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**Martin Luther King, Jr., Archbishop Desmond Tutu,  
and the Quest for Justice and Reconciliation**

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*This paper studies Martin Luther King, Jr.'s and Desmond Tutu's strivings for justice and reconciliation as the leaders of movements against white racist systems in the US and South Africa. Despite their differences in terms of nationality, age, religious denomination, and geography, the paper demonstrates how King's and Tutu's quests were grounded in the distinctive communal ethics informed by their Christian faith and their shared spiritual heritage as African peoples, which emphasize community, the ubiquity of religion, the moral order of the universe, and hopefulness. Contrasting their communal approach to a secular rational ethical approach to justice and peace, the paper explores their ongoing moral relevance in the globalizing world.*

**Keywords:** Martin Luther King, Jr., Desmond Tutu, racism, justice, reconciliation, community, human dignity

**Introduction**

King and Tutu are two major figures in human rights struggles against racism in the “twentieth century. The nonviolent movements they led played a central role in liberating tens of millions of people from the shackles of centuries-long racial oppression and in building new and better societies. Thanks to their genuine, life-long commitment to justice and reconciliation, they are now widely respected as moral exemplars for humanity. Their names are associated with humanity’s ongoing aspiration for justice and peace. They received humanity’s most prestigious awards, including the Nobel Peace Prize, and numerous other recognitions. Many schools, streets, and humanitarian and community centers are named after them, and the list is still growing.

King and Tutu lived several thousand miles away from each other; while both were clergypersons, they had different denominational affiliations. Tutu was archbishop of Cape Town, the spiritual head of the country’s 1.5 million Anglicans, while King was a local pastor, first in Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery and later a co-pastor with his father at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. King was killed in 1968 at the age of 39, while Tutu passed away in 2021 at the age of 90. Their speaking styles were also quite different; while King’s voice was steady, earnest, and spirited with a melancholy tone, Tutu’s voice was sonorous and high-pitched, peppered with his hallmark wit and chuckling.

Despite these geographical, denominational, and stylistic differences, King and Tutu share many similarities in their persistent quest for justice and reconciliation. These similarities are not accidental but result from several social factors. First, they were born into white racist societies; the fight against racism defined their entire life stories. Second, they were ordained clergypersons in Christianity; faith was central to their personal identities and moral formation, and the churches were the bases of their prophetic work. Third, Tutu was deeply influenced by King’s movement in the US (Baldwin, 1998, p.108). Indeed, he learned from King and his campaigns in the US and creatively adapted them to the South African context. A deeper look, however, reveals that their similarities are rooted in their shared communal and holistic

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spiritual heritages as African peoples (Paris, 1995).<sup>i</sup> Both King and Tutu shared key characteristics of African spiritual and moral heritages: a communal worldview, the ubiquity of religion, holism, the moral order of the universe, and hopefulness (Lee, 2017, p.15-48).

This paper examines King's and Tutu's communal ethics as spiritual and moral resources for our struggle for justice and peace today. I claim that their pursuit of justice and peace is informed by a distinctive form of ethics that combined their Christian faith and the communal cosmology of African peoples. For them, the ideas of justice and peace were not abstract, discrete philosophical notions, but rather deeply tied to their communal vision, personal spirituality, and actual struggles against injustices. Indeed, the magic of their global moral influence is found in their holistic and balanced approach to justice and peace issues, which harmonizes individuality and community, diversity and unity, and the religious and the civic. I conclude that although they have passed away, the importance of King's and Tutu's ethics increases today when humanity experiences an unprecedented level of threats to its well-being, as we see in the pandemic, climate change, and growing economic inequality.

*Critique of Racism*

It is obvious that King's and Tutu's quest for justice and peace emerged, primarily, in the process of their fight against racism. They learned that white racism is not merely confined to a personal bias or a legal system, but a comprehensive social system that is grounded in a white worldview that encompassed the ideas of God, humanity, and nature.<sup>ii</sup> That is, racism is sustained through the systematic support of not only law and force, but also a heretical theology, pseudo-science, and skewed aesthetics, which glorify whites as the normative model of humanity. Hence, its dismantling requires an alternative worldview that is equally comprehensive as a white racist ideology, in addition to a political-legal change.

