

DESMOND TUTU

A Spiritual Biography of South Africa's Confessor

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Preface

It is a rare person who arrives at that state of perfect spiritual serenity. I suppose they are saints of sorts, not necessarily beatified and canonized saints, but the kind of people in whose presence we intuit the nearness of God, because they bring their best friend everywhere with them. God does not accompany them as a bodyguard or go in front of them like a Soviet tank clearing a path. He accompanies them as a soprano's pure voice accompanies a song, as a dewdrop sits on a rose.¹

On one of my Tutu Travel Seminars to Cape Town, South Africa, in which Desmond and Leah Tutu kindly hosted theological students and clergy, one of my white students honestly but naively asked them, "How dangerous was it in South Africa during apartheid, and how did you deal with fear?" In the desert traditions of Christian spirituality, the question was more important than the answer. As the professor, I was nervous because my student certainly could have asked a better question—or at the very least, could have asked only one question at a time. But Tutu graciously answered both questions in one response: "God looked after us."

Indeed, in those dangerous times, Tutu's passionate concern for God and God's passionate concern for Tutu overrode fear. There were occasions when people would have been killed, had Tutu not stepped in, wearing his purple bishop's cassock. When I taught at Duke University, my colleague Peter Storey, a major Methodist leader from South Africa, told me about a time in the early 1990s in Soweto when he saw a teenager put a gun to Tutu's head. In that dire circumstance, Storey said to the youth, "Are you going to kill your bishop?" The kid backed down. God did look after Tutu.

Tutu also looked after God. When he was an active bishop, Tutu kept a rigorous schedule. At four in the morning he would wake, and then be on his knees in prayer for an hour. At five thirty, Tutu would walk and be silent. He would shower and be at his desk around six—often reading but also doing some desk work. At seven forty-five there would be morning prayer followed by the eight o'clock Eucharist. Breakfast would come around eight thirty.

Then he would formally begin his day at nine. So he would essentially have four hours of silence at the beginning of each day. In the middle of the day he would be back at chapel, then to a light lunch, then a siesta until three. So he would spend another two hours in silence in the middle of the day. At the end of the day he would spend half an hour in the chapel, then go to evening prayer. All told, each day would bring about seven hours in silence with God.

John Allen, Tutu's longtime friend, communication director, and biographer, told me that when he used to travel with Tutu, international organizations tried to pressure Tutu to do things morning, noon, and night. Allen said to them, "What kind of Tutu do you want? And why did you invite him here? Well, if you want him for his communicative skills, ebullient personality, and that kind of thing in which he thrives in big groups . . . if you want that Tutu, you need to respect his need for chunks of silence."² For Tutu, it was like two sides of a coin. If you want the spirituality, communication, and ebullience, you need the other side—silence, contemplation, and stillness with God.

Great stories about Tutu, like the ones above, have already been told; so why should you read this particular book? Much has already been written, filmed, and recorded about this important figure. Since theology and spiritual matters are ephemeral and, to some, even irrelevant, why should anyone be interested in looking at a historical figure like Tutu through a theological worldview? And personally, why should I write this biography, especially with the existence of my other books on Tutu's theology and my friend John Allen's expansive Tutu biography?

One answer has to do with my personal relationship with Tutu. I lived with him for two years in the early 1990s, and we have remained close since. Indeed, he ordained me to the clergy, married my wife Raquel and me, and baptized all three of our children. I will discuss this close nature of our friendship in the Introduction.

A further reason for this book is the fact that Tutu was a major leader of the antiapartheid movement in South Africa and frequently led demonstrations and spoke out on the world stage in support of democracy and civil rights. Even those who do not know the details know about the major events in Tutu's life: serving as the general secretary of the South African Council of Churches (SACC) from 1978 to 1985, receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984, serving as the first black archbishop of Cape Town³ and primate of Southern Africa 1986–96, and chairing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) (1995–98). But even though many may know these facts, the tensions of racism, politics, and short-term memory may have caused amnesia.

Many may not know that when other black⁴ South African leaders were jailed or exiled, Tutu was pressed into action to lead the opposition to apartheid South Africa. For example, by the late 1970s, around the time of the Soweto uprising, Nelson Mandela had been in prison for around fifteen years. For the younger generation of South African youth, Mandela had become increasingly unknown.

The Roman Catholic archbishop of Johannesburg, Buti Tlhagale, who grew up in Soweto, told John Allen that in the late 1970s the name Mandela was almost unknown to the younger Soweto generation. After the Soweto uprising of 1976, Tutu became one of the major figures to stand up against the apartheid government, along with people like Percy Qoboza (an influential black South African journalist and editor of the major black newspaper *The World* in Johannesburg), Nthato Motlana (Mandela's medical doctor who later became a prominent businessman), and Winnie Mandela (a major antiapartheid activist and Mandela's wife at that time).⁵

All of this occurred as Tutu was rising in the Anglican Church hierarchy, becoming bishop of Johannesburg in 1985 and archbishop in 1986. Here was a spiritual leader rising in a political world, with a complex set of constituencies. As a Nobel Peace Prize winner, he served all South Africans as their unofficial ambassador to the world at large. The form of protest he was able to engender on an international level was groundbreaking, as he pushed the point that sanctions offered the last hope of avoiding a "holocaust" in South Africa. Tutu also presided over the political miracle of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) from 1995 to 1998, and subsequently acted as a global Elder counseling many parties' conflicts around the world. If many people already know all of this, why another biography on Tutu?

In short, I have two answers. First, in his senior years, as Tutu has moved off the public world stage and worked more quietly as an Elder, younger generations may not have learned of these major contributions that Tutu made in facilitating South Africa's democracy. There were many reasons why Tutu actively decided to move off the world stage, including his wisdom to cultivate new leadership, as well as the fragility of his health. Tutu's decisions to become lesser so that someone else could become greater, such as when he pulled back from the limelight when Nelson Mandela was released from prison, were not accidental. These were habits that he learned from the biblical narratives of spiritual people. The Anglican priest Francis Cull, who was Tutu's spiritual director at Bishops court, the residence of the archbishop of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa, served as Tutu's confessor. Cull would hold Tutu accountable to go on retreats at least once a year, do a seven-day silent retreat when appropriate, say his prayers, and confess his sin.

