

Book Review of *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Desmond Mpilo Tutu, New York: Doubleday, 1999

I wrote this review several years ago. Some felt I was too “harsh” about the “lacuna” of Tutu’s not having addressed *American imperialism as worldwide apartheid*. That it is such is not in doubt. That for instance Martin Luther King Jr. addressed it and was consequently executed by the USA is compelling in this regard (see [An Act of State: The Execution of Martin Luther King](#)). This book is nonetheless a classic.

Introduction

Many Canadian (and indeed international) readers of this book will remember the frequent radio interviews of Anglican Archbishop Tutu on Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s (CBC’s) *As It Happens*. The same urbane, gentle, caring voice emerges in the pages of this book. (Archbishop Tutu, now retired, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984, and lectures throughout the world.)

In the first democratic elections in South Africa where Blacks were allowed to vote (Tutu was 62 years old when he first voted, April 27, 1994), Nelson Mandela, the 76-year-old ex-prisoner and head of the African National Congress party, was swept to power. It is a true wonder that an ex-con who had spent 27 years in prison should become President, and subsequently the most revered statesman in the world.

Bishop Tutu was anticipating an early retirement, at least from the activism against apartheid that had characterized his work for 20 years. It was not to be. In December 1995, he was assigned by his church to the newly formed Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), and then by President Mandela appointed chairperson. He remained so for nearly three years, when the Commission handed in its final report.

This publication is his reflection on that experience. “Reflection” is the appropriate word. More than an account of the events, people, and decisions of the Commission, the book is a personal memoir that will be an enduring classic. There are eleven chapters and a postscript. The prose is unadorned, the style elegant, and the sentiment throughout compassionate.

Apartheid was a national policy that permeated South African life, from 1948 when the Nationalist Party first enacted it, until the first democratic elections in 1994. After that date, no one was found ever to have supported it of course, wryly pointed out by Tutu. (Anthropologist René Girard underscores this universal self-deception in response to scapegoating. He cites Jesus’s words about the Pharisees:

And you say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the [innocents].’ So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the [innocents] (Mathew 23:30-31.)

Apartheid polity effectively turned every aspect of South African society to the advantage of the minority white population. All major social institutions from education to law were directly impacted. Perhaps the major *cause célèbre* in the Western world, that it was at last dismantled without a violent coup was amazing in its own right. That a black President, and former criminal should arise from its demise is a true wonder.

Tract for Restorative Justice

As a tract for restorative justice, it is unique due to the imaginative experiment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The title of Chapter Two is: “Nuremberg or National Amnesia? A Third Way”. “Victor’s justice” as imposed by the Allies at the end of World War II left simmering resentment, since atrocities were committed on both sides. Simply forgetting the past, as in the case of the general amnesty negotiated by the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile upon the transition to civilian government, left atrocities entirely unaddressed.

Our country’s negotiations rejected the two extremes and opted for a ‘third way’... And that third way was granting amnesty to individuals in exchange for a full disclosure relating to the crime for which amnesty was being sought (p. 30).

The carrot was freedom in exchange for truth. The stick was prison.

Ubuntu

A further aspect of restorative justice developed in this manuscript is consistent with a central feature of the African *Weltanschauung* - what we know in our languages as *ubuntu*, in the Nguni group of languages, or *botho* in the Sotho languages.

Ubuntu is very difficult to render into a Western language. It speaks of the very essence of being human.... It is to say, ‘My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours.’ We belong in a bundle of life. We say, ‘A person is a person through other persons.’ It is not, ‘I think therefore I am.’ It says rather, ‘I am human because I belong. I participate, I share.’... Harmony, friendliness, community are great goods. Social harmony is for us the *summum bonum* - the greatest good... To forgive is not just to be altruistic. It is the best form of self-interest. What dehumanizes you inexorably dehumanizes me. It gives people resilience, enabling them to survive and emerge still human despite all efforts to dehumanize them (p. 31).