The alternative of King and Tutu to a racist society was a theologically informed vision of a new community anchored in the principle of the *imago Dei*—a fully liberated, just, and mutually caring society that respects the dignity of all people regardless of their skin colors. This alternative vision was termed the beloved community for King and a rainbow nation for Tutu. To put it differently, King's and Tutu's moral response to racism was twofold, a communal cosmology and the biblical idea of the *imago Dei*,<sup>iii</sup> with which they addressed white racist anthropology and sociology at their cores. For them, the community was the organizing principle of their vision, ideas, and practices.

Racism is based on wrong anthropology that treats biological attributes, such as skin complex, as the determining factor of human worth. It denies the sanctity of people of color by justifying various discriminatory laws and acts, such as the forced removal of people; segregated public and residential spaces; unequal treatments in pay, education, healthcare, and social benefits; curtailing freedom of movement; and lynching. Racism is also based on wrong sociology; it artificially separates human beings into racial castes and creates division, fear, and hostility among them. By doing so, it deprives the possibility of friendship and community among different races. In short, racism is evil because it violates the dignity of people of color and frustrates God's design for human fulfillment in the community.

In developing the alternative worldview, King and Tutu drew on their Christian faith and distinctive communal spiritual-moral heritages of African peoples.

### **God and Community**

As men of faith, King's and Tutu's constructive work of building an alternative worldview started with their theology. For King and Tutu, racism was not merely a political and legal issue but also a spiritual and moral issue that goes to the heart of white racist worldview and self-identity. King and Tutu understood God as a personal, relational, and familial God. God is a personal God who listens to the prayers of humans and empathizes with their sufferings. As the creator, God relates to humanity like a parent. In one God, everyone is interrelated; the entire humanity belongs to one family of God. Furthermore, God is a moral God who sides with the poor and the oppressed and accompanies them in their struggles for justice.

Informed by African cosmology, King and Tutu also shared the same anthropological assumption that human beings are interdependent by nature; humans cannot be human without each other. While this idea was summed up in *ubuntu* for Tutu, for King it was coined in his vision of the beloved community (Lee, p.15-p.48).<sup>iv</sup> King declared (1967):

[A]ll life is interrelated. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. We are made to live together because of the interrelated structure of reality (p.68).

Similarly, Tutu also emphasized (1993; cited in Battle, 1997, p. 65):

We need other human beings in order to be human. We are made for togetherness; we are made for family, for fellowship, to exist in a tender network of interdependence... This is how you have *ubuntu* — you care, you are hospitable, you're gentle, you're compassionate and concerned.

King and Tutu identified a community as God's design for humanity and the purpose of history. For example, King believed that community is at the heart of civilization; the most creative turn in human evolutionary history was when primitive persons put aside their stone axes and decided to cooperate with each other. Hence, King declared (1958, p.106), "He who works against community is working against the whole of creation." Likewise, Tutu noted (1984, p.159): "The unity of the entire creation was God's intention from the very beginning of creation." After sin entered history, King and Tutu believed, all of God's activities in history point toward this goal of restoring the primal unity.

King and Tutu did not see the contradiction between their relational understanding of God and the communal cosmology of African peoples. Rather, the cross-fertilization of communal cosmology and Christian faith served their purposes very well in building a plausible moral vision and coherent ethics that attracted people of good will to a common task of dismantling racist systems together.<sup>v</sup> Whereas their communal cosmology helped to reject an individualistic, rationalistic interpretation of God and God's salvation, their theology enabled their vision of a community to be inclusive, universal, and democratic. This is more obvious in the case of

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Tutu because, in traditional Africa, *ubuntu* was expressed in an ethnocentric, tribalistic form to promote intragroup cohesion and commitment; it was usually confined to the members of one's tribe and harmless strangers or visitors. However, Tutu's Christian faith helped to transfigure this narrow idea of *ubuntu* into an inclusive one by adding a universal scope and moral content to it.

