


***Perichoresis* and the Renewal of African Public Life: Exploring Trinitarian
Theology in the Thought of Edwards and Barth**

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ABSTRACT

This article examined the relevance of the doctrine of *perichoresis* for renewing African public life through the comparative analysis of theological insights of Jonathan Edwards and Karl Barth. The research problem centered on the marginal role that classical Trinitarian ethics, particularly *perichoresis*, plays in addressing Africa's postcolonial challenges, including ethnic divisions, ecological degradation, and gender inequality. The goal was to retrieve and reappropriate perichoretic theology as a lens for justice, reconciliation, and human flourishing. Employing a method of historical retrieval and constructive reappropriation, the study engages Edwards' depiction of the Spirit as the bond of divine love and Barth's emphasis on the unity of God's self-revelation within his Trinitarian dogmatics. Their insights were placed in dialogue with African theological voices such as Desmond Tutu, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Kwame Bediako, and Jean-Marc Ela, and traditional philosophical concepts like *Ubuntu* and *harambee*. The main argument posited that *perichoresis* is not merely a metaphysical doctrine but a dynamic model framework for public ethics. The main findings were that African socio-political systems do not (usually) have their socio-political grounding in a relational ethics (theology); and *perichoresis* can contribute towards ecological, political and gender justice. The study further found that Trinitarian relationality presents a redemptive vision for Africa that serves as a resource for public theology by situating reconciliation and justice in the life of the Triune God. This article contributes to knowledge by retrieving the doctrine of *perichoresis* as a dynamic framework for public ethics in the African context. It bridges classical Trinitarian ethics/theology with contemporary African concerns by engaging the theological insights of Edwards and Barth alongside African theologians and indigenous concepts like *Ubuntu* and *harambee*. The study demonstrates that *perichoresis*, understood as divine relationality, can inform responses to postcolonial challenges such as ethnic division, ecological degradation, and gender inequality. In doing so, it offers a constructive vision for African public theology grounded in the life of the Triune God.

Keywords: *Perichoresis*, Edwards, Barth, Trinity, Africa

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of *perichoresis* has long dominated Christian theological thought. It reflects the profound relational oneness of the Triune God, so that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit dwell in an indivisible communion, yet maintain personal distinctions. This position holds significant importance for pastoral theology, interpersonal relationships, and social ethics. Two influential theologians, Jonathan Edwards and Karl Barth, offer distinct yet complementary perspectives on the concept of *perichoresis*. The Trinity, as a community of love, constitutes Edwards' central focus, with his beloved Holy Spirit attesting to the reciprocal love between the Father and the Son. Barth, by contrast, systematically expounds *perichoresis* to protect the unity and personal differences in God, and to apply this concept to both the immanent and economic Trinity. These insights offer an opportunity to explore how *perichoresis* serves as a model for human relationships, encompassing mutuality, holiness, community, and justice.

In the postcolonial situations within Africa, patriarchy on the horizontal and vertical planes lives in the body and spirit of the masses. Arbitrary colonial borders separated traditional communal structures, leaving nations digitally, culturally, and racially so separate that they struggle to form unity across centuries of separation. In this context, theological frameworks that prioritize interconnectedness, relational accountability, and inclusion in society are not just desired. However, rather they are needed for society to survive and for resources to thrive. The perichoretic doctrine or the dynamic mutual indwelling of the Triune persons holds out an ideal of community for African societies based on love without erasure, diversity without division, and unity without uniformity.

Despite its rich ethical and theological significance, the doctrine of *perichoresis* has played only a marginal role in addressing Africa's pressing postcolonial challenges, such

as ethnic fragmentation, ecological degradation, and gender inequality. While *perichoresis* offers a vision of relational mutuality, unity in diversity, and communal interdependence, its relevance to the moral and socio-political crises of African public life remains underexplored. This article identifies this gap and probes the potential of classical Trinitarian ethics—especially as developed by Edwards and Barth—for renewing African public life. The study specifically asks: How do Edwards and Barth interpret and apply the doctrine of *perichoresis*? In what ways can their theological insights be retrieved for the African context? And what ethical implications arise when their views are engaged in dialogue with African communal philosophies such as *Ubuntu* and *harambee*? By addressing these questions, the study aims to develop a Trinitarian ethic of justice, reconciliation, and communal flourishing grounded in divine relationality.

It argues that *perichoresis* is a transformational, multi-faceted, theological concept for African communities in divine communitarian mutualness and relationality. This study concludes that Edwards' theology of divine love and Barth's doctrine of relational revelation in Christ can provide a Trinitarian ethic of justice, reconciliation, and communal revitalization.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

This study used a historical retrieval and reappropriation methodology as formulated by George Coon¹ to examine the Trinitarian theologies of Edwards and Barth, particularly their discourse of *perichoresis*, as constructive resources in the African context characterized by injustice, fragmentation, and ecological crisis. The methodology emphasizes a two-step process: extracting theological concepts from historical contexts and reapplying them to contemporary context

The method is carried out in four interlinked processes. First, it reclaims theological perceptions from the primary

¹ Robert Falconer, ed., *Research Methodologies* (Johannesburg: South African Theological Seminary, 2024), 75.

sources—Edwards and Barth — that are centered on the notions of divine love, *perichoresis*, mutual indwelling, and the economy of salvation. Secondly, it delineates key doctrinal themes, such as relational ontology, self-giving love, and Trinitarian unity-in-distinction, which have ethical ramifications and promise for reconciliation. Thirdly, these classical insights are brought into constructive dialogue with African theological thoughts, such as those of Bediako, Oduyoye, Tutu, and Ela, engaging contextual concepts like *Ubuntu*, gender justice, and ecological ethics. The final methodological step reclaims these insights into a constructive Trinitarian approach, utilizing *perichoresis* as a normative theological model to address Africa's challenges of inequality, alienation, and wounded communal life. This combination of doctrinal critique, contextual reflection, and moral application shows that Edwards' and Barth's Trinitarian constructs possess rich theological content and redemption value for the contemporary African public sphere.