One such [universal] law is that we are bound together in what the Bible calls ‘the bundle of life.’ Our humanity is caught up in that of all others. We are humans because we belong. We are made for community, for togetherness, for family, to exist in a delicate network of interdependence. Truly ‘it is not good for man to be alone,’ [Genesis 2:18] for no one can be human alone. We are sisters and brothers of one another whether we like it or not and each one of us is a precious individual (pp. 196 & 197).

This is the heart of Tutu’s message, adumbrated in the book’s title, *No Future Without Forgiveness*. It is telling that Tutu finds it impossible to discover a Western language equivalent to *ubuntu*. Is Tutu suggesting that perhaps Westerners do not know how to be human because our cultural formation is so overwhelmingly individualistic, captured in Descartes’ quintessential reductionistic “I think therefore I am”? What, one can wonder, may have derailed Western anthropology from the Judeo-Christian impetus to “love your neighbour as yourself” - *as being your true self*? That, to punish another is to thereby make such a brother/sister (Maimonides, a medieval Rabbinical scholar), that failure to forgive is metaphysical suicide (Eastern Orthodox teaching)? With *ubuntu*, can one ever *as an end* punish, especially exercise the death penalty, or kill in war? Does not *ubuntu* emphatically say “Love does no harm to its neighbour” (the Apostle Paul), “Love your enemies” (Jesus)? I shall return to this in considering some critique of Tutu’s book.

Tutu repeatedly masterfully articulates the book’s theme, and related ideas. A reprise states,
We are bound up in a delicate network of interdependence because, as we say in our African

idiom, a person is a person through other persons. To dehumanize another inexorably means that one is dehumanized as well... Thus to forgive is indeed the best form of self-interest since anger, resentment, and revenge are corrosive of that *summum bonum*, that greatest good, communal harmony that enhances the humanity and personhood of all in the community (p. 35).

Why, Tutu asks, did South Africa “hit upon” this? In significant part, he answers, due to a man regal in dignity, bubbling over with magnanimity and a desire to dedicate himself to the reconciliation of those whom apartheid and the injustice and pain of racism had alienated from one another (p. 39).

Tutu argues that Nelson Mandela learned *ubuntu* and forgiveness through what he suffered.

Nothing is able to [teach *ubuntu*] quite so convincingly as suffering (p. 39), Tutu claims.

We say, “No pain, no gain”. An ancient Greek proverb goes, “*MATHEIN PATHEIN*” - to learn is to suffer. This too is a virulent Judeo-Christian theme almost universally eschewed in the West.

Justice

Tutu asks about justice, since the repeated criticism of the TRC is it did not deliver such. The response is classic restorative justice rhetoric: the impersonal state is not the victim; justice is not retributive.

We contend that there is another kind of justice, restorative justice, which was characteristic of traditional African jurisprudence. Here the central concern is not retribution or punishment. In the spirit of *ubuntu*, the central concern is the healing of breaches, the redressing of imbalances, the restoration of broken relationships, a seeking to rehabilitate both the victim and the perpetrator, who should be given the opportunity to be reintegrated into the community he has injured by his offense... Thus we would claim that justice, restorative justice, is being served when efforts are being made to work for healing, for forgiving, and for reconciliation (pp. 54& 55).

There follows extensive discussion nonetheless about victims and the TRC. Tutu argues that many indices demonstrate victim satisfaction with the process, one that included necessarily “reparations” - not “compensation”, which could never be achieved. An admitted weakness nonetheless of the TRC was: whereas amnesty was granted immediately to perpetrators upon fulfilling TRC requirements, victims awaited a long process before receiving state reparation. About 20,000 victims were implicated by the filing of the final report, October 29, 1998. The entire discussion in this section is exemplary for the bedeviling victims’ critique of restorative justice processes. The invariable criticism is, the offender is generally first and better served.

At one point, Tutu writes:

It is important to note too, that the amnesty provision is an *ad hoc* arrangement meant for this specific purpose. This is not how justice is to be administered in South Africa forever. It is for a limited and definite period and purpose (p. 54).