I remember Cull telling me about Tutu's spiritual disciplines when I lived with Tutu at Bishops court. Tutu had an intense awareness of his faults, Cull said, and was deeply introspective. Cull and I talked about how most people would never have believed this about Tutu, given his outgoing and buoyant personality. Cull used to say that you could not understand Tutu unless you understood Tutu's spiritual struggles as well.

So here in my first answer as to why this spiritual biography is important. Tutu may not be as well known to today's younger generations, just as Mandela was not known by the younger generations in the 1970s. But in Tutu's case, his seclusion has been self-imposed.

My second answer is the real reason for writing this book: Tutu is a saint. This point requires a deeper explanation, because I do not make such a claim out of sycophantic glory. What I mean here is that Tutu's maturity toward union with God provides a contrast to the alternative universe of apartheid, in which white separation from other races represented white holiness, in which true heroes and saints were only those of European descent and, even more particularly, Afrikaner.

The Hebrew word for holy is *qodesh*, which on the surface shares the same meaning of holiness or set-apartness. In the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), to be holy meant to be transcendent and totally other, because God is this way. The concept of being holy carried the connotation of the weight of glory that only a select group, chosen by God, could carry. In the New Testament, the word for holy is *hagios*, which also means to be set apart.

In a horrific sense, "apartheid" also means to be holy. Afrikaner theology in support of apartheid was rooted in a misguided interpretation of Calvinist doctrine. Such Afrikaner theology was developed to inspire Christians to keep going on the "Great Trek," an eastward migration in 1836 of Dutch-speaking settlers who traveled by wagon trains into the interior of South Africa to escape the Cape of Southern Africa's British colonial rule. The Cape's original European settlers, known as Boers, were in constant clashes with the British Empire. The Boers became oppressors of black people as they sought to legitimize the subordination of other South African ethnicities by laying the theological foundation for modern Afrikaner nationalism and apartheid.

The Boer Wars, in which the British Empire tried to vanquish Afrikaner resistance, left many Afrikaners desperate as they tried to survive in Africa. Poor white Afrikaners lined the highways trying to sell whatever they had to survive. Eventually four South African colonies united politically into the Union of South Africa and relinquished control to democratic elections. When this occurred, a group of young white intellectuals called the Afrikaner Broederbond formally adopted their version of Calvinist theology based on the work of Abraham Kuyper, prime minister of the Netherlands (1901–1905). Kuyper was also a theologian who articulated the theological concept of pillarization, which advocated for political and denominational segregation of a society. Human beings should consciously divide into different hierarchies purposely set apart from one another, he argued. The Broederbond believed in such pillarization to separate blacks, colored, and whites.⁶ Such a theological framework of "set apartness" was directly responsible for the establishment of apartheid in 1948.

The argument here and in much of this biography is that the worldview of apartheid was really one of hagiography (determining the criteria for sainthood), in which "separate development" was a euphemism for being holy. Apartheid was de facto a different version of the spiritual life, in which white people saw themselves particularly as saints. Apartheid was conceived and nurtured within the Afrikaans Reformed churches and was theologically justified as a political

policy. No one can effectively argue that apartheid was simply about politics, because it was inherently a spiritual enterprise that justified white power over darkness and black people.

My premise of Tutu becoming an alternative kind of saint turns apartheid's hagiography on its head and requires a spiritual and theological perspective. This may raise the hackles of those who are disassociated from religious, spiritual, or theological discourse. Even if it does, we still need saints. If human communities want to stop repeating the mistakes of history, we need to understand the errant uses of religion. *The brilliance here of Tutu's sainthood is in how he leads us to see how we are all saints—not just the set apart.* Tutu states, “In my theology there are no ordinary people. Each one of us, because we are God's representative, God's viceroy, God's stand-in, and a God-carrier—each one of us is a very special person.”⁷ Few can argue against Tutu's positive impact on the world in this regard.

There are those who believe that spiritual discourse is often only about the subjectivity of personal salvation—so much so that there is often no substance to whatever is being described as spiritual. A brief word, then, may be in order as to my interchangeable use of “spiritual,” “mystical,” and “theological.”

For me, mysticism denotes a spirituality lived out in those seeking the tangibility of divine presence. For example, there is the story of a mother trying to comfort her son, who is resisting bedtime. “Son, don't be afraid,” she says, “God is with you.” The boy, now crying even harder, says in between sniffles, “But mom, I need someone with skin on.” Spirituality is the skin of mysticism. Theology is a manner of thinking about mysticism, which is present in all our world religions but is often relegated to otherworldly pursuits. In Christian mysticism, however, there is not a sharp distinction between mysticism and theology or between personal experience of divine mysteries and the church's theology. As the renowned Eastern Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky states, “We must live the dogma expressing a revealed truth, which appears to us an unfathomable mystery, in such a fashion that instead of assimilating the mystery to our mode of understanding, we should, on the contrary, look for a profound change, an inner transformation of spirit, enabling us to experience it mystically.”⁸

So, in keeping with this balance of mysticism, spirituality, and theology, this biography uses these terms interchangeably. It is true, however, that mysticism in particular holds an apolitical connotation among many, as an inaccessible realm hidden from mortals. Tutu's spiritual life changes all of this as he states, “As I grow older, I am pleasantly surprised at how relevant theology has become in my perception.”⁹

My biography of Tutu offers more explicit attention to a remedy for this, as I believe Tutu's political life is actually illumined by deep spirituality—the kind of spirituality that is usually noticed only in crises or after death. In many ways, Tutu's spirit is akin to an artist who is known and valued only after death. Tutu's art looks like expensive grace (as opposed to cheap grace), restorative justice, and Ubuntu (the African concept of interdependence)—all pieces of work sold

at high value when the community realizes that a great soul like that will never be seen again.

