

'God is not a Christian'

Desmond Tutu

An interview with Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu in Cape Town, South Africa by Christian Egge

'A rainbow is a rainbow – precisely because the colours are different. The different colours come together – and then you have – a rainbow.'

Ubuntu – an African Humanism.

'God is not a Christian,' says Desmond Tutu in the interview below. At the same time he writes in his book *No Future Without Forgiveness*[1] that:

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.)

Is there a consistency in this theology? There is a deep consistency. With Desmond Tutu it must be looked for, not merely logically but also in his African, 'pre-Christian' background.

Ubuntu is an African term for 'being human.' All human relations that are characterized by mutual respect, dignity, brotherhood and community are expressions of ubuntu. Ubuntu-Botho means the art or the virtue of being human. We are created to live in a subtle network of mutual dependency. I am only a human being through my encounter with another human being. To hurt another is to hurt oneself to the same degree.

Desmond Tutu finds this African humanism to be a central point even in Christianity. Here it is of course related to the incarnation of Christ – that God became man. It seems as though Christianity for Archbishop Tutu is an expression of a divine, universal ubuntu that embraces all human beings independent of race, sex, ethnic background, or political, cultural and religious affiliation.

During the rehabilitation of South African society after the apartheid regime, the task was to re-establish balance and harmony. As Tutu writes in his book:

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 offence (pp. 54, 55).

One could say that this was the kernel of the task for the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission which carried on its work for about seven years from 1966. Archbishop Tutu was appointed Chairman of this work by Nelson Mandela.

The objective was to find a way, not only to reconcile the past, but also to create possibilities and hope for the future.

One has to choose a path between two extremes. On the one hand retribution by the victors, which has been referred to as 'victors' justice', as in the Nuremberg trials. On the other hand a 'blanket or general amnesty' or 'national amnesia' as in Chile. This second extreme is fresh in the memory: Pinochet and his generals gave themselves an amnesty. They were the accused, the prosecutors and the judges in their own cases – behind closed doors! In South Africa there was a third path: to offer amnesty to those who asked for it, but under a precondition: the perpetrators had to confess their crime in public and recount in detail what they had done. The crimes could not be swept under the carpet. It is generally accepted that there can be no reconciliation if the past is being denied. At the same time, if one wants the wounds to heal, there must be a willingness to forgive.

This work was no bed of roses; it was an enormous psychological strain for all involved. At times it was like going through hell, says Tutu. In this situation he had the real opportunity to test his African-Christian outlook on man against reality in a very concrete and existential way. And it held water! This can be seen clearly by reading his book. It should be a reference book for resolving apparently insoluble problems in conflicts all around the world. The transition from apartheid to democracy in South Africa was accomplished without a bloodbath or civil war, a process that may be called the implementation of a kind of 'moral technique'. It was in no way a given that it would succeed. In Tutu's view, human beings have the potential for freedom of thought and action. Thus the work in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was a bold venture.

The South African experience could prove an inspiration in our 'peaceful' (European) society, for example, in resolving the problem of bullying in schools. The 'moral universe' Tutu speaks of is equally valid at every level.

The Human Being is a moral agent.'

Conversation with Desmond Tutu on the precondition
of freedom, on religion and ethics.

C.E.: In the (compulsory) schools in Norway and Sweden we have all-embracing ideals towards which we are supposed to work: freedom and responsibility. We must search, respect and encourage that which is unique in every child. The Norwegian school curriculum requires us to consider the human being as:

...a moral being with responsibility for his/her own actions, and the ability to search for what is true and to do what is right.

All intentions are in accordance with the Declaration of Human Rights.

At the same time we teach biology which describes the human being as a complex biochemical machine. Consciousness is seen by many as the result, or product, of electrical and biochemical processes in the brain. Francis Crick, Nobel

Laureate and the man responsible for mapping the structure of the DNA molecule, presents such a view in his book *The Astonishing Hypothesis* from 1995:

You, your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules. As Lewis Carroll's Alice might have phrased it: 'You're nothing but a pack of neurones.'^[2]

Of course, not all biologists share this deterministic view of man. Most biologists believe, or want to believe, in a human being's potential freedom – and consequently also responsibility – at some level or another. The question is, however, whether it is not Crick who is the most consistent here. If it is the brain that thinks – who am I then? Am 'I' only my brain?

As the sophisticated natural sciences increasingly dominate our understanding of the human being – of what we are – the question of freedom versus determinism seems increasingly to come up for discussion, not least by teachers at all levels.

