Tutu's story

By Lawrence Wood in the October 17, 2006 issue

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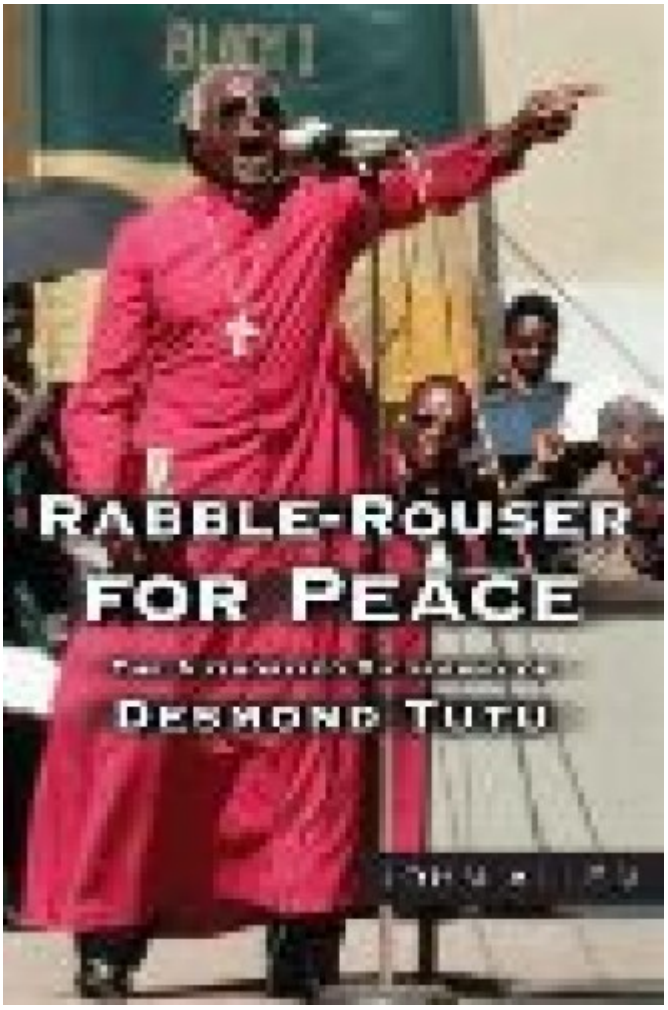

Rabble-Rouser For Peace: The Authorized Biography of Desmond Tutu

John Allen
Free Press

Americans have sometimes seen the campaign against South African apartheid as a reprise of their own civil rights movement. P. W. Botha and other Afrikaners with clipped accents seem to have inherited the Bull Connor role, while the impossibly heroic Nelson Mandela might have emerged from a 27-year stay in a Birmingham jail. But this particular drama had its own mercurial character, in part reflecting the complicated, very human Desmond Tutu.

No one better embodied the contradictory times. Standing all of five foot three, Bishop Tutu could whip a crowd into a frenzy, then insist on nonviolence. He was given to making intemperate remarks and offering breathtaking forgiveness all in the same speech. The title of John Allen's biography captures the seesaw spirit of this "rabble-rouser for peace."

Considering the challenges of the first half of his life, few would have guessed that Tutu would become such a forceful figure. He was lucky to survive childhood: born into near-poverty, sickly from birth, he contracted polio in infancy and then was badly burned. A community of Anglican monks shaped his life, and perhaps saved it—providing hospital care for more than a year as he narrowly survived tuberculosis.

Among the Anglicans, Tutu went from being an indifferent student to a promising one. Unable to afford medical school, he followed his mentor, the activist Trevor Huddleston, into the priesthood. Tutu did not feel particularly called; it just seemed an expedient thing to do. His response to the Sharpeville massacre of 1960, in which police fired on an unarmed crowd, did not suggest his later faith or politics. Being part of "a very apolitical bunch," he felt "a kind of anger at God" at the time, but he never thought of demonstrating against the authorities.

Some questioned Tutu's motives for becoming a priest. He developed a reputation as a spendthrift, which may have come from supporting an extended family, although he also sent his children to private schools. Other priests resented his rapid rise and considered him ambitious.

Huddleston had been right to see Tutu's promise, however, and travels abroad raised Tutu's political consciousness. As a student in England, he experienced such freedom and equality that apartheid could never again seem normal to him. Later, working for the Theological Education Fund of the World Council of Churches, he visited newly independent African nations and noted the pitfalls that South Africa

might someday face. For example, Uganda under Idi Amin Dada had become a madhouse. Tutu's letters from this period are remarkably prescient. He took Islam seriously and saw that Christianity had to address the continent's appalling poverty: "How do you speak about a God who loves you, a redeemer, a saviour, when you live like an animal?" Having absorbed liberation theologians, he moved on to a specifically black theology.

