

Jefferson Quick, Timely Reads

Mysticism of Tutu: Tutu Works to Make Sure Faith Affects People, Politics

By: Reverend Charles Brock
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Desmond Tutu sits with his daughter, Mpho Andrea, in the Netherlands in 2012.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu has had an extraordinary and exuberant life. At age 88, he is still deeply involved in the South African church and international Anglican Communion, as well as speaking at scores of events. A Nobel Peace Prize winner, he was the spiritual leader of the South African Revolution. But he could be critical of Nelson Mandela and associates if he felt it were needed: “They stopped the gravy train just long enough to get on.” He once visited Oxford University for one week and spoke on 24 occasions.

Tutu is a polymath in religion, making sure his faith impacts on national and international politics as well as personal relationships with others and with God. When

he preached at my college in Oxford, on a Monday morning at 9 a.m., we had a full chapel. His opening words were remarkable – “Please clap your hands. More. More. All right. Do you know why you are clapping? You are clapping for yourselves, because you in Britain developed sanctions on South Africa that played a major role in the overthrow of the white supremacist government. So, go on clapping!”

He is very witty. One among many stories I remember was the quip, “When the white man came to Africa, he had the Bible and we had the land. Now we have the Bible, but he has the land.” And perhaps not so funny – “When people say that religion and politics don’t mix, I wonder what Bible they are reading?”

He has a strong sense of injustice for the black people in Africa and all over the world. He also argued that black theology shared a repudiation of the supremacy of Western values (individualism and capitalism, for starters). In doing so he spoke of an underlying unity of Africans and the African diaspora, stating that “All of us are bound to Mother Africa by invisible but tenacious bonds. She has nurtured the deepest things in us blacks.”

For Tutu, two major questions were being posed by African Christianity: how to replace imported Christian expressions of faith with something authentically African, and how to liberate people from bondage. He said he believed that there were many comparisons to be made between contemporary African understandings of God in the story of Moses and the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures. He criticized African religion for failing to sufficiently address contemporary societal problems and suggested that to correct this it should learn from the black liberation theology tradition.

When pressed to describe his ideological position, Tutu has described himself as a socialist. “All my experiences with capitalism, I’m afraid, have indicated that it encourages some of the worst features in people. Eat or be eaten. It is underlined by the survival of the fittest. I can’t buy that. I mean, maybe it’s the awful face of capitalism, but I haven’t seen the other face.” In the 1980s, he was reported as saying that “apartheid has given free enterprise a bad name.” While identifying with socialism in general, he opposed forms of socialism like Marxism-Leninism which promoted communism and atheism. He was critical of the Marxist governments in the Soviet Union, comparing the way they treated their populations with the way that the National Party treated South Africans. In 1985, he stated that he hated Marxism-Leninism “with every fiber of my being,” although sought to explain why black South Africans turned to it as an ally: “When you are in a dungeon and a hand is stretched out to free you, you do not ask for the pedigree of the hand owner.”



Tutu at the [World Economic Forum](#) in 2009.

What kind of a mystic is he? He seems to be both a mystic of presence and will. When approaching the Divine, “words are often so utterly inadequate. The story goes of a farmer who used to sit in church for long periods of silence. When he was asked about this practice, he said of our Lord, ‘I look at him and he looks at me and it is enough.’ We too have moments when we are struck speechless, as when we are stunned by the beauty of the snowcapped Mt. Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, or the majestic roar of the Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe. Our instinctive worshipfulness then comes to the fore with all these created things; how much more when we encounter the source of it all – God, who is beauty, truth and goodness? Then we want to fall down to worship and adore the one whose glory fills the heavens and the earth. ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts.’”

Some prayers he published that he wrote or copied help us to understand him:

All shall be Amen and Alleluia.

We shall rest and we shall see,

We shall see and we shall know,

We shall know and we shall love,

We shall love and we shall praise.

Behold our end which is no end.

Seven archangels stand glorifying the Almighty and serving the hidden mystery.

Michael the first, Gabriel the second, and Raphael the third, symbol of the Trinity.

Surael, Sakakael, Saratael, and Ananael. These are the shining ones, the great and pure ones, who pray to God for mankind.

The cherubim, the seraphim, the thrones, dominions, powers, and the four living creatures bearing the chariot of God ...

Holy, holy, holy, Lord of hosts. Heaven and earth are full of thy glory. Intercede for us, O angels our guardians, and all heavenly hosts, that our sins may be forgiven.

-Coptic Orthodox

Hymn to the Blessed Virgin (last lines)

And now without doubt, and in the fullness of faith, I glorify thy birth from the Father and give praise to thy birth from the Virgin. The Virgin's womb is greater than the mystical chariot of light, loftier than the heights of the firmament, more sublime than the distances of space, more glorious than the seraphim and cherubim.¹

In a remarkable meeting, Tutu met with the Dalai Lama for a few days at the Dalai Lama's home in exile in India in 2015. They shared theology, politics, laughter, food, and prayer. The book "Joy"² is an account of that meeting. In it we see many similarities between them. One such is Oneness. Both men were trying to shift the Western perspective of *I, me and mine* to *we, us and ours*. In so doing, Tutu mentioned the idea that the astronauts saw the Earth as "one" and we needed to do the same. The oneness of the Earth is a symbol of what we could understand about ourselves. "When a disaster such as 9/11 happens, we realize we are family ... our sisters and brothers."³ We are One with each other and together. Mysticism fulfilled.



Farewell, brother.

Citations:

[1] Tutu, D. (2004). *An African prayer book*. Cape Town, South Africa: Double Storey.

[2] Lama, D., Tutu, D., & Abrams, D. (2017). *The book of joy: Lasting happiness in a changing world*. Toronto: CNIB.

[3] Lama, D., Tutu, D., & Abrams, D. (2017). *The book of joy: Lasting happiness in a changing world*. Toronto: CNIB.

Photos:

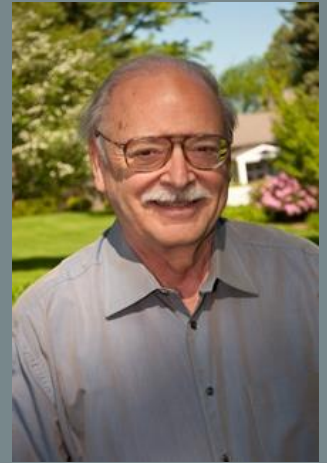
Desmond Tutu sits with his daughter <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/bigideas/why-forgiveness-is-the-only-way-forward/7557806>

World Economic Forum <https://premierchristian.news/en/news/article/wife-grateful-for-prayers-as-archbishop-tutu-returns-to-hospital?psrc=personyzeRelated>

Dalai Lama and Desmond TuTu <https://www.lionsroar.com/the-dalai-lama-and-desmond-tutu-the-best-of-spiritual-friends/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rev. Charles Brock, an Erie native, is an Emeritus Fellow, Chaplain, and Director of Ministerial Education at Mansfield College, Oxford, UK, where he taught for 35 years. He serves as the Director of the Institute on the American Dream at Penn State Behrend. Rev. Brock is acting minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Girard, Pa., and he is a Founding Member of the Jefferson Educational Society. Rev. Brock serves as the Director of the Brock Institute for Mega Issues Education at the Jefferson and serves as Secretary of the Jefferson Educational Society's Board of Trustees.



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