One wonders why? Why could there not be permanently instituted the kind of post-War Japanese justice that provides a system of *confession, repentance* and *absolution* (as described by John Haley in “Confession, Repentance, and Absolution” in *Mediation and Criminal Justice: Victims, Offenders, and Community*, edited by Martin Wright and Burt Galaway)? According to Haley, Japan is the only Western country that is experiencing a spiral of success in reduction of all major

crime indices. He argues it is attributable primarily to its unique restorative justice approach that is permanently instituted. However, amnesty is not just granted. The repentance process includes appropriate amends-making by which is demonstrated the offender's concrete contrition. This is described more theoretically in John Braithwaite's *Crime, Shame and Reintegration*. Archbishop Tutu might have engaged both these authors in his too quick dismissal of a longstanding amnesty process.

There is an entire chapter dedicated to victims' and perpetrators' stories. The "banality of evil", as Hannah Arendt ascertained with reference to the Nazi Holocaust, is Tutu's discovery too. The capacity for ordinary human beings to commit ghastly acts, and the capacity for other ordinary human beings to become what they hate in retaliation

made me realize that there is an awful depth of depravity to which we all could sink, that we possess an extraordinary capacity for evil (p. 144).

On the other hand, quite ordinary people,

nearly all the victims, black and white, possessed [a] marvellous magnanimity (p. 147)" in response to the horrors done to them or loved ones.

The remainder of the book is rich mining. Tutu provides commentary on many ancillary considerations of justice in a political context. It reads as a narrative "How-To" primer on restorative justice. While it regrettably does not cite any of the growing international literature on the topic*, it covers all of the major considerations both theoretically and practically in seeing its state implementation.

It includes many rich nuggets of wisdom. Tutu underscores the profound spiritual undergirding of this kind of justice work - not the "normal currency in political discourse (p. 80)."- he too rightly asserts. One wonders why not? He gently introduces classic Christian theology at several turns, saying,

As I grow older I am pleasantly surprised at how relevant theology has become in my perception (p. 82).

It reminds him and the TRC that no perpetrator is ever a "demon" (and therefore discardable as a responsible moral agent); that the Good News of Jesus has a bias for sinners contrary to the normal standards of the world (p. 84).; that hope springs eternal – no situation in this theology is irredeemable and devoid of hope (p. 85).; that "love is much more demanding than law (p. 85); "that we inhabit a moral universe, that good and evil are real and that they matter (p. 86).; that love is stronger than hate, that life is stronger than death, that light is stronger than darkness, that laughter and joy, and compassion and gentleness and truth, all these are so much stronger than their ghastly counterparts (p. 86).

Tutu Prophetic

* A very selective list includes: *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment*, Christopher D. Marshall, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2001; *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice*, Howard Zehr, Herald Press, Scottdale, 1990; *Christian Faith and Criminal Justice: Toward a Christian Response to Crime and Punishment*, Gerald Austin McHugh, Paulist Press, New York, 1978; *Crime Control as Industry: Towards GULAGS, Western Style*, Nils Christie, Routledge, London, 1995; *God's Just Vengeance: Crime, violence and the rhetoric of salvation*, Timothy Gorringer, Cambridge University Press, 1996; *Restoring Justice*, Daniel Van Ness and Karen Heetderks Strong, Cincinnati: Anderson Publishing Company, 1997; *Satisfying Justice: A compendium of initiatives, programs and legislative measures*, The Church Council on Justice and Corrections, Ottawa, 1996; *The Expanding Prison: The Crisis in Crime and Punishment and the Search for Alternatives*, David Cayley, Anansi: Toronto, 1998; *The Spiritual Roots of Restorative Justice*, Hadley, Michael, ed., New York, SUNY Press, 2001.