So I come clean in the outset of this biography with my mystical assertion that Tutu is a saint. Those who are saints work in the nexus between human and divine realities. This may come as little surprise to some who have critiqued my perspective on Tutu's life—claiming that my theological work on Tutu is akin to hagiography, with little critique. What I write here will be of little surprise to such critics. To my surprise, however, most of these critics still honor Tutu's spiritual acumen.

Christian hagiography still remains the domain of a white, European worldview in which the literary genre of spirituality seldom includes black folks. Yes, Tutu is honored as a political agent. For example, Tutu was among sixteen people honored with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, presented by President Barack Obama in 2009. "With unflagging devotion to justice, indomitable optimism, and an unmistakable sense of humor," Obama said, Tutu "has stirred the world's conscience for decades" and "continues to give voice to the voiceless and bring hope to those who thirst for freedom."¹⁰

Of course, I agree with Obama and thank him for honoring Tutu in the United States in this way. But Tutu is much more—and even much deeper. In many ways, Tutu's invaluable witness in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries reminds me of a humorous story told about a kindergarten class. A kindergarten teacher was observing her classroom of children while they were drawing. The teacher would occasionally walk around to see each child's work. She asked a little girl named Susan what she was drawing. Susan replied, "I'm drawing God." The teacher paused and, being theologically correct, said, "But Susan, you can't do that. No one knows what God looks like." Without missing a beat or looking up from her drawing, Susan replied, "They will in a minute."

Tutu's life demonstrates God. Few individuals take on such an impossible task. Even fewer demonstrate the impossible. Tutu falls in this category of someone defying the odds. As a biographer, I seek to be like little Susan and write what God looks like in the world. Although this may be critiqued by some who say that Tutu does not represent God, the work intended here is not to diminish the ineffable God, even as Tutu—an ecumenist who believes in interreligious dialogue—still adheres to the essential revelation of God in Jesus Christ. As I display in the latter chapters of this biography, such revelation never gets in the way of deep friendships with other saints, like the Dalai Lama, whose revelation of God is much different. Again, Tutu's constituencies are complicated. But the revelation of the incarnation provides a basis for Tutu's purchase on sainthood: God's incarnational ways of laying down bridges between worlds on which humanity may cross into God's divine life. My premise of sainthood, therefore, does not mean Tutu is God or that he is perfect; rather, I lay out a narrative of Tutu's life in which God is present and vital. Tutu is the first to admit his failings and shortcomings, the first to long for what he would do over if he

could. Such admissions and longings, however, are signs of Tutu's genius as a confessor.

THE DEFINITION OF A SAINT

In the language of Christian spirituality there are the categories of confessor and confessee. A confessor is one who hears the confessions of others, while the confessee is the one who provides the confession. As any good spiritual director worth her salt would admit, to be a good spiritual director, you have to be in spiritual direction. In the same way, when one thinks about what it means to be a saint, one must be aware that saints know that their holiness comes from the reference point of God, who naturally reveals that, for human beings, holiness exists on a continuum. In other words, by virtue of the fact that we are created, our holiness will always look like a cartoon compared to God's holiness. The very definition of holiness—to be set apart—thus looks different for a human than it does for God. That Tutu is holy (saintly) does not mean he is Jesus, but that given the circumstances of Tutu's life, he offers a discrete life set apart, demonstrating God in the world. So how will I go about displaying Tutu as saint?

Describing Tutu as a saint is controversial both in the sense of writing on him as a living figure and explaining the deeper meaning of the word "saint." The concept of "saint" is often never fully explained, or is used in a superficial way to describe a nice person. When I describe Tutu's spiritual life here, I do so with the intent of describing a complex life in a controversial time. Thereby, Tutu's life as saint is used in the traditional theological sense but also as the literary foil to the concept of apartheid.

As we will see in this book, Tutu does display the exemplary character of a saint, but his power is in how he helps us to see God's purpose to make us all saints. In the confusion of those in power claiming apartheid's holiness in setting apart a supreme white people, Tutu's spiritual life sheds light on how to see apartheid for what it truly is: sin. Rather than a vapid sainthood, Tutu's life represents the foil to dysfunctional understandings of apartheid as "being set apart (holy)" and even "ordained by God." This spiritual conflict between apartheid's image of God and Tutu's image of God prompted me to settle upon the deeper need to look at Tutu's life through the three Christian mystical stages of maturing in the life of God—purgation, illumination, and union—which I will discuss in the Introduction. It is because of these mystical stages that I describe Tutu both as a mystic and a saint.

Through the framework of these stages I will describe Tutu as a person modeling a sane contrast to the spiritual forces of apartheid. My motivation here is not to exalt him in some artificial way, but to show how religious exemplars like Tutu can make the world a better place. It is in these three mystical stages of purgation, illumination, and union with God that I will seek methodologically

to explain more fully this concept of Tutu's sainthood. Tutu does not achieve something called sainthood; rather, a holy life is thrust upon Tutu. This will help all of us see similar spiritual physics occurring in our own lives as well. Instead of using religion dysfunctionally as a political means, as in the case of apartheid, reading about Tutu's spiritual life should motivate us to accept what God is trying to do in our particular lives and in humanity as a whole. There can be no separation of one from the other.

In this receptive spirit, I preface this spiritual biography of Tutu as a prayerful response to the many current challenges facing the world, for which leaders like Tutu are needed all the more. It is in this prayerful response that I think Tutu ultimately teaches us how to understand the character of a "saint" differently than the hagiography that is often used to describe heavenly minded leaders of no earthly good. In other words, Tutu's life displays how, in God, we are all saints. Even though you may come from different spiritual traditions or no spiritual tradition at all, I hope that, when reading this book, you might stay open to the need for sane religious leaders like Tutu, who, as history continues to be written, will be found on the side of truth and reconciliation, rather than deceit and conquest.

