

# Interrupting separateness, disrupting comfort: An autoethnographic account of lived religion, *ubuntu* and spatial justice

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This article uses a fictionalised encounter as the basis for an autoethnographic exploration of the intersections between the South African social value of *ubuntu* and the notion of spatial justice. *Ubuntu* describes the interconnectedness of human lives. It asserts that a person is only a person through other people, a recognition that calls for deep respect, empathy and kindness. *Ubuntu* is expressed in selfless generosity and sharing. The spatial turn in the social sciences and humanities has resulted in a concern with the relationship between space and justice. It recognises that space is not simply an empty container in which people live and act, but is something that is constructed by social relations – and simultaneously constitutive of them. While this recognition gives rise to spatial perspectives on justice, what constitutes spatial justice, as distinct from other notions of justice, and how such justice is to be achieved are contested. Building on the work of legal scholar, Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, on spatial justice, I argue that the notion of *ubuntu* is able to shape our understanding of spatial justice, and when practised, it is able to disrupt space and challenge dominant spatial configurations.

## Introduction

As a member of a research community that is exploring the African social value of *ubuntu*, part of my personal journey has been to move away trying to dissect a reified *ubuntu* to learn to practice *ubuntu* as embodied action. One of the ways I have done this arises from my location in the Eastern Cape. Distances between cities, towns and villages in South Africa's largest province can be great. On any journey I make, I see people standing alongside the road, holding signs indicating their desired destination. As part of unlearning my innate selfishness and desire for comfort, and discovering *ubuntu*, I regularly pick up people alongside the road. They are poor, black and often from rural communities. This act has been a space for discovery, discomfort and profound challenge.

In this article, I use a fictionalised encounter between myself and a passenger to juxtapose narratives on *ubuntu* and spatial justice drawn from academic literature. The intersection of these narratives creates a space for reflection on my experience as a white South African, and particularly my past experience as a pastor leading a South African faith community as they simultaneously (and paradoxically) pursued and evaded justice. The shared journey in my car functions as a metaphor for the dialectical intersection of the temporal, social and spatial in the South African context, and as a microcosm of its social spaces that both reflect and create the social stratifications that perpetuate injustice. *Ubuntu* as action disrupts my privileged space but also highlights the inherent limitations of such disruptions and points to the need for more fundamental reconfigurations of space.

Richardson (2000), Clough (2002) and others have demonstrated how fictionalised narrative can be a legitimate and powerful way to present research findings. Although I have had many such encounters, the encounter described here is fictional and draws from many experiences, as well as from my imagination. The narration of the encounter may therefore be termed 'ethnographic fiction' (Richardson 2000:11). Richardson describes such evocative representations as a radical departure from social scientific naturalisms, through which, 'We find ourselves attending to feelings, ambiguities, temporal sequences, blurred experiences, and so on; we struggle to find a textual place for ourselves, our doubts and our uncertainties'.

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Autoethnography recognises the way in which research is influenced by personal experience, and rather than suppress this, it seeks to use such experience to enrich the research. The notion of evocative autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner 2000, 2006) is useful for clarifying my use of this narrative. Through it, I hope to stimulate deeper, empathetic understanding of both the sphere in which this research took place and my own experience as a researcher. Ellis (2004:46) has proposed that personal narratives, as a form of autoethnography, can contribute to a deeper understanding of the self as it intersects with the lives of participants or with a cultural context. It does this by inviting readers into the author's world, which becomes a resource for them to reflect on and understand their own lives.

My use of fictionalised narrative as evocative autoethnography is motivated by two factors. Firstly, I wish to diminish the gap between myself as the researcher and what is being researched in order to reflect my simultaneous involvement in the research process (Meerwald 2013:45). Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, I wish to reflect my preference for a narrative approach to research, exploring the contextually situated stories of people. Rather than explore reified notions of *ubuntu*, spatial justice and lived religion, I prefer to explore their confluence in a story. The story connects them to each other and to a concrete context. The fictional encounter in my car draws on empirical research conducted in East London, South Africa, in 2015. Twenty people, from urban and rural areas, were asked to tell stories of their experience about the presence or absence of *ubuntu* in the communities where they lived.<sup>1</sup> I have made many such journeys, but rather than describing one of them, a fictionalised representation of the journey allows me to draw on multiple experiences and the emotions and thoughts precipitated by these encounters.