### **The Imago Dei**

Along with their communal vision of society, the focal point of King's and Tutu's critique of racism was human dignity grounded in the biblical idea of the *imago Dei*. As mentioned above, the idea offered a key antidote to white racism that is based on false anthropology of white superiority. That is, the *imago Dei* offered the foundational human identity which is deeper than any socially-constructed identities, such as racial identities.

For King and Tutu, the *imago Dei* served as a key principle of justice. As humans are created by God and carry God's image, their dignity is sacred and transcendental. That is, every human being is free and equal before God regardless of her racial, ethnic, and cultural background. Any social system that violates the *imago Dei* is unjust, while a social system that protects human dignity is considered generally moral and just.

However, through their relational theology and communal cosmology, King and Tutu inject new meaning into the traditional understanding of the *imago Dei*. Whereas in the Western context, the idea of the *imago Dei* describes the individual moral faculty or rationality, for King and Tutu the idea has both individual and communal dimensions. That is, the *imago Dei* means 1) the infinite, sacred quality of a person as God's child, and 2) a fundamental kinship of all human beings as the children of the same God. Carrying the same image of God means that all human beings are interrelated in God as brothers and sisters.<sup>vi</sup>

This means that in the ethics of King and Tutu, community and individuality, *ubuntu* and the *imago Dei*, mutually balance and complement each other. In light of *ubuntu*, the *imago Dei* is not an individualistic notion; it is solidaric and relational. In light of the *imago Dei*, *ubuntu* is not a collectivist concept; it describes the shared, interdependent life in the freedom and dignity of every person. Just as individuals should contribute to the life of their community (*ubuntu*), the community should also protect the dignity of its members and enhance their well-being.

Based on this dialectic understanding of human nature, King and Tutu rejected libertarian individualism as well as any form of tribalism, ethnocentrism, or narrow nationalism.

### *Power*

One cannot properly understand King and Tutu's fight against racism, without understanding their realistic approach to power. Both King and Tutu understood that the mobilization of power is necessary for social justice. King and Tutu recognized that the imbalance of power is the immediate cause of social injustices (such as racism, classism, colonialism, and sexism) and that the oppressors never voluntarily give up their power and privileges. (King, 1986b, p. 292; Tutu, 1994, p.111). Moral persuasion alone cannot change injustices. Power must be checked by another power. To correct injustices, the amassing and mobilization of power by the oppressed is inevitable.

Out of this realistic awareness, King and Tutu relied on both moral appeal and collective actions in their pursuit of justice, such as protests, marches, boycotts, civil disobedience, sanctions, and public pressure through the use of mass media and international bodies. They also utilized Black religious and moral resources (such as rituals, music, art, religious and civic organizations, and cultural traditions) to empower people and sustain their movements. King and Tutu also advocated for black self-love and the raising of black consciousness.

Out of their deep awareness of the significance of power, both did not endorse any absolute form of pacifism, even in their advocacy of nonviolence.<sup>vii</sup> At the same time, because of their communal orientation, their use of power was not just instrumental but also communal. For them, power should be a liberating power that dismantles injustices and a communal power that creates a community. King and Tutu emphasized that the ultimate goal of using power is the community—not the humiliation and defeat of their opponents. King and Tutu rejected violence because it harmed the *imago Dei* of its targets and because reconciliation could not be achieved by violence. For King and Tutu, nonviolence was the method that met the moral demands of community and justice simultaneously because nonviolence is a collective exertion of power to achieve the goal of the community by removing injustice that stands in the way of the community.