In such history I seek to elucidate Tutu's spirituality, humor, character, and political impact through his speeches, sermons, lectures, and media statements, but most of all through my personal relationship with him. I had the unique opportunity to live in Tutu's household during the two years (1993 and 1994) in which South Africa gave birth to its first real democracy by electing Nelson Mandela as president. Although I met Mandela on a couple of occasions, I had the sustained experience of watching Tutu up close and sharing some of South Africa's historical moments with him—even standing next to Tutu as he cast his first vote as a South African citizen.

So another value of this biography is that it is not written from a displaced writer's viewpoint, tracking down secondary resources to create a piecemeal narrative; I both display Tutu's miraculous life witness and help the reader make real connection to this extraordinary figure, who helped a nation-state confess its sin of apartheid.

Finally, let me spell out four key benefits to reading this biography. First, readers of *Desmond Tutu: A Spiritual Biography of South Africa's Confessor* will be able to recognize a great discrepancy in Western culture—namely, how spirituality is more intelligible through communal experience than individual experience. Second, I help the reader participate in the difficult work of thinking through how to make spirituality relevant again to political structures. Those who care about institutional structures like government, mainline religions, and the business world—whether through deep commitment or great concern—will find this work on Tutu of great value. Third, those individuals who will not settle for the routinized spirituality of dying institutions will be able to understand a better strategy of personal fulfillment as intelligible through Tutu's life and witness. Last, in light of increasingly violent events around the world involving

refugees, immigration, white supremacy, and much more, this book offers a means of thinking through spiritual practices that may address systemic causes of violence. To this end, my bibliography highlights as many as possible literary responses by Tutu to the root causes of human violence.

Writing a book like this inevitably leads the writer to acknowledge appreciation for those who helped to make it happen. The list here is impossible to name completely. Naturally, Desmond and Leah Tutu must be named initially, as they gave me access to published and unpublished work and generous hospitality in which I got to know them as dear friends. I am grateful for getting to know their children: Trevor, Thandi, Naomi, and Mpho. My brother in ministry, Edwin Arrison, has been coleading our Tutu Travel Seminars in January and August. Edwin, Desiree, Layla, and Laura have become my family as well. Piyushi Kotecha, CEO of the Desmond & Leah Tutu Legacy Foundation, provided vital assistance to me in the process of publishing this book. John and Liz Allen were shepherds for me as I initially navigated the world of South Africa. I am indebted also to John for his friendship and helpful insights in making this biography coherent. Roger Friedman and Benny Gool served in situating this biography for its most potential. John de Gruchy and his work at The Volmoed Trust retreat in South Africa inspired me throughout my writing. I am also thankful to Kurt Dunkle for patiently supporting my writing at General Theological Seminary in New York. Eric Tuttle and Ellen Taylor did magnificent work as my work-study students. Grants from the Louisville Institute and Conant Grants from The Episcopal Church were extremely important in providing the necessary resources to be able to write this biography. And to the president and publisher of Westminster John Knox, David Dobson, a big thank-you for not only sticking with me through two books at WJK, but for also honoring me with your time in editing this book. Thank you, Julie Mullins, for picking up the baton and seeing this through the finish line, which was no small feat considering the COVID-19 pandemic. And I am grateful to Hermann Weinlick for his final read of the text. I am also in debt to Tony Gerritsen, principal of St. John's Theological College in Auckland, New Zealand, for providing the space and community to finish this book. The spiritual creativity in New Zealand is fantastic! Lastly and importantly, to my wife, Raquel, and our three children, Sage, Bliss, and Zion—thank you for seeing me through this significant work that will allow subsequent generations to learn about the spiritual life of Desmond Tutu.



Michael Battle with Archbishop Desmond Tutu in 1994, Bishops court, Cape Town.
Author photo.

Introduction

I will begin this introduction to the fascinating life and witness of Desmond Tutu in an unusual way, by pointing out for the reader the potential weaknesses in my approach, two in particular. First, there is a lack of objectivity in my approach. A good friend of mine at a major university once told me that “objectivity is not all it’s cracked up to be.” After we both shared a laugh, I learned that through the current movements in literature and academic life, objectivity is always interpreted. What this means is that I need to be transparent as to who I am as the biographer when engaged with the subject matter of the life I’m studying. In fact, I believe my relationship with Tutu will even be beneficial to the objectivist types who long for parameters, causes, and effects. In other words, I offer Tutu’s biography in the relationality of having lived with him, and even having been ordained a priest in the Anglican Church by Tutu in Cape Town at St. George’s Cathedral on my birthday, December 12, 1993.

I consider myself as part of the study of objectivity here. As stated in the preface, much of what I write here is from my first-person observation of the life and character of Tutu each year since 1993. I have been blessed to have Tutu perform most of the major rites of passage in my adult life. His friend and biographer John Allen joked once that I better outlast “the Arch,” otherwise he would have

to do my funeral service as well. For me to write any way other than out of such a relationship with Tutu would be disingenuous and ahistorical. After all, there are many critics of Tutu who can offer a balanced approach, if that is desired.

What concerns me here, however, is that such forces have not sought such balance; rather, there seems to be a norm of quietude toward Tutu's accomplishments. In other words, it seems as though there are those who have intentionally blocked credit due to Tutu for his accomplishments. I believe this is because of the implicit spiritual nature of his work, something secular society finds difficult to fathom.

Therefore, I offer my twenty-five-plus-year relationship with Tutu and subsequent primary research on him as a good thing rather than a methodological hindrance. Also, as an African American¹ focused on the intersection of Christian spirituality and nonviolence, I offer a different paradigm in which to situate Tutu. There are very few black writers who are explicitly known for their work in Christian spirituality. In fact, I would argue that, perhaps outside of Howard Thurman, who influenced Martin Luther King's spirituality, there is no such black "contemporary voice" on Christian spirituality. I believe this dearth of writing about black spirituality is due to the lack of effort to associate Christian spirituality with communal concepts, Celtic Christianity perhaps being an exception.

