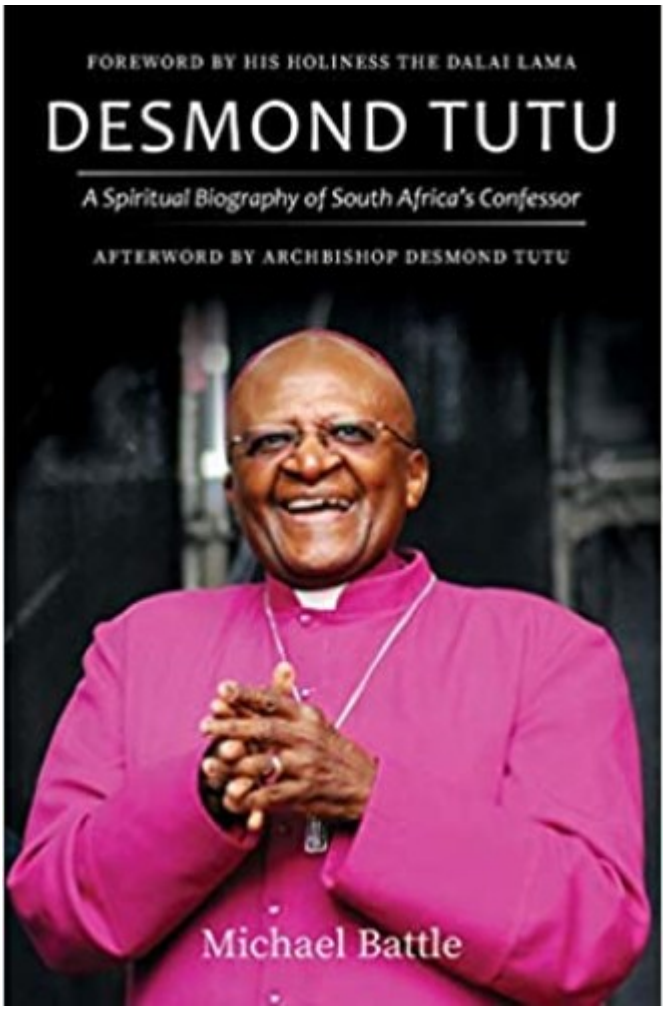
Tutu the mystic

Michael Battle’s biography focuses on the archbishop’s religious moorings.

by Charles Scriven in the February 23, 2022 issue

In Review



Desmond Tutu

A Spiritual Biography of South Africa’s Confessor

by Michael Battle
Westminster John Knox
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Desmond Tutu lived astride one of Christianity's great failures—and one of its great successes. At the pinnacle of White disdain for South Africa's original residents, the country's government enforced, from 1948 to 1994, a policy of sheer apartheid. Black and White residents were made to live separate lives, the latter privileged and wealthy, the former beaten down and impoverished. All this took place, moreover, under the cloak of Christian religion. White South Africans saw themselves divinely chosen to occupy South Africa and therefore fully justified in forcibly confining Black residents to reservations. Yet Christian consciousness slowly resisted, slowly came not only to repudiate the rationalization that undergirded apartheid but also to rally the country toward social and political renewal. Tutu was a key figure in both imagining and advancing the renewal process.

From the start, Tutu's family history and circumstances infused his life with gospel grace and conviction. At the same time, he knew apartheid's pain. His family was, for a while, fortunate to live in the Black community of Sophiatown, where for decades there had been an unusual degree of freedom, including interaction with White residents such as the Anglican monks who lived and preached there. One of these monks, Trevor Huddleston, impressed the young Tutu when, while walking by their home, he regularly raised a hat to Tutu's washerwoman mother. Tutu would later write that people like Huddleston (who himself came to be widely known) "made us realize that we too count, we too matter in the sight of God."

But then a hammer blow. The South African government forcibly removed Sophiatown's Black residents to Soweto, bulldozed the town, and declared it a Whites-only area.

Christian influence, though, persisted. Several African pastors, both Methodist (Tutu was baptized in that tradition) and Anglican, formed the young Tutu not only by example but also by education. Along with the monastic community of which he was part, Huddleston himself continued to have a shaping role, not least by schooling Tutu in forms of spiritual discipline that would come to define and sustain his witness.