### **Justice and Peace**

King's and Tutu's ideas of community, the *imago Dei*, and power shape their understanding of justice and peace. King and Tutu rejected a superficial understanding of peace and reconciliation which avoids confrontation with unjust social systems. For them, peace is never equivalent to the absence of conflicts, which can be easily created through the oppressor's forced acquiescence of the oppressed to unjust social structures and laws. Rather, justice is the precondition of peace; justice is indispensable for a genuinely peaceful community because it provides the fair terms and structures of mutual interactions and institutional arrangements in society, along with the protection of the basic rights of every person.

King and Tutu were neither anarchists nor moral relativists. Both believed in the moral order of the universe. The principles of justice, such as human rights, freedom, fairness, and equality, are universally binding because God placed them within the very structure of the universe (King, 1963, p.102; Tutu, 2004, p. 2).

However, true peace requires more than justice. Justice is necessary but it alone is not sufficient to achieve peace. In addition to justice, peace requires reconciliation (the removal of enmity) and love (mutual care and even sacrifice) among people. Genuine peace is possible only in a moral community that is just, fair, interdependent, and mutually caring, especially for the poor and the marginalized. Both King and Tutu understood that racism is not merely the problem of unjust laws, but also that of inner attitudes that are revealed in the form of fear, inferiority, arrogance, and greed. The inner attitudes are not enforceable; they can be changed not by laws, but by the spiritual and moral transformation of people. Toward this end, they emphasized religious and civic education, the building of mutual trust, and the practice of forgiveness and compassion.

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King and Tutu's dialectical approach to justice and peace is found in King's idea of desegregation and integration and Tutu's work as the head of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

**1) King**

King was born and grew up in the South where segregation was the law. The law required the separation between races in every social area of life: residential areas, education, public transportation, restaurants, pools, waiting rooms, cemeteries, etc. Its aim was to protect white privilege and power through the reassertion of white supremacy.

In his struggle against racism, King advocated not only desegregation but also the integration of all race groups. Desegregation aims at judicial changes, while integration focuses on the spiritual-moral transformation of people toward mutual acceptance and friendship. For King, integration meant the establishment of a social life that was free from fear, alienation, and enmity and filled with care, respect, and friendship (1986d, p.118, 123).

In King's ethics, desegregation emphasized the political aspect of human life (namely, justice), while integration was concerned with the communal dimension (namely, reconciliation and love).<sup>viii</sup> Dismantling the unjust system of segregation required massive collective actions of people, such as marches, sit-ins, and civil disobedience, to put pressure on political leaders and public opinion of the nation, while integration equally necessitated ongoing, persistent efforts of healing, mutual understanding, and friendship between different races through of religious and civic education and fellowship. For King, the two were inseparable in terms of the means-end relationship; whereas integration was upheld as the goal, desegregation indicated a necessary means toward it.

Through his dialectical approach, King attempted to move beyond the ethics of both evangelicals who advocated the change of race relationships through interpersonal reconciliation and individual moral education, and liberals who focused their efforts on legislative achievements. King claimed (1986a)

There are those who contend that integration can come only through education, for no other reason than that morals cannot be legislated. I choose, however, to be dialectical at this point. It is neither education nor legislation; it is both legislation and education. I quite agree that it is impossible to change a man's internal feelings merely through law. But this really is not the intention of the law. The law does not seek to change one's internal feelings; it seeks rather to control the external effects of those internal feelings. For instance, the law cannot make a man love—religion and education must do that—but it can control his efforts to lynch (p.142).

That is to say, the judicial change of desegregation was indispensable because it regulated racist behaviors and violence. Yet, in order to build a good community, the judicial change alone was not sufficient. There should be mutual acceptance and reconciliation among people through repentance and forgiveness, which King's idea of integration embodied. King believed that genuine peace is possible only in the beloved community, which is just, fair, mutually caring, and interdependent.

## **2) Tutu**

This dialectic approach to justice and peace is also found in Tutu's work as the head of the TRC. Similar to King's ethics, if the anti-apartheid movement was directed toward overcoming injustice, the work of the TRC was pointed toward reconciliation. The TRC's task was to investigate human rights abuses and political crimes committed both by supporters and opponents of apartheid between 1960 and May 10, 1994. To fulfill the task, the Commission granted amnesty to those who truthfully confessed their complicity in human rights violations. It punished those who were not truthful.