It is in reference to the former guardians of apartheid that Tutu becomes scathingly prophetic. The perpetrators of apartheid... were as civilized as the Westerners they claimed to be and, what is more, they were Christians... The Bible they read and which we read is quite categorical - that which endowed human beings, every single human being without exception, with worth, infinite worth, is not this or that biological or any other extrinsic attribute. No, it is the fact that each one of us has been created in the image of God. This is something intrinsic. It comes, as it were, with the package. It means that each one of us is a God-carrier, God's viceroy, God's representative. It is because of this fact that to treat one such person as if he or she were less than this is veritably blasphemous. It is like spitting in the face of God. That is what filled some of us with such a passionate commitment to fight for justice and freedom. We were inspired not by political motives. No, we were fired by our biblical faith. The Bible turned out to be the most subversive thing around in a situation of injustice and oppression (p. 93).

Tutu likewise decries the repeated claim, "We did not know."

If they 'did not know', as many claimed, how was it that there were those within the white community who not only knew of the baneful results of official policies but who condemned the vicious policy and worked to end it? (p. 217).

In particular, Tutu singles out the judiciary for censure, precisely because of its purported claim to uphold justice. He also chastizes the media, even the "liberal" journalists, for perpetuating racism. Further afield, he indicts the United States that

enthusiastically supported any government however shabby its human rights record as long as it declared itself to be anti-Communist (p. 237).

The white churches likewise were reprehensible, though generally have since repented – unlike elements in the judiciary.

The former apartheid cabinet member Leon Wessels was closer to the mark when he said that they had not wanted to know, for there were those who tried to alert them (p. 269)." Still, Tutu graciously states: " 'There but for the grace of God go I (p. 253).'

In his Chapter (Eight) of Horrors, Tutu says,

It is ultimately in our best interest that we become forgiving, repentant, reconciling, and reconciled people because without forgiveness, without reconciliation, we have no future (p. 165).

No Forgiveness: No Future

This central theme and book title is fully explicated in Chapter Eleven, "Without Forgiveness There Really is No Future", an outstanding contribution to world political literature. He begins with another horrendous African atrocity: the mass slaughter of Tutsis in Rwanda. He states baldly most of the perpetrators were Christians. In a mass rally attended by the new government leaders, he challenged

that the cycle of reprisal and counterreprisal... had to be broken and that the only way to do this was to go beyond retributive justice to restorative justice... (p. 260).

Tutu then trains his attention on Northern Ireland, where in 1998 he reminded those working for peace never to despair, never to give up, that

They were part of the cosmic movement toward unity, toward reconciliation, that had existed from the beginning of time (p. 263).

In 1989 and again in 1999, Tutu also visited and preached in Israel. He pointed out in his talks that

true security would never be won through the barrel of a gun (p. 268).

He also contributed towards an update of Simon Wiesenthal's famous collection of essays on forgiveness, *The Sunflower*. He uses Wiesenthal's inability to forgive the Nazi soldier, the first story in the book, as representative of modern Israel in its avowed incapacity to forgive on behalf of others now dead. If so, Tutu asks, how can it nonetheless accept massive reparations in their name? Given the great legacy of morality offered the world by the Jewish people, Tutu gently admonishes:

I hope that philosophers, theologians, and thinkers within the Jewish community will reopen this issue and consider whether it is possible to come to a different conclusion for the sake of the world (p. 278).

He wonders if similarly Africans and Afro-Americans refused to forgive Europeans for the 40 million dead, the massive people displacements, and horrendous suffering occasioned by slavery and the slave trade. (Tutu might at this point have helpfully drawn on the masterful study on political forgiveness by Donald Shriver: *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics*, especially his discussion of race relations in America.)

Tutu Theologian

In a passage reminiscent of John Lennon's song "Imagine", Tutu turns his most explicitly Christian in envisioning humanity's future *with* forgiveness:

God has set in motion a centripetal process, a moving toward the center, toward unity, harmony, goodness, peace, and justice, a process that removes barriers. Jesus says, 'And when I am lifted up from the earth I shall draw everyone to myself' [John 12:32] as he (*sic*) hangs from His (*sic*) cross with outflung arms, thrown out to clasp all, everyone and everything, in a cosmic embrace, so that all, everyone, everything, belongs. None is an outsider, all are insiders, all belong. There are no aliens, all belong in the one family, God's family, the human family... It was God's intention to bring all things in heaven and on earth to a unity in Christ, and each of us participates in this grand movement (p. 265).

