
On Desmond Tutu and Ubuntu

An article from the *Cathedral Times*
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Sometimes, it's simply worth acknowledging great words written by someone else. I reprint here, a few paragraphs written by Alec Russell, from a much longer article about Archbishop Desmond Tutu. It's [an outstanding piece from *The Financial Times Magazine* on September 13, 2013](#).

Desmond Tutu would have been a brilliant stand-up comic. Within moments of arriving at his foundation's offices, sporting his customary black workman's cap, he is teasing his staff, his visitors and most exuberantly, of course, himself. "You are too close," he tells a charity photographer, shooting away his lens. "Makes my nose grow big." When I ask after his right foot, which is in a cast, I think for a moment he has misheard. "She is very beautiful ..." Long pause. "The girl who I fell for ..." He chuckles, as does his audience, irrepressibly, even his staff who have surely heard this before. "Tendonitis," he adds. "Teenage-itis," says an aide.

[Tutu's daughter] Mpho, 49, an ordained priest, is an obvious keeper of her father's flame. She had the peripatetic childhood of all four of Tutu's children. Mpho is less voluble than her father - how could she not be? But they interrupt and tease each other at will as any loving father and daughter might do. When they laugh together, they crackle with the force of a high-veld storm - not least when I recount the decline and fall of our local Anglican church in west London, exhibit A in my contention to them that their church is in deep trouble in the west.

It was a grand Victorian church built to accommodate hundreds, I explain. Twelve years ago when one of our sons was christened there the congregation was barely a dozen strong. Now it is closed. "Is that the effect you had?" jokes the Arch. He urges his fellow Anglican clerics not to panic over suggestions that Britain is becoming a post-Christian society and their church is in long-term decline.

"Of course we [the Anglican Church] want to sell our product [and have full congregations] but in another way we ought to say ultimately it doesn't matter that our churches are empty. We have to find a way of communicating with those who say they find churches offputting. That doesn't make them any less members of God's family, How you actually get fulfilment as a human being isn't when you rough everyone up and clobber them [for not attending church, for example]. It's when you follow the example of the Lord, longing for the best for the other." We shouldn't be too selective, he adds. There really are churches where people are "well fed spiritually". Then, characteristically, he changes tack, a trick he deployed so often in his searing sermons of the past. The trouble is, he concedes, televangelists are filling a need.

"I've looked at our television here and you feel really sorry for what they [evangelical congregations] are fed. There's a young pastor in Soweto I think. They must have two or three thousand people at a service every Sunday, but it's real,"

"Drivel," says Mpho.

"I was going to say bull," He just stops. More laughter.

And my exhibit B, the success in the west of Richard Dawkins' paean to atheism, his bestselling book, **The God Delusion?** Tutu is warming up now and delivers a confident riposte - though again, and typically, not what one might expect from a priest.

"God doesn't want us being childish. God may want us to be childlike but not childish. We've been given intellectual gifts. We should go and question things we think are dubious intellectually. God is not sitting on edge that someone is going to find out eventually that the area of God's control is shrinking. It's not. God is not on edge. God says, "Bah!" God is thrilled that we've been discovering all kinds of things. When you look at what science has discovered, God says, "Yay. There they go. That's what I would like them to know."

As a cleric, Tutu has always defied rigid categorisation - if not flouted convention. At the height of the repression in the mid-1980s he embodied a "liberation theology". He ignored those superiors who thought he overstepped the mark. For him politics and religion were of a piece and had to be, in light of apartheid's injustices. He also easily bridged the sometimes awkward gap between Western and African traditions and thinking. John Allen, who was Tutu's spokesman for more than a decade, wrote in an authorised biography that Tutu liked to contrast the western with the African idea of what it means to be human by setting Descartes' "I think therefore I am" against the southern African tradition of ubuntu, which loosely means "a person is a person through other people". Tutu thinks the west "has a tendency to separate the secular and sacred", Allen tells me, "that it is very good at analysing and dissecting but not so good at integrating and pulling it all together."

Again, if anyone wants a fine introduction to the person and character of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, read [Alec Russell's article, from The Financial Times Magazine, September 13, 2013!](#)



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