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West and the World in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century  
Desmond Tutu and Apartheid in South Africa

One of the darkest times in South Africa was during the years that apartheid was in effect, and the country's native people were treated like dogs simply because of the color of their skin. However, during these dark times, there was a light of hope that spread throughout the country. This light was Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Desmond Tutu's beliefs and character played a vital role during apartheid as well as after apartheid was ended. His application of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission kept South Africa from turning on itself, and instead it unified the country and forgave the horrid actions committed by people in the past.

It is important to first note what exactly apartheid in South Africa was. Since it was colonized by the East India Trading Company based in the Netherlands, black South Africans had been oppressed simply because of their skin color. As time went on, two distinct groups were formed: the Afrikaners who were mostly Dutch, but was also comprised of Germans, English, and other European peoples, and the Native South Africans, who made up 73 percent of the population when apartheid ended in 1994. The former group discriminated against the latter, and saw fit to segregate bathrooms, drinking fountains, restaurants, and other typically public amenities. The right to vote was also withheld from the black population, and their voices were virtually unheard in any court or government office, which only served to strengthen the lack of unity among the people.

Due to the fact that Desmond Tutu is the Archbishop of South Africa, it is appropriate to see what the church was doing during the time that apartheid was implemented in South Africa. For the most part, unfortunately, the church did very little to stop the brutality and discrimination shown toward the native South Africans. Even after the Sharpeville Massacre when dozens of protestors were killed by the police and many more were seriously injured, the church did very little to interfere. However, once the church realized that these actions were wrong, it interfered immensely. It began to rally Christians worldwide to the cause and to try to reverse the actions that had battered the country for so long. In a document written by the Christian Institute called *A Message to the People of South Africa*, the authors wrote:

And so we wish to put to every Christian person in this country the question which we ourselves are bound to face each day, to whom, or to what, are you truly giving your first loyalty, your primary commitment? Is it to a subsection of mankind, an ethnic group, a human tradition, a political idea; or to Christ? (du Boulay 126)

This helped to rally the people of South Africa to the cause, and really began to change people's minds about their actions toward the native South Africans and the course of the country thus far.

One major contributor to the ending of apartheid in South Africa was Desmond Tutu. Desmond Tutu's actions during apartheid in South Africa were, in a word, remarkable. As he was going through training to be a bishop, he had several ideas that were quite extraordinary for the time. The first is that he did not want to be sealed off and simply devote himself to the Lord in solitude, but rather wanted to become involved

with the people so he could better understand what was happening in the country. Author Lyn Graybill stated in her book that, “For Tutu, spirituality had to be expressed in dealing with one’s neighbor, ‘whose keeper we must be’” (Graybill 103). Tutu had a strong sense of accountability for the people of South Africa that he was supposed to minister to, and realized that the best way he could do that was to be actively involved in the day-to-day lives of these people and would continuously work with them during their individual or group struggles.

Although he wanted to be on the same page as these people, he refused to become involved in the politics of South Africa. Granted, he knew what was going on, but did not want to sacrifice his religious role for that of a political one. During the time that Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for trying to lead the people of South Africa out of apartheid, however, Tutu was assigned to take his place until he was released on February 11, 1990. During this time, despite how it looked, Tutu saw himself only as the “interim leader” of South Africa (Tutu 1994 103), and proceeded to gladly give up his position once the other leaders were released from jail or exile. Just after Mandela was released from prison, an interview was conducted with Desmond Tutu inquiring about his future in the politics of South Africa. An excerpt of this interview is as follows:

QUESTION: Buy why not stay active in politics?

ANSWER: I am not a politician.

RESPONSE: Yes, you are.

ANSWER: No, I am a pastor, I am a pastor.

QUESTION: But you are also a politician?

ANSWER: Uh-uh, no I am not. I am a church person who believes that religion does not just deal with a certain compartment of life. Religion has a relevance for the whole of life and we have to say whether a particular policy is consistent with the policy of Jesus Christ or not, and if you want to say that that is political, then I will be a politician in those terms. But it won't be as one who is involved in party politics.... My role, the role of church leaders, is to be able to say: "Thus saith the Lord." (Tutu 1994 204)

Tutu did not believe that he was supposed to take control of the country away from the Afrikaners, but rather that he should work to promote unity among all the races in South Africa and lead only when the other leaders could not.

Along these same lines, Tutu refused to join any groups that focused only on one race for the control of power in South Africa. This was mostly because Tutu learned early on that there were actually many people of European descent that were good and had quality morals. One of these people was Father Trevor Huddleston. Tutu stated that one of his most memorable moments was when Huddleston, a white English-born man, simply tipped his hat to Tutu's mother, who was a black washerwoman. This single act showed Tutu that not all white people were "evil" as many were led to believe, just like not all black South Africans were good. While Huddleston stuck out in Tutu's mind, he also met many other white people during his travels of the world that made an impact on his views of others, and he realized that this cause was not just for the black people of South Africa, but that it would give hope to both black and white people that were being oppressed all over the world. When discussing Tutu's beliefs, Graybill said, "Tutu states

that he is determined to work alongside all concerned individuals—both black and white—for a nonracial democratic society” (Graybill 109). Color is not the focus for Tutu, but rather the focus is put on proper ideals and compassion for the brothers and sisters living in South Africa.