He also says tersely what forgiveness is not. Above all, it is *not* forgetting!

On the contrary, it is important to remember, so that we should not let such atrocities happen again (p. 271)."

It is also, however, *not* retaliation:

Forgiving means abandoning your right to pay back the perpetrator in his own coin, but it is a loss that liberates the victim (p. 272).

And while confession is not crucial, it helps! And though reparations may not be paid, they generally show the sincerity of the contrition.

Confession, forgiveness, and reparation, wherever feasible, form part of a continuum (p. 273).

Finally, in pointing to the serendipitous paragon of forgiveness that is South Africa, he says:

This tired, disillusioned, cynical world, hurting so frequently and so grievously, has marveled at a process that holds out considerable hope in the midst of much that negates hope (p. 281).

Tutu Not Prophetic Enough

Quibbles? One hates to raise some about such a sparkling panegyric to forgiveness. I do so reluctantly. I have three: Tutu's vision, for all its grandness, at times seems not radical enough, borders on naïveté, and falls strangely silent about the greatest human rights violator on earth today.

Tutu might have benefitted from Lee Griffith's profound theological and sociological study on prisons, *The Fall of the Prison: Biblical Perspectives on Prison Abolition*, or the International Conference on Penal Abolition (ICOPA), whose leaders, for example Dr. Ruth Morris, have produced challenging tracts such as *Penal Abolition: The Practical Choice*, to take us more radically towards prison abolition than he or Nelson Mandela do. This is reminiscent of Sister Helen Prejean's failure to take us further, in her opposition to the death penalty, than approving alternative life-sentences for murderers. As Ruth Morris frequently said of early Restorative Justice initiatives and theory: "Not enough!"

In his Chapter of Horrors, Chapter Eight, Tutu seems simply naïve in admitting:

What was so shattering for me was that it had all been so scientific, so calculated, so clinical (p. 182).

Yet earlier, in commentary of those brought before the TRC from both sides of the conflict, Tutu writes:

We stated categorically that apartheid was a crime against humanity. Equally vehemently we asserted that the liberation movements were conducting a just war because they had a just cause. But the Geneva Convention and the principles of the just war are quite clear that justice of war requires justice in war. A just cause must be fought by just means; otherwise it may be badly vitiated (p. 107).

Tutu is not naïve because he cannot believe humanity could stoop to such scientifically orchestrated atrocities, for he reminds us of Nazi Germany. He is naïve in believing that any "just killing" by the state in war or execution of a human being is other than "scientific, calculated, and clinical", that there is, in fact, such a thing as (involuntary) "just killing". "Just war" is *never*, and remains an impossible oxymoron in terms of killing and ecological degradation. "Just war" is surely the utter antithesis of *ubuntu*, by Tutu's own account! Why does Tutu not label it for what it is, in Western history: a Christian and secular heresy? ("Heresy" meant originally "wrong choice".) War and the death penalty are by definition "scientific, calculated, and clinical". So it would seem the Archbishop in fact does not on principle oppose deliberate state killings of some, and thereby lands us in the same soup as apartheid and all tyrannies which *ever* justify state murders. To argue, "but only if it is lawful" begs the very question of its morality, for by Tutu's own reckoning

love is much more demanding than law (p. 85).

Here the Archbishop cops out, granted in line with majority Christendom and world history, guilty of Mahatma Gandhi's wry observation:

The only people on earth who do not see Christ and His teachings as nonviolent are Christians.

Tutu states:

The Bible turned out to be the most subversive thing around in a situation of injustice and oppression (p. 93).

What Tutu still needs to affirm, it seems, as masterfully presented by for instance Richard Hays' "Violence in Defense of Justice" (Chapter Fourteen of *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*), is

the biblical subversion of the legitimacy of state violence itself.

