

Catching up with Archbishop Desmond Tutu

by [Adelle M. Banks](#)

November 3, 2011

c. 2011 Religion News Service

(RNS) Retired Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, fresh off his 80th birthday celebrations, is the subject of a new biography, "Tutu: Authorized," written by journalist Allister Sparks and featuring interviews by Tutu's daughter, Mpho, with world leaders and celebrities who have worked with him.

Tutu recently answered emailed questions about his decades of work fighting apartheid in South Africa and advocating worldwide for justice and peace. Some answers have been edited for length and clarity.

Q: Looking back over your 80 years, what's your greatest success? Bringing down apartheid?

A: The defeat of apartheid was undoubtedly our greatest success, not mine alone. It was a joint effort and, remember, we had very considerable help from the international community. We could not have accomplished it on our own.

Q: Was apartheid primarily a spiritual battle, or a moral or political one?

A: Apartheid was grossly evil without remainder and thus it was a moral battle. Its protagonists claimed to have biblical support for their vicious policy and so we had to demonstrate that it was unacceptable on theological and biblical grounds.

It was also a struggle that encompassed the political, quite obviously, since we wanted a different sociopolitical and economic dispensation. We had to convince Western economic leaders that it was in their interests to support sanctions against the apartheid regime and they, in turn, had to convince political leaders who were opposed to such sanctions.

I could myself not have survived had I not been buttressed by my spiritual disciplines of prayer, quiet and regular attendance at the Eucharist.

Q: The biography describes how you developed a personal tradition of hours of daily prayer. Do you continue that and, is or was it ever difficult to keep that commitment?

A: Yes. Without that daily routine, I just could not operate. I try and because many are praying for me, it has not been difficult to maintain the discipline.

Q: You have said, "What faith you belong to is very largely an accident of birth and geography." Can you explain your simultaneous commitment to Christianity and your belief that other faiths are valid?

A: For me the way to the divine is through the way Christ has revealed. That for me is the only way. But there patently are others. Abraham, Moses etc., were not Christians but we cannot deny that they had an encounter, a genuine encounter, with the divine. Can anyone in their right mind declare that the Dalai Lama, Mahatma Gandhi had an encounter with the divine? And that it has shown in their lives? If we denied the validity of Judaism then we would have to shut up shop.

Q: You've chosen to join the Elders, a group of retired leaders who address global problems, rather than a typical retirement. Don't you know how to slow down?

A: We hope as Elders to use our collective experience and "wisdom" to benefit humankind. We live in a global village. In the traditional village, elders were looked to as repositories of wisdom, knowledge and experience. We hope we can be this for our planet community.

Q: One of the things people seem to like about you is that you take your causes seriously but you don't take yourself so seriously. What's your secret?

A: My family is forever bringing me down a peg or two the minute I get pompous and full of myself!

Q: The new biography declares, "A silent Tutu is an oxymoron." Do you agree?

A: They can't be serious. I could be a Trappist monk.