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### ***Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1931-2021): Prophetic Witness for Social Justice***

Tribute by: A. Rashied Omar, The University of Notre Dame.

#### **Introduction**

On Sunday 26 December 2021, Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu passed away in Cape Town, South Africa, at the ripe old age of 90. Desmond Mpilo Tutu was born on 7 October 1931 in Johannesburg. In 1961 he was ordained as a priest in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa. From 1978 to 1985, Tutu served as secretary general of an ecumenical body, the South African Council of Churches. It was in this capacity that on December 10, 1984, Desmond Tutu won the Nobel Peace Prize for his Anti-Apartheid activism and human rights work in South Africa. He subsequently went on to become the first black Archbishop of Cape Town (1986-1994), and shortly after the demise of Apartheid he was appointed by President Nelson Mandela to lead South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1996-1998).

No less than a half a dozen biographies, at last three festschrifts, several theological treatises and dozens of essays have already been written about the phenomenal life and contribution of Desmond Tutu. I do not wish to regurgitate this here. For those interested in reading more detailed accounts of his life, I recommend the following two books: *Rabble-Rouser for Peace: The Authorized Biography of Desmond Tutu* by John Allen (London: Rider, 2006) and *Desmond Tutu: A Spiritual Biography of South Africa's Confessor* by Michael Battle (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021).

#### **Witness for Social Justice**

As is the case with all great historical figures it is inevitable that the rich life and legacy of Desmond Tutu will be contested. One of the most significant dimensions of Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu's rich legacy that I would like

to dwell on here is that of his prophetic witness for social justice and human dignity for oppressed and exploited people wherever they may find themselves. It is not surprising that this critical dimension of Tutu's life and legacy is considered controversial, since many people regard the mixing of religion with politics a taboo subject.

In his *Spiritual Biography* (2021), Battle shatters the false binary between the sacred and the secular by making a compelling case that Tutu's political actions for social justice were not in spite of his deep spirituality, but rather because of it. In this regard Tutu's social spirituality modeled and embodied what *The Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church* (Braamfontein: Skotaville Publishers, 1986), produced by black Anti-Apartheid theologians in 1985, called prophetic theology i.e. speaking truth to power. The *Kairos Document* not only decried the racist and oppressive system of Apartheid a heresy but provided South Africans with a crystalized articulation of a South African variety of liberation theology.

The Kairos theologians identified three distinct types of theological positions in relationship to state power: (1) state theology, which legitimates state-sponsored violence by providing divine authority to the state; (2) church theology, which ignores socio-economic and political injustices and privileges the maintenance of law and order over that of supporting social justice movements; and (3) prophetic theology, which embraces the legitimacy of the struggle of oppressed and exploited people to seek political liberation and social justice. The *Kairos Document* thoroughly critiqued the first two theologies, while espousing the latter. The Kairos theologians proclaimed that the Apartheid leaders had blasphemed against God by creating a "state theology" that abused Christian theological concepts and biblical texts such as Romans 13 to justify Apartheid.

Inspired by the prophetic theology espoused in the *Kairos Document*, Archbishop Tutu eschewed the role adopted by many religious leaders, namely that of either ignoring issues of social justice or being sycophants, groveling at the feet of powerful state leaders. Notwithstanding the robust role that Desmond Tutu, other ecumenical leaders such as Dr. Allan Boesak, and interfaith leaders, such as Dr. Farid Esack, played during the Anti-Apartheid struggle, by and large most South African religious leaders and institutions were guilty of church theology.

This was evident in the testimonies presented and confessions made at the TRC's Faith Community Hearings from November 17-19, 1997 (See: James Cochrane, John de Gruchy, and Stephen Martin, eds, *Facing the Truth: South African Faith Communities and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. Cape Town: David Philip Publishers, 1999). It is my considered view that herein lays the most significant part of the legacy of Desmond Tutu, namely that of his prophetic witness i.e. speaking truth to power. The Nobel Peace Prize awarded to Tutu in 1984

was indeed recognition of Tutu's prophetic witness during the Apartheid era for social justice and human dignity.

### **Beyond Apartheid**

In his unrelenting pursuit of peace with justice and human rights with human dignity, Tutu's speaking truth to power did not end with the demise of Apartheid in 1994 but continued during the final quarter century of his life (1994-2021). His strong criticism of the corruption within the post-Apartheid African National Congress (ANC) led government is well-known. The most famous of the litany of rebukes Tutu directed at the ANC-led government criticized their graft and neglect of the poor and marginalized in the country, and this came on his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday celebrations on October 7, 2011.

Tutu lashed out at the South African government for its refusal to grant the Tibetan Buddhist leader, the Dalai Lama, a visa to attend his birthday party. He vowed to pray for the downfall of the ANC. Not surprisingly, Tutu paid a price for his outspokenness and calling the ANC government to account for their moral mandate to the people of South Africa. In 2013 with the passing of his close friend and comrade, Nelson Mandela, the ANC led government omitted to invite Tutu to the state funeral. It was only after the intervention of some senior religious and civil society leaders that Tutu was given a late invitation and persuaded to attend. It was a slight that hurt him deeply but he refused to seek patronage from the new political elites. I would like to conclude by highlighting three examples in which Tutu's courageous prophetic witness was directed at global struggles against injustice. The first, and most significant case, is that of Tutu's decrying of Israel as an Apartheid state. In 2002 after a visit to the Holy Land, Tutu created a stir in a widely publicized speech denouncing the oppressive Israeli policies regarding the Palestinians and calling for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) against Israel (see <https://countercurrents.org/2022/01/zionist-subverted-west-ignores-desmond-tutu-opposition-to-israeli-apartheid/>).

Tutu's commitment to global struggles against injustices is epitomized by the following statement he made at the tenth international Israeli Apartheid Week in 2014: "Those who turn a blind eye to injustice actually perpetuate injustice. If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor." Archbishop Tutu remained a fierce critic of state-sponsored terror in Israel throughout his life, for which he was to suffer great ignominy. The pro-Israeli lobbyists have continued to malign Tutu as a senile anti-Semite (see <https://reason.com/volokh/2022/01/01/the-late-bishop-desmond-tutu-antisemite/>).

The second example of Tutu's prophetic witness at the global level came in 2003 when Tutu decried the US led invasion of Iraq as immoral and unjust. He

continued to be a fierce critic of the war in Iraq long after it had ended. He subsequently called for both George W. Bush and Tony Blair to face prosecution at the International Criminal Court for their role in the war on Iraq. Last but not least, in 2007 Archbishop Emeritus Tutu condemned his fellow Nobel Peace Laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi, for not opposing the Myanmar regime for perpetrating what he called the “ethnic cleansing” of the Rohingya people. In an open letter posted on social media Tutu said the following: “I am now elderly, decrepit and formally retired, but breaking my vow to remain silent on public affairs out of profound sadness [at the persecution of the Rohingya people].”

## **Conclusion**

The greatest honour we can bestow on the memory of Archbishop Desmond Tutu is to embrace his prophetic theology of holding those in power responsible for their moral and political mandates. This is a responsibility that should not only fall on our current religious leadership, but on all of us as responsible global citizens.

We express our profound gratitude for the remarkable contribution of Desmond Tutu to the struggles of the oppressed and exploited masses in South Africa and all over the world for a life of dignity and equality.

### **Research Africa**

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