## Research approach

I follow Van Huyssteen's postfoundational approach to research, which is suspicious of foundationalism's claims of objectivity and representational knowledge, and also of non-foundationalism's assertion of complete relativity. This approach seeks to reflect the balance between 'the way our beliefs are anchored in interpreted experience, and the broader networks of beliefs in which our rationally compelling experiences are already embedded' (Van Huyssteen 2006:22). This postfoundational approach is also attractive because of the possibilities it offers for interdisciplinary research. All forms of human rationality are the same because the same interpretive processes are evident across the spectrum of disciplines (Van Huyssteen 1999:44–45).

Transversal rationality (Schrag 1992:148; Van Huyssteen 2006:20) describes the possibility of conversation between various disciplines or narratives, in which areas of shared interest can be explored without needing to assimilate the perspective of one discipline into another. Multiple voices are

1. The statements recorded in inverted commas in my fictionalised encounter with Bongani are actual statements about *ubuntu* drawn from these interviews.

able to bring different perspectives, each form of rationality contributing to a deeper understanding. The convergence of disciplines and narratives that is facilitated by transversality 'points to a sense of transition, lying across, extending over, intersecting, meeting and conveying without becoming identical' (Van Huyssteen 2007:19). A helpful metaphor might be each discipline or narrative as a beam of light, which is able to illuminate the area of research in a unique manner.

My preference for Van Huyssteen's postfoundational approach is also informed by possibilities offered by transversal rationality to limit the impact of epistemological racism. Transversal rationality creates a space where the rationalities of different cultures, as well as different academic disciplines, can intersect and create knowledge. Van Huyssteen (2006:16) argues that transversal rationality eliminates the tendency to unify different kinds of knowledge. A particular form of knowledge cannot be viewed as superior to other forms of knowledge. A narrative approach to research is congruent with a postfoundational epistemology because it begins with the contextually situated stories of people (Müller 2009:204).

## Lived religion

Ganzevoort (2009:1) proposes that practical theology be described as the hermeneutics of lived religion. In contrast to the focus of other theological disciplines, which focus on the texts that constitute religious traditions, or on the concepts and ideas that define the parameters of a religion, practical theology is concerned with 'the transcending patterns of action and meaning embedded in and contributing to the relation with the sacred' (Ganzevoort 2009:3). He defines religion, which includes categories such as spirituality and faith, as 'the transcending patterns of action and meaning embedded in and contributing to the relation with the sacred'. As the hermeneutics of lived religion, practical theology is therefore concerned with the social construction of meaning and the processes of interpretation by which people make sense of life in general, but particularly life in relation to the sacred. This is similar to what Ammerman (2007:5) describes as 'everyday religion', which gives priority to the experiences of those who are not religious experts and their activities outside of the boundaries of organised religion.

As a practical theologian, I am interested in how people live out their faith in particular social contexts. I attempt to describe and critically reflect on praxis, whether this takes place within the structures of organised religion or in broader social and cultural contexts. The goal of this reflection is the transformation of praxis. In this article, I reflect on my own experience, particularly as it is disrupted and challenged by the story of a South African with a vastly different life experience to my own, by the *ubuntu* narrative evoked by this encounter.