3.0 THE DOCTRINE OF PERICHORESIS IN TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY

Perichoresis is a cornerstone of Trinitarian theological discourse. The word itself comes from the Greek *peri* (around) and *chorein* (to contain or make room), and it signifies the eternal interpenetration of the divine persons without confusion or loss of personal distinction.² Following the historical retrieval and reappropriation approach, the article begins with a historical overview of the concept, as modern Trinitarian theology has developed it in all its various opinions and practical consequences.

The distinction between one God in essence and three persons in one God was first expressed by early Church Fathers, in particular

the Cappadocians (Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus), who attempted to describe the enigmatic relationship of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit whilst retaining both divine unity and personal distinction.³ This finds a more systematic articulation in John of Damascus, who reiterated that *perichoresis* means that the persons of the Trinity are not separate beings, but rather a perfect co-inherence one with another.⁴

John Zizioulas reinterprets *perichoresis* primarily through the lenses of personhood and communion, claiming that the relational character of the triadic God serves as a model for being either existent or human. In *Being as Communion*, Zizioulas argues that identity is not self-enclosed but a function of relations. There is no bit of hidden knowledge of the Father, the Son and the Spirit that did or did not exist in relationship with the other persons, for the Father, the Son and the Spirit are only who they are relating to the other persons of the Trinity in eternal communion.⁵

Karl Barth points to *perichoresis* in the economy of revelation, noting the mutual interpenetration of the divine persons in God's self-disclosure. According to Barth, *perichoresis* depicts divine life as a life of perfect unity, yet with each divine person retaining a personal particularity essential to understanding the self-revelation of God and the relational dimensions of creation.⁶ The theological implications of *perichoresis* are greatly determined by Barth's insistence on the significance of unity and distinction in the Trinity.

Jonathan Edwards offers a novel perspective, primarily examining *perichoresis* in terms of love. Divine love is understood as the nature of the union between the persons of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, whereas the Holy Spirit is viewed as the personal bond

² Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991), 271.

³ Prestige G. L., *God in Patristic Thought* (London: SPCK, 1952), 191-198.

⁴ John of Damascus, "De Fide Orthodoxa," In *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. 9, trans. by E.

W. Watson and L. Pullan (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1899), 1.8, 1.6.

⁵ John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press), 1985, 85-87.

⁶ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, Volume 1.1, trans. G.T. Thompson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 1-2.

of love between the Father and the Son.⁷ According to Edwards, the relations of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are a harmonious unity that exists in mutual indwelling, not as separate entities, but as one divine essence held in love. In his treatise *The Freedom of the Will*, Edwards highlights that the Father, in reaction, is not only united with a singularity of purpose, but also in a dynamic, co-inherent way, in which each person dwells in the life of the others in septic love eternally.⁸

The doctrine of *perichoresis* is further developed by Jürgen Moltmann in terms of a social Trinitarianism that emphasizes the openness, dynamic vitality, and relational character of the divine life.⁹ In *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, Moltmann retrieves the concept of *perichoresis*, not simply as a metaphorical idea, but as a symbol of the divine “community” which identifies that the inter-relation of the three is one of love (reciprocity), freedom (releasement) and mutuality (co-equality) exercised between the distinct entities.¹⁰ He argues that the Trinity is not an order of rank but a perichoretic communion of equals, providing a prototype for society as a community of mutual participation with no lordship.¹¹

Moltmann describes the perichoretic unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as a divine model of relational freedom in love, wherein the persons mutually indwell each other—without confusion or subordination.¹² This idea has enormous consequences for both political and ecclesial forms of life, in that it calls human communities to imitate divine relatedness in justice, mutuality, and non-coercive communion.¹³ In contrast to monarchical depictions of God, Moltmann’s Trinitarian approach presents divine unity as unity-in-love (or unity-in-communion); the doctrine of *perichoresis* (co-inherence) serves

as the foundation for a radiant vision of theological anthropology and the social transformation that flows from it.¹⁴

In more recent years, systematic theologians such as Miroslav Volf, Paul S. Fiddes, and Fred Sanders have demonstrated the significance of perichoretic theology beyond systematic theology into areas that impact human relations through reconciliation, ecclesiology, and soteriology. Miroslav Volf translates perichoretic theology into the social realm of reconciliation and forgiveness. He contends that *perichoresis* offers a dynamic for a life wherein difference is preserved but embraced in love.¹⁵ While it showcases mutual interpenetration as a defining feature of the Trinity—creating perichoretic unity—it does so without erasing personal distinctiveness, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of monism or the dissolution of being.¹⁶ Volf applies this to divisions of ethnicity, race, and religion, arguing that societies especially those with a historical record of colonial oppression and marginalization (as Africa does with its record towards indigenous people) practice a perichoretic ethic of hospitality, openness, and embrace.

