“As a consequence of relativism, the naturalist treats all cultures as morally equivalent, each merely reflecting its own history and experiences...postmodernism and multiculturalism are firmly rooted in naturalism, for if there is not a transcendent source of truth or morality, then we find our identity only in our race, gender, or ethnic groups. But Christian can never equate truth the limited perspective of any group. Truth is God’s perspective as revealed in Scripture.” (21).*

Expanding on this statement by Colson and Pearcey, it is often difficult for an individual social work practitioner to interrogate the cultural practices of certain cultural, ethnic or “racial” groups as being problematic for members of that group. There is a difficulty in applying a criterion of morality to certain cultural practices, for fear of violating the integrity of that culture or being seen as **imposing** another cultural standard on the cultural or ethnic group under observation. As a result, such a hesitancy generated by a secular or relativist worldview creates a barrier for people of different worldviews to understand the limited nature of their racial, gender or ethnic perspective as compared to a “transcendent source of truth and morality”. That is, a source of truth that is based upon an understanding of divine revelation.

As suggested above, the issue of cultural competence is also an ethical issue. The current literature on social work ethics gives attention to the process of ethical decision making, ethical dilemmas and risk management concerns. The NASW code of ethics further identifies the principles that undergird culturally competent social work practice. Addressing similar concerns about theoretical base for social

work ethics as Colson & Pearcey (1999), Sherwood, (2007) argues that social work ethics requires a more robust and durable philosophical foundation than subjectivism, rationalism, modernism, naturalism, or what postmodernism can provide. He states that the social work profession needs a theological foundation for its ethical code. Such an ethical foundation can justify and establish moral obligations and apply them to all human persons and that transcends such distinctions as gender, family, ethnic group, nation, or race. He suggests that a divine command theory of moral obligation is just the kind of foundation that social workers need for our ethical obligation to seek justice for the good of others. He then refers to the work of Evans (2006) who argues for a religious meta-ethical divine command theory of the universal obligation to love others. This theory resonates with the theologies of Dr. King and Desmond Tutu.

There is another element present in the works of both Dr. King and Desmond Tutu that is missing in the multicultural approaches suggested above. This missing element is that these practices theories do not address the fundamental causes of racial divisiveness nor a suggestion as to how to mend such divisiveness. Though the anti-racist perspective places the cause of racial divisiveness as embedded in the structural inequities within society, their rationale involves a more basic critique but not necessarily a strategy or an ethical mandate for change of the divisive racial discourse in society. It is suggested that not only King and Tutu rely on a transcendent and moral order; they suggest a way to solve this racial divisiveness through racial reconciliation.

### An Ethic of Racial Reconciliation

There are many contemporary representatives of the ethics and theology of racial reconciliation (Battles, 1997; Campolo & Battle, 2005; Deddo, 1997; McNeil & Richardson, 2004; Sharp, 2002; Washington and Kehrein, 1997). In these works there are several common themes that are essential elements of this ethical and theological perspective, the first of which is understanding racism as a sin. If

racism is a sin, then addressing that sin requires repentance. We must repent of the sin that has estranged us from God and one another. We must acknowledge that our racist ways of living have repudiated God and dehumanized others by having deprived them of their dignity and worth as God creation (Sharp 2002). Repentance though is not a cognitive or emotional event but it is a way of living in a society that embodies varying manifestations of racism. It is a way of living that contest the existence of racism whenever and wherever it occurs.

Most importantly though, after repentance, there must be forgiveness. The Truth and Reconciliation efforts in South African was based in the assumption that reconciliation would occur once the truth is told – the truth about the horrendous acts of violence committed by the apartheid government against the black, colored, and Indian peoples of South Africa. What happened is that some of the perpetrators of violence spoke the truth of what they committed, but did not ask for forgiveness for what they did. This did not set well with some people. In Archbishop Tutu's book, ***No Future Without Forgiveness*** (1999) the title suggests that the future for a society torn apart by racism cannot move forward toward reconciliation unless there is repentance and forgiveness.

There is often the question of what is first repentance or forgiveness. Sharp, (2000) addresses this issue when he states:

*"My forgiveness of you is not contingent upon your repentance to me: that is over-against relation. Rather my forgiveness is expressed with and for your expression of repentance and my obligation is to forgive whether you repent or not; your obligations is to repent whether I forgive or not. But we remain over-against in estrangement unless repentance and forgiveness are both expressed in our relation. Reconciliation is expressed when we each discern that repenting and forgiving are ways of living together and that we each are enabled by the transforming Spirit to repent and to forgive."* (289)

In the above quote there is another element that is critical to racial reconciliation. It is the developing of reconciling relationships. Reconciliation is a way of being- with the "other". It is a way of

living that requires that we actually live in relationship with others in order to overcome estrangement, animosity and indifference. Reconciling relationship is the cornerstone of establishing the beloved community or building the Ubuntu society.

We can also see in the work of King and Tutu that reconciliation brings about sociocultural transformation. Reconciliation is not merely an individual matter, or an interpersonal relational reality between groups of individuals. Reconciliation should occur in the midst of the social order not on the periphery. Living a life of reconciliation involves challenging the social, political, and cultural manifestations of racism. While racial reconciliation changes the heart, it should further prompt those engaged in the work of interpersonal reconciliation to work in society in bringing about the beloved community or a community and society in which the *imago dei* is acknowledged and celebrated marginalized.

