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REVIEW ARTICLE



Beyond a “Political Priest”: Exploring Desmond Tutu as a “Freedom-Fighter Mystic”

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this essay is to critically review the remarkably unique account of Desmond Tutu’s life presented by Michael Battle in his book “Desmond Tutu: A Spiritual Biography of South Africa’s Confessor.” The central contention of this essay is that Michael Battle shifts the paradigm of biographical research about Desmond Tutu beyond the popular trope of “political priest” to that of “freedom fighter-mystic.” Through a careful filtering of Tutu’s life via the three stages of mysticism – purgation, illumination and union, Battle makes a convincing case that Tutu’s political actions for justice were not in spite of his deep spirituality, but because of it. This ethnographic spiritual biography troubles the binaries between the sacred and the secular, between spiritual contemplation and social action, and between God’s justice and social justice, thereby inviting readers to the warm embrace of a more authentic spirituality.

KEYWORDS

Social justice; mysticism; spiritual biography; Ubuntu; reconciliation; Humour

Introduction

My reflections on this book consist of a critical overview of the main contentions of it, after which I offer some points of engagement. I appreciated that right at the outset, Battle was keen to address the question – why yet another biography about Tutu, not only in terms of everything that has been written about Tutu by other scholars, but also everything that Battle himself has written about Tutu. Indeed, Battle has arguably written the most, quantitatively, qualitatively, and consistently about Desmond Tutu’s life and work, since 1995.¹

Desmond Tutu was the central subject of Battle’s PhD dissertation,² and Tutu himself provides what can be considered the best endorsement at the end of this book in his afterword:

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¹Some select publications, amongst more than twenty others, include: Battle, *Reconciliation; The Wisdom of Desmond Tutu* (Oxford: Lion, 1999, and Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000); *Ubuntu: I in You and You in Me* (New York: Seabury, 2009); and *Heaven on Earth: A Call to Community in the Book of Revelation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2017).

²Battle, “The Ubuntu theology of Desmond Tutu”.

He [that is Michael] has followed me like a duck that imprints upon its parent for many years now. He has already written several books on my theology. And I feel that what he says here will be important for those who merely situated my life in politics to see more of what I was trying to do on this planet.³

Methodology: “Like a Duck That Imprints on Its Parent’s Back”

Following him around like “a duck that imprints on its parent’s back” is the delightful phrase that Desmond Tutu uses to describe the methodology that Michael Battle employs for collecting the rich and diverse data which supported the many works that he has produced about Tutu’s life over the years. Anthropologists are likely to label Tutu’s phrase as “ethnographic biography” – indeed following someone like “a duck that imprints on a parent” may be exactly what deep and authentic ethnographic work looks like.

Battle’s significant ethnographic encounter when he lived in Tutu’s home for two years in the early 90s, forms the main basis for the portrayal of Tutu in this book – but he also draws extensively on precious primary sources such as handwritten sermons and letters, media statements, speeches, lectures and so on. While access to these documents certainly constitutes a privilege, readers themselves should feel privileged to have access to Michael Battle’s writings, because I would venture that Battle himself is probably a living archive of Tutu’s life and witness. I predict that someday someone is going to write about Battle’s scholarship on Desmond Tutu. While we wait for the test of my prediction, I can say with certainty that this book together with Battle’s previous writings on Tutu, is a scholarly gift, not least of all because it is built on careful documentation and analysis of Tutu’s life for over a quarter of a century.

Being a careful and critical scholar who doesn’t pretend to provide a completely objective and comprehensive account, Battle constantly and consistently reminds his readers throughout the book that he makes no claim to objectivity. His framing is laid bare right at the beginning of the book, in the preface:

So I come clean in the outset of this biography with my mystical assertion that Tutu is a saint. Those who are saints work in the nexus between human and divine realities.⁴

Framing: Freedom-Fighter Mystic

To both temper and explain his claim about sainthood, Battle adopts the same rhetoric of humour that Tutu uses throughout many of his engagements and especially during highly charged political situations, to both bring calm to, and speak critical truths about the tense context of Apartheid and beyond. In fact, I would commend this book, if for no other reason, than for Tutu’s sharp and critical humour that is so well documented herein. Being a good disciple of Tutu, Battle himself draws on this style and explicates his framing of Tutu as a saint through a joke, one he possibly enjoyed so much that he relates it twice – first on page 14 of the preface and then again, on page 62; the repetition is in the spirit of Tutu’s storytelling, he reminds us, of course.

³Tutu, “Afterword,” 316.

⁴Battle, *Desmond Tutu: A Spiritual Biography*, xiv.