In 1975, as Tutu returned to serve as dean of St. Mary's Cathedral in Johannesburg, the Afrikaner government moved to further disenfranchise millions of blacks. Sensing that the poorest townships could explode, Tutu publicly pleaded, "Please do not provoke us into despair and hopelessness. Please for God's sake." Privately he wrote President John Vorster a long letter of warning:

> Freedom, Sir, is indivisible. The whites of this land will not be free until all sections of our community are genuinely free. . . . I am writing to you, Sir, because I have a growing nightmarish fear that unless something drastic is done very soon then bloodshed and violence are going to happen in South Africa almost inevitably.

Within six weeks, the Soweto uprising began almost literally on Tutu's doorstep.

Tutu faced a difficult balancing act: voicing black discontent while leading a largely white parish. Alternately charming and challenging them, he appealed to their Afrikaner heritage, recalling that their forebears had endured British concentration camps. Somewhat to the bewilderment of other black leaders, he patiently courted Vorster's successor, P. W. Botha, explaining that even Moses continued to reason with Pharaoh. But white liberals grew nervous when Tutu called for a boycott of South African products.

What scared whites most about Tutu was that he would not renounce armed struggle. The use of violence was, of course, a desperate measure—but blacks, he said, were desperate. Tutu professed himself "flabbergasted at how most of the Western world turned pacifist all of a sudden. The same Western world lauded to the skies the underground resistance movements during the last world war."

The farther Tutu waded into the fight, the braver he became, especially after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984. (From what Allen has learned, the Nobel committee selected Tutu because he was "less controversial" than some other South African candidates. State broadcasters thought otherwise and gave his award

little mention.) Believing victory against apartheid to be inevitable, he also spoke against black violence—even threatening to leave the country should it get out of hand.

Tutu's nature at times might have seemed contradictory, but Allen says,

> Tutu the ebullient extrovert and Tutu the meditative priest who needed six or seven hours a day in silence were two sides of the same coin. One could not exist without the other; in particular, his extraordinary capacity to communicate with warmth, compassion, and humor depended on the regeneration of personal resources, which in turn depended on the iron self-discipline of his prayers.

Perhaps. Compared to, say, Mandela, Tutu was anything but disciplined. "If the Russians were to come to South Africa today then most blacks who reject communism as atheistic and materialistic would welcome them as saviours," he declared. After standing up to Botha in a shouting match, he admitted, "I don't know whether that is how Jesus would have handled it. But at that moment I didn't actually quite mind how Jesus would have handled it. I was going to handle it my way." He flatly called Ronald Reagan a racist, and fired this off for good measure: "I am quite angry. I think the West, for my part, can go to hell."

Such bluster made it possible for people to miss that he was right about so many things—disinvestment, for example. Even if disinvestment threw blacks out of work, Tutu argued, at least they would be suffering "with a purpose." And disinvestment did succeed, causing the value of the Rand to plunge and pressuring the government toward reform. Operating by intuition rather than calculation, Tutu knew when it was safe to press an advantage. Never were his instincts better than in September 1989, when F. W. deKlerk took office. Without consulting other leaders or obtaining legal permission, Tutu called for a march. Thirty thousand people filled the streets of Cape Town, and peaceful protests broke out all over the country. That was the turning point: within months, Mandela was freed from prison, and apartheid was beginning to crumble.

Allen was Tutu's media secretary and has known the archbishop for 30 years. One might have expected a tame, worshipful "authorized" biography of South Africa's black Anglican archbishop (now emeritus), but this one really captures a full man. Heavily researched and benefiting from Allen's long experience as a journalist, it will

probably remain definitive.

The book’s most fascinating chapters tell of Tutu’s work with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, to which Allen was an eyewitness. Believing that apartheid had damaged whites as well as blacks, Tutu put the nation on a very Christian path toward repentance, restitution and forgiveness. “There is no future without forgiveness,” he insisted. Some proud figures, such as Botha and deKlerk, did not want forgiveness, and others, such as Winnie Mandela, offered only slender apologies. But Tutu’s commission went a long way toward reestablishing *ubuntu-botho*, or humaneness, in South Africa.

Tutu has not shied away from other contentious issues. Allen notes Tutu’s support for homosexuals, AIDS patients and Palestinians—all victims of apartheid, he says.

Allen tells one of the great chapters in our faith, one that we may not have fully appreciated until now. An unlikely prophet, Desmond Tutu brought the Christian gospel into a real world of slums, pass laws, detentions and deferred hopes. He merits the highest praise anyone can give a mere human being: he made the gospel come alive.