These ideals were finally heeded South Africa’s president F.W. de Klerk. He played a major role in releasing Nelson Mandela from prison, which finally came about on February 11, 1990, and he did the unthinkable when he stepped down from his position of power to allow a fully democratic system to take over. Once apartheid was ended, there were still bitter feelings between the Afrikaners and the black people of South Africa. Quenching these feelings was extremely difficult, and it was finally decided that a sincere admission by the perpetrators of the time would suffice. This became known as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). If the former police officers, government officials, and other people who took part in actively discriminating and punishing people of other ethnicities came forward and admitted what they did to the public, they would be granted amnesty. One thing that many people did not agree with was the fact that the perpetrators were not forced to apologize for their actions, only admit what they did (although many apologized anyways). Although this was said to be a downfall of the TRC, it actually was very well thought out and worked out for the best. Desmond Tutu explained why apologizing was not required in his book *No Future Without Forgiveness* when he wrote:

For if the applicant was effusive in his protestations about being sorry and repentant to satisfy such a requirement for remorse, then he would have been condemned for being totally insincere and just laying it on thick to

impress the Amnesty Committee panel. If, on the other hand, he was somewhat abrupt and merely formal, he would have been accused of being callous and uncaring and not really repentant. It would have been a “no-win” situation. As it happens, most applicants have in fact expressed at least remorse and asked for forgiveness from their victims. (Tutu 1999 50)

By not *requiring* an apology from the perpetrators, the apologies that were offered were typically considered genuine, which made the process seem more legitimate as opposed to merely going through the steps to obtain amnesty.

One thing that Tutu stressed was the fact that he wanted *ubuntu* among South Africans instead of retribution. Tutu states that there really is no word in the English language that can accurately describe the real meaning behind *ubuntu*, but he tries to describe it when he writes:

You are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have.... A person with *ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are.

(Tutu 1999 31)

Desmond Tutu wanted the people to take the apologies of others to heart and forgive their actions and move on with their lives as best they can. It does not help to keep a record of wrongs and try to right them by doing the exact same thing in return. Tutu realized this

and sought to reinstate mutual feelings of goodness and consideration between the people of South Africa, regardless of ethnicity.

One of the major goals of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee was, as noted previously, to deter the people from fighting with each other in order to feel satisfied for what had been done to them. This pattern was eminent in other countries throughout Africa after the colonial rule was lifted. When a common enemy was no longer in sight, the people sought to fight each other to gain land or power, which ended up breaking out in civil wars and tearing the countries apart. This was an unacceptable outcome for South Africa in Tutu's mind, and he did everything in his power to stop this from taking place. He said:

The cycle of reprisal and counterreprisal that had characterized their national history had to be broken and that the only way to do this was to go beyond retributive justice to restorative justice, to move on to forgiveness, because without it there was no future. (Tutu 1999 260)

If the people could not find it in their hearts to forgive the honest confessions and apologies of the former police and government officials who had oppressed them, the country of South Africa would be torn apart and its people killed in an attempt to "restore justice". Tutu argued that killing the former killers was not a way to exact proper revenge. The people of South Africa should not sink to the level that they had hated for so many years, but rather they should step up, hold their heads high, and accept the apologies offered by the perpetrators. This is the only way to keep South Africa in one piece, and instead of being classified as a "black country" or an "Afrikaan country", they should embrace their differences and become a "Rainbow Country".

One of the biggest accomplishments that came out of the ending of apartheid was the implementation of suffrage across the whole country. Up until that time, no black South African had ever been allowed to vote in any kind of political election, especially not for the president of the country. However, by ending apartheid, many new doors were opened and the people could finally see each other as equals. These people had been tortured, relocated, and cast aside for years, and it was finally their turn to voice their opinions without fear of reprisals. Tutu commented on this when he said:

They had never voted in the land of their birth until that day. They had suffered the humiliations of the iniquitous pass laws and had seen their people uprooted and dumped as if they were rubbish in the massive forced population removal schemes that had traumatized so many from that community. (Tutu 1999 56)

This newfound right was a remarkable achievement for many, but none so much as Desmond Tutu. The day Nelson Mandela was elected as the new President of South Africa was the day that all of their persistence through the suffering and loss was rewarded. They could speak their minds and finally live harmoniously with the country's former oppressors.

Desmond Tutu was a vital role in the fight to end apartheid in South Africa, and his actions did not go unnoticed. Through his actions with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as well as his personal character and beliefs, Tutu was able to end the discrimination that had plagued the country for so long and finally instill a sense of pride and compassion among the people of South Africa. I would like to end as I think Tutu would see fit- with a sense of both hope and achievement. This excerpt comes from a



book by Desmond Tutu called *No Future Without Forgiveness* when he talks about his first time ever voting in a free democratic election:

The moment for which I had waited so long came and I folded my ballot paper and cast my vote. Wow! I shouted, “Yippee!” It was giddy stuff. It was like falling in love. The sky looked blue and more beautiful. I saw the people in a new light. They were beautiful, they were transfigured. I too was transfigured. It was dreamlike. You were scared someone would rouse you and you would awake to the nightmare that was apartheid’s harsh reality. Someone referring to that dreamlike quality had said to his wife, “Darling, don’t wake me. I like this dream.” (Tutu 1999, 5-6)

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