For the TRC, confession of crimes served as the minimal requirement of justice and the means toward reconciliation. Tutu believed that in order for South Africa to move toward a rainbow nation, it required national healing and reconciliation. To achieve the goal, the TRC relied on the public confession of the perpetrators to prevent the recurrence of similar heinous violent human rights violations and to heal alienated relationships. The idea was to grant the perpetrators the opportunity to start fresh in a new society. This means that the TRC, grounded in *ubuntu*, pursued restorative justice rather than retributive justice.

Critics said that the TRC was unfair to the victims, for once amnesty was granted, the victims lost their rights to litigate the perpetrators in civil courts to seek compensation for their damages. Tutu acknowledged that the TRC was not perfect, but he believed it was the best form of justice that South Africans could achieve under the limitation of available information and resources. Such litigations are typically prolonged, exhausting, and expensive. There would also be no guarantee that the litigations would lead to the discovery of the truth because the apartheid system had already destroyed most criminal evidence, or would conspire to cover up the crimes, thus making it difficult to prove the cases beyond a reasonable doubt. Instead of wasting limited resources on endless litigations, the TRC decided to use the limited resources to rebuild the nation.

## **Conclusion**

In fighting against the racist systems of white Americans and Afrikaners, the Christian faith and African communal spirituality of King and Tutu have served as the resources of both their critique of racism (resistance) and the vision of a new community (reconciliation), while providing sustaining power for their struggles.<sup>ix</sup> Importantly, King and Tutu applied their communal ethics to other major social justice issues as well. King's prophetic ministry included the critique of militarism (e.g., the Vietnam War) and classism (e.g., the Poor People's Campaign), just as Tutu applied the ethics of *ubuntu* to economic justice, Israel's occupation of Palestine, and women's and children's rights (Tutu, 1982). For them, a new society is an inclusive, mutually caring and sharing society where everyone is welcome and where the worth of human dignity is before profits. Based on their communal vision and the *imago Dei*, King and Tutu called for a redistribution of wealth and equitable sharing of resources, while encouraging every member to contribute to the common good of society rather than being occupied with the pursuit of self-interest and self-aggrandizement.

By locating their quest for justice and peace in a communal worldview, while acknowledging the cold reality of power, King and Tutu avoided naïve moral utopianism and Machiavellian utilitarianism. They rejected the advocacy of justice and peace that is not supported by collective



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power because such an attempt is empty and powerless against the entrenched injustices. At the same time, they rejected a naked pursuit of self-interest and power at the expense of a community (shalom) and justice because such a pursuit is narrow and utilitarian, and justifies any means to achieve the goal.

In this respect, King and Tutu's approach is different from secular liberal theories of justice and peace which are shaped by the Enlightenment ideas of rationality, individual rights, and contractualism but ignore the importance of a communal vision, love ethics, and spiritual practices for justice and reconciliation.—Thanks to communal cosmology, their ideas of justice and peace are not abstract or analytic but relational and organic. Furthermore, justice is not only retributive but restorative, and peace is not merely the absence of conflicts, but the presence of friendship and kinship. Both are fulfilled in a community.

Someone might ask: How would their faith-rooted quest for justice and peace work in a more secularized society such as the US? <sup>x</sup> Despite the change in time, their ethics of justice and peace is still relevant for our fight against classism, corruption, militarism, sexism, and other forms of social evils. A globalizing society needs an inclusive moral vision that encompasses every human being and the planet and ethics that respects human dignity. Today, the world is globalized to the extent it affects our everyday life. The crises that humanity faces today—the pandemic, nuclear threat, climate change, and migration, to name a few—are global in nature. At the same time, the dignity of the poor and the marginalized are severely undermined amid these crises. The Covid-19 pandemic and worsening global warming exemplify the necessity of the global vision most painfully. These crises cannot be solved by one nation, religion, or race alone.

