

Interview with Desmond Tutu, Archbishop of Cape Town

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Introduction

Last summer, I had the rare and distinct privilege to attend a meeting of The Elders in Johannesburg, South Africa, where I silently observed some of the most charismatic and influential world leaders working toward promoting world peace. These leaders were motivated to establish a sense of reconciliation and cooperation between “cultures” and “religions.” As a Muslim woman who often feels her faith to be misaligned and misconstrued by a small band of corrupt polemicists, I wanted nothing more than to understand how it is that religion could be used as a tool to bring about peace when it has so often been utilized as a tool to bring about evil.

While contemplating these questions, I was most struck by one man in particular. Archbishop Desmond Tutu had stood at the front lines paving the way toward reconciliation and peace in a country torn to shreds. The white politicians, represented by Frederik Willem de Klerk and the National Party, continued to declare that apartheid and racism were mandated through religion, their Christian religion. Yet while South Africa was crumbling from such injustice, Archbishop Tutu was rebuilding through promoting the religious principles of equality, justice, mercy, loving one’s neighbor and dignity for every human being. By establishing a strong interfaith and interracial network, Archbishop Tutu established a movement that united all individuals and worked toward healing and retribution.

It was just hours before dinner at The Elders meeting. I had set up my camera and recorder in the sitting area next to the Archbishop’s hotel suite. I saw him coming down the hall, greeting every person he passed: conference organizers, hotel staff and then me. “Well hello,” he said, offering me his hand and a warm smile. After introducing myself and thanking him for the interview, he asked for a few moments alone in his hotel room to freshen up and catch his breath. As I waited, I flipped through his book once more and thought about how this man, nearly 78 years old, is larger than life: his physical presence was unable to fully be captured on the pages from his works.

When he was ready, he came and sat across from me, his assistant taking a seat nearby. He cleared his throat, looked down, clasped his hands, closed his eyes and

started with a prayer for the blessings of God to shine down on all of us. He and his assistant uttered "Amen." I, an "Ameen."



Desmond Tutu on the Role of Religion in the Peace Process

Johannesburg, South Africa

Amina Chaudary: Archbishop, Muslims have a lot of respect for you and your work against apartheid. We see you as a good, positive force in the world. As Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth: if you lose your saltiness, with what will you be salted?" We look at a man like you and see you as the salt of the earth. I'm here for you to give us some salt. We need some real answers to some of the most pressing problems in the world today. So we thank you so much for your generosity in time.

When people questioned why a religious leader like yourself, as opposed to a lawyer, was appointed head of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, you respond, "The president must have believed that our work would be profoundly spiritual. After all, forgiveness, reconciliation, reparation were not the normal currency in political discourse." What does this say about the role that religious people should have in peace processes around the world?

Desmond Tutu: They should be very active if they believe that the world belongs to God, and politics is a very important part of the world, then they must participate in political affairs because they are alive. And if they don't act neither as the leaven or the salt or the light, then things can go horribly badly wrong.

AC: Do you think that if religious clergy were not involved, the path toward healing and retribution in South Africa would have taken a different course?

DT: Certainly the TRC process would have been either different if it was say lawyers, because they come with a particular mindset and, as I say, they are generally not found in the times when people are looking for reconciliation. They are involved when there is litigation, when you have two sides at loggerheads. And lawyers would not normally be looking to resolve the problem by trying to reconcile the opposing parties. The lawyer would generally be more interested in finding out who is the guilty party. But we tend to move towards retributive justice, rather than what was a very important part of the TRC — restorative justice.

AC: Was that a good lesson for the rest of Africa?

DT: Remember that we did not invent the TRC. There were countries like Chile and Argentina and Uganda who had been before us, so we learned from them, from their achievements and also from their failures. Yes, the world I think saw the South African version as something perhaps that many would want to have emulated. We were the first commission to have public hearings and generally to operate transparently and in public. That was one characteristic. The second is that we are the first truth commission that had the power to grant amnesty and so we were asked quite a few times by people from other parts of Africa and other parts of the world. You had people from Rwanda for instance, who were keen to learn more about what we had done. And countries such as Liberia have had a TRC now. Sierra Leone. In fact one of the commissioners was a commissioner on the TRC. Ghana, Nigeria, quite a few, and in other parts of the world, the man who was the deputy chair of the commission, Dr. Alex Boraine, when we finished and went to New York, he founded the International Center for Transitional Justice. And he was president of that for about four years and said they could not cope with the amount of work they were asked to take on.

