

Comparison of the Theological Methods of the South African
Theologians, Desmond Tutu and Itumeleng Mosala. Jason John.

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Tutor: Andrew Dutney approx. 3,200 words.

Introduction

Archbishop Dr. Desmond Tutu and Reverend Dr. Itumeleng Mosala are two South African ^{black} Negro theologians. Both lived through the apartheid (race separation) policies of the National Afrikaner government, and the oppression and violence which accompanied it¹.

This commonality is in no way reflected in their theology. This essay contrasts their theological aims and starting points, then compares their attitude to, and use of several theological "tools." The essay concludes with a tentative assessment and prediction of the effectiveness of their theology.

¹ I am not suggesting that apartheid is solely responsible for the oppression and violence in South Africa, but some of its key policies (forced relocation of people, banning of mixed marriages or mixed worship services etc.) are particularly stark examples of the legal justification of an pre-existing racist ideology in South Africa.

Aims

Tutu's ideal is a democratic and just society, where the diversity of races and sexes is seen as a positive, enriching asset, not a cause for separation and division². Blacks³ and Whites will realise that God loves them all, restoring the Blacks' self-image and freeing Whites from the fear of Black retribution. Tutu's focus, then, is on the need for the ~~abolishment~~^{ban} of racism, and specifically apartheid in South Africa.

Mosala acknowledges the racism in South Africa, but this is not his primary concern. Class status, not race, determines whether one is an oppressor or oppressed. His ideal society is classless, where all are able to support themselves and are free from fear of war and manipulation by the elite⁴. His focus is on the abolishment of capitalism and the liberation of working class Blacks.

Starting Point

Where do Tutu and Mosala start in their quest for the above societies, and where do they draw their justification for seeing such societies as the ideal?

² S. Maimela, "Archbishop Desmond Mpilo Tutu A Revolutionary Political Priest or a Man of Peace?" in B. Tlhagala & I. Mosala, eds, *Hammering Swords into Ploughshares Essays in honour of Archbishop Mpilo Desmond Tutu*, p. 53.

³ There are dozens of native African tribes. "Black" is, however, a useful grouping, and I am following Tutu and Mosala's convention.

⁴ I. Mosala, "Ethics of Economic Principles: Church and Secular Investments.", in Tlhagala & Mosala, p128

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"In the beginning God..." It is God's love for all people that motivates Tutu. His theology is consistently theocentric, he seeks to put into practice God's desire for the world. The ministry of Jesus and the imagery of Christians as the body of Christ underlies Tutu's view of the Christian response. At creation, God signalled His desire to live in communion with us, and for us to live with each other. The creation was good, but people are very good.

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Mosala, conversely, starts with humanity. Mosala looks at the oppression of working class Blacks in South Africa, and their material conditions, then seeks to find a means of liberating them. Mosala does not, as do other liberation theologians⁵, seek to determine what God is saying into the situation. At least, if he does, he is silent on the matter. God appears to play a less than peripheral part in Mosala's theology⁶.

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Theological Tools

The Bible

Tutu draws his inspiration from God's desire for South Africa, but how does he know what that is? How do both authors see and use the Bible?

⁵ For example Asian Women theologians (C.H. Kyung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again* Introducing Asian Women's Theology, P. 107).

⁶ I have sent a fax to Mosala asking him, among other things, to tell me a little of what he sees God's role in South Africa being. I haven't yet received a reply.

I hope you are ...

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Tutu believes that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, constructed in the JEDP⁷ tradition. The Bible is not therefore simply dictated by God, but the thoughts contained within it, especially considering their origin, show that God's thoughts must underlie it. For example, speaking of the construction of the creation account during exile,

I think one of the proofs that the Bible is inspired is such facts as "P" declaring that all the wonderful things (God) has said apply not only to the Jews, but, wonderfully, to all men and women⁸.

