

Like many others, I was greatly disturbed by the remarks made last week by the Presiding Bishop Katharine Schori of the Episcopal Church at the General Convention, including her repudiation of what she called, "the great Western heresy: that we can be saved as individuals, that any of us alone can be in right relationship with God." She continued, "That heresy is one reason for the theme of this Convention. Ubuntu. That word doesn't have any 'I' in it."

Many outraged evangelicals were quick to denounce the PB and her remarks. But I think there is more involved here than meets the eye. She continued, "That heresy is one reason for the theme of this Convention. Ubuntu. That word doesn't have any 'I' in it." Her critics (and supporters) need to take "Ubuntu" seriously. "Ubuntu" is the key to what she said and to much else happening in many churches today, including Evangelical ones and it is the "true" Heresy".

At its most simplified, "ubuntu" is used to emphasize the need for unity or consensus in decision-making. That is probably its most common usage (I've never heard anyone other than Episcopalians use the actual word), but it really is much, much more- a Philosophy of Life which has become a popular ideology among many people and groups who do not use the word. This Philosophy is the context of the PB's statement and I think it explains what she meant. Besides just criticizing her for the statement itself, we need to get a handle on the Philosophy behind it. Nelson Mandela explains it this way-

"A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed."

This is probably the common definition and ideal or theoretical usage in the Episcopal Church, although many would debate whether it is actually practiced by the PB herself and other ideological activists within the Church. But there is more to it.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu (2008) further explained Ubuntu as follows:

"One of the sayings in our country is Ubuntu - the essence of being human. Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can't exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can't be human all by yourself, and when you have this quality - Ubuntu - you are known for your generosity. We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole world. When you do well, it spreads out; it is for the whole of humanity."

This sounds more like what Ms Schori was trying to say, substituting "Christian" for "human being" in the above quote from ABp Tutu. Reread it, doing that to see what Ms Schori was actually saying

These quotes are from the Wikipedia article about Ubuntu. It also quotes Louw (1998) that "the concept of ubuntu defines the individual in their several relationships with others, and stresses the importance of ubuntu as a religious concept. He refers to the Zulu saying, 'a person is a person through (other) persons'" and thus the motto at the GC, "I in you and you in me". Think about that.

Now the PB shocked many Evangelicals, but there is some truth to what she says and many Evangelicals come close to agreeing with her with their huge emphasis today on "Community" and the common complaint they have that traditional Evangelicalism is too individualistic and their oft repeated criticism against Capitalism as greedy self-serving. What Ms Schori said is also close to the popular "One" program and the activism of U2 and others, stressing that we are all one world and must cooperate and share resources equally around the globe, being that hat we are all family, etc. That sounds like Ubuntu. Many Evangelicals actually share elements of the PB's criticism about "individualism" when they themselves criticise many Christians and churches as being selfish and self centered. And that criticism is often deserved. And it is is true, many Evangelicals have no sense of wider Church or any Ecclesiology at all.

This is not the case, however, with those who are well grounded in the Historic Reformed Faith. We have long known and declared that union with Christ is union with the Body of Christ. We know the corporate meaning of the Sacraments. We know there is no Salvation apart from the Church, meaning that we need the Church, its Sacraments, Disciplines, Teaching and Fellowship in order to live and grow in our Christian Faith and Life, hence, full Salvation. Nothing heretical there.

But there is far more than all of this at stake in Ubuntu Philosophy. If we take seriously, literally, "a person is a person [only] through (other) persons', the very existence of a "Person" as objective (ontological) reality is questioned and therefore, personal Salvation as well. Pushing further, the very existence of God as an objective, self-sufficient, reality is also at stake. If Ubuntu is true, all that we are (and God is) must always depend on variable and changing relationships. Our very existence as persons and that of God as well would always be changing or becoming. This would then also be true of all Authority and Truth, as well.

Added to this, the interconnectedness taught by Ubuntu Philosophy involves everything from God, Humans, animals, stones to minerals in the ground. We agree that each

and all of us on several levels are connected to all other living beings, as well as to the natural world around us. We know we need each other to be human, that to be in relationship with other human beings is essential to being human. Men need women to be fully men and vice versa. Most of all, we know we need to know God to know what being "human" actually is, inasmuch as we are made in His Image. We know that only in Christ, which includes being in the Body, can we be fully human. So yes, strict individualism is "heresy".

If this is what Ms Schori meant, we must agree with her. However, we believe that the "we" in the I-Thou relationships are actual, real, individuals with objective existence. That we are modified, influenced and shaped by all our relationships is certainly true. But, we deny those relationships literally create us or that we depend on them for our essential existence as individuals or for our Salvation.

If my take on Ms Schori's statement is even close to what she meant, The Leader of The Episcopal Church is talking not just about the rejection of objective, individual personal Salvation, but is advocating an entirely different Religion! And it seems to be a mixture that includes Panentheism and some Radical French Post Modernism as well as Interpersonal Psychology, Matthew Fox and Pierre Teilhard Chardin and Mysticism- all this and Ubuntu, too. And a major influence on Ms Schori for the latter could be Dion Forster, a South African Theologian who has popularized Ubuntu. He in turn is indebted to Bede Griffiths. [Google them] This Mixture, this Religion, is not the Classic Christian Faith and should never have been the Theme of the General Convention of the Episcopal Church or of any other!