The story goes like this:

A kindergarten teacher was observing her classroom of children while they were drawing. The teacher would occasionally walk around to see each child's work. She asked a little girl named Susan what she was drawing. Susan replied, "I'm drawing God." The teacher paused and, being theologically correct, said, "But Susan, you can't do that. No one knows what God looks like." Without missing a beat or looking up from her drawing, Susan replied, "They will in a minute".⁵

And so Battle explains that "Tutu's life demonstrates God," and that as a biographer, he seeks, "to be like little Susan and write what God looks like in the world."

Battle is also quick to make a disclaimer as follows:

Although this may be critiqued by some who say that Tutu does not represent God, the work intended here is not to diminish the ineffable God, even as Tutu – an ecumenist who believes in interreligious dialogue – still adheres to the essential revelation of God in Jesus Christ ... such revelation never gets in the way of deep friendships with other saints, like the Dalai Lama, whose revelation of God is much different.⁶

Having made his disclaimers about how he understands the concept of sainthood in relation to the life and witness of Desmond Tutu, Michael Battle spends the rest of the book exploring Tutu's life through the three Christian mystical stages of maturing in the life of God – purgation, illumination, and union. Throughout the book his main aim is to convince the reader that any dichotomy between the sacred and the secular, between mysticism and political action, and between God's justice and social justice is false. Michael Battle would agree with Susan Rakoczy's answer to her focal question in her essay of the same title "What does mysticism have to do with social justice?"⁷ He too would answer "A great deal!"

The main aim of the book therefore is to see Tutu's political action for justice not occurring *in spite* of his deep spirituality, but *because* of it. Michael Battle is keen for his reader to understand that "Christian mysticism is in fact essential in understanding Tutu's life."⁸ He carefully and conscientiously crafts the biography around the three pillars of Christian mysticism: purgation, illumination and union.

Purgation

It is interesting, but perhaps not surprising given the focus of the book on the intersections of contemplation and social action, that the first stage – purgation – receives the most amount of attention in the book. While conventional wisdom regarding this stage refers to personal or individual purging of sins – "purgation is the renovation of character in which to begin the journey toward God" – Battle shows how for Tutu, "this was not only aimed at an individual's character but at the whole of a nation-state called South Africa."⁹ Battle meticulously and methodically sets out the evidence of the purgatory character of Tutu's spirituality and social action in this section of the book. Three aspects emerge out of the analysis he presents.

⁵Ibid., xiv.

⁶Ibid., 15.

⁷Rakoczy. "What Does Mysticism Have to Do with Social Justice?".

⁸Battle, *Desmond Tutu: A Spiritual Biography*, 5.

⁹Ibid., 38.

The first is that purgation involves un-learning. This un-learning involved expunging the knowledge that Apartheid and Bantu education propagated which promoted the idea of divine election for white Afrikaners who saw themselves as saints. In order to begin the journey with God, Battle contends that Tutu had to purge himself of the inherently spiritual enterprise of Apartheid that theologically justified white power. A large part of this stage of purgation therefore involved un-learning normative theological knowledge.

Another aspect that Battle's conceptualisation of the stage of purgation surfaces is the idea of resistance. Resistance involved first declaring Apartheid to be a heresy and then refuting its claims as a contamination to the real Gospel. As Battle asserts "Tutu's political spirituality resisted this contamination as apartheid grew to become the state religion of South Africa ... The brilliance of Tutu's spiritual leadership contained purgative elements that helped him expose the evils of apartheid, as well as lead his own city-state in resistance to seeing an apartheid state as the city of God."¹⁰

Finally, a third aspect of purgation that is worth recalling from this book, is Battle's portrayal of purgation as prophecy. As one purges, unlearns, and resists, one similarly becomes a prophet that speaks truth to power. Battle maintains that: "It was really in the 1970s that Tutu found his voice as the purgative prophet, warning those in power that their intransigent and godless law would reap destruction."¹¹ Both the ideas of political spirituality and purgative prophecies, as coined and developed by Battle in this book, offer much scope for further theorising particularly in the fields of Black and decolonial theologies.