For Paul S. Fiddes, *perichoresis* is initiated by the church’s engagement with God in a context of human participation. Fiddes argues that if *perichoresis* is to be fully understood, it must not remain an abstract doctrine, but rather shape how believers relate to God and one another. He understands worship, prayer, and communal life as spheres in which the church is drawn into the perichoretic life of the Trinity. He emphasizes that humans do not

⁷ Jonathan Edwards, *Discourse on the Trinity*, ed. Paul Helm (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 115–117.

⁸ Jonathan Edwards, *The Freedom of the Will* (Yale University Press, 2001).

⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and The Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 16–18.

¹⁰ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 19–22.

¹¹ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 65–67.

¹² Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 56–58.

¹³ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 70–73.

¹⁴ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 152–160.

¹⁵ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 128–130.

¹⁶ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 128–130.

simply receive divine grace but get to be active players in the life of God in relationship.¹⁷

Fred Sanders also contributes to the discourse by exploring *perichoresis*, both biblically and systematically, in the context of how the intra-Trinitarian relations shape both how one is saved and who they are. Sanders argues that *perichoresis* not a mere metaphysical doctrine but is deeply rooted in God's self-revelation and redemptive work. For Sanders, salvation included in the perichoretic love of the Trinity. The believer is led into communion with God by the Spirit, as the believer in turn is joined with Christ. It means that Christian existence is ultimately relational, reflecting the self-abandoning love of the Trinity.¹⁸

3.1 Jonathan Edwards on *Perichoresis*: The Trinity as a Community of Love

Paul Helm has observed that although Jonathan Edwards does not use the term *perichoresis*, his description of the mutual ecstatic enjoyment of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit entails a deep co-inherence and relational dynamic.¹⁹ Edwards regards the Trinity at its most basic as a community of love. He defends this tripersonal conception of God in his *Discourse on the Trinity*, where he writes that the Father "does in one act generate the Son, which is the perfect expression of the self of God, and the Holy Spirit proceeds as love between the Father and Son."²⁰ According to this framework, the divine persons are not separate, detached entities but share in a dynamic, relational unity. The mutual indwelling of the divine persons, without loss of personal distinction, which is central to the patristic notion of *perichoresis*²¹ finds its close parallel in Edwards' vision of the Trinity as a communion of love.

¹⁷ Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of The Trinity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 77-78.

¹⁸ Fred Sanders, *The Triune God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 56.

¹⁹ Paul Helm, *Jonathan Edwards on God and Creation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 37.

²⁰ Jonathan Edwards, *Discourse on The Trinity*, ed by Paul Helm (Eugene, Or: Wipf & Stock, 1957), 118.

²¹ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, 88.

A few key elements of perichoretic relationality are evident in Edwards' theological vision. Thus, the persons of the Trinity exist as perfect self-gift, eternally giving themselves in unity. This reflects the perichoretic notion that each person wholly shares in the divine life of the other without blurring.²² The Father and the Son would not even be capable of maintaining their jointness and interpenetration without the Holy Spirit, who Edwards locates as the personification of the same divine love.²³ The Spirit's procession as love guarantees that *perichoresis* is not only ontological but also intensely relational.²⁴ One of the beauties of Edwards is that he emphasizes that divine life is one of eternal, joyful reciprocity, moving us beyond a static conception of God.²⁵ Contemporary Trinitarian theologians concur that people must come to see the Trinity as an unending, relational love event,²⁶ Such understanding is deeply rooted within Catholic teaching.

Edwards's view of divine love as necessarily diffusive puts all of these forms of individualistic models of salvation, as well as political models based on self-interest and domination, into question. His theology argues that true authority must reflect divine self-giving; thus, it must radiate goodness outward and seek the flourishing of others.

3.2 Karl Barth on *Perichoresis*: Divinity Unity and the Economy of Salvation

Karl Barth, particularly prominent in his *Church Dogmatics I/1 and IV/1*, employs *perichoresis* to affirm both the unity and distinction of the persons of the Trinity. He argues that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit exist in a relationship characterized by dynamic movement. This perichoretic relationship plays

²² Sanders, *The Triune God*, 56-57.

²³ Edwards, *Discourse on The Trinity*, 122-123.

²⁴ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, 130.

²⁵ Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of The Trinity*, 79.

²⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and The Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981, 175.

out in God's revelation and redemptive work.²⁷ In contrast to a static understanding of the divine persons, Barth understands the Trinity in dynamic terms, one of mutual self-giving love whereby each person gives themselves entirely to the divine essence without mixing or separation.²⁸ A key aspect in Barth's conception of *perichoresis* is its relation to God's revelation in himself. In *Church Dogmatics I/1*, Barth reinforces the point that the Trinity is known through the acts of God in history, specifically the Father sending the Son and the Spirit witnessing to the Son's work.²⁹ This mutual interpenetration, as *perichoresis* in differentiated divine life and God's world, is replicated not only within the Godhead but also in the life of God with the world. The Son reveals the Father, and the Spirit enables the world to recognize the Son, and so the Trinity is dynamically engaged in human history.³⁰ In other words, *perichoresis* is not only an ontological reality but also a movement towards humanity of graciousness.³¹ Specifically, Barth's application of *perichoresis* to the economy of salvation is presented in *Church Dogmatics IV/1*, within the context of the incarnation and atonement. The Son's work is indissolubly attached to the Father's will, and the Spirit is the instrument of the Son, for the Son is effective in human life.³² The nature of the work of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit can therefore be seen in their mutual indwelling within the Trinity; likewise, each Person's work in salvation reflects this relational nature: the Father who purposes, the Son who suffers, and the Spirit who applies. Such divine simultaneity of action demonstrates that *perichoresis* is not an abstract metaphysical doctrine, but rather directly related to the redemptive work of God.³³

For Barth, the doctrine of the Trinity entails not only relational political structures but

also a radical economic ethic. In the perichoretic life of God, no one holds being, no one hoards glory: everything is shared. In human society, this requires resisting economic systems that concentrate power and wealth in the hands of a few, leaving the many with a limited share of what is available to them.