As we understand the ethics of racial reconciliation we come to understand that reconciliation is the work of God and happens best in the presence and power of God. Reconciliation is above all in the work of Christ on the cross which means that reconciliation is not only vertical but horizontal as well. Not only are we called to reestablish our connection with God vertically but horizontally we are called to reestablish our connection with each other. Racial reconciliation occurs when we experience forgiveness from God and from each other. Here we can envision and create the possibility of a new future together as members of the beloved community or an Ubuntu society. This beloved society or Ubuntu community does not call for us to abandon our sense of cultural and racial identity. It calls for putting our identity in perspective. Reconciliation means rejecting and abandoning false and idolatrous identities which are grounded in racial or cultural formulations, for a healthier sense of racial and cultural identity. Racial reconciliation supports an identity that acknowledges both our unique



differences and our *imago dei*. Most importantly, an ethic of racial reconciliation calls for the establishment of reconciled relationships.

### Reconciliation in Christian-based Multicultural Social Work Practice

Social workers are ethically obligated to be aware of their own cultural bias as well as be aware of the cultural differences and critical cultural values important to clients. As social workers give attention to empowering the disempowered clients they must not ignore those disempowering societal “powers and principalities” that systematically create forms of alienation from significant others and from the broader community.

There are those situations in which the alienating factors are caused by segregation and discrimination based on race. In these situations the social worker is challenged to address those issues in ways that ameliorate the suffering caused by those alienating forces of racism. As the anti-racist theorist suggested, unaware social workers may replicate racism and oppression by their failure to understand their social and political location within the powerful and compelling matrix of those social dynamics that embody and reinforce racist practices.

Without a theoretical and moral perspective that is based upon a transcendent understanding of the nature of man, and his purpose on earth, one cannot reasonably engage in a moral or ethical critique of the social dynamics that create racist oppressive social orders. Nor can one reasonably develop compelling strategies to bring about change in those oppressive social orders without relying on perspectives that lack transcendent moral justification. Both King and Tutu recognized that rationales for change developed by the human intellect were insufficient and did not have moral substance to create or sustain change. For King and Tutu the rationale and justification for social change had to be drawn from the source of the created order-God. It was God they turned to for the power, the strength, the courage and the insight to engage in social change and racial reconciliation.

In working with multicultural clients social workers are challenged, as the anti-racist theorist suggest, to be aware of how their social location and those biases' and prejudices associated with their location may replicate racist and oppressive practices. Such a position objectifies the client as the "multicultural other" and thus can maintain a form of alienation.

For a Christian social worker, seeing a client foremost as embodying the image of God and understanding one's self as embodying that same image can create the horizontal dimensions of reconciliation. This understanding creates the common bond between the social worker and the client. This is even more important when working with a client who is different in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status etc. Reconciliation in this context helps add clarity to the direction needed for multicultural practice. This provides a step toward reconciliation with the client that reflects the ethical values of a Christian-based multicultural practice. This is reconciliation on a micro level in that it is relational between persons –it is the source of human connection. The helping relationship becomes a microcosm of the caring, supportive, and reconciled community.

With King and Tutu, reconciliation is most importantly vertical in that it involves a reconnection with God through Jesus. It is a return to the source and strength of our lives. It is the foundation upon which we are sustained through the rough moments in our personal, interpersonal and social lives. It is by this form of reconciliation, or reconnection with God that reconnects us with the values that guide us as multicultural practitioners. Such reconciliation with God also provides guidance for the expansion of our interventions to include approaches that reflect not only principles gleaned from theories of social work practice, but allowing those theories to be informed by biblical principles.

If Christian social workers are to incorporate the work of King and Tutu into their theoretical and ethical perspective then they can augment their work by attending to the suggestion of Washington and Kehrein (1997) eight Biblical principles for reconciliation which are:

1. **Call:** As Christians we are called to a ministry of reconciliation, and we are commended by scripture to reconcile with each other across racial, cultural and denominational barriers.
2. **Commitment to Relationships:** As we are loved by God and adopted into His family we are called to committed relationship with our brothers.
3. **Intentionality:** Reconciliation requires purposeful, positive and planned activities that facilitate reconciliation and right relationships
4. **Sincerity:** There must be a willingness to be vulnerable and express our feeling, attitudes, differences, and perceptions, with the goal of resolution and building trust.
5. **Sensitivity:** Seeking knowledge about our brothers and sisters in order to related empathetically to people from different traditions, races, social standing or cultures is necessary.
6. **Sacrifice:** Reconciliation involves a willingness to give up an established status or position to accept a lesser position in order to facilitate reconciling relationships
7. **Empowerment:** Barriers can be removed through prayer, repentance and forgiveness and through such we are free to experience the power of the Holy Spirit in reconciling relationships
8. **Interdependence:** As differences are recognized we also realize that God has placed us as members in the body of Christ where we need and depend on the contribution of each member.

In summary as Perkins and Rice (1993) state: *"neither love nor truth alone takes us further than the color of our skin...Alone, truth is powerless to heal. And love alone is equally powerless. Brought together, however, they become spiritual dynamite that can bread down walls"*(190). Social workers through their education and professional commitments have an ethical orientation, a knowledge base, and practice skills that support culturally competent practice. In addition to this knowledge, ethical and skill set, Christian social workers have the moral mandate to be ambassadors Christ in efforts toward creating an environment of racial reconciliation. It is suggested in this presentation that the work of Dr.

King and Archbishop Tutu offers relevant concepts, and ethical perspective grounded in community which can support Christian social workerx in not only multicultural or competent practice but also racial healing and most importantly, racial reconciliation.

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