AC: Just as religion should and can be a powerful source of peace and understanding, it can also be used as a powerfully destructive tool. When can religion become evil?

DT: It isn't religion as such that is violent or incorrect. Actually I don't know any religion that promotes violence. It is the adherents of whatever religion.

Christians have to be some of the most humble and very modest in this regard. It is not any particular religion that is to blame. There is no religion in fact that I know that encourages or propagates violence in that its adherents should carry out. Christians are the last to be hoity-toity. Now that they talk about Islam as being a violent faith, when you look at the history of Christendom, the Crusades and the many wars of religion that were fought, the cruelty of Christians in burning what they believed to be witches and burning heretics, and then very recently they were responsible for the Holocaust . . . it was Christians.

(Former U.N. Secretary-General) Kofi Annan put it very well. He appointed a group, the Alliance of Civilizations, when we presented that report. It was interesting. We were a very diverse group ethnically, religiously, culturally, in all kinds of ways, but we were able to produce a unanimous report. This was amazing given what people say about religions. When we handed over that report to him in Istanbul, he, in his address, said that it was clear that it was not the faiths — but the faithful — who were the problem. Because, as you know, there are very good Christians who are compassionate and caring. And there are very bad Christians. You can say that about Islam, about Hinduism, about any faith. That is why I was saying that it was not the faith per se but the adherent. People will use their religion to justify virtually anything. People are able to justify immense cruelty and say that it is something that is sanctioned by their faith.

AC: The apartheid in South Africa was driven by some practicing Christians. You say, “The people enforcing it were not heathen, but those who claimed to be fellow Christians.” They used the Bible to justify oppression and what they call, creation ordinances. At the same time, many Christians also spoke out against apartheid through a Christian lens. Why is it that racism can be read from revelation in more than one way?

DT: It is people. Because as you were saying, some people are able to use Bible as a means of opposing injustice, whereas others are able to find justification. You can find justification for slavery in the Bible. Some say this is what the Bible says and that closes the argument. You will find that the Bible, if you want it to, will justify many things. St. Paul had a very male chauvinistic view of women. He would say things like women must not talk in church, must cover their heads, they mustn't talk and must remember that it was a woman who first tempted and this whole mess started because women messed us up. So you can read it in such a way that it justifies polygamy. Most of the leading figures of the Old Testament were polygamists. Abraham had several wives and concubines. If they wanted, they could say this was approved in the Bible.

AC: This is obviously the same with regards to the Quran or any other religious text being misread and used to propagate evil. As I'm sure you've read the Quran in your religious studies as well, it is, as any religious book, one for instilling good morals and values and for people to live their lives ethically. Yet it is frustrating to see it's being used to justify evil and malicious purposes.

DT: **People will use anything. Look, when you think of the KKK, they actually have as their emblem a fiery cross. And they don't see any contradiction between the cross, an instrument of suffering that procured our reconciliation with God, and its use as a symbol for nefarious attacks on black people. But they believe that they are being obedient to God because they can read things that they see. People in apartheid South Africa can tell you that God cursed black people when they cursed Him. And so the hermetic people were condemned to be drawers of water and of wood.**

AC: So then, how do you reverse the use of religion to justify evil purposes? Especially when it becomes so powerful a force in the world today, as say Islamic or Christian, or any faith-based terrorism?

DT: **You have to use the principles of interpretation. We say the final and full revelation of God is not a book, it is a person. Jesus Christ. You have to then say, whatever it is that I say or do or think or teach must be something that will be consistent with who Jesus Christ was. So that is your ultimate litmus test, not that you've got specific words to say, whatever they may be saying. It is what is being said. They're consistent with the revelation of God that we encounter in Jesus.**

AC: You recently made a trip to Palestine and — while it was barred from U.S. media — you spoke out against injustices whether they are in Israel or in Palestine. To begin addressing this issue, do you believe that the conflict in Israel and Palestine is a religious one or a political one?