## *Ubuntu's* disruption of space

I enjoy driving long distances. This is fortunate because my work, whether as a researcher or as a management consultant,

often involves long road trips. Over the years, I have found ways to make the hours I spend behind the wheel of my car enjoyable. I am able to access the large collection of music on my smartphone via the Bluetooth on my car's sound system. Familiarity with various routes means I know where to buy good coffee (I confess to being something of a coffee snob). And then there is my car; I love my car. It is a BMW X3, bought second hand, but still a beautiful machine. It is powerful, safe and comfortable. It insulates me from much of the harshness of road travel, along with my carefully chosen music, coffee and a variety of snacks.

It was still dark when I left East London, heading to Mthatha – dark, cold and wet. My first stop was at a boutique coffee franchise at an all-night filling station. I ordered a double cappuccino; a large, freshly baked apple and cinnamon muffin; and added a bottle of still mineral water before paying and leaving. As I turn onto the N2 freeway, there is the familiar site of someone standing by the road, waiting for the offer of a lift. I am simultaneously moved to stop by the thought of people waiting in the rain, and tempted not to stop by thoughts of wet car upholstery and inconvenience and even the risk of being a victim of crime. I stop and lower the window to speak to the man standing next to the vehicle.

I ask him where he is going. He tells me he is going to Idutywa, a small town between Butterworth and Mthatha. I open the door and signal for him to get in. He settles into the seat nervously. It is unusual for a white South African to stop and offer a lift in this way, almost unheard of. He looks uneasy. Grateful, but uneasy. We travel without speaking for a few minutes. The music that was so relaxing a few seconds before I stopped now feels like an intruder. I cannot imagine that Bongani is a fan of alternative rock music. I am not sure whether to simply turn it down, and allow it to fill what might otherwise be an uncomfortable silence, or turn it off. I turn the music off.

I introduce myself and ask him for his name. It is Bongani. I ask him if he lives in East London. He tells me that he is returning to a village near Idutywa after an unsuccessful attempt to find a job in East London. He tells me that there are no jobs where he lives. There is only poverty. He lives with his mother and four younger siblings. He finished matric the previous year, and now feels the pressure of providing for his family.

While he is talking, I glance at the coffee nestling in its holder in the centre console and think whether I should still drink it. It seems rude to do so, because there is only one cup and I cannot offer him any. I think about the muffin. I take it out, break it into two and offer him one of the halves. He accepts, gratefully. I tell him that I am trying to learn about *ubuntu*; I ask if he will tell me about it. He smiles:

*Ubuntu* is something that is part of our culture. It does not matter if you are poor. We are all poor, but even with that poverty you will see *ubuntu*. Even if what they have is a little, people will

share their food with someone in the community who does not have anything.

If you take our weddings, everyone in the community is invited. Everyone can come and eat meat – even that drunk guy. *Ubuntu* is about treating all people with respect; it is about courtesy and compassion.

I ask Bongani if *ubuntu* could be an answer for how we live together in South Africa. He seems unsure:

Most white people do not have *ubuntu*. They only live for themselves. If you are black and poor it seems like they do not even see you. They do not want to know about your struggles.

I am aware that my small gesture of offering Bongani a lift, as an expression of *ubuntu*, does not really scratch the surface when it comes to the struggles he faces, living in rural poverty. It might be an act of *ubuntu*, but as an isolated act it leaves too much unchanged. I will continue to live in affluence and comfort. His struggle will continue.

We reach the intersection with the gravel road that leads to the village where Bongani lives. It is still raining, so I ask him how far down the road his village is. He tells me it is about 15 minutes' drive. I glance at my watch. I have time before my first meeting, so I offer to take him there. The road is bad. It is rutted and sections have been partially washed away. In the wet weather, it requires careful navigation and the journey takes longer than expected. As I drive I notice that there are no shops in his community, apart from a tiny spaza shop that adjoins one of the houses. Bongani tells me that they have to travel to Idutywa when they need to buy food. A return journey in a taxi costs R40, which is a substantial encroachment on the money that is available for life's necessities.

I drop him off at his home, a simple, one-roomed dwelling on the side of a grassy hill, with a corrugated iron roof that has rocks on it to secure it against wind and storm. An outhouse stands some 15 m from the house; on the other side of the house, there is a small cultivated patch of earth where maize and spinach are growing.

