Harsh politics, extravagant forgiveness: No Future Without Forgiveness.ByDesmond Mpilo Tutu.Doubleday, 244 pp., $22.95.

by Sarah Ruden in the July 5, 2000 issue

No Future Without Forgiveness, by Desmond Mpilo Tut

As the Archbishop of the Anglican Church in South Africa, Desmond Tutu was the leading international spokesman against apartheid and the natural choice to head that country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. His deeply sincere book gives an indispensable view of what the TRC was about, spiritually and ideologically.

His moving personal narrative arches over the many narratives that made up the TRC testimony. But for the sake of future human rights efforts, we must try to see beyond the giant charm of this tiny man and separate the achievements of the TRC from his advocacy of it.

The "healing of memories" through narrative is a widely popular theory among activists in the aftermath of apartheid. The dominant psychoanalytic school in South Africa has long been the Jungian, with its forthright links to art and mysticism. Ritual reenactment of trauma is now the officially favored method for dealing with the past. Reenactment must take place in safety; hence, according to the TRC's architects, the commission had to guarantee amnesty for confessed crimes. Narrative, it is thought, has a cleansing and restoring quality that leads to inner peace, to peace between individuals, and ultimately to national reconciliation. Tutu is a strong subscriber to this idea.

Those sympathetic to the narrative approach could find support in the results of the TRC. Frequently widows and bereaved parents expressed satisfaction at hearing what had happened or visiting a crime scene or a grave site. Survivors sometimes publicly embraced their loved one's killers after such revelations. An unsolved crime

has a way of preventing those left behind from getting on with their lives, and South Africa does not have the resources to solve even a tenth of the crimes committed under apartheid. Bringing to light a group of them was an accomplishment in itself.

Offenders found some relief in their confessions. Not that any serious offender was eager to appear. It was a common tactic to hang back and let one's lawyer determine whether enough evidence of a crime existed for a criminal prosecution, and then, if it did, to confess. If nothing else, perpetrators demonstrated a sort of justice by telling how their own lives were gradually eaten hollow by broken marriages, depression and drug and alcohol addiction. Tutu gives numerous examples of the benefits the TRC brought to both perpetrators and victims.

But was the TRC meant to address actual human rights violations, or just subjective feelings about human rights violations? Memories are not the chief cause of the suffering of most of the victims of apartheid violence. Many of them are disabled and cannot afford physical therapy and job training, or they have been left destitute by the killing of the family's breadwinner, or they need long-term psychiatric treatment and social and spiritual support to mitigate what was done to them. They remember it well, and can talk about it. They need to rebuild the close and trusting relationships by which human beings recognize themselves as human.

Many of the victims who testified at the TRC have become bitter. Isolated and impoverished, these witnesses believed that they were taking the first step in a process that would reintegrate them into society. But no one has yet received more than a few hundred U.S. dollars worth of reparations, enough for an artificial limb but no medical follow-up, or for a couple of months of groceries for a small family. "We were put on display and then abandoned" is a frequent complaint.

The accusers know that they are largely disregarded in the political process, and their rage has been increased by their helplessness. Any rationale for their treatment is unlikely to be challenged at high levels. TRC's functions satisfied every powerful group in the country. The white Nationalist government gave up power peacefully only on the condition that its members not be punished for apartheid crimes, and the African National Congress welcomed impunity because, though its cause was right, its methods were no better than the government's. They were less widely implemented only because the ANC's resources were scantier.

The extent of the TRC's concession now looks breathtaking. The TRC guarantees pardon for any confessed crime "associated with a political objective." That is, the perpetrators have only to convince the commission that politics was somehow on their minds when they committed their crimes. And they can keep any material gains, since their pardon includes immunity from civil suits.

What some individuals were able to get away with under apartheid is becoming clear in the trial of Wouter Basson, who was in charge of the government's biological and chemical weapons program. Because Basson refused to cooperate with the TRC, he is being held criminally liable for dozens of murders, genocidal schemes and tens of millions of dollars diverted into private companies. If he had confessed it all, he could legally continue to enjoy the profits, since his political motive is undeniable: anyone who plots to sterilize millions of black women is nothing if not an active racist.

As for the the ANC's crimes, the TRC did not even exact an account of the ANC's strategy and directives (as it did—if a bit fecklessly—from apartheid's leaders). All it did was to pardon low-level operatives who had engaged in kidnappings, torture, bombings, extortion and massacres. When Winnie Madikizela-Mandela appeared before the commission, it could not ignore her felony conviction and the eyewitness accounts of other wrongdoing, but the commissioners were terrified of her. She was allowed to appear as a special category of human rights witness, neither confessing anything nor making any accusations of her own—except for sneering at witnesses, whom she apparently regarded as stupid, mentally ill or liars. It ended with Tutu flattering her and pleading with her to admit that "things went wrong," which she at last grudgingly did.

