South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the Light of *Ubuntu*: A Comprehensive Appraisal

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**1 The TRC as Catalyst for Communion**

In this chapter I provide a moral appraisal of the South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in the light of the indigenous\(^1\) sub-Saharan values from which it largely sprang,\(^2\) namely, those associated with talk of “*ubuntu*” in the Nguni languages of Zulu, Xhosa, and Ndebele as well as cognate terms such as “*botho*” in Sotho-Tswana. These terms literally mean humanness or human excellence, and serve as catchwords for complex African ideals that prize relationships such as communion, harmony, and cohesion. Which conception of national reconciliation follows from these relational values, and to what extent did the TRC further it? Could the TRC have done so more than it did, had it been configured somewhat differently? Given how discordant and fragmented South African currently is with respect to race, would a new TRC be useful?

I answer all these questions here, and do so by appealing to a philosophical interpretation of *ubuntu*. Instead of taking a given African people’s understanding of *ubuntu* for granted, I draw on values and norms associated with it by an array of traditional southern African peoples in order to articulate a basic and comprehensive moral principle, one that even many outside the indigenous sub-Saharan tradition could find attractive. That is, I advance an interpretation of *ubuntu* that promises to serve as a public morality for a post-independence, multicultural South Africa (though not only it).

After spelling out *ubuntu* as a contemporary social ethic, I indicate how it grounds a novel, communal conception of national reconciliation that is distinct from accounts that South Africa’s Constitutional Court and other thinkers

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\(^1\) By “indigenous,” “traditional,” and related terms, I mean black African cultures insofar as they were not influenced by those from other continents such as Europe and the Middle East.

have invoked, and I use it to evaluate the TRC. I argue that the TRC did help to effect some reconciliation across racial groups in South Africa, that South Africans were better off in terms of their relationships for having had the TRC.

However, it is extremely clear that a communal reconciliation was far from fully effected, and that, if anything, in the past few years there has been a backslide. While I do argue that the TRC could have done more, had it been more wide-ranging in its approach, I also maintain that there were limits to what it could have realistically been expected to do on its own. I argue that many other agents, particularly large groups of white people and major businesses, could and should have much more actively taken up the cause of advancing reconciliation.

Despite the limits of the TRC, I conclude, with others such as Graca Machel, Yacoob Abba Omar, and the South African Council of Churches, that it probably merits being revived in some way to address the current crisis of racial alienation and even hostility, especially between those of African and European descent. There needs to be a forum in which people of different races listen to each other's experiences and perspectives, as well as one in which an authoritative body describes how South Africa has arrived at its fractured state and prescribes how it could progress towards something more integrated, both socially and economically. Such a forum would, again, hardly be sufficient to achieve a communal reconciliation fully, but it could serve as a spark, prompting government departments, businesses, universities, civil society organizations, and individuals in their day to day lives to do more as well.

A number of my recommendations will be familiar to those acquainted with the literature on the TRC. What I intend to be most revealing in this chapter, beyond providing a big picture of what was achieved and what was not with respect to reconciliation, is demonstrating how all the prescriptions can be grounded upon a concrete understanding of reconciliation as informed by an ubuntu ethic. I lack the space to show that an ubuntu-oriented reconciliation makes the best sense of what the TRC did well and of what should have been done that was not. However, insofar as it does a good job of unifying the intuitions of most readers about what was accomplished and what has yet to be, the ubuntu perspective facilitates understanding of an important part of South Africa's history.

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4 Yacoob Abba Omar, "Is It Now Time for TRC II?" New Age Online, April 19, 2013.
5 Becker Semela, "Call for Phase 2 of TRC," New Age Online, January 25, 2016.