Desmond Tutu and the promise and perils of the prophetic role of the Church

Christopher Craig Brittain and Nkanyiso Maphumulo
Trinity College in the University of Toronto, Canada

Abstract
The legacy of Desmond Tutu is often framed according to one of two polarized trajectories. On one hand, his accomplishments are sometimes romanticized and his life and theology are viewed as a panacea of all South Africa’s struggles. On the other hand, he is often severely criticized for advocating idealistic notions of reconciliation and “rainbowism.” This essay challenges both understandings of Tutu’s legacy. Indeed, this refusal to adopt an either—or perspective on Tutu’s life and work—by either seeing him as representing the perfect solution to South Africa’s struggles, or a naive and ineffective part of the problem—is itself consistent with how Tutu himself approached the challenges of his time. He is best understood as an African contextual theologian and as a pastor responding to immediate pastoral situations. It is precisely this approach to seeing beyond polarizing dualisms that is the most enduring aspect of Tutu’s legacy.

Keywords
African theology, contextual theology, Desmond Tutu, reconciliation, South Africa, TRC

Emerging from the ashes of the Apartheid regime in the late twentieth century, South Africa was seen by many as a beacon of hope and inspiration. Initially, this young democracy from the tip of the continent did not disappoint. It was hailed for opting for reconciliation and forgiveness instead of retaliation and litigation—a praise often credited to the role played by Archbishop Desmond Tutu as the chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The nation’s paradigmatic constitution, adopted in 1996, has been
celebrated by legal theorists like Thembeka Ngcukaitobi to be the best in the world.\textsuperscript{1} Added to this achievement were the many houses, schools, and health facilities built for the poor, and South Africa’s hosting of the 2010 World Cup, the first African country to host this prestigious soccer tournament.\textsuperscript{2} Despite these impressive accomplishments, however, even Ngcukaitobi and Makgoba are compelled to admit that such positives are adumbrated by the harsh realities of being a contemporary citizen in this hitherto hopeful nation; “those very achievements, in showing what is possible, highlight where we have failed to live up to our potential. Despite the changes, despite the talk, despite the policies we advocate, levels of inequality in our society remain shocking.”\textsuperscript{3} How should the legacy of Desmond Tutu be understood in the context of these ongoing struggles within South Africa?

Two months before Tutu’s ninetieth birthday, riots in two of South Africa’s most populous provinces saw some of the worst public unrest since the end of the Apartheid system in 1994. While these events were sparked by the unprecedented incarceration of the former president, Jacob Zuma, the unrest was widely recognized as being rooted in the country’s massive inequality, unemployment, racism, and lack of service delivery. Thus, although not directly related to Tutu’s period of public leadership, the riots represented a challenge to all he stood for. As such, these developments underscore the ambivalence surrounding Tutu’s legacy within South Africa, and the way it is inextricably intertwined with the complexities of the situation within the nation.

Whether merited or not, the successes and failures of this young democracy are frequently tethered to the life of Tutu. Consequently, his legacy is often framed according to one of two polarized trajectories. On one hand, his accomplishments are sometimes romanticized, when his life and theology are viewed as a panacea of all South African socio-political woes. On the other hand, he is often severely criticized for advocating idealistic notions of reconciliation, \textit{ubuntu}, and “rainbow-nationism.” Many within South Africa view the country’s socio-economic inequalities and structural tensions as painful counter-narratives to, if not outright demonstrations of the failure of, celebrations of the TRC, and of the legacies of the leaders who advocated for this process, including Desmond Tutu.

In this face of such painful realities, this essay challenges both prominent narratives for interpreting Tutu’s legacy. Indeed, this refusal to adopt an either/or perspective on Tutu’s life and work—by either seeing him as representing the perfect solution to South Africa’s struggles, or a naïve and ineffective part of the problem—is itself consistent with how Tutu himself approached the challenges of his time. The discussion that follows demonstrates how he consistently refused to view the situations he confronted in binary terms—as black against white, oppressor against the oppressed, friend against enemy. This is related to the duality of Tutu’s vision, a consistent “bi-focal” lens through which he approaches the issues that he addresses. In the first instance, he seeks to perceive the world as God sees it, which,

\begin{enumerate}
\item Thembeka Ngcukaitobi, \textit{The Land Is Ours, South Africa’s First Black Lawyers and the Birth of Constitutionalism} (Cape Town: Penguin Books, 2018), 1.
\item Thabo Makgoba, \textit{Faith & Courage: Praying with Mandela} (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2017), 181.
\item Makgoba, \textit{Faith & Courage}, 181–82. See also Ngcukaitobi, \textit{The Land}, 1.
\end{enumerate}
for Tutu, is achieved by recalling that all human beings are created in the image of God. The second aspect to Tutu’s approach to theology and leadership is his careful attention to the specific conditions of the context in which he finds himself. Tutu does not operate by conducting ideal thought experiments or by seeking to construct coherent systems; instead, he is best understood as an African contextual theologian and as a pastor responding to immediate pastoral situations. The essay argues that it is precisely this approach to seeing beyond the polarizing dualisms of complex situations that is the most enduring aspect of Tutu’s legacy. Even as Tutu’s life of public service exhibits both the perils and promise of the prophetic role of the church, it also illuminates how much can be achieved, albeit imperfectly, by those who have sufficient vision and commitment to seek to transform the world for the better.