Michael Battle's biography addresses Tutu's life with particular focus on these religious moorings. That life became newly familiar when, shortly after the death of South Africa's last apartheid president, F. W. de Klerk, in November 2021, Tutu died in late December. Mainstream obituaries noted his Christian faith and his role as Anglican archbishop. They made little or no reference, however, to the spiritual practice that gave both direction and oxygen to Tutu's leadership. This is Battle's main theme. He argues that Christian mysticism must be central to any adequate account of his subject's astonishing impact on his nation.

Battle, an African American professor at General Theological Seminary, writes from the perspective of personal friendship. He lived with Tutu in South Africa for two years in the early 1990s and afterward saw him annually for more than two decades. Tutu officiated at his wedding, baptized his children, and ordained him to Episcopal ministry. In the course of all this, Battle saw firsthand his friend's regimen of prayer, contemplation, and participation in the Eucharist. That experience enhanced Battle's understanding not only of mysticism itself but also of how it provides what he calls the metanarrative—the overall pattern and structure—of Tutu's life and work.

Battle organizes his biography around mysticism's classic stages: purgation, illumination, and union. Purgation is cleansing from spiritual disorders and wrongheaded perspectives on God. Illumination is Spirit-guided movement toward "alignment of human and divine will." Union is full harmony with God. These stages name the three main parts of Battle's book, with each part divided into four or five chapters. The point all along is exploration of two journeys: Tutu's and South Africa's under his leadership and influence.

"Stages" suggests linear progression. This is partly true: union, or harmony with God, is mysticism's goal, and it comes after purgation and illumination. But in one way this is misleading. It's true that purgation, or cleansing, is the beginning point of renewal, whether in an individual or a nation. Tutu learned repentance, humility, and self-denial from his own spiritual practice and from the confession of sin this practice evoked. When he became the best-known religious leader in South Africa, he evoked similar truth telling from the nation itself and so became, as Battle puts it, a "purgative force."

But the theme of purgation shows up in the book's illumination and union sections as well. And here, far into the book, is a passage that perhaps should have appeared near the start. Battle says, "It is a misconception to think that purgation,

illumination, and union are somehow linear in movement. They are more a circular motion.” They are, I gather, recurring aspects of mystical devotion. This is clarifying, although the denial of the linear seems overstated.

The book, it turns out, is more difficult to read than it might have been. Sentences now and then falter from awkward construction or unnecessary jargon. But a wealth of insight and inspiration remain. And if, as thoughtful Christians would surely agree, Western civilization is now facing a political crisis that is at bottom spiritual, then a richly detailed story of spiritual leadership producing redemptive political effect is at once timely and crucial.

Tutu as “purgative prophet” succeeded both for insisting that his society come clean about its faults and for possessing the “unique gift of disarming warring parties.” He was, as Battle shows again and again, a peacemaker. He could get people to see the same world and then to embrace not only the same goal but also the same path to that goal. His conversations with de Klerk helped the South African government, against all expectations, release Nelson Mandela from prison in 1990.

The goal, Battle repeatedly emphasizes, was not just the formal ending of apartheid; it was national reconciliation. Tutu’s witness fixed South African eyes on deliverance from self-love and on the embrace of forgiveness. Battle’s middle section, on illumination, gives prominence to the famous Truth and Reconciliation Commission. After democratic elections put Mandela at the helm of government, Tutu became the commission’s chair. He had insisted that truth telling alone would not heal South Africa; nor, alone, would amnesty for offenders. Offenders would need to own up, in public, to their deeds, and their truth telling would have to go hand in hand with willingness, by victims, to set aside debilitating resentments. Only confession and forgiveness together could open a path to a better future.

The book attends to many other themes of Tutu’s witness, including the African ideal of *ubuntu* (human interdependence), the centrality of “Christ as paradigm,” and the meaning of *shalom*. It also touches on Tutu’s generous attitude to others, including de Klerk and Christian leaders from the Dutch Reformed tradition that too long upheld apartheid.

The book reports, too, on one important shortfall in postapartheid experience. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission had taken up the ideal of restorative justice. Victims who offered forgiveness relinquished the right to sue for compensation, but

a reparations policy, it was assumed, would address their need. As of the 2021 publication date of Battle's book, that policy "remains unfinished," he writes.

Given widespread worries today, the fact that democracy is still alive in South Africa bears mention. And so, for that matter, does the fact that in 1994, on the day of the country's first all-race election, "nearly twenty million people voted, without violence." Tutu's leadership reminds us that even if Christian spirituality can be futile or counterproductive, it may, when genuine and in the right hands, effect a transformation.