3.3 African Cosmology and Relational Ontology

African cosmology is based on a holistic view of reality, in which there is a profound, dynamic interrelationship between the spiritual and physical realms. This perspective informs African understandings of the person, justice, and reconciliation, and provides an important theological and anthropological framework for reclaiming *perichoresis* in African thought. Two notable scholars who have expressed this indigenous perspective are John S. Mbiti and Kwame Gyekye.

According to Mbiti, traditional African metaphysics does not focus on the autonomous self, which is the Western ideal, but on the relational community, which includes the living, the dead, and the yet to be born as a community.³⁴ His frequently-cited dictum, "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am," expounds the communitarian dimension of African ontology.³⁵ Mbiti argues that the human person is quintessentially relational and that any disruption in personal, social, or cosmic relationships, such as injustice, alienation, or moral dislocation, results in a tear within the web of communal and spiritual existence.³⁶ Thus, the social realm and the metaphysical must be reckoned together: the work of reconciliation is only finished when brokenness has been replaced by reconciliation in human relationships and peace has been re-enacted in

²⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/1* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936), 2

²⁸ T. F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 102.

²⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/1*, 312.

³⁰ Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 1: The Triune God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 127.

³¹ Colin Gunton, *The Christian Faith: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 54.

³² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 203.

³³ John Webster, *Holiness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 88.

³⁴ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 108–110.

³⁵ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 141.

³⁶ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 46–49.

ritual action; when tranquility of spirit has been achieved.³⁷

Kwame Gyekye has developed a relational approach by introducing what he calls the concept of “moderate communitarianism,” in which both the community and the moral agent within it are significant. In *African Cultural Values and Person and Community*, Gyekye maintains that African moral reflection is not just collectivist, but dialectically relational.³⁸ Justice, in this sense, is not an abstract legal theory but a lived commitment to social peace, mutual obligation and the common good.³⁹ Gyekye emphasizes that in African metaphysics, moral values have a metaphysical weight—moral deeds or sins re-echo on the individual’s life to impact on the spiritual world. Reconciliation should thus involve a combination of moral obligation and spiritual renewal, incorporating ritual, dialogue, and community participation.⁴⁰

Both Mbiti and Gyekye construct an African worldview in which relationality is not accidental, but a constituent of the moral and metaphysical configuration of life. Their perspectives provide a rich soil upon which one may mine the doctrine of *perichoresis* as a Trinitarian model for justice and reconciliation in Africa. Just as *perichoresis* tells of mutual indwelling, love and relational harmony within the Triune God, so African cosmology emphasizes the necessity of human flourishing through the restoration of right relationship (socially, spiritually, and cosmically). Here, the two systems coincide in conceiving forgiveness as not only a legal or personal transaction, but also as a restoration of communal, moral, and spiritual balance.

4.0 RECONCILIATION AND DIVERSITY: THE IMPLICATIONS OF PERICHORESIS IN AFRICAN SOCIETIES

The perichoretic understanding, as presented by Jonathan Edwards and Karl Barth, offers a profound theological perspective on

reconciliation and diversity in African societies. The perichoretic model of divine relationality serves as a vision for healing and unity in the context of Africa’s narrative of colonialism, ethnic divisions, political conflicts, and socio-economic inequalities. The *perichoresis* of the divine persons without confusion or loss of identity illuminates our moral posture towards others, condemning practices of exclusion, ethnic nationalism, and stratified social hierarchies. Introducing theologians such as Kwame Bediako, John Zizioulas, Colin Gunton, and Leonardo Boff creates an opportunity for a powerful contextual application of *perichoresis* to address specifically African concerns, including tribalism, postcolonial identity, and religious pluralism. Building on this theological vision of unity in diversity, we now turn to focus on how *perichoresis* can inform personhood and identity formation in African communal contexts.

4.1 Perichoretic Personhood, and Relational Identity Formation in African Societies

By extending from the doctrine of *perichoresis*, the relational character of personhood provides key considerations for the healing of African societies. Colin Gunton’s Trinitarian anthropology critiques the modern Western propensity to treat the person as an autonomous, self-contained individual. On the contrary, according to Gunton, personhood is properly understood as being-in-relation.⁴¹ This understanding of the profoundly relational nature of our epistemological vocabulary of personhood, rooted in the perichoretic life of the Triune God, corresponds powerfully with African philosophies like *Ubuntu* that agree that a person is only in relation with others — “I am because we are.

Isaac Boaheng argues that *Ubuntu* provides a utilitarian communal framework for expressing personhood in African societies. In Ghana, for example, he observes, this value system is enacted in phenomena such as

³⁷ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 164–169.

³⁸ Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction* (Accra: Sankofa Publishing Company, 1996), 35–38.

³⁹ Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, 41–46.

⁴⁰ Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, 41–46.