Illumination

The second mystical stage that Battle introduces in the book is the stage of illumination, and here he focuses primarily on Tutu's role as confessor during the Truth and Reconciliation (TRC) hearings. The stage of illumination is when one can clearly see and grasp the enormity of one's sinful nature and one is able to confess it. Battle sees the TRC as involving this process of illumination, where the sin and heresy of apartheid is confessed. So how does such Christian mysticism illumine Tutu's spiritual life, asks Battle. He answers as follows:

My thesis ... is that Tutu's role as national confessor operates from a distinctively theological model of relationality, in which forgiveness informs human identity, and a Trinitarian image of God involves the flourishing relation of persons. Tutu's complex persona as archbishop and chair of the TRC opens doors for those who are disgruntled with organized religion. Tutu's spiritual life helps us to have our notion of God deepened and expanded to be open to otherness. He helped Afrikaner Christians see this light, and helped his comrades see the light of God in their enemies.¹²

While the analysis offered by Battle of the TRC might very well be plausible, the characterisation of the process of the TRC that Battle offers is couched in distinctly Christian-normative terms. Battle shows some awareness of this, but arguably glosses over this critique, with Tutu's assertion that "had churches not justified apartheid theologically, it

¹⁰ibid., 60.

¹¹ibid., 90.

¹²ibid., 55.

might never have existed ...” and elsewhere, he argues that confession and truth-telling “was an extraordinary accomplishment that many fail to see, because most of us have learned about apartheid as a political movement. Apartheid, however, was just as much religious as political. To get the religious zealot to confess any error of worldview is a miracle. Only a few achieve this.”¹³ Only a few who have reached a stage of illumination can accomplish this, Battle seems to be saying, but the Christian framing of the “miracle” is left without comment.

Bolstering the point further, Battle uses the example of Chris Hani’s funeral where some say Tutu preached the most riveting sermon of his life. Battle recalls how Tutu responded to the possible criticism of having the funeral of a Communist in the Cathedral, by reminding the crowd that it was not Communists who created apartheid; it was Christians. I suppose if one thinks of illumination as the proverbial lightbulb moment then this was it!

In this regard, Michael Battle goes even further to suggest that a key strategy for illumination in Tutu’s worldview was humour. So, he recounts how in response to criticisms that he was mixing religion with politics Tutu responded, “It is as if I should say, ‘Hey, that man is dying,’ and instead of trying to establish whether my claim is true or not, they are saying, ‘Hey, Tutu, are you speaking as a politician or a bishop?’”¹⁴

Union

The final mystical stage engaged with in the book is union. I must admit that I struggled most with how this stage of union was characterised in the book. I understand that the mystical stage of union is when the mystic finds union with God, and Battle makes every effort to ensure that the reader understands that union with God, does not imply by any means a disavowal of the concerns of context and lived experiences of hardship. I did, however, feel the slipping and shifting that happened in this last section of the book between the transcendental and the physical. And perhaps that itself is the point? That the mystical stages are not by any means a linear progression, but that it’s messy and mysterious and that God is perhaps messy and mysterious. Michael Battle captures this messiness most aptly with the following retelling:

Tutu recounts how, in a favorite book of cartoons by Mel Calman entitled ‘My God,’ there is a humorous scene depicting God looking somewhat disconsolate and muttering, “I think I have lost my copy of the Divine Plan.” Looking at the state of the world, Tutu concludes, one could be forgiven for wondering if God had any plan at all. Continuing in a humorous tone, Tutu states further:

I do not know about you but I have often found the best literature in most homes in the loo. Once I was visiting some friends, and I came across a book of cartoons entitled My God – It had charming line drawings ... and I came out an hour later. Some of them were quite delightful. One showed God with all of us directing all kinds of contradictory requests to Him and God says, “I wish I could say ‘Don’t call me, I’ll call you.’” The one I would like to refer to shows God looking somewhat disconsolate as He reads a poster which declaims “God is dead” and he says, “That makes me feel insecure”.¹⁵

¹³Ibid., 55.

¹⁴Ibid., 126.

¹⁵Ibid., 179.

As mentioned at the beginning of this review, if you need one motivation to read this spiritual biography it should be for the ways in which Battle captures that exceptional characteristic of Tutu – his humour. His irreverence in a book that purports to be a spiritual biography is nothing short of delightful! What one takes away from this retelling, within this section of the book on the mystical stage of union, is not that an imperfect human meets a perfect God in some transcendental encounter, but rather God is rendered as complicated, complex and “earthy” again dispelling the binaries between the transcendental and the physical, which is the most common theme in the book.

Further points for reflection

Overall, the spiritual biography of Desmond Tutu that is presented in this book, is a most befitting tribute to a man who Battle characterises as a purgative prophet. I went a step further and suggested that the picture that we are presented with is that of a freedom-fighter mystic, and I made that assertion being fully aware of the complex and contested use of the historical designation “freedom fighter” in South Africa. The book presents a comprehensive and unique account of the political spirituality which sustained Tutu’s role as purgative prophet. That said, I end this review with two points that invite further reflection.