He is a "biblical theologian," where biblical theology is a theology based on the Bible, describing and clarifying themes found in it, rather than a theology based on philosophical ideas and religious traditions⁹. Tutu is largely a contextualist, applying the Biblical ^{witness} as they stand to the situation of the Black oppressed and White oppressors in South Africa, particularly by comparing the teachings and practices of apartheid with those of the Bible. To Tutu, the Bible is fundamentally and consistently anti-oppression and anti-separation, and therefore apartheid is anti-biblical, heretical and evil,

⁷ Yahwehist, Elohim, Deuteronomic, Priestly; as described, for example, in C. Biggs & A. Catlin, chap. 3.

⁸ D. Tutu, *Hope and Suffering*, p. 66.

⁹ *New Dictionary of Theology* and *A Dictionary of Christian Theology*, s.v. "Biblical theology", and B. Goba, "A Theological tribute to Archbishop Tutu" in Tlhagala & Mosala, p. 63.

*The Bible says God's intention for humankind and for His entire universe is harmony, peace, justice, wholeness, fellowship¹⁰... Christianity and apartheid are totally incompatible¹¹... *Apartheid is totally evil, unbiblical and unchristian¹²...* My passionate opposition to apartheid stems from my understanding of the Bible¹³... (My opposition) has nothing to do with a political or any other ideology... (it) is *based firmly and squarely on the Bible¹⁴* [Italics mine].*

Given that God inspired the Bible, Tutu's hermeneutical starting point is that the Bible reveals that God loves us all, but God is biased, siding with the oppressed, in South Africa He sides against Apartheid, which is oppressing Blacks and (less obviously) Whites¹⁵. The Bible is a revolutionary book, written by the oppressed, for the oppressed¹⁶

Some of his hermeneutical questions then, have been, "Who are we, and why did God create us? Whose side is He on? What does He think of Apartheid? Can you be Christian and Black? Is God Black or White?¹⁷."

¹⁰ D. Tutu, "Christianity and Apartheid" in Degruchy & Villa-Vicencio, eds, *Apartheid is a Heresy*, p. 41.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 28.

¹² Maimela, p. 51.

¹³ D. Tutu, "Why we Must Oppose Apartheid" in N. Tutu, *The Words of Desmond Tutu*, p. 27.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 33.

¹⁵ E.g. B. Goba, p. 61; D. Tutu, Address given at NCYC, tape 1; and D. Tutu, "Grace upon Grace." *Journal for Preachers*, vol. 15, 1991, p. 21.

¹⁶ S. Maimela, p. 50.

¹⁷ D. Tutu, "God Intervening in Human Affairs", *Missionalia*, vol. 5, p. 115.

Mosala rejects Tutu's approach to the Bible, "(Tutu) also fails to identify the oppressor in the text.¹⁸" Mosala rejects "Biblical theology," since the Bible is a patchwork of different contradictory traditions, some pro-liberation, others pro-oppression. Despite the patchwork nature, the Bible is primarily constructed to justify the practices of the oppressors and exploiters who compiled it¹⁹. The Bible is not the word of God, but an ideological justification of oppression, with some liberating elements included, "Black theologians are correct in detecting *glimpses of liberation... in the biblical text*²⁰."

Mosala calls for a historical-materialist hermeneutics. Unfortunately he does not define exactly what he means by this, but recalling his Marxist roots and considering his hermeneutical examples, he presumably means that hermeneutics must be preceded by uncovering the history of the Israelite social structure. Uncovering the material and social conditions of the community allows the reader to free the texts from their oppressive orientation, and see how to use them on the side of liberation.

For example, after determining the social structure of Israel at the time Micah was written, Mosala proposes three classes who have contributed to the book. The original working class prophet had his specific condemnations of the elite edited into general moral principles by the working

¹⁸ I. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa*, p. 37.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 41; I. Mosala, "Ethics...", p. 120.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 40.

class scribes, before the elite compiled the text, adding messianic expectations of their liberation from the other nations and future rule over them²¹.

