

Archbishop Desmond Tutu: Why is his legacy still relevant today?

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On December 26th, 2021, South African Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu passed away. We all know who Desmond Tutu was. An apartheid opposer and human-rights activist, Archbishop Tutu was one of the members and supporters of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs), which were established in 1995 to facilitate the healing and 'rebuilding' of South African society in the post-apartheid era. TRCs are a form of what is known as *restorative justice*.

Restorative justice as a concept is based on the idea of reconciliation between an individual who committed a crime and the rest of society that suffers from the consequence(s) of that crime (Della Porta 1992, 167). This stands in contrast with the concept of *retributive justice*, which envisages that those breaching law have to be sentenced to a punishment proportionate to the law violation that they committed (Zedner 2011; von Hirsch and Maher 2008). It lies at the base of most, if not, every, legal system.

This short piece does not provide the right space to explore and discuss the multifaceted concept of restorative justice and its implications for society. Nor does this allow for a comparative evaluation between restorative justice and retributive justice. These would require separate and longer works, which I hope to contribute sometime in the next months.

I, however, intend to draw attention to one particular element that characterised Archbishop Tutu's commitment to restorative justice, as well as the very concept of restorative justice itself: *ubuntu* (Bertagna, Ceretti, and Mazzucato 2015, 249).

This word comes from Nguni-bantu languages in Africa, and it is difficult to translate it into Western languages (ibid.). It refers to the humanity of a person in relation to others. That is, it stresses individuals' openness to and friendliness with one another and it understands individuals' humanity as "inextricably connected to" (ibid.) each other; that is, "my humanity [...] exists concurrently with yours" (ibid.).

The concept of ubuntu is relevant and key for our societies and for our time. It is so because it offers a very different way of looking at and understanding individuals as human beings and the world as a whole, revealing new ways of addressing socio-political issues.

One of the ways that Archbishop Tutu used to explain what ubuntu means is as follows:

“[...] A person is such only through other people [...]. We don't conceive ourselves as in '*I think therefore I am*' (*Cogito ergo sum*), but rather 'I am human because I belong, I participate, and I share'”.
(Bertagna, Ceretti, and Mazzucato 2015, 249).

I think that this is of particular note. The concept of ubuntu considers one person's “humanity as inextricably connected to [another's]” (ibid.). Therefore, it stresses the *unity* of people rather than division. If divided, people's humanity, that is, our very essence as human beings, would be somewhat incomplete.

Under this perspective, it is not difficult to see why after apartheid, South Africa opted for the TRCs as the main tool to build a new and post-conflict society. People needed to reconnect with each other; they all had to find themselves (again) and this could only be done through reconciliation with each other. This is a crucial point.

This is the case because the aim of reconciliation is not to find culprit(s) to punish. This pertains the sphere of retributive justice, where people violating the law are punished according to the violation they have committed. Reconciliation, which belongs to the domain of restorative justice, neither punishes nor establishes who is right and who is not. It seeks to reconnect people with each other, rather than pitting them against one another. This is the reason why this article posits that the concept of ubuntu, and Archbishop Tutu's legacy more generally, is relevant for our societies today.

We claim that such societies as the 'Western' ones, where violent conflicts are not present, are different from those in worn-torn countries or with a history of conflict and discrimination. Yet, observing more closely, we would realise that this is not the case. Our societies are divided into many groups, to which we assign labels corresponding to specific characteristics. These groups range from ethnic and religious to political and social ones, and new ones keep arising according to the issue/crisis we face.

The saddest element in all of this is not the groups themselves. Groups' differences are per se enriching. Rather, it is the fact that making distinction between groups serves the ultimate purpose of establishing what/who is and can be accepted and what/who is not and cannot be accepted. It serves the purpose of defining *good* and *bad*, although we know that when conflicts arise, *right* and *wrong*, *good* and *bad* never lie exclusively on one side (e.g. see Rosenberg 2015; 2003; Fisher, Ury, and Patton 2011; Sclavi 2008a; 2003; Gilligan 2001).

Therefore, Archbishop Tutu's legacy sits on going beyond the very limiting right-and-wrong approach, focussing instead on individuals' shared humanity by forming and nurturing relations with

others (see also Moro and Faranda 2017; Bertagna, Ceretti, and Mazzucato 2015). South Africa's experience with TRCs, as well as other examples of reconciliation between perpetrators and victims (Bertagna, Ceretti, and Mazzucato 2015)¹, tells us that it is in the continuous effort of (re-)creating bonds between people that a united and peaceful society can thrive.

Surely, it may be pointed out that each case is different and that each case requires ad hoc measures as what works for someone does not necessarily work for someone else. This is definitely true, as the one-size-fits-all approach can, in fact, be damaging and counterproductive. However, academics and practitioners also know that a single-case study can still help us learn something about other (similar) cases.

For instance, in one of their latest works on engagement in political violence in Northern Ireland, Ferguson and McAuley (2020, 227) state that although each (conflict) case is unique and it is not always easy neither possible to generalise findings, they can still tell us something about other (conflict) cases.

Similarly, in his introduction to methods in comparative politics, Landman (2008, 28–29) wrote that despite being weaker vis-à-vis generalisability, single-case studies can be deemed as comparative “if [they] use concepts that are applicable to other [cases], develop concepts that are applicable to other [cases], and/or seek to make larger inferences that stretch beyond the original [case] used in the study” (ibid., 28).

Furthermore, some studies in sociopsychology and socio-anthropology, as well as those building on the so-called *need theory*, have observed that despite differences across peoples, cultures, and individuals, fundamental physical and psychological needs (e.g. air, food, protection, community, love, among others) are universal (e.g. see Rosenberg 2015; 2005; Hogg 2014; Rosenberg 2003; Sclavi 2008b; 2003; Gilligan 2001; Burton 1979).

Therefore, in conclusion, this short think piece intends to push readers to reflect more on what the concept of ubuntu and the various experiences of post-conflict and post-violence reconciliation can tell us about our society and its problems. It means to invite readers to do so even if at a first sight cases might appear so different to not be applicable to others. Praising the admirable work and commitment to peace of such important figures as Archbishop Desmond Tutu risks to merely pay lip

¹ Another very good, but unfortunately, almost unknown example is an Italian case of reconciliation. Between the late 1960s and the mid-/end of the 1980s, Italy experienced political violence perpetrated by armed organisations from the far-Right and the far-Left. In the late 2000s, some processes of reconciliation between a group of mostly former far-Left militants and a group of victims began. As said, this case is almost unknown, particularly in the English speaking academic world. This is also due to the fact that most material concerning this case is exclusively in Italian. For non-Italian speakers the following could be a good short piece on this interesting case (Ragazzi 2016). For those understanding Italian, see e.g. (Ferrandi 2020; Franceschini 2020; Bonisoli 2018a; Fasanella and Franceschini 2018; Bonisoli 2018b; Moro and Faranda 2017; Bertagna, Ceretti, and Mazzucato 2015).

service if words are not followed by concrete actions. If actions follow words with the aim of better understanding whether a given experience can help reduce the likelihood of similar (re-)occurrences there and elsewhere, then we will be able to claim to have learnt something.



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