⁴¹ Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 33.

communal work (*nnɔboa*), receiving strangers, and the concept of the extended family, all of which have the effect of reinforcing the idea that one's humanity is obtained and maintained through relationships with others.⁴² Basing his argument on Tutu's perception, Boaheng maintains that the *Ubuntu* philosophy requires one to be generous, affectionate, and interconnected with one another.⁴³ This is so because "a person is a person only through other persons."⁴⁴ This view resonates with the Western idea of an independent self and proclaim rather that "one cannot fully embody humanity in isolation from others."⁴⁵ For Boaheng, *Ubuntu* was seen as a concept and value system "that has the potential to heal social divisions and create a more inclusive development process in Ghana, as well as the rest of Africa."⁴⁶

John S. Mbiti further explores this communal vision in his seminal work, *African Religions and Philosophy*, which provides a fitting introduction to the essentially communal nature of African spiritualities. His assertion that "I am because we are and, since we are, therefore I am" emphasizes the relational nature of African personhood.⁴⁷ Mbiti's analysis of African cosmology demonstrates how the African sees oneself as surrounded by the family, clan, and community, similar to the perichoretic relationships of the Trinity.

In the African context, *perichoresis* resonates deeply with indigenous cultural values. It is not merely a foreign Christian import, but rather aligns naturally with the holistic and communal worldview inherent in many African societies. As such, the doctrine of *perichoresis*

offers both a retrieval of African relational wisdom and a meaningful insertion into contemporary African theological discourse.

Whereas neoliberal individualism has disintegrated communal ties throughout the continent through the proliferation of extractive economic forms, a recovery of a perichoretic vision of humanity, one amenable to indigenous motifs, points to a path of redemptive reconstitution. According to Tabitha Edgar, neoliberalism intensifies identity crises due to its orientation toward self-sufficiency and competitiveness that works against relational belonging.⁴⁸ In African contexts, built on the notion of being woven into family structures and communities, but where colonialism and globalization have torn and devastated these traditional communal structures, the perichoretic model beckons a return to relational solidarity: not mere coexistence but active, loving participation in the lives of others.

Perichoresis thus ceases to become a mere theological proposition and becomes an ethical prerequisite. It requires forms of social life that privilege mutual indwelling over hierarchical domination, cooperation over competition, and solidarity over segregation. Such a framework undergirds local African political norms evident in the Asafo councils of Ghana or the *harambee* philosophy of Kenya⁴⁹, both of which prioritize collective action and consensus.⁵⁰ Edgar notes that the framework of orthodoxy (right belief), orthopraxy (right action), and orthopathy (right affections) presented by Charles Ringma provides a holistic

⁴² Isaac Boaheng, "Ubuntu socio-political ethics and Ghana's journey to realizing the aspirations of Agenda 2063," *Social Sciences, Humanities and Education Journal (SHE Journal)*, 5(4), 2024, 11–12.

⁴³ Boaheng, "Ubuntu socio-political ethics and Ghana's journey to realizing the aspirations of Agenda 2063," 11.

⁴⁴ Boaheng, "Ubuntu socio-political ethics and Ghana's journey to realizing the aspirations of Agenda 2063," 11.

⁴⁵ Boaheng, "Ubuntu socio-political ethics and Ghana's journey to realizing the aspirations of Agenda 2063," 11.

⁴⁶ Boaheng, "Ubuntu socio-political ethics and Ghana's journey to realizing the aspirations of Agenda 2063," 12-13.

⁴⁷ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 108.

⁴⁸ Tabitha Petrova Edgar, *Personhood, Particularity, and Perichoresis: The Doctrine of the Trinity in Identity and Faith Formation* (MA thesis, University of Western Ontario, 2021), 79. <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/7900>. Retrieved on 2025-04-0

⁴⁹ *Harambee* is a Swahili word meaning "all put together." It signifies Kenya's indigenous philosophy of communal labor, participatory development, and mutual aid, often used to mobilize resources for public projects. See Wangari Maathai, *The Challenge for Africa* (New York: Pantheon, 2009), 113-115.

⁵⁰ Colin E. Gunton, *The Christian Faith: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 45. Edgar, *Personhood, Particularity, and Perichoresis*, 89.

context for transformation in society.⁵¹ Therefore, African societies seeking reconciliation and justice should simultaneously pursue theological reconstruction (orthodoxy), practices of collective healing and economic justice (orthopraxy), and the development of empathy, humility, and forgiveness (orthopathy). In this way, *perichoresis* can energize not only theological reflection but also grassroots movements for societal transformation.

Perichoresis in faith formation is vital for the reconstruction of both personal and communal identity. It embodies a relational model where identity is shaped not in isolation, but through mutual indwelling and interdependence. Edgar, reflecting on Canadian youth, argues that identity construction in postmodern societies has become increasingly fragile due to the erosion of cohesive social and theological foundations.⁵² Similarly, African societies—fragmented by colonial borders, ethnic tensions, and economic instability—require a reimagining of identity rooted not in ethnic essentialism or individualistic nationalism, but in relationality and shared humanity. *Perichoresis* offers a compelling theological vision for such reconstruction: an identity forged through communion, reciprocity, and love, reflecting the Triune God's way of being.

Both Triune and worldly in the same breath, perichoretic participation (i.e., shared mutual indwelling, like a three-dimensional dance) beckons Africans away from tolerance alone and towards the chilled embrace of diversity as a gracious gift of creation, holistically working amongst generations to create brand new practices and identities that are rooted but open, distinct yet interrelated with all creation. Hence, the doctrine of *perichoresis*, synthesizing Gunton's ideal of relational

personhood, Volf's call for inclusion, and Barth's theology of revelation unto reconciliation, is proposed as a theological vehicle for African healing. It provides a vision of reconciliation, justice, and flourishing that is not an afterthought but the very image of the eternal, relational life of God now released to enter into history.