Historic materialism, then, is not concerned with how God has moved through history to reveal himself to people, but how the elite and middle class hijacked prophetic working class cries for justice, compiling the scriptures to justify their oppressive ideology and maintain the *status quo* within the Israelite community, redirecting the liberation to a nationalistic, rather than class oriented one.

Historic Materialism is a general starting point. The specific starting point for Mosala's hermeneutics is, "Struggle"²², in the context of "The social, cultural, political, and economic world of the Black working class and peasantry²³." This struggle is the lens through which to view the biblical texts, keeping in mind the historic-materialist theory of their construction.

The hermeneutical question, then, is "What ancient struggles do the contemporary struggles of Blacks uncover hidden in this text? What practices are the ruling class trying to justify by writing them?" Mosala's answers these questions through an anthropocentric, not theocentric lens. Indeed, "The biblical texts witness to the fact that there are many Gods²⁴," so referring to God's will is useless.

²¹ I. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics*..., p. 101-153.

²² E.g. Ibid, p. 32,99.

²³ Ibid, p. 21.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 28.

since there are so many versions of what that is.

Theological Tradition

The authors' attitude towards "Western" hermeneutics is, not surprisingly, reflected in their attitude to the Western theological tradition as a whole.

Tutu accepts the valid contribution of Western theologians to South Africa, but states that "Our curricula, the subject content, our worship, our life style, our theologising, our expressions of ... the Gospel - all these have been and continue to be in largely Western terms.²⁵" He complains that, "We have had to be circumcised into Westerners first before we could be Christianised,²⁶" and that Black theologians are incapable of meeting the real needs of Africans because of their dependance on a theology created in the West. Tutu calls for Black theologians to, engage in the more demanding, but infinitely more rewarding task of creating a theology uniquely African ... looking to our own spiritual and cultural resources, to our own value systems²⁷.

Whilst Tutu appreciates the past contributions of Western theology, and wants to maintain fellowship and dialogue with "White" theology, he refuses to wait for their permission to develop a self-sufficient Black theology for South Africa²⁸.

²⁵ D. Tutu, "Whither Theological Education?" *Theological Education*, vol. 9, 1973, p. 269.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 270.

²⁷ Ibid, pp. 270,271.

²⁸ D. Tutu, "God Intervening in Human Affairs", p. 115

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Mosala, as expected, is less sympathetic towards Western theology. He commends Methodism for teaching that all people, rich and poor, are valuable and loved by God. It is, however, still enslaved to the middle-class mentality, and therefore fails to be truly liberating. Methodism's only hope of being relevant is to "Relocate ideologically" and "Commit class suicide" by rejecting capitalism as evil²⁹. Mosala does not reject Methodism³⁰ solely because it is Western, but because most Methodists support capitalism and exploitation. It seems that he hopes dialogue with Black theology will set Western theology free from this, and enable it to become relevant and liberating. Theology that insists on supporting capitalism must, I assume, ultimately be rejected and ex-communicated from Mosala's Black theology.

Politics

Now that the church is independent of the state authorities in many countries, it is often said that the church should not meddle in politics³¹. Many areas of theology are easily separated from politics, such as Christology, Trinity studies and Sacraments. Liberation theologies, however, of necessity engage in politics. How have Tutu and Mosala used the political stage?

²⁹ I. Mosala, "Wesley read from the Experience of Social and Political Deprivation in South Africa", *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, vol. 68, 1989, p. 90.

³⁰ Or presumably Western theology in general.

³¹ For example the recent controversy over the Catholics' criticism of the Opposition's economic rationalism policy expounded in "Fightback".

Tutu has often been accused of being politically motivated, especially by the government and conservative Whites. He denies this, claiming that "It is not political philosophy... but the Gospel of Jesus Christ (that causes him to) castigate apartheid as evil and immoral in an absolute sense³²." Since he believes apartheid to be evil, and his role as a Christian to oppose and prophesy against evil, there must be a political element to his theology.