In this time of global crises, King's and Tutu's faith-rooted, communal ethics of justice and peace offers the direction for humanity. They implore us to work together to create a global society that is just, fair, compassionate and caring that goes beyond the current culture of ruthless competition, the endless pursuit of self-interest, and exclusive forms of tribalism. They urge us to put human dignity above material gains (profits) and to protect the dignity of the poor and the marginalized through the equitable sharing of resources. They beseech every person and every nation to collaborate for the common good of humanity and the planet.

Much of the future of humanity will depend on how the current generation listens to their prophetic voices and follows their steps.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Although King may not have been conscious of this heritage, he grew up in the African American community in the South that was still permeated by this heritage.

<sup>ii</sup> For King and Tutu, racism was not merely a political, legal issue but also a spiritual and moral issue that goes to the heart of white worldview and self-identity.

<sup>iii</sup> The *imago Dei* is a Latin phrase that means the image of God; it is the belief that every person is created in God's image.

<sup>iv</sup> The awareness of African spiritual heritages was more immediate and explicit for Tutu than for King. Recognizing their significance for contextualized Christian theology and political struggles, Tutu developed a highly sophisticated and cogent form of theology: *ubuntu* theology. Although King was less self-conscious of the importance of African spiritual heritages upon African Americans, one still sees their influence in his theology, ethics, and spiritual practices.

<sup>v</sup> King's and Tutu's African communal cosmology is intimately related to the Christian idea of love (*agape*) in terms of their emphasis on the interdependence and solidarity of the entire humanity in God as the Creator. The idea of love offers a theological justification for their communal anthropology. Their notion of love indicates less a romantic feeling or a warm sentiment than a moral desire and power to build a community. Love is concretely practiced in the form of forgiveness and reconciliation—the removal of enmity and the restoration of friendship. As the creative good will toward others, in short, love indicates a drive towards the unity of human beings in God.

<sup>vi</sup> For King and Tutu, the *imago Dei* is inseparable from their theology (God) and sociology (society).

<sup>vii</sup> For example, King said (1986c): "War, I felt horrible as it is, might be preferable to surrender to a totalitarian system. But more and more I have come to the conclusion that the potential destructiveness of modern weapons of war totally rules out the possibility of war ever serving again as a negative good" (39). He also quite heavily relied on the federal authority (and the National Guard through it) to protect nonviolent resisters from the violence of white mobs. He criticized police brutality, but never advocated for its abolishment. He accepted a moral, legitimate use of force by the police. In this respect, he was not an absolute pacifist, nor an anarchist.

On the other hand, Tutu warned (Berger, 2021), "I am a man of peace, but not a pacifist." "I will never tell someone to pick up a gun," he said in another interview "But I will pray for the man who picks up the gun, pray that he will be less cruel than he might otherwise have been, because he is a member of the community. We are going to have to decide: If this civil war escalates, what is our ministry going to be?"

<sup>viii</sup> King's ideas of desegregation and integration was the reiteration of his dialectical view of the relationship between justice and love. Desegregation is the implementation of justice through the deliverance of the oppressed (people of color in this case) from injustices (racial oppression) by reclaiming and restoring their freedom, dignity, and rights under a new legal structure that guarantees fair treatment and equality. On the other hand, integration embodies love: reconciled and harmonious relations among people based on justice, with the special care for the poor and the marginalized. To build the beloved community, both justice and love are necessary.

<sup>ix</sup> African American churches and South African black churches were at the center of King's and

Tutus' grassroots organizing and movements. Worship experiences at those churches were highly spiritual, therapeutic, and communal, providing people with the necessary succor and courage to persevere despite the ongoing challenges of racial oppression. King and Tutu heavily relied on these religious and cultural qualities in mobilizing people and reinvigorating their commitments for the movements.

<sup>x</sup> One cannot deny that their faith-guided strategy was effective because the majority of whites in the US and South Africa were self-identified Christians.

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