I also believe that racism plays a part in controlling the discourse of who can be classically described in the discourse in Christian spirituality. For many in the Western world, "black spirituality" is an oxymoron. Often Christian spirituality is perceived in terms of light and darkness, thereby implying that blackness cancels out an orthodox understanding of what is spiritual. This is an unfortunate association, since in Christian mysticism, darkness is a key component in knowing God. For example, Dionysius the Areopagite, mentioned briefly in the Bible (Acts 17:34) and known as the pioneer of Christian mysticism, describes Moses' encounter with God as Moses' not actually meeting God's substantial nature, but meeting the place where God dwells. Dionysius puts it this way:

This means, I presume, that the holiest and highest of the things perceived with the eye of the body or the mind are but the rationale which presupposes all that lies below the Transcendent One. Through them, however, [God's] unimaginable presence is shown, walking the heights of those holy places to which the mind at least can rise. But then Moses breaks free of them, away from what sees and is seen, and he plunges into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing.²

Dionysius's genius is in exposing the incomplete human bias about God. No doubt the associations of light and whiteness encouraged many European Christians to transfer their identity more readily onto divine things—so much so that black people were cursed with blackness. Dionysius helps us see that most human perceptions of spirituality are self-contained or focused on one's personal perspective. In any case, the medieval canon of European persona can no longer serve as the only perspective of spirituality. Much more work must be done to

enhance the Western tradition of spirituality in light of what the church looks like in this new millennium. My book offers such a work to the reader. This biography's most valuable contribution may be in my unearthing of Christian spiritual and mystical sources from an unusual source for many in the Western world: the continent of Africa.

The second weakness of my approach could be diplomatically described as this work's being too contemplative (meaning confessional or religious). To write a spiritual biography on Desmond Tutu as confessor, however, I cannot help but be confessional and religious. Paul Brett helps me explain through his observations of a Tutu speaking engagement:

Here was no dry academic lecture for publication in a learned journal, [by someone] who would review evidence, quote research, qualify in footnotes. Here instead was someone speaking out of years of struggle in one of the most inhuman, and tense, political situations of modern times. Here was a Church leader personally involved in a situation commented on almost daily in the international press, and well-documented in the lives of millions of black people longing for the basic political and economic freedoms.³

I totally agree with Brett's assessment of Tutu. (In fact, I grieve not being able to write a complete work just on Tutu's sense of humor and profound contagious laughter, both of which contributed to his lectures being anything but dry. In many ways, I think this sense of humor was Tutu's greatest God-given weapon as a confessor, because humor disarms pretension and deceit.) Even though I am a theologian, my intention as his biographer is to present Tutu's life not as a "dry academic lecture," but as a life seen through both deep admiration and my personal relationship with him as a father figure.

Through field research and analysis of primary documents, I will argue that Tutu's life and work are crucial for both the well-being of the world and the survival of the church that seems equally bent toward crisis and culture wars. I am also afforded the perspective of studying Tutu's continuing impact, especially his role as chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission,⁴ his subsequent leadership role with the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals, and lastly his relationship with the Dalai Lama and other global leaders. Most of all I seek to show the reader Tutu's spiritual life. Tutu invites us into the spiritual life as he realizes the centrality of worship, meditation, the Eucharist, quiet days, retreats, and the life of prayer. This realization is not so much by precept as by example, pointing to the fact that this aspect of the Christian life, as Tutu once told me, is caught much more than taught.

My assumption is that many do not realize the deep spirituality of Tutu. For example, it brings rich excitement to Tutu to see monks engaged in the regular round of daily prayer—matins, midday prayer, evensong, and compline. As Tutu remembers his early experiences with monks, he laughs when he says, "We lesser mortals were engaged in more mundane pursuits such as study in theology."

Such spiritual formation happened early for Tutu, because his context of apartheid needed well-formed spiritual masters to challenge it. Tutu was particularly

impressionable in the spiritual world, and it has remained as an indelible mark in his own consciousness to realize that he was being sustained by these faithful acts of worship, adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and intercession. He was forever changed to discover Christian monks who prayed so faithfully and so often. The chapel where Tutu trained as a seminarian, he said, "was hardly left empty outside of service times. . . . It is at this seminary, St. Peter's Rosettenville, Johannesburg, that I learned the nature of an authentic Christian spirituality."⁵

The reader will also sense that this biography is not written from a journalistic perspective, in which linear events are outlined by which to chronicle the political life of Desmond Tutu.⁶ Instead of such an approach, I have chosen to take advantage of my own relationship to Tutu and my life experiences with him. I am a Christian, and I care deeply about this identity. Likewise, I am black, and I care deeply about this identity also. In order to understand the perspective from which I write, the reader needs to understand how these two identities are interrelated. Most of my life has been spent in the discovery of how black identity and Christianity help us better see practices of peacemaking and reconciliation. I started this discovery with Tutu, an exemplar of someone who brings black and Christian identity together.

In white society, Tutu profoundly negotiated how Christianity helps us better see practices of peacemaking and reconciliation. Such an exemplar has led me to think that one of the unnerving issues of human spirituality is how many people believe that spirituality separates us and disconnects us from our actual, political lives. In other words, spirituality (or religion, for that matter) is forced into the private domain and bears little traction to help us live as connected communities.