I think of Bongani's mother and siblings inside the house. I think about hunger, deprivation and isolation. I think about a world, an existence from which I am isolated. I am forced to think about what else I have that I should share with Bongani. I am simultaneously aware that sharing or giving without meaningful relationship risks being patronising; it could even be a strategy to ease my privilege-induced guilt rather than a solution to the injustice that exists within our relationship.

## Transversal rationality and interdisciplinary conversation

The notion of transversal rationality proposed by Schrag and Van Huysteen will form the basis for an interdisciplinary dialogue in this article. The perspectives of *ubuntu* and spatial justice are offered here because they have the potential to illuminate my encounter with Bongani. As a form of

transversal rationality, these narratives can be placed over and alongside my own story, and the points of intersection can be explored. In what I have described as 'transversal narrativity' (Eliastam 2015), I have previously proposed that new meanings are able to emerge at such intersections, meanings that are able to disrupt dominant stories and make it possible for new stories to emerge.

This echoes Müller's (2011:4) metaphor of an ecotone for postfoundationalist practical theology. An ecotone is a transition zone between adjacent but different communities of plants or animals, where different communities meet and integrate. This gives rise to a wider variety of species found in this transitional zone, in what is called the 'edge effect'. For Müller, the practical theologian's ecotone is the delicate public space created through interdisciplinary dialogue. It is a space where practical theology can explore a number of diverse narratives, allowing multiple habitats to be visited and re-visited. In the fictional encounter that follows, my car becomes an ecotone in which different stories intersect: my personal story, the story of my passenger as well as broader social discourses.

As a form of transversal rationality, narratives on *ubuntu* and spatial justice are drawn from literature to illuminate the encounter in my car, and the stark contrast between Bongani's world and my world that it highlighted.

## Ubuntu

Cornell and Van Marle argue that *ubuntu* is simultaneously ontology, epistemology and ethical value system. As such, it transcends major distinctions in Western philosophy. They write:

*Ubuntu* is a philosophy on how human beings are intertwined in a world of ethical relations from the moment they are born. Fundamentally, this inscription is part of our finitude. We are born into a language, a kinship group, a tribe, a nation, and a family. We come into a world obligated to others, and those others are obligated to us. We are mutually obligated to support each other on our respective paths to becoming unique and singular persons. (Cornell & Van Marle 2015:2)

*Ubuntu* resonates with universal values of human worth and dignity. It has been translated in different ways: as 'humanity' (Shutte 2001:2); 'African humanness' (Broodryk 2002:13); 'humanism or humaneness' (Mnyaka & Motlhabi 2009:63); or 'the process of becoming an ethical human being' (Mkhize 2008:35).

For Mkhize (2008:43), *ubuntu*, 'incorporates ideas of social justice, righteousness, care, empathy for others and respect'. Mnyaka and Motlhabi (2009:74) argue that *ubuntu*, 'is inclusive ... it is best realised in deeds of kindness, compassion, caring, sharing, solidarity and sacrifice'. Makhudu (1993:40) proposes that, 'every facet of African life is shaped to embrace *ubuntu* as a process and philosophy which reflects the African heritage, traditions, culture, customs, beliefs, value system and the extended family

structures'. Chikanda (1990) regards *ubuntu* as African humanism. It encompasses sensitivity to other people's needs, charity, sympathy, care, respect, consideration and kindness.

Bishop Desmond Tutu (1999:34–35) writes that the significance of *ubuntu* is that, "a person is a person through other people." It is not "I think therefore I am." It says rather: "I am human because I belong." I participate, I share'. The notion of *ubuntu* points to the interconnectedness of human beings, with the implication that people should treat each other as though we are all members of an extended family (Gish 2004:122). Tutu lists the spiritual attributes of *ubuntu*: generosity, compassion, hospitality, caring and sharing. People with *ubuntu* are compassionate and gentle. They do not take advantage of others. They use their strength for the benefit of the weak. If someone lacked *ubuntu*, they lacked something essential to being fully human. Tutu (1999:35) argues that this sense of shared humanity means that a person's humanity is diminished when others are humiliated or oppressed.