### Critiques of Tutu’s legacy

Although Archbishop Tutu’s ninetieth birthday met with much fanfare, both within South Africa and internationally, his legacy has increasingly been subjected to criticism. Indeed, theological discussions of Tutu’s life and writing has shifted significantly since John de Gruchy went so far as to describe Tutu’s leadership of the TRC as a “civic sacrament.”

Much of the criticism has focused on Tutu’s role as Chair of the TRC. Nomfundo Walaza offers, for example, representative criticism from within South Africa of Tutu’s failure to translate the vision and rhetoric of the TRC’s agenda into more widespread social and economic change: “He never fully explained how these noble ideals of healing, forgiveness and reconciliation could be translated into achievable realities.” This perspective resonates with criticisms of Tutu’s role in promoting the concept of ubuntu in the work of the TRC—the notion that one is a person only in relation to other persons. Richard Wilson’s evaluation captures the core of this assessment: “Ubuntu’s categorical rejection of revenge also includes a rejection of the more moderate form of justice as ‘retribution.’” As such, “the constitutional right . . . to due justice . . . is taken away by amnesty laws.” Wilson concludes that while the TRC under Tutu’s chairmanship may have helped advance reconciliation between victims, it did little to mediate victim–offender relations. Others have advanced even sharper critiques, reducing Tutu’s use of ubuntu to “the saccharine assertions of rainbow jurisprudence.” Such dismissive references to Tutu’s vision of South Africa as a “rainbow nation” of different ethnicities and races have sometimes labeled it as a naïve “rainbowism,” which served only to help manufacture a veneer of legitimacy for the post-Apartheid state.

---

4 John W. de Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 95.  
5 Nomfundo Walaza, “Insufficient Healing and Reparation,” in *Looking Back Reaching Forward: Reflections on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa*, ed. Charles Villa-Vincencio and Wilhelm Verwoerd (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 2000), 250.  
6 Richard A. Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 11.  
7 Alfred Cockrell, “Rainbow Jurisprudence,” *South African Journal on Human Rights* 12, no. 1 (1996): 12.
Similar criticisms have become increasingly common among evaluations of Tutu’s legacy by theologians outside of South Africa. Miroslav Volf, for example, imagines himself standing before Archbishop Tutu as he presides over the TRC to confront a “Captain G” who interrogated him in the former Yugoslavia in the 1980s. Volf becomes increasingly frustrated during this thought experiment, as he contemplates Captain G going through the motions of offering sufficient acknowledgment of the wrongs he committed against Volf to receive official amnesty from criminal prosecution, but demonstrating little remorse or self-doubt. Volf writes that such “false truth and acknowledgement mixed with self-justification” is “poisonous when it comes to forgiveness and social reconciliation.”

What Tutu’s approach to reconciliation lacks, he continues, is sufficient moral judgment of the wrongdoer.

Maria Mayo’s criticism of South Africa’s TRC focuses on an analysis of Tutu’s role. She argues that Tutu’s rhetoric as chairman and subsequent defender of the process was guilty of pressuring victims into forgiving perpetrators. Tutu, she accuses, “rejects the potential value of negative emotions such as resentment, outrage, and anger.” He advances, she continues, a notion of “unconditional forgiveness” that ignores the fact that forgiveness as an element of reconciliation “requires work from all sides.” Mayo quotes a young victim’s interview in a newspaper to highlight the force of her critique:

What really makes me angry about the TRC and Tutu is that they are putting pressure on me to forgive . . . The oppression was bad, but what is much worse . . . is that they are trying to dictate my forgiveness.

Although such criticisms of the TRC and of Tutu’s roles in the process raise significant issues, at the same time, it is striking how consistently such critics often preface their evaluations with appreciative assessments of the achievements of the TRC. Walaza concludes his critique of the TRC, for example, with the acknowledgment that “[d]espite my concerns, I believe that were it not for the hard and painful process of the TRC, South Africa would not be where it is today.” Volf suggests that relationships in South Africa “often were at least partially healed” by the TRC. If Mayo’s criticism is the sharpest of these voices, her praise is also the most exuberant: “I might go so far as to join with others who call the TRC miraculous,” as well as “a beacon of hope.”

The contrast between the harsh criticism of Tutu’s role in the processes of the TRC and the celebration of the TRC’s partial but real achievements are not simply contradictory or paradoxical. Instead, making sense of these divergent reactions has to do with the immense complexity of the challenges confronting South African society as it began to

---

8 Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2006), 218.
9 Maria Mayo, *The Limits of Forgiveness: Case Studies in the Distortion of a Biblical Ideal* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 103.
10 Mayo, *The Limits of Forgiveness*, 105.
11 Mayo, *The Limits of Forgiveness*, 129–30.
12 Walaza, “Insufficient Healing,” 155.
13 Volf, *The End of Memory*, 219, n. 1.
14 Mayo, *The Limits of Forgiveness*, 101.
dismantle the Apartheid system, as well as the compromises and limitations inherent to attempts to translate moral and theological ideals into pragmatic political action. It is in the context of such fraught complexities that the legacy of Tutu should be evaluated. For, as the discussion below demonstrates, Tutu’s theology and his engagement with the challenges confronting South African society were responding to particular conditions and events in specific moments in time.