Tutu recognises that international political economic pressure is a useful tool to change a government's mind, leading him to eventually (and reluctantly) call for the imposition of economic sanctions and disinvestment against South Africa³³. He appears to have been vindicated in this, since outside observers have claimed that trade sanctions have been a key element in bringing the government to the negotiating table³⁴.

Despite Tutu's label as a subversive radical by the government, his politics are still conservative by Western standards, in that he supports a democratically elected government. He is silent on matters of capitalism versus other political structures, and one might be suspicious that this is to avoid alienating the Western powers, whose support

³² S. Maimela, p. 52.

³³ For a particularly amusing example see, D. Tutu, "South Africa's blacks: Aliens in their own land", *Christianity and Crisis*, November 26, 1984, p. 442.

See also, D. Tutu, "Wall of Fire", *Trinity Seminary Review*, vol. 7, no.1 1985.

³⁴ J. Davis, "South Africa: How far to democracy?" *Christianity and Crisis*, May 11, 1992, p. 148.

might quickly be withdrawn from an anti-capitalist. Tutu is certainly not ideologically communist³⁵, but there are veiled references to a fundamental rejection of Western policy.

We don't value people for who they are, but for what they do... You don't need to amass all of these material possessions. They are good, but they are not what invests you with worth... Go forth and behave like (a child of God)... so that the kingdoms of this world become as a kingdom of our God³⁶.

We... have been obscenely exploited by the West and consequently we have been placed in a position of unending pauperism and underdevelopment... We have been trying to catch up with the West... We have accepted... its values... all too uncritically... Even if it would be possible to catch up with the West, is this in fact a worthwhile pursuit³⁷?

We accept to easily government propoganda about communism, etc. Have we thought for ourselves, "What is communism?" What has happened to dissent in this country?³⁸

While not explicitly rejecting the capitalism (or "Free" enterprise) of the West, there is clearly an immanent escatological hope, and an ill-defined political economic system beyond the greed traditionally associated with capitalism. One thing is clear, God is at work in politics, at work in sanctions, and in all the global political happenings of the world, and He will be victorious. The government must remember that, "You are not God. You may be powerful, but you are mortal. Beware when you take on the church of God... many others have tried it and ended

³⁵ S. Maimela, p. 51.

³⁶ D. Tutu, "Grace upon Grace.", pp 20-23.

³⁷ D. Tutu, "Whither Theological Education?". p. 269.

³⁸ D. Tutu, *Hope and Suffering*, p. 67.

ignominiously³⁹."

Mosala obviously rejects capitalism and capitalistic politics. The oppressed working class must be liberated, but unfortunately he doesn't say how this will be achieved. There is no sense of it being through the inauguration of God's kingdom on earth, or God working in people's hearts to bring about reconciliation. At the same time there is no open call for rebellion, except perhaps implicitly in his vocabulary, where for example Black theology is a prime "Weapon for struggle"⁴⁰. Exactly how this weapon should be used on a practical level is unclear. Mosala does not sanction replacing capitalism with communism, since he suspects that many of the communists in South Africa are as racist and exploitative of the blacks as the capitalists⁴¹. There appears to be an implicit call for a grass-roots upsurge, possibly violently, to overthrow the present system. I hope that some solid plans for restructuring and action will come from Mosala in the next two years⁴². God's role in politics and world events is not considered in what I have of Mosala's works.

The Church: Corporate and Individual

The Church is the body of Christ, called to continue His

³⁹ D. Tutu, Sermon delivered at St. Georges Cathedral, 1987, in N. Tutu, p. 29.

⁴⁰ I. Mosala, "Wesley...", p. 90; I. Mosala, "Ethics...", p128, and throughout *Biblical Hermeneutics...*

⁴¹ I. Mosala, "Wesley...", p. 90.