Jonathan Edwards emphasized the Holy Spirit as the bond of love between the Father and the Son, emphasizing the relational nature of divine life.⁵³ This diffusive self-compassionate love⁵⁴ extends a challenge to African societies to transcend ethnic competition and achieve a mutually interdependent existence. Countries such as Rwanda, Nigeria, and South Sudan have only continued this legacy of ethnic violence due to colonial-era divide and rule policies. The Rwandan genocide in 1994, for instance, was the result of long-running tensions that colonial powers had aggravated. For Edwards, a love that moves outward in this way points to a reconciliation that entails more than treaties or truces; it involves a cruciform reshaping of ties between one another (a covenant) that are grounded in mutual self-donation.

This reflects the philosophy of the *Ubuntu*, an African ethic of communal spirit: "I am because we are."⁵⁵ Thus, the perichoretic model confirms *Ubuntu* by showing that active participation in the world is not a human invention, but an imitation of divine life. Africa's Desmond Tutu's theological vision of *Ubuntu* is a concrete application of a perichoretic relationality to the healing of society. For Tutu, *Ubuntu* is more than a cultural value; it is a theological principle that holds that one becomes fully human through others.⁵⁶ As he did in his leadership of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, showing how relationality, mutual forgiveness, public truth-telling, and restorative justice could

⁵¹ Edgar, *Personhood, Particularity, and Perichoresis*, 21; Charles Ringma, "The Church's Calling in A Troubled World: The Grand Design and Fragile Engagement," *Zadok Papers* 225/226 (2017): 1–12.

⁵² Edgar, *Personhood, Particularity, and Perichoresis*, 82.

⁵³ Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits*, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 133.

⁵⁴ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Volume 8: *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 251

⁵⁵ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 108.

⁵⁶ Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 31.

restore a broken nation. His emphasis on interdependence is analogous to the perichoretic model of divine life, in which difference is not suppressed but loved into a painful reconciliation. Tutu's theology thus stands as a prime example of *perichoresis* in action in historical, political, and social transformation.

The necessity of reconciliation in African societies is further confirmed by Karl Barth's Christocentric concept of *perichoresis*. Barth's critique applies to oppressive structures of power. He writes of the Triune God as existing in reciprocal relationships without coercion or dominance.⁵⁷ This criticism is particularly relevant in the context of post-colonial Africa, where authoritarianism and corruption have eroded democratic governance. Dozens of African countries such as Zimbabwe, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda have fallen victim to leaders who used the systemic machinery of autocracy to remain in power. Barth's Trinitarian vision necessitates the rejection of hierarchical oppression and the appointment of governance predicated on justice and mutually accountable action. Allan Boesak extends the perichoretic vision into the political realm, critiquing systems of domination that betray the relational character of power.⁵⁸ In *Dare We Speak of Hope?* Boesak argues that authentic political hope can only come from something better than the exercise of power, which he calls life-giving, participatory community engagement. He targets both church and state structures, which contribute to injustice, and advocates for a politics that reflects the relationality of the Triune God — one that is decentralized, accountable, and mutually empowering. Boesak's theology is a necessary African voice in this regard, linking perichoretic thought to the embodied struggle for justice in concrete socio-political settings.

Scholarly reflections on the implications of interdependence at the divine level have contributed to the call for leadership cultures that embody Trinitarian mutuality and

proximity, as opposed to top-down power, thereby bolstering traditional African communal decision-making systems, such as Ghana's *Asafo* councils or Nigeria's *Igbo* consensus-based leadership.

Kwame Bediako contextualizes Christian theology with African traditions. According to Bediako, whereas African identity and Christianity are not in opposition, they can be synthesized in a manner that reflects communal spirituality.⁵⁹ Bediako's emphasis on the perichoretic nature of African religious experience suggests that reconciliation involves not merely a social task, but rather a spiritual endeavour that encompasses the healing of historical wounds, including those caused by colonial Christianity. In this sense, African theology's decolonization does not necessitate its rejection of Christianity, but rather a rediscovery of its perichoretic implications within the context of African communal understandings.

John Zizioulas' account of *being as communion* only deepens the African dialogue on reconciliation within the subject of religious pluralism.⁶⁰ Christianity, Islam, and traditional religions coexist in a sometimes-tense relationship in Africa, where, in the case of Nigeria, there are conflicts between Christian and Muslim communities. Using the perichoretic model offered by Zizioulas, a way out is to end the separation through definition, the end of defining identity against the other; rather, it is to be rediscovered through dialogue and the common experience of our shared humanity. This understanding of beliefs reflects the practice observed in Africa, where interfaith traditions, such as the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda, encourage Christian-Muslim cooperation for peacebuilding purposes.

Focusing on *perichoresis*, Colin Gunton critiques the Western paradigm of individualism and subsequently advocates for a vision of

⁵⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 727.

⁵⁸ Allan Boesak, *Dare We Speak of Hope? Searching for a Language of Life in Faith and Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 59.

⁵⁹ Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1995), 96.

⁶⁰ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 88.

relational personhood.⁶¹ This is especially relevant within African societies that have inherited communal ways of living but presently interact with neoliberal economic systems. Globalization has led to an unprecedented rise in economic inequalities, resulting in the erosion of community ties in favour of individual needs and the pursuit of material goods.

As Gunton's vision of God is perichoretic, he would insist that economic justice is a relational not simply a transactional matter, one that rightly nurtures policies of community wellbeing as opposed to those of economic elitism. The African concept of *harambee* (literally, "pulling together" in Swahili), used most extensively in Kenya, reflects this theological vision of mutual economic support and prosperity.