**Tutu and the TRC**

The degree to which Tutu himself and the processes of the TRC are frequently understood to be one and the same is perhaps understandable. As its Chair, Tutu was often taken to be the symbol and spokesperson of the TRC, someone who helped advance its vision and legitimacy. The Afrikaans journalist Antjie Krog recalls how Tutu held together the participants in the process with his words of comfort and encouragement: “He [Tutu] caresses us with pieces of hope and humanity.”\(^{15}\) Elaborating, she continues, “Whatever role others might play, it is Tutu who is the compass . . . It is he who finds the language for what is happening.”\(^{16}\) If he is indeed so implicated in the work of the TRC, if it is true that “he singled out witnesses who embraced forgiveness and made their stories his leitmotif,”\(^{17}\) then might Tutu’s critics be correct to focus the blame for the limitations of the TRC on him?

This would only be the case if Tutu was responsible for the design and regulations that established the parameters of the TRC. Yet John Allen notes that the establishment of the TRC was “the provisional outcome of realpolitik, which reflected the convergence of pressures from three directions: idealistic human-rights advocates within the ANC, frightened generals of the old order, and a nongovernmental lobby.”\(^{18}\) As such, the Commission was the product of political compromises, and was intentionally limited to focusing on extreme events rather than on the everyday structures that supported the system of Apartheid.\(^{19}\) As the Chilean philosopher José Zalaquett notes, unlike the situation surrounding the post–World War II Nuremberg and Tokyo trials, the TRC was organized by a government that included members from the old regime, which still had sufficient power and influence to obstruct inquests into past atrocities or threaten to ignite civil war.\(^{20}\) Krog recalls that Tutu made this very clear at the outset of the TRC: “We did not decide on amnesty. The political parties decided on amnesty.”\(^{21}\) If Tutu was mindful of at least some of the chief limitations and vulnerabilities of the TRC from the outset of the process, why did he agree to Chair the process, and why did he decide to become such a vocal defender of its vision? What he says next to the journalist

---

15 Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 45.
16 Krog, *Country*, 201.
17 John Allen, *Rabble-Rouser for Peace: The Authorized Biography of Desmond Tutu* (London: Rider Books, 2006), 351.
18 Allen, *Rabble-Rouser*, 344.
19 Wilson, *The Politics of Truth*, 34.
20 Krog, *Country*, 31.
21 Krog, *Country*, 30.
interviewing him helps to bring his motivation into view: “Amnesty made our [South Africa’s 1994] election possible.”

To better understand his acceptance and support of the TRC, despite his acknowledgment of the process’s limitations and design flaws, it is instructive to view Tutu’s manner of engagement as being in continuity with an approach to theology that has been consistent throughout his public leadership in South Africa. For Tutu is best understood as a contextual theologian who is deeply rooted in South African culture and society.

**Tutu as a contextual African theologian**

Since his exposure to black and liberation theologies, as well as his work in the ecumenical context of the World Council of Churches, Tutu has emphasized the contextual nature of his theology. He recalls recognizing how, in his early career, “I had all along provided orthodox, impeccable answers . . . to questions which no one in the communities we were serving was asking.” He concludes that theology is only relevant when it addresses issues of a particular community: “There could therefore be no final theology, since the questions, the contexts, were forever changing.” As such, “Western theology is no more universal than another brand of theology can ever hope to be . . . Theology is a human activity possessing the limitations and the particularities of those who are theologizing.”

Writing in 1975, however, Tutu realized that “African theology has failed to provide a sufficiently sharp cutting edge.” He suggested that African theology needed to “recover its prophetic calling” by seeking to achieve “a radical spiritual decolonization” by recalling “its vocation to be concerned for the poor and oppressed,” and by developing insights “about the corporateness of human existence in the face of excessive Western individualism.” This concern to disentangle Christian theology from the cultural norms and assumptions of northern capitalism will subsequently be developed in Tutu’s well-known emphasis on the concept of *ubuntu*, taken from the Xhosa expression, “umntu ngumntu ngabantu,” often translated as “a person depends on other people to be a person.” Yet focusing solely on this concept to understand Tutu’s legacy or his role in the TRC is to treat *ubuntu* as itself a kind of abstract “‘universal’ principal of theology,” an approach which he rejects. This nuance is often missed by Tutu’s critics, who read his writing on forgiveness or interpret his role in the TRC in a de-contextualized manner. What is key to navigating these debates is locating Tutu’s theology in the social situations to which he is responding.

---

22 Desmond Tutu, “Dark Days: Episcopal Ministry in Times of Repression, 1976-1996),” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 118 (2004): 32.

23 Tutu, “Dark Days,” 32.

24 Desmond Tutu, *Hope and Suffering* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1983), 75.

25 Desmond Tutu, “Black Theology/African Theology—Soul Mates of Antagonists?” in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, ed. Gayraud S. Wilmore & James H. Cone (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979), 490.

26 Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1997), 39.
In this regard, it is significant to recognize how Tutu understands the church’s role in serving the society in which it is located. As Michael Battle has identified, this is a core dimension of Tutu’s spirituality, “[f]or Tutu the spiritual life is a means to an end, communion between God and creation (including political life). In other words, it is not enough to be spiritual.”27 This vision was clearly articulated in 1975 while Tutu discussed his concerns over the political and economic situation in Africa: “I believe fervently that the church is going to be the salvation of Africa. If the church fails, then I am frightened for the future.”28 Far from articulating a version of Christendom supercessionism, Tutu emphasizes that such a point is appropriate because the countries he is speaking about (chiefly Zaire and South Africa in this case) are “mainly Christian” by population. As such, it is the duty of Christian leaders to serve the communities which they live in and serve.