Tutu announced in July 2010 that he would retire from public life later that year. His retirement would begin on October 7, 2010, on his seventy-ninth birthday, he said, and he looked forward to spending more time with his family rather than at airports and conferences. Tutu told a media briefing at St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town that the time had come to "slow down, sip Roobios tea with my wife," and "visit children and grandchildren," instead of traveling from convention to conference to university campus. He added he would honor all existing appointments but would not add any new engagements to his schedule.⁷

When I learned that Tutu had set his own perimeters for his retirement, I was relieved to discover the structure of this spiritual biography. Not only did I now have the scope of time to measure his public witness, I was also convinced of how I saw his essential impact on the world through Christian mysticism. My intuition had always been that this book should be in the genre of a spiritual memoir; hence I was happy to learn from John Allen, Tutu's longtime communications director, that John's important biography on Tutu left space for my spiritual biography. Talking to me in a driveway in Stanton, a suburb outside of Johannesburg, John said he was pleased with his book's public reception, but I wanted to find out how he saw my work on Tutu complementing or competing with his own work. John told me that in many ways he ended his own work on the spiritual theme I present here and that more work was essential on

Tutu's spiritual impact. John writes in his epilogue, "Tutu's understanding of an omnipresent spiritual world, in which the ancestors and saints are as much part of one's experience as people now living, helped him to break down the barriers in modern Christianity."⁸ John told me not to worry, that our two works on Tutu should complement each other. John's words in the driveway encouraged me. It was as if I could pick up where he left off. In John's epilogue he writes, "The foundations of Tutu's stature and his moral authority are to be found in his spirituality and his faith. It is in these also that his legacy can most clearly be discerned."⁹

John's genius comes from his journalistic background, as he recounts the historical framework in which Tutu acted. My biography, on the other hand, is more akin to Athanasius's work on the *Life of St. Anthony*, the African saint who founded monasticism. My problem, however, is that the general public does not care about Athanasius or the *Life of St. Anthony*, a work written around the year 356 CE. So why should a spiritual biography matter? I learned from Athanasius that spiritual biographies are just as vital as historical pieces, because they provide a metanarrative of the central character's life and work. This biography of Tutu provides a lens to see what often goes neglected in our own lives, because the spiritual life is hard to see. Even more, the work of reconciliation is hard to perceive, especially if one does not know something needs to be reconciled.¹⁰

METHODOLOGY

As mentioned in the preface, I will display Tutu's spiritual life in this book through the three stages of Christian mysticism: purgation, illumination, and union. This may seem like an odd construct for a political leader like Tutu, but as I try to display in Tutu's life, Christian mysticism is in fact essential in understanding his life. I will show how purgation exemplifies Tutu's formation as an institutional church leader, illumination exemplifies Tutu's role as confessor, and union exemplifies Tutu's elder years as sage. Although this is not a chronological biography, I seek to provide a framework for readers to figure out where in Tutu's life they are. So the ordering of this book follows Tutu's life through his three stages: (1) ordained public ministry (purgation); (2) chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (illumination); and (3) designation as a global Elder and sage (union).

The first part of this book, Purgation, traces Tutu's formation into becoming a complex public figure.¹¹ In this first part I expose the reader to how Tutu becomes a man of intense spirituality. This formation occurs through significant relationships and his formation as a priest of the Anglican Church, which has often been described as the handmaiden of the oppressive system of apartheid. This contradiction between deep spirituality and the institutional church leads to the second part of the book, Illumination, in which I discuss Tutu's ability to act as South Africa's and the world's confessor through the TRC. Lastly, in the third part of the book, Union, I glean from Tutu's role of confessor how

he naturally is unable to retire, due to the church and world's constant need to confess sins and mistakes. This is the period in which I describe Tutu as sage.

So why this threefold division: Purgation, Illumination, and Union? The reason is simple. I think Desmond Tutu is a Christian mystic. As Tutu's life proceeds through purgation, illumination, and union, not only does mysticism describe Tutu's life; it also prepares him to counter apartheid's concept of holiness. These three parts of the ancient Christian practice of Christian mysticism, originating in Dionysius, also display Tutu's maturation in the spiritual life as a saint. Hence my argument that Tutu is both a mystic and a saint.

Mystic and saint become synonymous as the human pilgrim participates more fully in the relationality of God and creation. Tutu becomes a mystic and a saint as he participates in God's holiness that transcends the concept of holiness in apartheid. Evelyn Underhill, an Anglican mystic (1875–1941), in her book *Mysticism* defines mysticism as “the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with transcendental order, whatever be the theological formula under which that order is understood.” She envisions such harmony as union with God, in whose presence human beings become holy. For Underhill, at the end of the day mysticism is practical, not theoretical.¹²

Christian mysticism is often controversial among Protestant sensibilities that envision a contradiction between mysticism and the gospel message of salvation through faith.¹³ This is complicated further by what is described as the negative or iconoclastic theology of Dionysius. Although scholars differ on the true identity of Dionysius, his impact on the discourse of Christian mysticism is unquestioned. He envisioned Christian mysticism as how we move into the life of God without restriction and mediation. This sets the stage for why it may seem strange for some that Tutu is associated with Dionysius and the Christian mystics; however, much of my work on Tutu in the past has made these connections already.

In my other work on Tutu, I received resistance to and disbelief about my premise that Tutu is a mystic. Some felt this could not be true because Tutu was an African freedom fighter, while others felt my take on Tutu was naive and idealistic. My premise of Christian mysticism has yet another obstacle to overcome: Tutu is political. For those who think of Tutu primarily as a political actor on the world's stage, this notion that Tutu is a Christian mystic, a saint, and a political leader may seem impossible to accept. But it will come as no surprise to others that the church is just as political as secular governments. In fact, Tutu in no small part was discovered by a Christian monk, Trevor Huddleston, whose work was deemed just as political as Tutu's.¹⁴ My teenage children often laugh when I inform them that Tutu was discovered by a monk. They joke, “Dad, you'll make Tutu into a superhero, because most superheroes have a monk trainer!”

I base this spiritual biography not upon such comic-book formation of a hero but upon my primary knowledge of Tutu and my research on his life over the years. In 1995, when “biography as theology” was popular, I submitted a chapter of my PhD dissertation on the topic “Archbishop Desmond Tutu's Biography

as Theology.” However, my supervisor at Duke University at the time, Stanley Hauerwas, and I decided to allow the biography to stand on its own. A quarter of a century has passed, and you are now reading the manifestation of this plan—allowing for a more substantial and longitudinal work on Tutu as a distinct text of theological intelligibility in a violent world. During this time, my thinking and writing on Tutu has fermented in such a way as to be manifested in this overarching spiritual biography.