## The spatial turn

The spatial turn, that has impacted various disciplines, saw the old geographical notion of 'place' problematised as 'space'. Henri Lefebvre argued that 'Physical space has no "reality" without the energy that is deployed within it' (Lefebvre 1992:13). Space is constituted by social relations rather than its physical characteristics, and is therefore, '... is not a thing but rather a set of relations between things (objects and products)' (1992:83). Space is not simply a container for people, buildings, things and activities; it is both constituted by social relations and constitutive of them. Human existence is embedded in social, temporal and spatial dimensions which are dialectically related and which constitute each other. Lupton's description of this way of viewing space is helpful:

... space cannot be thought of as fixed or absolute, but as socially produced: a social construct not a physical entity. Space cannot exist independently of human activity, since its meaning is produced by the social relations of people within and outside it, through the ways that they use it and imagine it. Space also produces particular forms of activity and sets of relations by configuring the identities and understandings of people who occupy it. In this sense, places cannot be thought of only in physical and locational terms as a backdrop to human activity, nor only as containers in which people are gathered and in which they interact. (Lupton 2009:112)

Harvey echoes Lefebvre in arguing that space consists of relationships between things. Harvey (1996) views space as relational; space does not exist prior to the things that make it up, as if it were a container that is waiting to be filled with things. Instead, space is the relationship among those things. Instead of focusing on the manner in which things are distributed on a map, Lefebvre and Harvey explore the processes that shape spaces, paying particular attention to social relations.

According to Harvey's Marxist analysis, space reflects commodity production with the consequence that conflict over space mirrors class conflict. We live in a world where market forces collaborate with the state to preserve the advantages of a minority, which gives rise to the unequal and unjust distribution of resources. Harvey (1993:310) argued that space reflects the 'prevailing ideology of ruling groups' and is 'fashioned by the dynamics of market forces'.

Massey (2005) described space as a product of social interrelations and embedded practices that was framed by a number of histories. Space is produced at an ideological level as well as the material level. Beebe, Davis and Geadle (2012) observe that:

Space was dynamic, constructed, and contested. It was where issues of sexuality, race, class, and gender – among a myriad of other power and/or knowledge struggles – were sited, created, and fought out. (p. 524)

Creswell (2004:29) points out that space is 'not simply an outcome of social processes ... it was, once established, a tool in the creation, maintenance and transformation of relations of domination, oppression and exploitation'.

## Spatial justice

Following from the assertions of Lefebvre, Harvey and others that all social processes are spatially produced, it is evident that relations of justice are also spatially produced. 'Guiding the exploration [of spatial justice] from the start is the idea that justice, however it might be defined, has a consequential geography, a spatial expression that is more than just a background reflection or set of physical attributes to be descriptively mapped' (Soja 2010:1). The manner in which the spatial world is organised shapes social relationships. Since space is the medium in which humans live, it is where inclusion or exclusion finds material expression.

Soja emphasises that the search for spatial justice cannot replace the search for social, economic or environmental justice. Rather, the spatial justice perspective is able to bring greater clarity and understanding to these concepts and provide insights into the extension of justice in the social and political arena. 'In the view taken here, everything that is social (justice included) is simultaneously and inherently spatial, just as everything spatial, at least with regard to the human world, is simultaneously and inherently socialized' (Soja 2010:5–6). The significant contribution of spatial justice is the manner in which it highlights the instrumentality of space in producing social relations characterised by (in) justice. By highlighting the role of space in producing justice and injustice, a spatial justice perspective is able to illuminate social relations and point to changes that will bring about greater justice in society. Williams (2013) explains:

Spatial justice is an analytical framework that makes space, understood as a physical, social, and mental production, a central category for understanding justice. Theorizing spatial justice involves both understanding how spatial relationships produce social relations and developing normative frameworks for evaluating those social relationships. (p. 4)

Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos (2010), Williams (2013) and Ansaloni and Tedeschi (2015), among others, wrestle with the question of what such a normative framework should look like. Approaches to spatial justice tend to focus on ethical and moral issues in the planning process. Unequal treatment is highlighted, and following Rawls (1971) approaches to justice tend to be distributive and either focus on radical social change and redistribution of resources, or on criteria that could help planners create and implement policies that favour the least advantaged in society. Purcell (2002:101–102) describes the former as an attempt to 'restructure the power relations that underlie the production of urban space, fundamentally shifting control away from capital and the state and toward urban inhabitants'. In contrast, planning scholars such as Fainstein (2009, 2010) and Campbell (2006) argue that justice is an evaluative criterion, which involves universal norms that transcend the particular that must be applied in policy-making in order to achieve a just city through a fair distribution of benefits.

Ansaloni and Tedeschi (2015:2) express concerns about the course taken by contemporary debate over spatial justice. They argue that it is based on meta-narratives and try to identify moral issues and the universal values that should be applied to them. They demonstrate the difficulties inherent in trying to identify the best practices or fairest solutions, and question whether these even exist, let alone whether they can be applied in a particular context.

Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos (2010:187) points out that the majority of literature reduces the concept of spatial justice into an alternative version of social, distributive or regional justice. Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos asks 'If spatial justice is simply a just distribution of resources in a given region, one is left wondering whether any justice can possibly afford not being "spatial" in this narrow sense. On the contrary, if the peculiar characteristics of space are to be taken into account, a concept of justice will have to be rethought on a much more fundamental level than that'. He argues that the notion of space in spatial justice needs to transcend the regional. The juxtaposition of *ubuntu* and spatial justice opens up possibilities for a rethinking of justice, which contributes to Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos' proposal.

## In search of spatial justice

My encounter with Bongani highlights the configuration of space in the Eastern Cape that perpetuates the social injustice. Where each of our lives reflects the anomalies of apartheid urban planning that reserved the cities and suburbs for white people and pushed black South Africans to the periphery, particularly with the creation of Bantustan 'homelands'. There has been a gradual influx of affluent black South Africans into the suburbs in post-apartheid South Africa, but the majority, like Bongani, remain on the margins. This existence on the margins deprives them from resources, from access to opportunities and from meaningful participation in the economy.

Like Bongani, many black South Africans live in poverty, cut off from social services, economic infrastructure and the opportunity to improve their lives. Their spatial positioning makes any form of self-actualisation almost impossible. Rather, it seems inevitable that they will exist in enduring poverty, without hope of substantial change, without hope of justice. This captures what, for Mendieta (2010:446), is at the heart of social exclusion, it is 'to be deprived access to the space in which we can be properly human'.

In contrast, my location in space makes it possible for me to live in relative comfort, access resources such as quality education and healthcare, find employment, be mobile and so on. My location in space is also a source of social capital because it connects me to a valuable invisible network of institutions and relationships that are based on a shared collective identity and shared values. These give me access to information, opportunities and influence.

An act of *ubuntu* opens my life to the presence of the Other. It brings an awareness of our location in space, and of how injustice has been inscribed on it. *Ubuntu* can never be a one-off act though, and emerging *ubuntu* invites further expressions of solidarity and sharing.