The urgent tone in the speech above is explained by Tutu’s sense of the deep grievances and sufferings on the continent of Africa, many of which are the legacy of colonialism. Speaking in Nigeria in 1974, Tutu refers to the sense of injustice he witnesses, which “make the outlook for the future somewhat sombre,” and which is “but one glowing example of the rape of Africa by the colonizers who forced their dismemberment of Africa through their voracious greed.” In such remarks, one observes the resonance that Tutu’s thought has with liberation theology’s concern to formulate theology in support of the poor and oppressed. What is also evident is his close attention to the context of Africa. For Tutu, such concerns are not merely a “political” matter, but are deeply theological and pastoral: “How do you speak about a God who loves you, a redeemer, a saviour, when you live like an animal?”29

When encountering such speeches by Tutu from the 1970s, some commentators find it difficult to imagine that the speaker is the same person who chaired the TRC. Mayo, for example, expresses puzzlement over the contrast she sees between Tutu’s “vociferous” denunciations of injustice in South Africa prior to the TRC and his call for “unconditional forgiveness” during the TRC, or between the “crusader Jesus” of his earlier writings and the forgiving “reconciler” Jesus of his TRC period.30 Indeed, how can the man who criticized an “anaemic” and “cheap reconciliation” which seeks the “domestication” of the oppressed be the same person who later suggests that there is “no future without forgiveness”?31

What is evident throughout Tutu’s career is a refusal to be forced into an abstract choice between such binary options. His resists the demand to choose between anger or compassion, justice or reconciliation, reparation or forgiveness. To achieve this, Tutu approaches this issues and situations he addresses in a ‘bi-focal’ manner. In the first instance, as a Christian theologian and pastor, Tutu seeks to be shaped by the priorities

---

27 Michael Battle, *Desmond Tutu: A Spiritual Biography of South Africa’s Confessor* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), 38.
28 Allen, *Rabble-Rouser*, 127.
29 Allen, *Rabble-Rouser*, 128–29.
30 Mayo, *The Limits of Forgiveness*, 134–40.
31 Tutu, *Hope and Suffering*, 38; Desmond Mphilo Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).
of God. He writes that religious worship and personal devotion are “to sensitize us so that we could see as God [sees] and hear as God [hears].”32 This commitment has consequences. Positively, it means that oppressed and colonized black Africans might come to recognize their own dignity and identity as “children of God” who are called to “love and serve God in our own way. We cannot do it as honorary whites.”33 At the same time, those whom God is working to liberate from bondage are not liberated for their own sake, but “for the purpose of being God’s people.” Thus, everything the oppressed person does or says “must be tested by whether it is consistent with the Gospel of Jesus.”34 Tutu feels compelled, therefore, to acknowledge that even P.W. Botha, leader of South Africa’s ruling National Party, prime minister from 1978 to 1984, and opponent of the TRC process, is his “brother” by virtue of his common baptism in Christ.35 Although Botha may be a political opponent, for Tutu, this does not render him sub-human.

This first theological lens illuminates the nature of Tutu’s theological perspective and pastoral engagement. The second dimension of Tutu’s “bi-focal” approach to theology and politics is his careful attention to the specific conditions and dynamics within his immediate context. Although consistent in his opposition to colonial rule in Africa and to the structural racism it imposed on the continent, Tutu was also ever alert to the dangers of civil war and genocide. As early as 1973, he was mindful of the ways in which the children of oppression and suffering “would never forget and their children would merely bide their time waiting for the opportunity to wreak revenge.”36 This concern over the threat of ongoing cycles of violence persists throughout Tutu’s writing and speeches. He was closely attentive, for example, to the atmosphere within South Africa in 1978, in which “there is a gloom and despondency among Blacks and Whites who had hoped that things might be beginning to move in the right direction” so that “the chances of reasonably peaceful and non-violent change are fast disappearing.”37 This concern for the practical consequences of mis-steps on the road to liberation remained a preoccupation of Tutu throughout his career as a theologian and church leader. While he advocated that theology must be courageous and prophetic in its criticism of injustice, he also insisted that it be mindful of the consequences of any rhetoric or actions used in the name of justice. This stance is a consequence of Tutu’s contextual reading of the situation in South Africa and elsewhere on the African continent. He was attentive to this dynamic even within the processes of the TRC itself, noting how many rejoiced when “their side” received amnesty, but when the “other side” received it, they denounced the TRC.38

There is a subtlety in Tutu’s position, however, that merits further elaboration. It would be a mistake to simply conclude from the remarks above that Tutu’s perspective implies a rigid commitment to pacifism. Although his own Christian commitments and disposition certainly incline him personally toward non-violent forms of resistance, to insist on this as

32 Tutu, “Dark Days,” 36.
33 Tutu, “Black Theology,” 489.
34 Tutu, Hope and Suffering, 56, 153.
35 Tutu, “Dark Days,” 36.
36 Allen, Rabble-Rouser, 134.
37 Tutu, Hope and Suffering, 65.
38 Allen, Rabble-Rouser, 369.
a universal principal would amount to the sort of de-contextualized “Western” approach to theology that Tutu challenges. In this regard, his view of violence and non-violence in the context of political struggle resonates with that of Reinhold Niebuhr, who criticized “religious idealists” for “advocating compromise and accommodation as the way to social justice,” while ignoring “the power of self-interest and collective egoism.”\footnote{Niebuhr, \textit{Moral Man}, 248.}