From certain angles, the TRC process can look like the mere sanctification of a transfer of power that serves the interests only of those who were already powerful: the white government, white economic interests, and an antigovernment movement that enjoyed international support and was already effectively ruling black areas. I sense something sinister in the emphasis on "healing" selected individuals, which isolates responsibility in them and their healers. In addition to the clergymen on the commission, who have had training in counseling, several commissioners had backgrounds in medicine or psychology. (The lawyers formed their own unhappy opinion bloc.) Tutu stated that the main purpose of the TRC was for everyone to feel the right way—in a wider sense, for the whole nation to forgive—and he presented this view to the public in the uncompromisingly theological terms summarized in his

book.

Tutu argues, as do many others, that the new dispensation, including the TRC, is a heaven-sent salvation from civil war. The “Mandela miracle” has rightly impressed the whole world. But many who did not benefit from it must feel, in the routine horror of the townships, as if they are locked behind the backdrop of an extravagant play. They might say that at least during a war someone strong is on your side, and that at least war ends. Citizens need to feel the law as a transcendent and benign presence, as it is in many countries, and as it was in tribal Africa. This feeling can come only when evil acts have consequences.

Sufficient reparations alone could have achieved this, delivering the redress promised by law to those forced to give up their legal rights for what was claimed to be the common good. But any further reparations given will likely be in laughable amounts. This is not the TRC’s fault—though perhaps the commissioners should not have agreed in the first place to serve on a body without discretion on this point. Though the TRC was asked to advise on reparations, the government must provide the money.

Piet Meiring, a clergyman who served on the Reparations Committee and wrote his own book (*Chronicle of the Truth Commission*, Carpe Diem, 1999), describes the process of determining what reparations were due. He and his colleagues felt that each victim should get $3,600 a year for six years. (He quotes from the deliberations the opinion that this would provide “a fairly normal life,” but that is not the case: a South African nurse or schoolteacher earns three times this amount, but cannot on her own give her family a middle-class lifestyle.) The total sum looked large, but one commissioner reminded her colleagues that it was only .25 percent of the government’s annual budget, and an unbelievable bargain compared to the lawsuits the TRC prevented.

The government refused to make the appropriation. Tutu says he was disappointed at this. He should have thrown a fit. His considerable international prestige would have brought some results, if only in the form of private fund-raising efforts toward meaningful compensation. In view of this failure to act in the interest of the weak, even the best passages in this book smack of an unjustified cheerfulness. His invitation to examine the political meaning of Christianity is engaging, and his retelling of biblical stories and use of anecdotes—he is a master preacher—are winning. But what good is even the most beautiful preaching if in practice its stern

messages turn out to be only for the poor and its reassurances only for the rich?

There are many likely causes, including his illness from prostate cancer, for the diminished impressiveness of Tutu's recent activities and of this latest book. But his response to the Gospels needs in the end to stand on its own, and in this case it does seem oversimplified. He cites the brother one must forgive 70 times seven (Matt. 18:22) but ignores one vital element: the brother must humbly ask for forgiveness. Such a request is why the king in the parable that follows that passage forgives a servant's debt ("I forgave you all that debt because you besought me," 18:32) while, presumably, collecting the debts owed by other servants. Adequate contrition has to include an explanation and any possible compensation.

The theories of "restorative justice" beginning to circulate in South Africa suggest a recognition of these constraints and benefits. If forgiveness is a good thing, it must be made easier, not harder. Parents struggling to forgive their child's murderer will probably never be able to do so if he is living placidly next door and driving his victim's bloodstained car. Rendering unto Caesar is a religious command for just this reason: the human condition has to be dealt with on its own terms to create a foundation for spirituality.

Those able to set spiritual examples and give spiritual advice with the least hypocrisy are often extraordinary people. Their advice commonly does not take the capacities of ordinary people into account. Tutu is himself a master of forgiveness. The insults and harassment he endured under apartheid—including finding a baboon fetus hung up in his garden—would have leveled an average person. But in the postapartheid era he speaks not mainly to leaders like himself, but to the average people who are now in charge of the nation's future. And to the degree that he speaks to leaders, he cannot persuade them of anything their constituents would forthrightly reject.

In a moving passage, Tutu describes a visit to Rwanda after the 1994 massacre of a million Tutsis. The mostly Hutu perpetrators may spend decades in prison, in inhuman conditions, while the genocide trials grind ahead. Tutu recommended mercy to prevent future waves of retribution, but the government rebuffed him. Jesus had declared that the devil could not be forgiven, said Rwanda's president. Did the president mean that certain degrees of evil were beyond his ability to contemplate, although his contemplation was wide enough to embrace Jesus, an all-powerful, benevolent divinity? Or was his point that, since the devil insists on separation from God, no purpose can be served by forgiving the devil? Or perhaps

the remark was a mere evasion, a way of saying politely to a prominent churchman that Africans desperately need to end the culture of impunity.