**Desmond Tutu**

**Biography**

Desmond Tutu was born in 1931 in Transvaal Province, South Africa to a religious Christian family. In his early career, he was an educator first before he moved into theology (Kunnie 1996, Kindle Edition, section: Life and Career). Tutu’s work against black oppression began while at Federal Theological Seminary in Alice, Cape Province, where he was influenced by civil rights leaders in the areas of black consciousness and African nationalism (ibid.). During the early 1970s, Tutu left Africa for Kent, England for a position that allowed him to work within global theological education, focusing on theological development in Africa and asisting churches in “assuming a more indigenous character” (ibid.). He was the first black Dean of the Anglican Church in South Africa.

Becoming ever more conscious of the situations facing blacks in South Africa, “Tutu’s prominence as a black theologian struggling against apartheid became evident when he was elected the General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches (SACC)…[becoming] one of the most outspoken critics against apartheid and a leading Christian prophet in Sound Africa” (ibid.). Fighting for the release of Nelson Mandela and supporting Mandela’s organization, the African National Congress (ANC) of South Africa, “Tutu was condemned as a ‘communist agitator’ and an ‘unworthy cleric’ by the racist regime that ruled South Africa” (ibid.). Awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984 for his work for liberation of South Africa, elected Bishop of Johannesburg in 1985, and consecrated as Archbishop of Cape Town in 1986 (ibid.), Tutu’s influence in South Africa and the world was strong. Tutu served as the chair of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, “created by Nelson Mandela’s Government of National Unity in 1995…to investigate violations…provide support and reparation to victims and their families, and compile a full and objective record of the effects of apartheid on South Afrian Society” (The Forgiveness Project, [http://theforgivenessproject.com/stories/desmond-tutu-south-africa/)](http://theforgivenessproject.com/stories/desmond-tutu-south-africa/%29).

**Theological Themes and Contributions**

**Theological Method.** Tutu is “a black liberation theologian…[who] has demonstrated a model of theological resistance to the evil of racism” (Kunnie 1996, Section: Theological Method) and a self-proclaimed African theologian. In his view, “theology is provisional and temporally conditioned…never static; instead it responds to the existential needs of a particular people during a specific generation” (ibid.) Black theology “is concerned with humanization, liberation, forgiveness, and justice…[and] effects the liberation of white oppressors just as much as the black oppressed” (ibid.).

**God and Christ.** Consistent with liberation theology, “black theology essentially asserts that God is on the side of the oppressed,” aligned with those who are weak (ibid., Section: God and Christ). In Tutu’s view, Christians must be called to work with marginalized and exploited people, aligning themselves to a never neutral God, and following the example of Jesus and his attention to the oppressed (ibid.). “Tutu underscores the point that the motivation for his liberatory actions is not political, but essentially theological” (ibid.).

**Social Analysis.** Tutu speaks out regarding the “evils of monopoly capitalism [for] the role that socioeconomic factors play in oppression” (ibid., Section: Social Analysis). He also renounces “industrial capitalism for its accent on profit and belittlement of the worth of the human person” (ibid.). Finally, he also “takes the Western cultural precept of rugged individualism to task for it abrogation of the African practice of communal ownership and corporate individuality” (ibid.). Capitalism contributed greatly to the injustice of apartheid, leading to gross disparities of wealth and resources between blacks and whites.

**The Role of Culture**. Tutu views African cultural identity as critically important to black liberation theology; “the richness of the African cultural past must be tapped in the evolution of black theology of the present” (ibid, Section: The Role of Culture). “The relational or communal understanding of the self that is employed across the African continent is fundamentally a theological concept” (ibid.).

**Gender.** Although Tutu has not been as vocal regarding gender inequities as other areas, he is aware that “black theology [must] address the question of domination and inequality of women under patriarchy” (ibid., Section: The Question of Gender). Aware that this has “been a stumbling block to women in society…he recognizes the necessity for a holistic concept of God that will be inclusive of both sexes” (ibid.).

**Nonviolent Struggle.** “Tutu describes himself as a peacemaker and not a pacifist…[and] considers any form of violence evil regardless of its ends” (ibid., Section: Nonviolent Struggle). Similar to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, violence may be a lesser evil, such as ‘revolutionary violence’ used to fight against Hitler (ibid.). Many Black South Africans are dissatisfied with the outcomes of nonviolence, seeing few positive results for Blacks.

**Current Relevance**

Desmond Tutu remains an important Christian theologian, author, social justice activist, and scholar with high visibility today. Although his many years of work have focused on achieving peace and justice for blacks in South Africa, his words and his work go beyond that group. He has worked alongside such leaders as Nelson Mandela, Jimmy Carter, Kofi Annan, and the Dalai Lama. An author, he co-authored *The Book of Joy* with the Dalai Lama, *The Book of Forgiving* with his daughter, Rev. Mpho Tutu, and several other titles. Compared to human rights activists Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, he remains an inspirational global figure who has lived by his strong faith in people. The strategies for his work are universal, which is one of the reasons that he has remained so prominent as a human rights activist.

# Works Cited

Kunnie, Julian. 1996. "Desmond Tutu." In *A New Handbook of Christian Theologians*, edited by Donald A. Musser and Joseph L. Price, 479-488. Nashville, TN: Abingon Press.

“The Forgiveness Project: Desmond Tutu,” last modified 3/10/2010, accessed 4/30/2017, <http://theforgivenessproject.com/stories/desmond-tutu-south-africa/>.