Niebuhr’s view that individuals caught up in a violent context “are never as immoral as the social situations in which they are involved and which they symbolize,”\footnote{Niebuhr, \textit{Moral Man}, 248.} anticipates the way in which Tutu approached the situation within South Africa. For example, soon after becoming General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches in 1978, Tutu was called upon to comment on the legitimacy of armed struggle at a trial of Tokyo Sexwale and five other black militants. After being convicted, the accused asked Tutu to be a witness during sentencing, because the prosecutor had called for the death penalty. Tutu explained to the judge that

as attempts to bring the conditions of blacks to the notice of authorities have seemed to fall on deaf ears, there have been those who . . . out of desperation, out of deep frustration, have resorted to saying that this can happen only by violent means.\footnote{Tutu, \textit{Rabble-Rouser}, 172.}

Tutu struck a similar tone at the 1978 Lambeth Conference, when he explained to international partners, “Our cry is, ‘Do not abandon us even when, perhaps particularly when, the struggle for various reasons becomes violent.’” Although Tutu remained convinced that a critical criterion for justified use of violence had not yet been met in South Africa—since non-violent means to advocate for the end of Apartheid had not yet been exhausted—he was also reluctant to outrightly condemn those who were driven to violent resistance. As John Allen explains, Tutu did not reject the use of force under all circumstances, partially because of an ambivalence he felt toward the potential of non-violence civil disobedience. This latter strategy, Tutu reasoned, depended on a sufficient degree of respect for human life within the government to make it hesitate to massacre demonstrators, and he was not convinced this was true of the South African authorities.

As such, it is unhelpful to characterize Tutu as being either “for” or “against” the use of violence in resistance to oppression. Given the way his perspective is rooted in the concrete tensions of the situation in South Africa at the time, what would it mean to treat violence as an “option” in a context in which many black citizens were reduced to poverty, had limited access to education, had their mobility rigidly restricted, were unlawfully detailed, and violently assaulted? Violence was an ever-present reality in South Africa for many black inhabitants before any particular political “options” were selected; “The White man was the top god, and the Black was the underdog and they were going to see that it stayed that way.”\footnote{Tutu, \textit{Hope and Suffering}, 94.} This nuanced view of the issue of violence illustrates the duality of Tutu’s theological perspective. On one hand, he is committed to viewing his opponent from the perspective of God, and thus as a sibling. On the other hand, his careful reading of a specific social context
suggests modifications and adaptations to how such theological commitments are lived out in practice in a particular situation. Tutu summarized this position to then Prime Minister P.W. Botha as follows: “I have this deep commitment to try to work for peaceful change. But I am equally committed to fundamental change.”43

It is in this light that Tutu’s understanding of the role of the church comes once again more clearly into view. As is the case with his general approach to theology, Tutu’s ecclesiology is thoroughly contextualized; “It is important . . . for us to demonstrate in small or large church groups that it is possible for Black and White genuinely to share.”44 The Church, when it is living faithfully and truly, seeks to “demonstrate in its very life that Jesus has broken down the wall of partition.” While it preaches “the Gospel of reconciliation,” it must work “for justice first, since there can never be real reconciliation without justice.”45 As such, Tutu understands the Church’s as having a prophetic role—both in serving to call out injustice and in seeking to work for harmony and peace by the way its members live together as a community. The first task can result in accusations of bias or inappropriate “political” activity on the part of the church, accusations that were commonly directed against Tutu by his critics. As Tutu noted, however,

If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.46

The Church, therefore, will sometimes find itself in situations where it is compelled to “take a side,” in the sense of taking a stand on a specific issue or direction of travel. This decision is not motivated by political or personal ambition, but rather by the attempt to live as a disciple of Christ. As Tutu explained it while serving as Bishop of Lesotho,

Thus everything in this world has to be judged according to the standards of Christ. Does it contribute to the Kingdom of God, does it help to liberate God’s children from all kinds of bondage, does it help them to become more human persons who can exercise their God-given right to say yea or nay, to be responsible? Does it enhance life or make for death? And nothing is exempt from this judgment. Otherwise there would be a part of creation over which God does not rule and He is the Lord of all life.47

For Tutu, this prophetic role of the Church is not limited to criticizing what ought not to be; it also includes articulating a vision of what should be the case, or, indeed, a recognition of what God is actively bringing into being. In Tutu’s theological perspective, a central dimension of this vision is the belief that all human beings are created in the image of God, which

---

43 Allen, Rabble-Rouser, 174–75; 180–84.
44 Tutu, Hope and Suffering, 66–67.
45 Tutu, Hope and Suffering, 86.
46 Sheila A. Otieno, “Ethical Thought of Archbishop Desmond Tutu,” in The Palgrave Handbook of African Social Ethics, ed. Nimi Wariboko & Toyin Falola (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 598.
47 Desmond Tutu, “Church and Nation in the Perspective of Black Theology,” Journal of Theology for Southern Africa 15 (1976): 9.
invests each person with an intrinsic, “infinite worth.” For this reason, Tutu argues that “ontologically we are one in Our Lord Jesus Christ.”