A similar naïveté, to the point of reprehensible silence, is shown concerning the United States. In his depiction of Ronald Reagan's role and that of America in buttressing all kinds of totalitarian regimes the world over, including apartheid South Africa, he says, "This was the era...", seemingly implying US foreign policy has somehow since changed, because communism is no longer the perceived worldwide threat it once was. This is surely betrayal of stark reality: that the ultimate "rogue state", the contemporary "Beast" of Revelation 13, is the United States of America. In its recent Afghanistan offensive alone, it deployed "scientific, calculated, and clinical" means to destroy many thousands of innocent civilians (far surpassing in body count the fatalities of September 11, 2001), tens of thousands of "combatants", infrastructures, environments, and peoples' futures (who with or without forgiveness lay dead or wounded just the same).

Tutu himself says of terrorism:

[South Africa's] own police officers, meant to uphold law and order and to apprehend terrorists, had themselves carried out a very serious act of urban terrorism. It demonstrated so clearly the moral bankruptcy of the foul system... (p. 180).

The US-led Western "War on Terrorism" is identically morally bankrupt and foul, as its many previous economically vested interest interventions. Further, Tutu points to many other world trouble spots, Rwanda, Ireland, Israel, yet is totally silent about current US activities around the globe. These interventions make the American government beyond doubt the ultimate terrorist organization of the 21st century, deploying a gargantuan arms trade in, and weapons of mass destruction, and poised to launch (again!) as "first strike" their ultimate nuclear arsenal.

And the Archbishop remains totally silent about this massive worldwide sustained assault on human rights? Easily accessible are a plethora of meticulously researched publications such as American journalist William Blum's *Rogue State: A Guide to the World's Only Superpower* that decry the United States for identical atrocities to the activities of South African apartheid police and military.

Why is Tutu utterly silent about this? Does he not know better? Or does he not want to know? ("...they had not wanted to know, for there were those who tried to alert them (p. 269)."

If they 'did not know', as many claimed, how was it that there were those within the white community who not only knew of the baneful results of official policies but who condemned the vicious policy and worked to end it? (p. 217).

As one Canadian filmmaker said of Guatemala in the 1980's,

A holocaust of smaller proportion to that by the Nazis, but of similar ilk, is happening in Guatemala against indigenous peoples, and the buck for its responsibility stops at the desk of the President of the United States of America.

Similar atrocities by or sponsored by the US have been documented in dozens of countries the world over since World War II.

Starkly put: Why, in this profoundly searching and insightful book about the evils of the totalitarian system called apartheid, does Archbishop Tutu not explicate that *the United States to the (non-compliant) world is South African apartheid to Blacks*? He has the moral stature to do so. He does so with reference to Israel against Palestine. Why is he totally silent about contemporary US worldwide apartheid? "If you are not for us, you are against us", declared President Bush emphatically after September 11. That is apartheid at its starkest, consistent with US foreign policy at least since World War II.

Is there any place, *yet*, in the world, to rest on one's laurels in the struggle for that cosmic dream for humanity – when we will know that we are indeed members of one family, bound together in a delicate network of interdependence (p. 274).?

Tell that “dream” to the recent victims of the billion-dollar-a-month bombings in Afghanistan that left tens of thousands dead and maimed, the good earth wasted. And the Archbishop has *nothing* to say? Now that South African apartheid has ended, has evil dominance and oppression for economic gain been eradicated from the earth? *Please, Mr. Archbishop, please answer!*

Conclusion

Desmond Tutu's book is an arresting read, if one ignores the monstrous lacuna concerning the United States. To have ignored the United States is (to borrow from Karl Barth) too much like Jean-Paul Sartre's proud individualistic fearless staring down of evil, so imagined, when the real McCoy (the *hubris* of existentialist atheistic rugged individualism) all the time is mockingly leering over Sartre's shoulder at the charade. South African apartheid in sheer numbers of victims and ecological degradation pales before the horrors of gargantuan US planetary imperialism.

Where is Archbishop Tutu's prophetic voice concerning that? Perhaps it has been raised elsewhere? It is a great, though forgivable, oversight in an otherwise outstanding classic on forgiveness.

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