In some ways I understand my kids’ assessment of Tutu as the quintessential hero, as I would pray at dawn and sunset with him. Serving as Tutu’s chaplain in those years, praying, driving, and even jogging with him, I learned not to talk too much, to allow Tutu to be contemplative in the midst of his hectic schedule. I recall one such trip to St. James Church, a white church in Kenilworth, a suburb of Cape Town. The day before, the church had witnessed a massacre, perpetrated by four black members of the Azanian People’s Liberation Army (APLA). Eleven members of the congregation were killed and fifty-eight wounded. Tutu had been called out of morning prayer to make the emergency trip, and as we set off on the journey, I heard him resume his prayers from the back seat. It was at that moment I realized the insight of Tutu’s deep spirituality: the hardest thing for him in the midst of a turbulent world was to keep saying his prayers every day. We all needed such prayer as we approached the driveway of St. James Church.

Again, this may seem strange to those who extrapolate a kind of extroverted political character for Tutu, based on his powerful speeches and defiance against apartheid. Nonetheless, this is who Tutu is—a man of deep prayer influenced deeply by the traditions of Christian mysticism derived from Christian monasticism. It may seem strange for Western educated folks to associate Tutu with such seemingly esoteric speech and Christian mysticism, but we gain further insight from Dionysius as to why Tutu belongs among Christian mystics. The role of a prophet in Christian mysticism is important, as Dionysius explains:

Foolish is my word for those who are attached to knowledge and who love things that can be known and have beginnings: they believe there is nothing supernatural beyond these. They recognize they know him “who has made darkness his dwelling place,” in much the same way as they know themselves. And since, as the *prophet* [my emphasis] says, the divine teaching of these secrets is beyond them, what are we to make of those even more foolish folk, who live not only by their mental powers and their own natural philosophy, but descend lower still, beneath them, and live by those bodily senses they have in common with animals?¹⁵

Tutu agrees as he explicates further the deep call of the prophet. Tutu believes that the prophet is God’s spokesperson. Such a person is not simply a communications officer or a puppet of a ventriloquist; rather, a prophet is made in this threefold mystical way of purgation, illumination, and union. The prophet especially knows the first stage of purgation, as suffering inevitably occurs for prophets. The Christian prophet heeds Jesus’ admonition that unless a person

takes up the cross and follows him, such a person cannot be Jesus' disciple. Suffering is the essence of prophecy.

So how does one know whether God has taken hold of a person to be a prophet? Herein, Christian mysticism becomes all the more important. Since a human being cannot always know what is of God, self, evil, or chance, the process of maturation in the Christian life takes on the three stages of the mystical life. Human beings depend on the metrics of Christian mysticism in which to discern closeness or distance from God; and the church is used to validate such journeys. Tutu speaks to such potential prophets:

Are you ready to speak up boldly, criticizing evil without fear or favor, ready to bear the consequences? Are you ready for the suffering that is almost inevitable—the taunts that you were mixing religion with politics, that you were unpatriotic, the scurrilous attacks on your integrity, on your person and those you love? Are you ready for the sake of God's word to risk detention without trial, banning, deportation and even death? It all sounds melodramatic but look at what happened to Bishop Reeves, to Beyers Naude et al. Are you ready to suffer being unpopular. . . . Do you have a sense of humor not to take yourself seriously remembering whatever the evidence apparently to the contrary, that this is God's world and He is in Charge? If you don't fill this bill, then count out prophecy.¹⁶

For some, it may seem strange that prophecy is somehow involved in Christian mysticism. But if you think about it more closely, it makes sense. Tutu explains further, "Those who would speak must do so out of a personal experience of God borne of a life of prayer, meditation, Bible Reading, retreats, and regular participation in the sacramental life of the church, people for whom the spiritual is absolutely central. They must then proceed to say 'Thus saith the Lord' and speak out of a deep and passionate love for the land and the people."¹⁷

When I was a professor of spirituality and black church studies at Duke University, one of my chief concerns was to bring spirituality together with other kinds of discourse. What this question implied for me was the difficult matter of measuring what it is that I do when I teach and research "spirituality." Am I a dispenser of information? Do I disciple others? Am I a coach, coaxing the less enlightened into maturity? Or am I simply a mentor? Parker Palmer's insight into these matters is helpful as he states,

Then I ask the question that opens to the deeper purpose of this exercise: not "What made your mentor great?" but "What was it about you that allowed great mentoring to happen?" Mentoring is a mutuality that requires more than meeting the right teacher: the teacher must meet the right student. In this encounter, not only are the qualities of the mentor revealed, but the qualities of the student are drawn out in a way that is equally revealing.¹⁸

My answer to making sense of "spirituality" came to me in Palmer's advice. I had to focus on practices of mutuality. The best kinds of spirituality are always

about mutuality. This is why Christian mysticism's threefold process of purification, illumination, and union ends the way it does—finding mutuality with God. From such insight I also focused on Tutu's beautiful concept of Ubuntu theology, in which the goal of human identity is mutuality. It is in this way of being human that Tutu helped to dismantle apartheid. In sum, I make sense of the structure of this book and my own autobiographical context of this biography through how I have been formed to be black in the world while also being focused on Christian spirituality.

In order to understand how my formation is important to understanding the life of my mentor, Tutu, one must also understand two other particular and relational identities: African and Anglican. In my African American identity, I challenge some of the divisions that characterize theological and religious discourse today. One may see this challenge in my books on Tutu or his theology.¹⁹ Tutu's thought is grounded in religious experience in which God creates what is good by creating what is different. Consequently, there is no legitimacy in an apartheid narrative (itself a homogeneous theology) that forms people into believing that otherness, that is, racial difference, is the foundation by which one race may dominate another. As I lived with Tutu, he became my teacher of such insights, and I became his student. I learned from Tutu in the deeper contexts of learning, by being with him. Being is crucial for a theological teacher, because such subject matter cannot be easily measured by the typical empirical standards.