I usually ask my interviewees whether they really believe in human freedom and responsibility. I shall not ask you such a question, as it is apparent that you believe strongly in freedom, having spent a lifetime working towards it. For me, as a Norwegian born after the Second World War, it has been very instructive, but also shocking, to read your book *No Future Without Forgiveness*. Here the question of freedom or determinism is neither abstract nor philosophical but existential.

Can you, from your experience, give us evidence of the human being exercising his potential for freedom of action?

D.T.: Yes. I think those who say that it is only our genes, our logical make-up that determine, or predetermine, how we are going to operate would have to explain the following. When a human being has been subjected to appalling treatment and has been victim of the kind of abuse that should really eat him up with resentment, bitterness, anger and the desire for revenge, what is it that enables that person to react with forgiveness and reconciliation? If we accepted the causal relationship you have spoken about – which one would expect to be the normal consequence for someone who has been treated that way – how do we explain the fact that so many, who have been victims of injustice, of oppression, of cruelty, have not responded in the way that might have been expected of them?

One of the things that surprises people about what happened in South Africa, is the unexpected that took place. Take Nelson Mandela for example. He was in jail for 27 years and treated in the most abominable fashion. If you go to Robben Island, you can see the cell in which he was living and the mattress-kind of thing that he was given. Everyone assumes that when a human being is treated in this fashion the consequence must be to produce someone who will come out saying: I want revenge! And of course, yes, there were those who, because of their suffering, in fact said: we want pay back. How was it possible then, for Nelson Mandela and many others who came before the Commission, how was it possible that the natural consequence did not happen in their case? It can only be because these people made a deliberate choice to say 'I will not hit back, I will forgive you!'

It is not only Nelson Mandela. He is the most spectacular example, the best known. There were also ordinary people, *so-called* ordinary people – I do not have ordinary people, everybody is special in my theology: I refer to people who were not educated; people who for a long time were anonymous, unknown. These peo-

ple come before the Commission to tell their story, and you believe that these persons who have been treated so abominably have the right to be angry, they have the right to be bitter, they have the right to *demand* justice. And they say: No, if this person says 'I am sorry' – then I am ready to forgive. Why? Why did they not, as it were, allow the natural consequences to happen? Unless it is that – they made a choice? They had the freedom to choose. Just as we are aware that there were those who said 'we can't forgive them, we can't forgive their actions', thus we see that there were also those who said 'Yes, it is bad, but we will forgive.' Choice!

C.E.: So we actually have this possibility of choosing. Where do we acquire this quality, this freedom of choice? How do we account for it?

D.T.: According to the biblical account of creation, God created Adam and Eve, and one of the extraordinary things was that God, in creating us as human creatures, could have created us as human creatures who would always choose to do right. Instead, God took the incredible risk of creating us free. This freedom meant that we had the capacity: to choose to obey – or not to obey; to choose to love – or not to love. It is inherent in human nature, it is something that we have been given. We are not robots, we are creatures who have the faculty to choose. Because this is the case, as a human being you can be blamed and you can also be praised. If we were programmed always to choose correctly, programmed without the freedom, then we would not be moral creatures. We are moral creatures precisely because we have this freedom. For example, you can't say to a dog, which is controlled almost entirely by instinct, that it is bad: 'This is a bad dog' because the dog just grabs a piece of meat you put in front of it. You can, of course, train it or teach it. If, however, you followed the deterministic line that some of your biologists try to apply to humans, you would argue: No, we would not be blameworthy, we would not be praiseworthy, and we would therefore not be moral agents.

Moral agency requires as a fundamental condition, or precondition, the fact of being free. As one person has

put it the most extraordinary thing is: The doctrine of hell is God's greatest compliment to us. God, who has the perfect right to be a totalitarian, has such a profound reverence for our freedom that He would much rather we went freely to hell, than compel us to go to Heaven.

C.E.: At a meeting in India with the Dalai Lama six weeks ago where scientists were talking with him about science and ethics, I spoke to a professor of biology, Ursula Goodenough, who said: 'Well, we can actually act freely but human freedom is like the skill of a beaver.' The beaver has developed a speciality: the ability to construct dams. The human being has developed a different speciality: symbolic language. As we develop more and more concepts, we combine them in new ways, and finally we have (what she calls) a kind of 'semiotic freedom'.

This is a faculty emerging from the physical in an evolutionary perspective: we can then think and act out of freedom – according to the formula something more from only this. However, in her theory there is nothing in man that is spiritual or able to transcend death.