Leonardo Boff, from a liberation theology perspective uses *perichoresis* to address social justice, critiquing systemic inequalities.⁶² These observations are especially pertinent to Africa's struggles with economic extraction, land dispossession and resource-based violence. The continent's abundance of natural resources — gold, diamonds, and oil — has more often brought suffering than prosperity due to exploitative multinational corporations and corrupt political systems. A Trinitarian social vision of Boff calls for economic structures to focus on the well-being of the marginalized, reminiscent of African beliefs in a reconnected land as a communal good rather than an individual commodity. Jean-Marc Ela's African liberation theology asserts that perichoretic relationality necessitates economic justice.⁶³ To Ela, the church must become the voice of the marginalized wherever it finds itself, manifesting a "theology of the bottom" that is attentive to the cry of the poor. His contextual theology renders structural poverty a theological crisis — a repudiation of the mutual indwelling and relational flourishing that the Triune God models. In Ela's vision, *perichoresis* is not just

spiritual communion, but requires material solidarity, whereby structures must be transfigured to denote the divine life of love, justice, and interdependence. This has echoes in the *ujamaa* philosophy of Julius Nyerere, who served as Tanzania's first president and promoted a practice of cooperative economics and social solidarity as a proactive response to exploitative capitalism.

Kathryn Tanner, pressing the implications of *perichoresis* from a feminist theological angle, also emphasizes its implications for mending gender inequities.⁶⁴ Gender-based violence, exclusion of women from leadership, and economic marginalization of women are still prevalent in many African societies. Tanner's perichoretic vision subverts this structure, insisting on the equality of the relational, and calling for societies in which men and women thrive together in interdependent commonality. There is a much-needed feminine spark in the conversation on *perichoresis* within African Theology that comes through Mercy Amba Oduyoye.⁶⁵ Her work emphasizes how the marginality of African women call for a relational, expansive community model. In this liberative space, Oduyoye critiques not only traditional African patriarchies but also imported Western feminisms, instead offering an African-centered theological vision where mutual care, equality, and solidarity are all essential.

Perichoretic life in her theology entails not only ethnic reconciliation but also gendered liberation, welcoming all persons into a just and life-affirming community modelled after the Trinity. This echoes sentiments among African feminist movements that favour communal leadership frameworks over Western individualist feminism, such as Uganda's *Mothers' Union*, which promotes a model of gender justice rooted in the Christian faith.

The model of reconciliation and diversity as a *perichoresis* represents a change-

⁶¹ Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 236.

⁶² Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 136.

⁶³ Jean-Marc Ela, *African Cry* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), 112.

⁶⁴ Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and The Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 47.

⁶⁵ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 42.

making vision of African societies. Edwards's insistence on diffusive divine love summons communities to embody radical relationality, especially in terms of ethnic and religious reconciliation. Barth's resistance to hierarchical oppression arrests authoritarian governance and enables mutual accountability. Through Gunton and Zizioulas, relational personhood becomes critical to both economic justice and interfaith dialogue. Trajectories of African theology are carried through Boff and Bediako, who project these parts of the discussion into African socio-political realities, through economic justice, decolonialized faith, and communal flourishing. Tanner's gendercide and gender critique calls for the destruction of these oppressive structures that block full human flourishing. While *perichoresis* offers deep insight into human personhood and social reconciliation, its implications extend beyond the relationship between humans and creation, especially within the context of Africa's ecological crises.

4.2 Perichoresis and the African Ecological Crisis

The perichoretic vision of intra-divine interrelationship itself has profound implications for human reconciliation and communal flourishing, and accordingly for ecological ethics. Africa's environmental crisis, characterized by deforestation, drought, and desertification, compounded by the predatory practices of extractive industries, is more than a technical or economic matter; it is a theological problem. Within this framework, *perichoresis* provides a relational and integrative theological paradigm that resists the instrumentalization of the earth and instead evokes mutual indwelling between humanity, creation, and the Triune God.

The theology of Jonathan Edwards provides a deeply powerful interpretative framework through which to recommend this interrelation. In his work, *"The End for Which God Created the World,"* he argues that *creation is the overflow of divine beauty and*

*love; the material world is the medium through which divine glory and relational joy can be revealed.*⁶⁶ The cosmos is not an expendable resource but the participatory realm that mirrors the perichoretic communion of the Trinity. To transgress upon creation is, in Edwards' terms, to defile the deity's signet etching into the fabric of the world. His insistence on the diffuse nature of divine love not only applies to human community, but to all of the creation, which is alive to share and reflect the divine harmony.⁶⁷ On the other hand, Karl Barth, in *Church Dogmatics III/1*, makes a similar point regarding the integrity and purpose of creation about the covenantal partner, God. Barth argues that Creation is thus not neutral stuff; rather, it is caught in the course of God's self-revelation and reconciliation.⁶⁸ Barth's Trinitarian theology thus rejects all dominative and utilitarian approaches to the environment, asserting that stewardship is meant to be based on the mutual, participatory love that exists within the Godhead. This relational orientation reframes dominion not as domination but as care in communion.

Increasingly, African ecological theologians have retrieved such relational paradigms to critique as well as affirm environmental degradation and indigenous cosmologies. One such voice is Laurenti Magesa, who argues for the sacredness of land within African religious traditions, reminding us that there is no strict separation between the spiritual and material worlds in African cosmology.⁶⁹ Land is not a commodity, but a sacred trust, held in communal custodianship and a reciprocal relationship with human life.⁷⁰ It is this comprehension that echoes the understanding of the Triune persons living in a perichoretic state of mutual indwelling, without confusion or hierarchy. If the Trinity is the model of perfect communion, African cosmology provides a relational model of the

⁶⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *The End for Which God Created the World*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 121–125.