⁴² Mosala is on Sabbatical in the U.K. until 1994.

work on earth. Individual Christians are part of the body, called to share in Christ's sufferings for the gospel. These are two recurring themes of Tutu's view of the church. If we are true Christians, faithful to Christ's commission then we must prophesy against evil things like apartheid, and we must be willing to suffer⁴³.

Since Christ identified with the poor, the church must do likewise, caring for them, healing them, and condemning those who oppress them. Since Christ died for what he did, we should not be surprised if Christians die when the church does as it should. The church, corporate and individual, is one tool for God to work through, it is His hands in the world. While only part of the church is in South Africa, the rest of the church supports it, especially through prayer. Again, the church of God cannot be overcome from without, its biggest threat is complacency and submission to the *status quo*.

Interestingly, given Mosala's theory about the middle-class church (see below), Tutu's condemnation of the government is consistently explicit and specific, and he calls the church to be equally specific in its accusations against oppression⁴⁴.

To Mosala, most of the traditional church, and the biblical Hebraic priesthood, has been a failure because of its support of oppressive ideology. Monarchism and Authority

⁴³ E.g. NCYC tape 1; D. Tutu, *Hope and Suffering*, p. 68.

⁴⁴ E.g. as quoted in S. Maimela, p. 51.

are undesirable, and these too are characteristics of the traditional church. The traditional ruling and middle-class Black churches are ineffective liberators. The working-class black churches suffer from a lack of a well-grounded theological discourse, distorting the Bible in their favour. Once the working-class churches locate themselves systematically and critically, they will be genuinely liberating, and it is through them that the future liberation of black working-class might come⁴⁵.

The royalist ruling-class Black churches fail because they explicitly support the elite and their oppression of the workers. Middle class churches fail because they rationalise the specific cries of the oppressed into general principles palatable to the elite and themselves. Although they condemn oppression and theft, they are not explicit about who is stealing what. Tutu and his sympathisers fall into this category. As I mentioned earlier, this is an interesting allegation, of Tutu especially, since he has a long history of specific condemnation of many policies, and has consistently stood alongside and lived with the working class blacks. Perhaps the problem is that he also lives among, and works with the elite, which has earned him the reputation in some black circles as being too soft⁴⁶.

⁴⁵ I. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics...*, pp. 191-192.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

Effectiveness: Past and Future

Tutu and Mosala have aimed their theological sights at different issues. Tutu focussed on the abolition of the racist apartheid policy, not the inherently classist capitalistic policies. Apartheid is technically dismantled⁴⁷, but how much this has been due to those sharing Tutu's theological understanding and strategy.

Tutu has been vindicated in his call for sanctions. His insistence on maintaining dialogue with both the government and the ANC and other political factions⁴⁸ has succeeded in bringing many of them to the negotiating table. His high profile at demonstrations and funerals, and the high profile of the South African Council of Churches succeeded in attracting the world's attention. Tutu's theologically centered opposition to violence⁴⁹ was perhaps another key factor in helping him gain so much support early on, although it did produce dissenters amongst the more radical blacks⁵⁰. Black theologians of Tutu's "school" finally convinced the

⁴⁷ J. Davis, p. 146, claims that the new constitution will be primarily cosmetic, strongly protecting White interests, but there do appear to have been major steps forward since May.

⁴⁸ E.g. C. Villa-Vicencio, "Archbishop Desmond Tutu: From Oslo to Cape Town." In Tlhagala & Mosala, pp 8-9.

⁴⁹ E.g. R. G. Crawford, *Journey into Apartheid*, p. 5-6; D. Tutu, "Freedom fighters or terrorists?" in C. Villa-Vicencio, *Civil Disobedience and Beyond*, pp. 97, 99. (Note that his initial anti-violence call in 1989 is modified by 1990).

⁵⁰ S. Maimela, p. 55.

Dutch Reformed Church⁵¹ that apartheid was unbiblical, showing that perhaps the establishment can be fought on its own terms, with its own weapons, and within its own hermeneutical framework.