### ***Ubuntu*, justice and space**

There is a conflict over space. Ansaloni and Tedeschi (2015:1) go as far as asserting that reality is 'the relentless encounters of bodies (assemblages) whose fight for space determines unique temporary agreements (spatial justice) as a result of power exchanges (affects) among these bodies'. For Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos (2010:198), this conflict points to the 'impossibility' (in the Derridean sense) of spatial justice, because all claims are enmeshed in a net of monadic positions that can each only be occupied by one body at any particular moment in time. 'The demand for spatial justice unfolds a monadology of the particular body, an irreplaceability of position and an impossibility of sharing the same space at the same time' (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2010:198). This shapes his understanding of spatial justice:

Spatial justice has to be thought in terms of embodiment and spatiality, on the one hand firmly located in the particularity of one's body right here, and on the other, within the folds of a universal impossibility of simultaneous emplacement. Simply put, spatial justice is the strife to conciliate the arguably justified demands of both ego and alter to be simultaneously at precisely the same space, to occupy precisely the same corporeal trace in space at precisely the same time. Thought in this way, spatial justice is a strife for and also an argument to abandon the ubiquitous quest for identity, and look instead for a relationality that connects void rather populated spaces. Indeed, this is the radical call of spatial justice: the demand for a plural, emplaced oneness ... (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2010:199)

The notion of a form of justice based on relationality, and a plural, emplaced oneness echoes *ubuntu* language. Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos recognises that building spatial justice requires a 'radical ethical gesture' in order to

transcend the perpetual conflict inherent in social relationships. He explains:

This is perhaps the crux of the concept of spatial justice – and indeed the answer to the kind of justice that spatiality dictates: that the only way in which its demands can be met is through a withdrawal, through the departure of the one who occupies the contested space, and the simultaneous conceding of priority to the other's claim. (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2010:200)

Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos (2010:199) points out that 'it may be relatively easy to care for the ones "over there", but what about the ones who want to be "right here", right where we stand?'. To answer this question, Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos touches on the notion of kenotic withdrawal (Lévinas 1969; Weil 1992) to describe this concession. Kenosis is a sacrificial emptying, modelled on the example of Jesus that is described in the work of Meister Eckhart and Jacob Böhme. In order to constitute justice, Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos argues that this withdrawal and concession must exist in a permanent state of oscillation, in which the one for whom I withdraw does the same for others.

If my reading of Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos is correct, *ubuntu* is uniquely able to answer the call he makes for a radical ethical gesture. *Ubuntu* is relational, and gives material expression to the plural, emplaced oneness that spatial justice demands. It is a withdrawal from contested space that gives priority to the other, and this is expressed in a multitude of reciprocal relationships.

A relational, *ubuntu* spatial justice is able to address issues of power, domination and exploitation. It challenges the abuse of power in spatial injustice (Marcuse 2010:90–92) because it denounces power *over* in favour of power *with* – a sharing of power. *Ubuntu* teaches us that the first step towards spatial justice is relational. Like Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos' notion of spatial justice, *ubuntu* is a process of constant becoming. It offers a relational ethic for spatial justice that is unique in its ability to resolve issues of inclusion and/or exclusion, power and oppression.

*Ubuntu* leads to a disruption of space. It brings me into contact with the Other, whose relative disadvantage calls for a concrete response from me. The response is not based on a metanarrative, or on an ethic abstracted from some moral code. The response is based on our shared humanity, our fundamental interconnectedness in this world. To the extent that the humanity of the Other is diminished, my humanity withers. This recognition precipitates a reconfiguration of our relationship, which in turn brings about a shift in spatial arrangements between us, albeit a small one.

The challenge for me was that the first *ubuntu*-inspired movement towards the Other both disrupted spatial configurations and called for further disruption. Incipient relationship called for further movement, for letting go of my position of privilege in favour of greater sharing and more significant reconfiguration of the social relationship between us. My personal discomfort arose from my experience that

practicing *ubuntu*, as a white person in post-apartheid South Africa, was a bit like pulling on a loose thread in a jersey. The act was likely to be the start of a process, a process that could lead to the unravelling and disintegration of much of my privilege and comfort. But, from an *ubuntu* perspective, this erosion of my privilege over and power over is intrinsic to my becoming fully human.

