

Tutu and St. Thomas: Off-base charges of anti-Semitism

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [October 30, 2007](#) issue

The University of St. Thomas is the largest private institution of higher learning in the state of Minnesota, a school “inspired by Catholic intellectual tradition.” Recently, the university found itself in the embarrassing position of having failed to do some basic research; it did not check its sources.

The story behind this development began innocently enough in April, when a staff member from St. Thomas’s Justice and Peace Studies program informed his colleagues that he had booked South African archbishop Desmond Tutu for a campus appearance.

Tutu’s visit to St. Thomas was to be sponsored in partnership with PeaceJam International, a youth-centered project that brings Nobel laureates to campuses to teach about peace and justice (*City Pages*, St. Paul, October 3).

The campus was excited at the prospect of bringing Tutu to St. Thomas in the spring of 2008, where he would be the fifth Nobel Prize winner to speak in the PeaceJam series. In an unexpected turn of events, however, the university ordered the event’s sponsors to withdraw their invitation to the archbishop. Why this sudden withdrawal? According to the *City Pages* story, the school was afraid Tutu’s presence on campus would “offend local Jews.”

City Pages traced the withdrawal to a conversation between Julie Swiler, a spokesperson for the Jewish Community Relations Council of Minnesota and the Dakotas, and Doug Hennes, St. Thomas’s vice president for university and government relations. Hennes said, “We had heard some things [Archbishop Tutu] said that some people judged to be anti-Semitic and against Israeli policy.”

To justify his banning of Tutu, St. Thomas’s president, Dennis Dease, cited a “speech” that Tutu gave in 2002. “I spoke with Jews for whom I have a great respect,” Dease said. “What stung these individuals was not that Archbishop Tutu

criticized Israel, but how he did so, and the moral equivalencies that they felt he drew between Israel's policies and those of Nazi Germany, and between Zionism and racism."

The president failed to check his sources—not a very good way to reach a major decision about intellectual dialogue. Many Jews were outraged. More than 2,700 e-mails were sent to the school in response to an appeal from Jewish Voice for Peace, asking the school to reverse its banning of Tutu. Local and national media picked up the story which pitted a Nobel Peace Prize recipient against a Catholic university.

The pressure had its effect. On October 10, President Dease reversed his decision to ban the archbishop and declared, "I made the wrong decision earlier this year not to invite the archbishop. Although well-intentioned, I did not have all of the facts and points of view, but now I do."

"The facts and points of view" which President Dease lacked were easily available in the sermon which Tutu preached in the historic Old South Church in Boston during a 2002 conference on "Ending the Occupation," sponsored by Friends of Sabeel-North America. The sermon included these words:

My heart aches. I say, Why are our memories so short? Have our Jewish sisters and brothers forgotten their humiliation? Have they forgotten the collective punishment, the home demolitions, in their own history so soon? Have they turned their backs on their profound and noble religious traditions? Have they forgotten that God cares deeply about the downtrodden? . . . This is God's world. For goodness sake, this is God's world! We live in a moral universe. The [South African] apartheid government was very powerful, but today it no longer exists. Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Pinochet, Milosovic and Idi Amin were all powerful, but in the end they bit the dust. . . . Injustice and oppression will never prevail. Those who are powerful have to remember the litmus test that God gives to the powerful: What is your treatment of the poor, the hungry, the voiceless? And on the basis of that, God passes judgment.

Leave it to *Time* magazine senior editor Tony Karon, a Jewish journalist originally from South Africa, to focus on the absurdity of the claim that there was any anti-Semitism in Tutu's sermon. Karon wrote in his blog Rootless Cosmopolitan October 3:

The utterly charming thing about the Zionist Thought Police is their apparent inability to restrain themselves, even from the very excesses that will prove to be their own undoing. Having asked sane and rational people to believe that Jimmy Carter is a Holocaust denier, the same crew now want us to believe that Archbishop Desmond Tutu is an anti-Semite. . . . This case underlines precisely how absurd the policing of discussion about Israel in the U.S. has become. . . . There are few, if any, more decent, humane, courageous and morally unimpeachable individuals in the world than Bishop Tutu.

President Dease has done the right thing by acknowledging his mistake in banning the archbishop. He has also invited Tutu to participate in a forum on campus which would be cosponsored by the same Jewish organization that influenced the university to ban Tutu in the first place.