This is very far from the concept of the soul or the concept of man that we learn from St Paul. In Corinthians, 1:15, we find a clear difference between man as a 'living soul' and man as a 'quickening spirit', that is the transformed man of res-

urrection. The latter is incorruptible. Here it is spoken of body, soul and spirit. We hear that it is 'sown a natural body (that is body and soul), it is raised a spiritual body'.

Plato has his tripartite soul. In his writings, the soul itself appears in the living man through three faculties: thinking, 'courageously acting' and desiring. As opposed to the body, Plato speaks of the soul as an entity in its own right, and the best part of it, so to speak, is eternal – or may attain immortality. Could you say something now about the human being from your point of view?

D.T.: I, as an African, am aware that there is an invisible world: the world of the spirit. I do not need to have been taught this by Christians. In our tradition, we know that we are linked with those who have gone before and those who are yet to be. For us, all are alive. It is not just 'the chain of being', it is the community. We are community! In our view you are a human being only because you participate in the life of the community. Long before Christianity came, we were aware that those who die are, you could say, the living dead. Sometimes, they are also called the ancestors. People used to think that Africans worshipped the ancestors. They don't worship the ancestors; they revere them. They say the ancestors, as it were, stand between the Supreme Being and us. The Supreme Being in the African understanding was like a big chief! You as a mere small person would not approach the Big Chief directly. You approach the Big Chief through the mediation of your ancestors who know you well because they are in the family. Often you see that this awareness of the invisible spirit world was so strong that originally we used to do the following. Before taking a drink for myself, I would pour a few drops on the ground, a libation, to say 'I am sharing with those invisible ones who surround us'.

The Bible refers to 'the cloud of witnesses'. The human being, in the biblical understanding, is a clod of earth into which God breathed the breath of God, causing the piece of clay to come alive. It is more than just having a soul in a kind of prison. It is not in a prison. The body is connected with the spirit in a very intimate kind of way, and Africans were aware of this. That is why they had very clever traditional healers, who understood, long before European medicine did, that most illnesses are psychosomatic. Being angry can cause an ulcer to develop. The spiritual affects you physically and, if you have a headache, you find it very difficult to be happy. The body, the mind, the spirit are intimately, almost inextricably, bound together in our view. In the view of the Bible, we should not be allowing ourselves to be misled by the dualism that was so prevalent, particularly amongst the ancient Greeks, who saw the body as the prison of the soul. We do not, and we should not, see it this way, and therefore it is possible for God, the Supreme Spirit, to become a human being. The Incarnation is made possible. It is possible to have a sacramental principle where water, wine and bread can become the means of communicating the sublime, the Divine Life.

There is a consistency. We have lost it, and partly, unfortunately, because of the influence of an African, St Augustine. He infected (the theology) as a result of his own experience. Before his conversion, his life of, what we might perhaps call promiscuity, made him almost hostile to the material.

C.E.: You mean that it was a kind of psychological thing in his own life that affected his theology?

D.T.: Yes, I would say so. [Laughter]

C.E.: I have the impression there were other Church fathers who were more Aristotelian, who believed the body and the soul or spirit were much more integrated into each other?

D.T.: Well, Thomas Aquinas, yes. But we have still been affected a great deal by the Augustinian view. You encounter it in discussions when people ask 'Can religion and politics mix?' For example, it upsets them when the Church is involved in political issues. Then they ask 'How can you do this? You are not preaching the Gospel.'

C.E.: So you'd better stick to your Sunday job?

D.T.: Yes, exactly.

C.E.: I have to ask about ethics then. You talk about a moral universe, which is very interesting. I was talking to the translator of the Dalai Lama, B. Alan Wallace, who is himself a Buddhist. He also speaks of a kind of moral universe. The Buddhists believe in forces or 'laws' working in the cosmos, physically as well as morally. They speak of *karma*, in a very pragmatic way. I have been wondering about this. We all believe in gravity. We say that gravitational forces are functioning. Could we speak of a moral universe in this way, that is that there are actually forces or laws in the cosmos that are working on a spiritual level: moral laws? I mean, as an African, with your African background and as a Christian, how would you explain this moral universe? I have read your book, and I have seen how the work of your Truth and Reconciliation Commission has demonstrated the amazing impact that truth itself, and moral initiatives, can have on people. It is probably more important than ever to focus on this today. Could you say something about it?