### **Ubuntu, spatial justice and lived religion**

For Bergmann (2007:353), theology is already and always spatial. This is particularly true of practical theology as the study of lived religion in particular localities. An explicit spatial justice perspective exposes the intersection between lived religion and social relations, and interrogates religious practices as these occur in the spaces produced at various geographic locations and places. My life and story intersect with Bongani's in the place I call a car. Knott highlights the significance such an encounter has for an understanding of lived religion:

If what we mean by place is that nexus in space in which social relations occur, which may be material or metaphorical and which is necessarily interconnected (with places) and full of power, then (a space) has the potential to contain and express religion (religion being those social relations given meaning by a certain type of ideology, set of traditions, values and ritual practices. (Knott 2005:134)

Obadia (2015:206) argues that spaces and places can be viewed as 'empirical locations where cultural and social processes occur, and where the sense of community, identity and belonging, and religious experiences, are framed'. Religion is always located. The sites, places and spaces within which lived religion occurs are produced by social processes and forces. Lived religion simultaneously shapes space and is shaped by the spatial configurations in which it exists. Space, in particular through its local manifestations, tells a story about religion within that space. Its topography mirrors the contours of religious belief and practice far more accurately than catechisms or statements of faith.

It is difficult to disagree with Obadia's (2015:206) contention that religion is currently aligned with what Derrida describes as the 'tele-techno-media-scientist, capitalistic, political and economic' facets of global society (Derrida 1998:65). Instead of exercising agency towards justice, religion in general (and Christianity in particular) may be complicit in perpetuating injustice, both at a structural and local level.

My experience as the leader of a congregation in Cape Town's Southern suburbs reflects some of this unholy contradiction. In 2002, I was appointed as senior pastor of a congregation located on the urban edge between affluent, predominantly white, suburbia and the sprawling poverty of those spaces on the periphery of the city that apartheid planners had demarcated for black people. At that time, the membership of the church was almost entirely white, and its liturgy reflected

an affinity for the soft rock sub-culture of the West Coast of the United States rather than its location in Africa.

A pastoral emphasis on Biblical imperatives to pursue reconciliation and justice led in tentative attempts to reach out to less advantaged people in the communities around us. However, the presence of homeless people and refugees in Sunday services disrupted suburban religious comfort. There were complaints from some members about the odour of unwashed bodies, about 'disruption' in the children's church from the presence of other cultures and about people begging after the Sunday morning service. It was enough to let 'them' into 'our' space. The demands for the reconfiguration of that space that their presence now demanded were too much to bear. This was particularly evident in the arena of finances, where the diversion of church finances towards justice and restitution initiatives resulted in conflict.

Just as the *ubuntu* act of opening my car door to Bongani called for further concrete expression of *ubuntu*, opening the doors of our congregational meeting place to the least advantaged in our community called for deeper, sacrificial withdrawal for our spatial position of privilege. Such sacrifice is not easy. I remember the unembarrassed remonstration given to me, at a church leadership meeting, that if I 'had my way there would not be churches where white people felt comfortable'. Inviting the presence of the Other disrupted the prevailing ordering of space and exposed the subterranean ideological forces that shaped religious practice for many members of that congregation.

This suggests the need for a transformation of religious practice that moves people towards a relational justice that is sacrificial and dynamic. *Ubuntu* simultaneously disrupts spatial configurations and creates an in-between space, which could facilitate such a transformation. The spatial configuration of the world in which Bongani and I live is such that it risks making him invisible to me. *Ubuntu's* recognition of shared humanity, combined with respect, compassion and care is expressed in sacrificial withdrawal from the space that I occupy, so that another can occupy it – and then also give way to another. *Ubuntu* gives rise to a spatial justice that moves beyond redistribution and self-actualisation and becomes deeply relational and sacrificial. As such, it offers potential for the shaping of a theology of spatial justice. Graham (2011:267) points out that, 'How we find ourselves is ultimately about being placed in relationship – both spatial and cosmological – to a range of "Others" across time, culture, and species, but also to a divine horizon'.

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