The official dismantling of apartheid is only the beginning, there is much damage to undo. Tutu will almost certainly retain his reconciliatory tone, while now calling for policies and funding to undo the economic damage done to the blacks, especially in the homelands (In this sense it is a classist approach, since it is the black working class that lives there).

It remains to be seen whether South Africa will merely shift to an unofficial racism akin to Australia and America's, or whether their past struggles will give them enough incentive to become an example to the rest of us of a truly multi-racial country.

Even if racism disappears (there are no encouraging signs from other countries), the class/wealth gap will remain. I doubt Tutu will call for the dissolution of "ruling classes," since in a democracy there is always an elected government and administration, but rather he will continue to encourage the leaders to be motivated by love for people of all races, and obedience to God, leading to a closer approximation to the Kingdom of God on earth.

⁵¹ The DRC is an Afrikaaner church, including amongst its members most of South Africa's government members. The DRC supported apartheid until the 1980's. I can't find the date of their anti-apartheid declaration, but I think it was 1982.

That was the year the World Alliance of Reformed Churches declared theological support for apartheid to be heretical & expelled member churches which refused to recant. So it may well be the right year.

Unfortunately there is nothing to suggest that humans leaders are likely to ever live up to this expectation, nor the rest of the population for that matter. While this ideal *will* be realised, I can't imagine it before Christ returns⁵².

While Tutu's vision seems unrealistic, it is at least Christ-centered, calling on God for help and seeing God as the principle strength of the struggle. Anthropocentric "theologies" like Mosala's seem to me even less hopeful, since they rely on human strength, love and wisdom, not God's. Given that capitalism is immoral, how will his oppression free society be realised - it would be the first time in recent history. Since human virtue is historically inadequate, how can liberation be gained but by violent revolution instituting some new form of oppression? Mosala appears to view God more as a tool than the loving creator and ruler of the universe.

Even if Mosala's hermeneutics of struggle has uncovered the truth behind the biblical texts, it is not clear how this "weapon of struggle" can do anything practical. Admittedly, Mosala's papers have so far had little reason to discuss God, they have been primarily economic, ecclesial and historic-material. I hope he will soon publish some theology and strategies, only then will it become clear whether Mosala's ideas are fundamentally anthropocentric or theocentric and therefore, in my opinion, to determine their likely effectiveness.

⁵² I would, however, love to be proven wrong!

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Whilst I join Mosala in longing for a society where

... the natural and human resources (are) invested in productive rather than destructive technology; (where) people learn how to live and work together rather than go to war with one another; (where) each family unit has equal access and control over the fundamental means of livelihood; where living without fear of anything (but in awe of God) is integral to existence⁵³.

I can only imagine it developing through the following means, and I join Tutu in praying,

God, please help us know that we matter, that we are creatures of your love, from all eternity, for you chose us in Christ even before the foundation of the world. What bliss, what ecstasy! If we really could believe that, the world would be revolutionised⁵⁴.

Amen.

Thanks for a fascinating essay John. It is well researched, well structured and written in a clear style. The analysis is of a generally high standard and you move towards a very helpful conclusion. I'm very impressed. And I'm absolutely delighted to see someone with an interest in political theology. Good on you! The obvious places for you to go with this interest is into some study of Liberation Theology from Latin America (Gutierrez, Segundo, Berrero especially for you I think) and Asia (the Mingyung Theology would be a good place to start). In addition, there are important European contributions (Metz, Moltmann & Kee, and from the US Yoder). Feminists such as Fiorenza & Ruckler have also got a lot to say which is of acute relevance.

One point of weakness in this area is your apparently narrow concept of God & God's work in the world. As you read more widely you will find many more dimensions to the specifically theological racism.

Thanks for a most helpful essay.
Andrew

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¹ I have followed as closely as possible the referencing method in the A.C.D. handbook, but it is neither strictly correct nor consistent.

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