⁶⁷ Paul Helm, *Jonathan Edwards on God and Creation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 89–93.

⁶⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/1*, trans. J. W. Edwards et al (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), 94–97.

⁶⁹ Laurenti Magesa, *What Is Not Sacred? African Spirituality* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014), 67.

⁷⁰ Magesa, *What Is Not Sacred?*, 71–74.

bond between people, creation, and God.⁷¹ Magesa's thought, therefore, offers a theological and ethical trajectory for resistance to environmental degradation, an ecological vision grounded in sacred responsibility, interconnectedness, and all creation flourishing in harmony with the divine relationality.

Similarly, Benezet Bujo argues that ethics in Africa must be based on the idea of vital force, a metaphysical and moral notion that enshrines the communal force that binds creation together. Bujo, in his work, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, argues that the relational and dynamic nature of African ethics is grounded in lived experience, not abstract principles, of interconnected life.⁷² Vital force conveys the collective agency of every being—human, animal, ancestral, and natural within one network of existence in which all beings work together for the flourishing of them all. To diminish, waylay or destroy another's vital force is to lose one's own.⁷³ This holistic relationality has a potent theological analogue in the doctrine of *perichoresis*, in which the divine persons of the Trinity mutually indwell and coexist as mutual self-giving and shared life. As the Triune God does not exist in isolation but in dynamic communion, so Bujo's African ethic imagines the world as a sacred web of relationships bounded by reciprocity, care, and mutual indwelling.⁷⁴ In this view, environmental exploitation reflects not just an ecological failure but a moral and theological rupture that comes at the cost of tearing the sacred fabric that holds creation together. Bujo's theology thereby suggests that ecological justice cannot be pursued apart from a blessed reconstruction of human identity as inherently communal and spiritually grounded within creation, an understanding that finds empathetic repetition

and deepening through a Trinitarian relational ontology.⁷⁵

4.3 Implications for Church, Society, Individual and Governance

The doctrine of *perichoresis* in the African context, when appropriated, carries profound significance for ecclesial life, community relations, identity, and political governance. For the Church, *perichoresis* is a redefinition of ecclesiology as participatory and expansive. It claims that the Church is called to image the Triune communion, to foster communities of interdependence and shared leadership in which all are welcomed as Christ Jesus himself.⁷⁶ Worship and mission, therefore, are not individual transactions, but communal manifestations of God's relational nature. For society, the relational ontology of the Trinity undermines social atomization, exclusion, and ecological abuse. It presents an alternative vision of community drawn from values of solidarity, reciprocity, and care—values that resonate with African philosophies such as *Ubuntu* and *harambee*.⁷⁷ Communities are invited to embody a divine interdependence that promotes justice, reconciliation, and care for the environment.

The person or individual is also not an independent agent, but a relater, embodying the dynamic dependence of the divine persons. This moulds an identity of a human being defined by compassion, humility, and shared responsibility. The bounded self is a perichoretic self, not exclusionary but open to others, formed in love, not in self-interest that isolates or exploits. Concerning governance, *perichoresis* challenges hierarchical domination and promotes dialogical, participatory leadership instead. Just as the life of the divine is ordered

⁷¹ Magesa, *What Is Not Sacred?*, 85-86.

⁷² Benezet Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community: The African Model and the Dialogue Between North and South* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2009), 27-30.

⁷³ Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 36-38.

⁷⁴ Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 45-48.

⁷⁵ Emmanuel Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 88-91.

⁷⁶ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *The Trinity: Global Perspectives* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 303-306.

⁷⁷ Desmond Tutu, *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 25-27; Wangari Maathai, *The Challenge for Africa* (New York: Pantheon, 2009), 113-115.

in mutuality, so, too, public life should be ordered in justice, transparency, and accountability.⁷⁸ Leadership in such a vision is service that yields the flourishing of all creation. *Perichoresis* is not only a theological insight but also a transformative vision, to which the Church, society, individuals, and governments are called to align themselves, thereby apprenticing us to the Triune God.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated that the doctrine of *perichoresis*, when viewed through theological lenses articulated by Jonathan Edwards and Karl Barth, is a rich resource to support various challenges of reconciliation and justice in African societies. Edwards' focus on love as the building block of the Trinity, and the Spirit as this bond of love, and Trinitarian life itself as entering into that bond through Christ, resonates with African communal metaphysics, such as *ubuntu*, that insists on radical relationality to heal our deep divisions in society. Barth's Christological focus on revelation and responsive divine life speaks to the critique of authoritarian systems of governance and God's self-disclosure, setting a potential ground for participatory theological reflection that contributes to a framework where governance is accountable to the logic of a shared, two-way relationship with God. Based on African theologians such as Tutu, Bediako, Oduyoye, and Boesak, this study has demonstrated that *perichoresis* is not a speculative doctrine alone, but a dynamic vision that informs human relationships, gender relations, ecological ethics, and political solidarity. By retrieving and recontextualizing perichoretic theology within African socio-political realities, this article argues that divine mutual indwelling serves as a meta-model for social cohesion, axial accountability, and radical justice. Therefore, *perichoresis* becomes a theological basis and an ethical imperative for the healing of Africa, which invites communities to embody the relational life of the Triune God.

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⁷⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 198–203.

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