The first point relates to how Africa is presented in the book. Battle claims that “this biography’s most valuable contribution may be in the unearthing of Christian spiritual and mystical sources from an unusual source for many in the western world: the continent of Africa.”¹⁶ He also states: “To my knowledge, outside of an edited volume written in 1978 no one has attempted to construct what is unique to the character of African Christian mysticism that pertains specifically to black people. In particular, no one has attempted this in a manner intelligible to an African epistemology of community. In light of the spurious use of the term “mysticism” and the disparaging view of African Christianity as the by-product of colonialism and European missionaries, our discussion should prove instructive to many who long to make sense of African Christian spirituality in more beneficial ways.”¹⁷

While the idea of uncovering forms of mysticism in Africa that may have been hitherto ignored, is a noble one, I wonder about the fetishising of Africa, which of course may very well not be the intention here, but it could have an unintended consequence. As someone who heads up a research centre bearing the name of Desmond Tutu, I am reminded of the regular requests that I get from foreign academics and activists wanting to touch the hem of Tutu’s proverbial garment. Notwithstanding that the idea that we do not actually physically work with the revered Archbishop seems to be lost on those who make such requests, I wonder whether rendering the spiritual biography in terms of an African mystical exceptionalism, might result in further requests from Americans and Europeans who go shopping for what Sophia Rose Arjana has termed the “mystical marketplace.”¹⁸

In spite of my concern above, I would equally contend that the content of this book, particularly in its intentional shattering of the stock images of an other-world mystic replacing it with a politically spiritual prophet, mitigates the risk of seekers to the

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁸Arjana, *Buying Buddha, Selling Rumi*.

“mystical marketplace” of Africa. Arjana rightly characterises the problem with modern mysticism as follows:

The search for enchantment in the modern world rarely entails the decades-long religious labour of the early Christian desert fathers or the Buddha’s lifetime struggle to achieve enlightenment. More commonly modern mysticism is characterized by a kind of dilettantism, a lifestyle that consists of a CD of Deepak Chopra meditations on Rumi, a subscription to Oprah’s magazine and a yoga retreat in Bali.¹⁹

Despite the often hagiographic account of Tutu’s spiritual biography that is presented by Michael Battle, the politically astute and sharply critical “freedom-fighter” mystic that is presented, does not easily lend itself to fortune cookie wisdom that typifies the modern mystical searches in exotic lands, that Arjana refers to. This book reminds us that real mysticism is hard work. It invites us to consider that Tutu may very well have been transforming the practice of mysticism through political action, rather than the other way around, and this is perhaps more radical and relevant in centring an African epistemology about mysticism.

The centring of radical and relevant action within a mystical framework, is a second point that invites further reflection and perhaps caution. The book, like the TRC process, unfortunately, also sacrifices reparations and restitution on the altar of the idealism of reconciliation, ubuntu, the rainbow nation, and unity. Battle is very aware that his work on Ubuntu is “criticized as idealistic and uncritical of reified racism.” He cautions that “What is missed, however, in such criticism is how Tutu was never naïve in his exhortation of Ubuntu. In the same way that heaven is idealistic, Ubuntu’s ideal provides human beings an African cultural imagination to see the world differently.”²⁰

I would argue that the aspiration of this ideal must be tempered with the harsh daily lived experiences of those on the margins in South Africa. And so, we have to consciously and regularly pose these questions to the mystical social justice framework that is presented in this book. How can the land be taken back in this framework? And while very little attention is paid to them in the book where are the queer clergy and other queer people of faith within such a framework? Is there space for women to smash the patriarchy, and shatter ceilings within this framework?

The reflections above notwithstanding, the words of the Archbishop which end the book are instructive for those of us who seek to take away wisdom from its pages:

The premise of Michael’s work here is that I am a Christian mystic in the sense of the mystical stages of purgation, illumination, and union. Am I a Christian mystic? I leave that for the eye of the beholder. I certainly have been trained by deep and holy people. I do my best to say my prayers and participate in communion with God on a daily basis. I indeed know what purgation is, as I struggled against apartheid and grew up in a hostile world. I also know about illumination, through the breakthroughs in my life to lead a process for my country to be conscious of what was done in the name of apartheid. And as I approach my latter years, I long for union with God and God’s creation. If this is a Christian mystic, so be it that I am one as well. Herein is the value of Michael Battle’s work on my life – to hold up a mirror with this book and invite the reader to also mature through the mystical stages of God’s love.²¹

¹⁹Ibid., 1.

²⁰Battle, *Desmond Tutu: A Spiritual Biography*, 48.

²¹Tutu, “Afterword,” 315–16.

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