These are core elements of Tutu’s vision and theology, but he seldom articulated them in an abstract or generalized manner. The injustices he thinks the Church must resist are those generated by the Apartheid system. The vision of the unity of all human beings he advances is one that is directed to all South Africans, but particularly those identifying as black or white. Thus, it is in not merely a generalized notion of the imago Dei that he preaches, but one that “must succeed to exorcise from the souls of black Christians the self-contempt and self-hatred which are the blasphemous effects of injustice and racism.” At the same time, this vision also includes “hope that in the process we could also help white people recover their humanity and personhood which have been grievously injured by their participation in an unjust and oppressive society.” Moreover, as already alluded to above, for Tutu, the urgency of both tasks is very much due to his assessment of the dangerous situation confronting South African society: “Together we must learn to live as brothers or together we will be forced to perish as fools.”

Such a stance characterized Tutu’s leadership from the time he served as Dean of Johannesburg (1975) through to his role as Chair of the TRC (1995–1998). The consistent way in which his theological perspective and his engagement as a church leader were adapted to the specific situation that he was confronting is perhaps one of the most significant aspects of his legacy. For although Stephen Bevans’s description of contextual theology as a mutually critical “dialogue” (between the experiences of the past and experiences of Christians in the present context) is to a certain degree appropriate, the metaphor evokes a vision that is rather more civil and tidier than is often the case. The turbulent nature of Tutu’s experience as a leader offers not only a far more dramatic example of the dynamics and perils of contextual theology, but it is also one that is likely much more typical of the challenges inherent to theological and pastoral leadership than is the notion of a “dialogue.” Such were the demands of engaging in the situations confronting South Africa that Tutu was sometimes led to ask himself, “Why the heck am I doing this thankless job?”

Having demonstrated the extent to which Tutu is best understood as an African contextual theologian, the discussion now turns to further illustrate the nature of his approach to theology and leadership by recalling two situations in detail.

**Tutu in context**

**The Soweto uprising (June 1976)**

In 1976, the political atmosphere within South Africa was intensifying after African countries to the North that were previously run by governments composed of white people, such as Angola and Mozambique, became independent of their former colonial

---

48 Desmond Mpilo Tutu, *God Is Not a Christian* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2011), 50.

49 Tutu, *Hope and Suffering*, 156.

50 Tutu, “Church and Nation,” 10.

51 Tutu, *Hope and Suffering*, 69.

52 Stephen B. Bevans, *Essays in Contextual Theology* (Leuven: Brill, 2018): 2.

53 Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, 193.
rulers and began to host black liberation movements within their borders. In response, the South African Prime Minister, John Vorster, emphasized that, “In white South Africa, the whites will rule,” and he advanced a plan to strip black Xhosa-speakers in the Transkei region of their South African citizenship. Attuned to the rising tensions in that part of the country, Tutu, then Dean of Johannesburg, addressed a white audience through a local newspaper: “Blacks are being provoked beyond human endurance . . . We don’t want a bloody confrontation. I mean this with all my heart. Please do not provoke us into despair and hopelessness.” He then wrote to the Prime Minister himself,

I am writing to you, Sir, because I know you to be a loving and caring father and husband . . . and as a fellow Christian and a victim of British imperialism. Your people, more than any other section of the community, must surely know that in the very core of their beings . . . that absolutely nothing will stop a people from obtaining their freedom.

Having appealed to Vorster’s common humanity and his own people’s experience of colonial oppression, Tutu turns to urge the Prime Minister to see black South Africans in a similar manner:

I am writing to you, Sir, because I have a growing nightmarish fear that unless something drastic is done very soon then bloodshed and violence are going to happen in South Africa almost inevitably. A people can take only so much.

When Tutu’s letter ended up being published in a Durban newspaper, some dismissed his efforts for being a useless gesture. Yet Tutu’s warning was prescient, although the location of the uprising—in nearby Soweto—took even him by surprise. On June 16, protests against cuts to access to education for black residents grew to up to 20,000 people, led by black children. When the police opened fire, at least 176 people were killed. Tutu’s response to the situation included preaching to his congregation the following Sunday—many of whom were white—that their silence over the situation was “deafening.” He asked how they would feel if white schoolchildren had been shot. In the parish newsletter, he urged his parishioners to speak to their fellow white neighbors: “Tell them that unless radical changes are effected in the ordering of society, then South Africa cannot survive. Nobody can win.”

This example illustrates once again the dual perspective of Tutu’s approach to contextual theology. He maintains a clear commitment to the Christian notion of love of neighbor and a common human identity as imago Dei, while focusing attentively to the realities of suffering and oppression, and the urgent desire for change fuelled by such frustrations. Without diluting either of these perspectives, Tutu’s determination to avoid being drawn into the polarizing dynamics of the situation, his refusal to side exclusively with either black or white South Africans, remains his most striking witness.

Allen, Rabble-Rouser, 153–55.
Allen, Rabble-Rouser, 158.
The Chris Hani March (April 14, 1993)

Following the release of Nelson Mandela from prison on February 2, 1990, intense tension remained within South Africa, as turbulent maneuvering and negotiating among political parties and constituencies ensued. Violence remained widespread, with approximately 14,000 South Africans dying from political violence between 1990 and the first democratic election in 1994.\(^{56}\) It was during this troubled period that on April 10, 1993, Chris Hani, the leader of the South African Communist Party and a member of the armed wing of the ANC, was shot outside his home by a far-right anti-communist.