D.T.: All I can say is that for us it has been proved many times. Let us look at history, fairly recent history: Hitler. For a long time he seemed to be unassailable. He was able to do almost whatever he wanted to do. The end result was the Holocaust. But what finally happened to him? Well, we don't know for certain whether he committed suicide or what really happened there in the bunker. Mussolini. Amin in Uganda. You name them: Franco, Marcos, Pinochet, and our own apartheid rulers here. For a very long time it seems they will sweep everything before them. They are 'in charge'. They are 'the cock of the walk' as it were. But then, something happens. In nearly every case!

God prevails. It may only be after very great pain and suffering, but prevail He does. Even more interesting, let us look at the current situation. Who is the most admired political figure? It is definitely not George Bush!

George Bush is nothing if not strong and powerful. He gives orders to the United Nations. He says: 'Do this. If you don't, I will act unilaterally.' Nevertheless, this is not a man who is admired. In fact, in England, they say it has shown how unpopular he is amongst the British. Why? Why is Nelson Mandela held in so much higher regard? Who are the other people who have been admired? The Dalai

Lama, Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi. Why? Not because they are powerful! Mother Teresa was anything but powerful. The Dalai Lama is a refugee!! Yet, almost anywhere in the world, when you tell people that the Dalai Lama is coming to speak, thousands will turn up. Why? It is the same with Nelson Mandela. It was the same in a way with Mother Teresa. It seems so obvious that people recognize – not power, but *Goodness*. Goodness. Goodness! This person is good. Why? Nelson Mandela amazed the world because he was expected to be consumed by bitterness and anger yet he spoke about: forgiveness! Mother Teresa could have lived a comfortable life in Europe. Instead she chose to go to India where she worked with the lowest of the low. Mahatma Gandhi, a brilliant lawyer, gave it all up to live a very simple life dedicated to non-violence. Why? The answer: because we have it in us to know that in fact we were made for goodness.

C.E.: I have a question here again concerning religion. As you say, just like thousands of others, I listened to the Dalai Lama when he was in Stockholm. He said: 'We are working for the freedom of the Tibetan people. We are also working for the freedom of the Chinese people. Our enemies are our teachers.' And when I heard him say these things, I was asking myself: Is he not a Christian to speak such words?

I see this in the context of Mahayana Buddhism. In this branch of Buddhism the so-called Bodhisattva-ideal is central. The *Bodhisattva*, a highly developed being, refrains from fulfilling his last step of entering into Nirvana and leaving *Samsara*, the 'wheel of life', behind. Instead, he incarnates again and again as long as there are suffering, sentient beings on earth. This branch of Buddhism develops from the time of Christ and onwards. The result of this self-sacrificing, brotherly attitude is that this kind of Buddhism represents a religion which is more positive towards the earthly existence. So I wonder: is there an inner connection between Buddhism and Christianity? What is your perspective on this?

D.T.: In saying God is not a Christian I have no wish to be imperialistic. God is not a Christian! All of us belong to God. God reveals God to all of us and we have different understandings of God, because we are the creatures that we are. I don't believe I have a God who sits and worries that a Buddhist may come up with a wonderful idea. I do not feel obliged to think it cannot be a good idea just because it is a Buddhist idea. No, I am thrilled – that a Hindu could be such a leading exponent of non-violence, and affect and influence so many people as Mahatma Gandhi did. I am not upset that one of the most brilliant scientists, Einstein, happens to be a Jew. You see it points to the wonderful bounty of God that none of us has a proprietary claim on God. God is God, God is forever free. Even the Bible itself says that The Word, which enlightens everyone, not just Christians, was coming into the world at the time when Jesus became a human being. This Word was there with God from the beginning. Many people who tend to try and box God up and attach Christian labels claim that only Christianity has the truth. Ask them: what was God before Jesus Christ was born? God was God. God was dealing with Abraham, with Moses, with Plato, with Aristotle. You cannot say: 'No, Plato was not wise, Socrates was not wise because he was not a Christian.' It's too silly; too silly for words!

The light of God shines as it has always shone, and we each apprehend that Light as we are able. And misapprehend it!

C.E.: Finally, do you have a piece of advice for the schools in Scandinavia in the multicultural society? Do you want to say something to teachers, parents, and pupils in Norway and Sweden? What would you say as a result of your experiences?

D.T.: I would want to say: Amongst the many things that one has learnt is that God has created us different, like a rainbow. A rainbow is a rainbow precisely because the colours are different. The different colours come together – and then you have – a rainbow!

[1] Tutu, D. (1999/2000) No Future Without Forgiveness, London, Doubleday/Random House.

[2] Crick, F. (1995) The Astonishing Hypothesis. The Scientific Search for the Soul, London, Touchstone Books, p 3.