



## Obituary: Desmond Tutu (1931 ? 2021)

Jeremy Dewar, Workers Power Wed, 29/12/2021 - 10:42

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Anti-apartheid activist and liberation theologian Desmond Tutu died after a long battle with cancer on Boxing Day, aged 90.

Tutu is best remembered for his active involvement in the struggle against South African apartheid, whose overthrow was one of the great historic achievements of the twentieth century. He used his positions first as the secretary general of the South African Council of Churches and later as the first Black Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town (hence his nickname, the Arch) to promote non-violent opposition to apartheid.

This meant in practice that, while Tutu supported rent and school strikes in the townships and even called for a general strike, he also opposed Umkhonto we Sizwe, the ANC's military wing, and reprisals by the movement against collaborators (?necklacing?). This made him an ideal figurehead for the liberal anti-apartheid movement, initiated by his friend and early mentor Trevor Huddleston. He was however a courageous and outspoken advocate of the struggle to end the vile white supremacist state and he could recognise its twin ? the Zionist settler state of Israel. Where his own church, most Labour, social democrat and liberal politicians shrank like cowards from condemning it, Tutu did not.

His support for the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) campaign was probably his biggest contribution to the downfall of apartheid. It helped turn moral sympathy into active support, hitting the increasingly isolated regime where it hurt ? in their pockets.

Tutu took full advantage of his privilege as Archbishop to tour the world to whip up support for BDS, to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984 and to address the United Nations a year later. More important than this was Tutu's ability to speak truth to power, emboldening and broadening the youthful ranks of the anti-apartheid alliance, like when he told President Reagan, "America can go to hell!" And this from a man of the cloth.

The limits of his contradictory position ? for liberation but against the means to achieve it ? could be seen when he took Senator Ted Kennedy on a tour of the townships, only to have the meeting disrupted by activists outraged at the promotion of a US imperialist politician.

His Achilles' heel was his petit-bourgeois pacifism because it precluded total victory for one side or the other. So, as the revolutionary forces mounted their offensive against the system in 1984-86, it was Tutu who first offered himself as a mediator. Although he was initially rebuffed by President PW Botha, Tutu's campaign for reconciliation, that is, Christian forgiveness, would find favour 10 years later with South Africa's first Black president, Nelson Mandela.

Tutu chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Commission from 1996 to 1998. The TRC, hand-picked by the ruling ANC though it included a few supporters of apartheid, was given the power to hear testimonies from victims (of both sides!), grant reparations and either seek rehabilitation or grant amnesty (for those who ?repented?). Its emphasis on forgiveness rather than justice was underlined by Tutu reading a prayer before each session.

Although 22,000 victims of apartheid were identified and heard, the refusal to distinguish between the violence of the oppressor and that of the oppressed, who had every right to fight back, rankled with many ? as did the ?forgiveness? of 849 perpetrators, who were granted amnesty over the heads of the oppressed.

Most damning was the TRC's failure to address the collective grievance against the apartheid system as a whole, by dealing with those at the very top of the pyramid.

Former president FW De Klerk, having failed to derail the Commission in the first place, refused point blank to accept his government bore any responsibility for the crimes committed by his security forces. De Klerk's predecessor, PW Botha, refused even to attend, describing the TRC as a 'circus'. Tutu could do nothing to compel either of them to go further or to bring them to trial. The family of Steve Biko was one of many who felt robbed of real justice by Tutu's TRC.

Later, Tutu courageously equated Israel's treatment of the Palestinians with South Africa's treatment of its Black population and extended his support to the Palestinians' campaign for BDS saying:

'I have been to the occupied Palestinian territory, and I have witnessed the racially segregated roads and housing that reminded me so much of the conditions we experienced in South Africa under the racist system of apartheid.'

For such statements, a Times of Israel blogger called Tutu, even before his burial, 'an insidious antisemite', duplicating the invective levelled at 'the Arch' by the apologists of apartheid in the 1980s.

Some on the left are tempted to see Tutu's role on the TRC as a blip in an otherwise liberationist life, especially since he later went on, in addition to his already mentioned stalwart support for the Palestinians' cause, to stand up for LGBT rights, a woman's right to terminate a pregnancy, and for the shunned and excluded victims of AIDS. Nor was he afraid to call out ANC corruption and their reneging on promises to the Black poor and working class. He also called for Tony Blair and George W Bush to be sent to The Hague for trial as war criminals (Iraq), once refusing to share a platform with the former.

But the TRC was crucial to the democratic counter-revolution that the ANC was conducting. The Commission provided ideological cover for the 'reconciliation' that the ANC leadership, headed by Nelson Mandela, was offering to white monopoly capital. The National Party, which had ruled over apartheid for decades, was offered ministers in a coalition government and governorship of the central bank, despite gaining only 20 percent in the first inclusive election in 1994, a third of the portion achieved by the ANC. The Freedom Charter, especially those clauses calling for nationalisation, was dumped for a 'sunset clause' guaranteeing the rights of (white) private property.

Tutu was never a member of the ANC - indeed he banned Anglican clergy from joining any political party - but he worked closely with its legal arm, the United Democratic Front and, once he was free, Mandela. Despite deeper hostility to the Stalinist SACP, Tutu presided over the funeral of its leader Chris Hani, assassinated by a white racist in 1993. By this stage though, the SACP was at the forefront of the drive for a popular front government and a capitalist 'stage' of the revolution, that is, a democratic counter-revolution.

There were many on the left who thought this would be a transitory phase and counselled support for the ANC. Workers Power and the League for the Fifth International's predecessor were not among them. Tragically, we have been proved right and millions of Black South Africans; landless farmers, workers, unemployed youth, are living with the legacy.

However, Tutu's sincere sympathy for the oppressed meant he also 'spoke truth to power' to the new Black élite, to the likes of Jacob Zuma, and spoke openly of how little of the fruits of liberation the poor and exploited had received, in savage contrast to the millionaires like Cyril Ramaphosa. However, he remained unwilling to recognise the right and the necessity of the exploited and oppressed to struggle for power 'by any means necessary'.

So, whilst we recognise Tutu's contributions to the struggle and his courage, it is with those who are struggling for a socialist South Africa today that we solidarise.