Tutu, who was at this time Archbishop of Cape Town, realized the danger the situation posed. The assassination was a clear attempt to derail the already fraught peace process on the part of white nationalists, while militant black groups might consider the murder as grounds to strike back. Determined not to allow the situation to erode the political progress that had been made thus far, Tutu urged his audience not to get side-tracked: “In our responses there should be no more loss of life. Let our pain and anger be like birth pains giving life to a society where democracy, justice and peace will replace totalitarianism, injustice and violence.”\(^{57}\)

At an initial memorial service in St. George’s Cathedral, Tutu applauded Hani’s support for the peace process. Anticipating that he might be criticized for praising a Communist, Tutu reminded his audience that it was Christians, not Communists, who have created the Apartheid system. The Cathedral audience broke out in applause. The service had to be cut short, however, due to the size of the crowds, and as angry youths clashed with police forces on the Grand Parade. Tutu and other leaders left the Cathedral to march through the Grand Parade. Michael Battle, who was at Tutu’s side that day, recalls the situation:

> We heard shots ricochet off concrete and steel. Bystanders ran for cover. Some found comfort in seeing Tutu still marching in his purple bishop’s cassock. But the crowd was so frantic that they almost knocked us over. We made it closer to the eye of the frantic storm, where Tutu faced the police, who were lined at the end of the street . . . The police fired their guns in the air. Tutu pleaded with them not to use force. As I stood next to Tutu, I heard him say to the police, “There are hostile elements here who want to make use of this thing. Most of these people are being peaceful. So far, you have been reasonably good.”\(^{58}\)

Over 80,000 people gathered for Hani’s funeral on April 19 at the country’s largest soccer stadium outside Soweto. Tutu was to deliver the homily and choose as his text Romans 8:31, “If God be for us, who can be against us?” After greeting the mourners in five languages, offering condolences to Hani’s family and recounting some personal memories of Hani, Tutu directed his audience to look to a certain vision for the future:

> The death of Chris Hani gives . . . the government and all the key players another chance. We want to make a demand today . . . We demand democracy and freedom. When? [“Now!”] . . . We demand a date for the first democratic elections in this country. When? [“Now!”].\(^{59}\)

\(^{56}\) Allen, *Rabble-Rouser*, 324.

\(^{57}\) Battle, *Desmond Tutu*, 113.

\(^{58}\) Battle, *Desmond Tutu*, 114.

\(^{59}\) Allen, *Rabble-Rouser*, 334.
Then, after proclaiming that “We are unstoppable! Nobody can stop us on our march to victory!,” Tutu made it clear who was included in this vision, and who this victory was for, by drawing the crowd into an energetic call-and-response: “We will be free! [‘We will be free’]. All of us! [All of us!] Black and white together! [Black and white together!]”

Reflecting on this speech, Battle suggests that “The genius of Tutu in this moment was his recognition that millions needed a cathartic moment to pour out emotions rather than other people’s blood. Tutu committed himself to become that channel, to prevent uncontrolled violence.”60 As in the situation in the aftermath of the Soweto uprising, Tutu sought to discourage people from being defined by the polarizing forces unleashed by the terrible event. Instead, he urged his audience to adopt a different interpretation of the situation, one that did not demonize either “Blacks” or “Whites” as an abstract collective. To achieve this, Tutu offered an alternative vision of a possible future, one in which the injustice and violence of the present was not denied but overcome. This capacity to help an audience avoid being pulled into the vortex of polarizing rhetoric, while sustaining a vision of a common humanity and citizenship, remains the most impressive and lasting legacy of Tutu’s leadership. In these two examples, one witnesses a unique example of what it means to embody a practical and contextual theological vision is a challenging and perilous situation.

The TRC revisited

It is through the lens of such examples of leadership in turbulent situations that Tutu’s engagement with the TRC process is to be understood. As the first section of this essay illustrated, several critics have questioned this Tutu’s legacy due to perceived limitations and failures of the TRC. Given Tutu’s leadership during the Commission, and the vocal way he supported the mission of the process, it is not difficult to understand how he and the TRC are often considered one and the same. Whatever the merits of these analyses of the limitations of the TRC, however, it is also important to recognize that these criticisms have the benefit of hindsight, and that they can be formulated in a less turbulent and fraught environment than the one in which Tutu and South Africans found themselves.

As noted above, Tutu also recognized many of the TRC’s limitations. Yet, despite not having been the one who determined the processes’ parameters and scope, he nevertheless was determined to make the most of this opportunity to shape a better future for South Africa. Krog recalls how isolated Tutu was as he strove to make the very imperfect initiative work for the betterment of the country. When asked who Tutu’s friends were on the Commission, she cannot identify anyone, “[t]hose wrestling out their own agendas call Tutu the fool, the court jester, the ultimate cover-up artist.”61

In addition to such a challenging environment, Tutu was not blind to the problematic elements of the TRC. He noted that a significant percentage of the white population “are appalled that anyone should suggest that they contribute to the fund for reparations.”62

60 Battle, *Desmond Tutu*, 116.
61 Krog, *Country*, 202.
62 Tutu, “Dark Days,” 29.
He laments how “many whites came to take for granted our spirit of forgiveness, thereby trivialising black suffering.” As for the perpetrators of violent crimes during Apartheid, “Too many have given themselves absolution too facilely.” On the paucity of reparations awarded to victims by the process, “unfinished business.” In such statements, Tutu himself rehearses a number of the most prominent criticisms of the TRC. In his view, however, within the context of the looming threat of a civil war based largely along racial lines, the process—despite its inherent flaws—was the best chance to sustain a route to a more peaceful transition to a better society, one based on a democratic political model.