DT: **Ultimately, suffering is always political with all kinds of justifications — there are those who justify Israel's occupation of land as being a fulfillment of what God had promised. But then you can also say, in terms of that same Bible, they will be judged very harshly because the God who may have promised them this land is also the God who is the God of the widow, the orphan and alien and who makes it quite clear that God will not welcome religious acts, no matter how elaborate, if they do not represent a person who demonstrates that they care about justice, about compassion and things of that kind. So there would be those of us who say that in many ways, you worry about what the Jews in Israel are doing to themselves. Yes, they may at the moment have incredible power and**

are supported almost unconditionally by especially America, but most of the West as well. Yet what they are doing is contrary to the best teaching and highest teachings of their faith.

AC: It is often argued that everything in the Muslim world circles around this one issue. Israel does exist and there are innocent Jews who live there and want peace and reconciliation. Similarly there are innocent Palestinians with a history to the land. But this seems to be the center of the extremist motivation. What do you think would happen to fundamentalist Muslims, like bin Laden and the rest, if the Arab-Israeli crisis was actually resolved?

DT: Well, that is what we said in the *Alliance of Civilizations*, that originally we were meant to be looking at clash of civilizations and the role of religion in that. In our final report, first of all, we said although there are tensions between the West and this so-called Third World or the South, it has found its chief expression in the tension between the West and the Islamic world. And we said in our report that all other points of tension pale in comparison to this whole matter of the Middle East. Unless that is resolved, the tensions that we are speaking about, the West and Arab world, those would not disappear, they will not be resolved.

AC: The U.S. is often seen by the Arab world as not having an even-handed approach to the region vis-à-vis the Arab-Israeli conflict. Given this perception, what realistic role do you think the U.S. can play toward achieving peace and how likely do you think this will happen in the next 10 years?

DT: The U.S. tries to be involved. America has a very important role that it could play. You've got Jimmy Carter who, as it were, put in a number of pitches there. I myself have not understood how the foreign ministry could appoint Tony Blair as a special envoy in the ME peace process when he's been so much under the thumb and depicted as (former U.S. President George W.) Bush's poodle. Of course there is hardly any love lost between Bush and the Arab world, especially because of the invasion of Iraq.

AC: Iraq used to be the best example of peaceful co-existence between cultures, religious sects and different religions. Saddam Hussein did the greater part of the modern day destruction to Iraq, but the U.S. invasion also had drastic consequences to the delicate stability that used to exist in Iraq between Shi'ites and Sunnis who have very deep distrust for one another. You shared a similar experience in South Africa when you say, "We found that we were often very suspicious of one another and that it was not easy to develop real trust among us. We realized only later that we were all victims of a potent conditioning with ready made judgments of those who belonged to other groupings." Such seems to be taking place in Iraq now and spreading beyond its borders into areas with any type of diverse Muslim population. Drawing from your experiences, how can

this deep-seated sectarian conflict taking place in the Middle East and beyond be resolved now?

DT: By people sitting down and beginning to really hear one another and not being influenced by their stereotypes. Really sitting down and trying to hear: What is it that bugs you? Why don't you think you like me and maybe I will tell you why I don't like you. Of course, you've got to reckon with the burden of the past. You can't just easily dismiss it. It is a legacy and often you have to carry an albatross. And it won't happen until people are able to have a certain level of trust and try to speak to each other, not as caricatures but as people. It turns out that all would really want peace and all would want to be sure that they would not be taken advantage of. They want much the same things, but they have been formed by history to have a particular perception of the other.

AC: Do you think the global Muslim community is doing enough to combat extremism?

DT: It will be very difficult out of a vacuum to say no. You know, when people see what is happening in Gaza, that can't make you too fond of the perpetrators — the Israelis. If you are a Muslim and you look at what is happening there, it fills you with a lot of resentment. Especially if you are weak, then you are nursing these grudges and you are increasing in bitterness and look for a chance to get your own back. One of our friends is a professor in Harvard and she is involved in conflict resolution and has propounded very cogently and credibly this theory about dignity. She says the moment our dignity is undermined, we get up in arms and want to see our dignity restored — especially if we are humiliated. Every situation of justice is an occasion where someone is being humiliated and they want to restore their dignity. They think, "I am a human being and I may not be able to defeat these people or destroy them, but I will hit out at them, because I am not a thing, I am human."

AC: What is one thing most people would be surprised to know about you?

DT: That I like to be liked.

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