Again, as Tutu would say, such things are caught, not taught. For example, mathematics teachers may observe the progress of their students through how well they reason out a particular formula. In biology, a professor will see the results of a student's lab. In theological/spiritual discourse, however, what results could ever satisfy the quest to know God? Herein is my claim for this biography, that my "being" with Tutu carries a deeper authority in which he produces mutuality between student and teacher—between me and him.

I made this claim once at a conference on teaching and learning, and it was interesting to note the responses to my claim. The primary response was refutation, namely, that the theological teacher should not seek mutuality with a student, because there are necessary dynamics in which certain boundaries are conducive to learning. The further argument against the claim was that to assume the goal of mutuality is to exacerbate hegemonic relationships between teacher and student, especially as the student can never be in an "equal" relationship to the teacher.²⁰ This is a strong refutation that demands a careful response.

What do I mean by mutuality? Frederick Buechner helps me explain my meaning of mutuality through his definition of vocation as "the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."²¹ In the context of a biography written by a student of Tutu, the concept of vocation proposes a kind of mutuality, in which teacher and student's behavior are congruent not only with words and ideas but also with commitments and practices. The theological teacher helps the student see the world differently by learning to see "what is not there." By learning to see "what is not there" in the world, we learn to see

“what should be there.” Besides Mahatma Gandhi, Simone Weil, Martin Luther King Jr., and Mother Teresa, there is no one better suited in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to teach us this lesson than Tutu.

As an African American Christian theologian, I argue that how I continue to see “what is not there” is informed by my commitment to God’s interrelational image of Trinity. From this perspective of God’s mutuality, I practice “what is not there,” namely, my vocation of being African American and Christian. This leads me back to Buechner’s definition of vocation. Those who teach theologically have an opportunity to develop “the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” By Tutu’s being mutual with me as his student, I also facilitate the revelation of Buechner’s concept of vocation to the reader of this biography. This revelation of vocation honors the theological student who innately knows that God is known through vulnerability. This is a counterintuitive process, however, because we often come to mutuality first through conflict and disorientation. We know mutuality by first knowing what it is not. Therefore, to move out of this introduction into part 1 of this book, we do well to see that Tutu’s formation requires his own mentors of mutuality. Tutu’s own formation as a student of other spiritual masters helped him to understand how to go about the impossible task of bringing about the miracle of mutuality in the hostile world of apartheid.²²

How then do I understand myself as a theological teacher in this biography? One can synthesize an answer only through the mutual search for communal ways of knowing. In other words, Tutu’s life and witness are meant for diverse communities. Unfortunately, since Tutu is African and Christian, he is often pitched to limited communities. In the 1980s, conservatives (including conservative Christian leaders) tried to spin the media toward the contradictory image of Tutu as both radical and fake. Jerry Falwell stated, “If Bishop Tutu maintains that he speaks for the black people of South Africa, he’s a phony.”²³ And more radical communities wanting to exact revenge on those benefitting from apartheid claimed that Tutu was a “sell-out.” Tutu being seen in these contradictory ways speaks well to his integrity, to his never giving in to easy solutions that benefit certain groups at the expense of others. Tutu’s life shows us how to do more than charity work. His spiritual formation helped him to discern between charity work and community service. Charity work implies “detached beneficence,” whereas community service conjures up images of doing good deeds in impoverished, disadvantaged communities by those who are wealthier and more privileged.

I hope in this biography to show how Tutu’s mystical sensibilities challenge the perceptions of both community service and charity, replacing them with spiritual and human responsibility in a pluralistic but unequal society. By doing so, community service and charity shift from an individualistic experience into a social responsibility.²⁴ Another quality of genius possessed by Tutu is in his charisma to call individuals to become community. Although descriptions of such community appear to be politically neutral, such practices of becoming

community in a multicultural world demonstrate a deeply political reality. All of this points toward Tutu's spiritual formation. What moves him beyond "charity" work is the intentional and disciplined focus of his spiritual life. Such focus begins with his adoration of Jesus.

Addressing South African Methodists, Tutu said:

Jesus was forever a man of prayer, who sat the spiritual unequivocally at the center of His life, and it is from this vertical relationship with the Father that He drew the resources for His ministry of healing, feeding, preaching and forgiving. We could well say that Jesus was a man for others precisely and only because He was first and foremost a man of God, a man of prayer. If it was so for the Son of God Himself how should it be otherwise for us? He is our paradigm. Our resources can be ultimately only spiritual for we cannot be conformed to the world but must be transformed and have our minds renewed. Our struggle is not just with flesh and blood but against the powers and principalities, with supernatural forces in the heavens so that we must needs put on the whole armor of God as we seek to satisfy the deep longings of the human heart; for a great African saint has said, "Thou hast made us for thyself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee"; as we seek to assure God's children that they are of infinite value in the Father's sight and nothing can change that fundamental fact about themselves; that they don't need to amass material possessions or behave like bullies, throwing their weight around to prove who they are for their value is intrinsic to their being created in God's image; as we seek to assure them of God's forgiveness of their sins, the sins of uprooting millions and dumping them as rubbish in resettlement camps, destroying flimsy, plastic covers under which hapless women crouch . . . for true spirituality is not a form of escapism. Authentic relationship with God is tested and expressed in a loving relationship with neighbor; therefore, the vertical and the horizontal belong together. Christianity knows no false dichotomies. Politics and religion speak of life and all life belongs to God who is Lord of all life. Love of God and love of neighbor are two sides of the same coin, how can you say you love God whom you have not seen when you hate your sister and brother whom you have.²⁵

Although this is a spiritual biography, I aim to provide as much context as possible in the confines of this space and genre. We now turn to an overview of Tutu's life and the beginnings of his church work. Hopefully, this will help ground the reader for what follows, as Tutu faces the challenges of purgation, illumination, and union. I am keeping in mind that many readers will not know the details of apartheid in South Africa. Indeed, many students reading this book will have been born after the movement. So we will begin with a brief and basic historical context in which to understand this spiritual biography.