Indeed, it is possible to interpret some of the questionable decisions Tutu made during his chairmanship of the TRC as being the result of his almost desperate effort to interrupt the reluctance of different consistencies to participate in the process. For example, he is sometimes criticized for pleading to figures like Madikizela Mandela to apologize and exaggerating the sincerity of the response he received. Many challenge his tendency to single out too immediately and too regularly those victims who quickly embraced forgiveness. Some of these decisions might well be criticized, but only when also acknowledging the privileges of hindsight. What is clear is the extent to which Tutu sought, not to craft a perfect process free from political and moral limitations, but to work within the conditions of the situation in which he found himself, and to work to achieve the best possible outcome in a painfully imperfect context. Perhaps the most appropriate way to summarize Tutu’s stance toward the TRC is once again to avoid framing the issue as a decision to be “for” or “against” the process; instead, his perspective was guided by the same basic questions that consistently shaped his contextual approach to theology:

Does it contribute to the Kingdom of God, does it help to liberate God’s children from all kinds of bondage, does it help them to become more human persons who can exercise their God-given right to say yea or nay, to be responsible? Does it enhance life or make for death?

**Tutu’s legacy in the post-Apartheid context**

It cannot be denied that, in recent years, post-Apartheid analysis of the limitations of the TRC have diminished Tutu’s reputation among several theologians outside of South Africa, while within South Africa, critics often dismiss his post-Apartheid public engagement in various ways, including labeling him “naïve,” out-of-date, a “grumpy old man,” “ignorant about party politics,” and even a voice for the “right-wing elite.” Some accuse him of contributing to a system in which black people continue to live in poverty while white people remain in comfort. Even an admirer like Antjie Krog projects some of her fears and disappointment onto Tutu when she states, near the end of her memoire,
Ever since [Tutu] returned from America after his cancer treatment, he’s seemed very rhetorical. When confronted with anything, he keeps saying, “God is good. God is good.” You want to say, “That’s not enough from you—sometimes God alone is not enough.”

When one becomes a symbol for the hopes and fears of a community, showing any sign of being “merely human” can be disheartening for those longing for ongoing displays of miracles.

Attention to the contextual nature of Tutu’s approach to theology and leadership, however, brings into view the extent to which Tutu did not focus on achieving perfect solutions to the challenges he confronted. He concerned himself with what was possible to achieve within the constraints of the given situation, or, perhaps stating it more accurately to the spirit of Tutu’s life, he sought to remain faithful to God and God’s mission, within the context in which God had placed him. Such is the promise and the peril of prophetic leadership.

Tutu himself describes often feeling like he was on a “roller-coaster ride” as he undertook his work in public life. He had to operate without a clear blueprint or roadmap to follow, and both recognized and accepted the limitations and perils inherent to inhabiting such a position. Tutu accepted that “liberation is costly,” and that those who work for it must “bear the responsibilities and difficulties of freedom.” Moreover, he realized that those who have suffered persecution and injustice often cannot see themselves or others clearly for “their slavery had dehumanized them.” Such a perspective on one’s critics and one’s fallible fellow-travelers illuminates once again one of the core features of Tutu’s contextual approach to theology—its resistance to dividing up a situation into an either/or dualism. His capacity to see beyond (as opposed to ignoring the reality of) the binaries of black and white, oppressor and oppressed, friend and enemy, remains impressive and inspiring. It is this example and vision that promises to be his most enduring legacy.

Debates over the relative success and failures of the initiatives Tutu participated in will no doubt continue to remain contested and controversial. What this essay has demonstrated, however, is that focusing on “inconsistencies” in Tutu’s thought and action or faulting his commitment to imperfect initiatives like the TRC, largely fail to recognize Tutu’s own recognition of the unsystematic, partial, and incomplete nature of his public leadership. For, rather than seeking ideal solutions, Tutu focused on what he thought was appropriate and possible under the circumstances in which he found himself. He is thus best understood as an African contextual theologian, and as a pastor responding to immediate pastoral situations. Those who can recognize this in him will be those who continue to cherish his legacy, and to thank God for his witness.

---

66 Tutu, 361.
67 Tutu, No Future Without Forgiveness, 262.
68 Tutu, Hope and Suffering, 52.
69 Tutu, Hope and Suffering, 51.
Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Author biographies

Christopher Craig Brittain is Dean of Divinity and Margaret E. Fleck Chair in Anglican Studies at Trinity College in the University of Toronto. His publications include: “Racketeering in Religion: Adorno and evangelical support for Donald Trump,” Critical Research on Religion 6.3 (2018), The Anglican Communion at a Crossroads: The Crisis of a Global Church (Penn State, 2018), and Religion at Ground Zero: Theological responses to times of crisis (Continuum, 2011).

Nkanyiso Maphumulo is a South African born Anglican priest. He holds a Master’s degree in African theology from the University of KwaZulu Natal. Currently, he is a PhD student at the University of Toronto, Trinity College, focusing his research on a de-colonial perspective of Theodicy.