

Why, as Christians, We Must Oppose Racism¹

By Archbishop Desmond Tutu

The following is the text of a speech delivered by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in the Great Hall, Parliament House, Canberra on December 6th, 1994, as the inaugural Dunrossil Lecture. The Dunrossil Lectureship was established by St John's Anglican Church, Reid, Australian Capital Territory in memory of Viscount Dunrossil, former Governor General of Australia. Lord Dunrossil is buried in the churchyard at St John's. The [St. Mark's] Review is grateful to the Church and to its Rector, the Venerable David Oliphant, for permission to publish the lecture.

Somebody once remarked that we learn from history that in fact we do not learn from history. It is quite staggering that we should read of attacks by louts on foreign workers in Germany simply because they are of a different race. One would have thought that with the memory of the Holocaust fresh in their minds the last thing Germans would want to be guilty of is a resurgence of racism. Unfortunately, neo-Nazism has indeed reared its ugly head with the vicious attacks on *Gastarbeiters* by youths who have no compunction about evoking the memory of Adolf Hitler. We should be careful though that we do not become hysterical and my formulations earlier would be perilously close to the kind of generalisation that can easily evoke a panic-stricken reaction. We should in soberness give thanks for the fact that tens of thousands of decent Germans have marched in massive demonstrations to protest against this new socio-pathological phenomenon. But we have sadly to admit that there is a new xenophobia abroad. It is a characteristic of periods of transition when familiar landmarks have been shifted or removed, landmarks that have served to help people find their bearings, that almost inevitably there is a nostalgia for the security that comes from having simplistic answers to complex questions and a desire for an absolute certainty.

No wonder there is a growth in fundamentalism, especially religious fundamentalism, especially among Christians and Muslims. These persons are upset that there are often no straightforward answers to the many ambivalences and ambiguities that characterise life as most people experience it. They are impatient with the diversity to be found as in a plurality of ideologies, political options, religious faiths, cultures and ethnic groups. They hanker after homogeneity. They spew forth intolerant views about issues relating to, for example, human sexuality and particularly homosexuality, about abortion, about interfaith dialogue, about morality, etc. Some of the more horrendous manifestations of this intolerance of diversity are being seen in what has euphemistically been called "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia and the awful genocide in Rwanda.

The circumstances obtaining today provide fertile ground for the growth of racism. When the economy is not doing too well and people are competing for scarce jobs in a time of high unemployment and recession and therefore of an increase in crime, then they start looking for scapegoats. Foreigners and those who do not resemble the majority in one way or another become ready-made candidates for bearing the blame for

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whatever is going wrong. Hitler was cunning in using the prevailing difficult economic situation of the 'day to blame the Jews for the misery that the true Aryan Germans were experiencing. He was on an unbeatable ticket. Nazism, which we all today condemn as so obviously evil and immoral, spread like wildfire, much to the surprise and chagrin of many of us:

We must be ever vigilant because racism is again on the rise and there are those who don't think it is such a bad thing because it can be made to seem innocuous, dressed in the garb of ethnic pride and a legitimate self-determination. It has been possible for a Mr. Duke, known to have been a high-ranking member of the Ku Klux Klan, to be quite unbelievably a credible candidate running for the Governorship of Louisiana. His racist antecedents did not rule him out automatically and categorically as one might have expected. He put up a very good show at the time. And that is quite, quite scandalous, because my dear friends, racism can never be benign. It can never be respectable. It was racism that blotted the world's copybook by giving us slavery—doing commerce in fellow human beings.

It was racism that produced the awful ghastliness of the Holocaust in which millions of Jews were killed after being subjected to the most appalling suffering and degradation. There was nothing benign and nice about putting children into gas ovens after transporting them in inhuman conditions in cattle trucks.

It was racism which produced the awful excesses of the Ku Klux Klan whose emblem was a flaming cross—almost the ultimate blasphemy, and sacrilege—when they made life a sheer hell for blacks through their lynchings. There was nothing benign or respectable about that.

It was racism that gave the world apartheid where people in the land of their birth did not vote just because of the colour of their skin; where children were stunted psychologically, emotionally, intellectually, and physically, not accidentally, but by deliberate government policy; where to oppose such a system earned you a banning order that consigned you to a twilight existence as a prisoner at your own expense, or detention without trial, where you might undergo unspeakable torture, or you died mysteriously in detention, as did Steve Biko. Or you served an unconscionably long prison sentence for having the audacity to claim that you too were human: that you had fundamental inalienable rights: that you had a dignity that should not so callously be trodden underfoot and rubbed in the dust—as had Nelson Mandela, spending 27 years in incarceration, and many others. Or to have to go into exile as happened to Oliver Tambo who, like so many others, was in exile for over 30 years. Or you were the target of sinister hit-squads.

No, my friends, there has been nothing nice and benign and respectable about the racism that was called apartheid. It was, accompanied by harassment of innocent people, by their vilification and denigration in the State-controlled electronic media and in some of what were sycophantic lick-spittle newspapers which were the apartheid Government's lap dogs. Let me add that there were undoubtedly courageous journalists and newspapers which helped to keep the torch of freedom flickering. But the point I want to stress is that there is a growing racism abroad and it must be opposed with all the vehemence and determination at our disposal, because racism can ultimately never be benign, nice and respectable. It is always evil, immoral and ultimately vicious and not to be tolerated by Christians and people of goodwill as well as those of other faiths. I want now to show that racism on all scores is immoral, evil, unbiblical and unchristian.

Racism claims that what invests us, each person, with worth is some extraneous arbitrary biological or other attribute, skin colour or ethnicity. and because from the nature of the case such a attribute cannot be a universal phenomenon, possessed by all persons indiscriminately, it thus gives an exalted position to the class that possesses it, to the exclusion and detriment of those others who do not possess it. It is the “Open Sesame” to an exclusive club, access to which gives all kinds of privileges and benefits denied those who have not ‘been fortunate to gain admission. The attribute, without any necessary intrinsic value, endows those who have it with an automatic superiority to all those out there who do not possess it. Whether you deserve it, merit it or not, as soon as you belong to the privileged group, you have it made. You do not have to struggle or sweat for the status. That is yours automatically. To us all it seems so odd, indeed thoroughly absurd, that this should be the case, but even someone as smart as Aristotle thought that human personality was in fact not a universal phenomenon because in his view slaves were not persons. .

I do not need to demonstrate at any great length the utter absurdity of the racist position. The Bible and Christianity teach a categorically different position. What endows the human person with worth is not this or that attribute. No, it is the fact that each person is created in the image and likeness of God. This is something that is so for every single human being. It is something that is intrinsic, as coming with the package of being human. It does not depend on status, on gender, on race, on culture. It does not matter whether you are beautiful or not so beautiful, whether you are rich or poor, educated or uneducated. This is something that is true for every human person.

And what does it mean to be created in the image and likeness of God? In the ancient world the sovereign could not be present simultaneously everywhere in his domain, so he caused statues to be set up around his realm. These were his image and likeness and his subjects paid homage and reverence to the statue as to the monarch himself. Thus the assertion that we are each created in God’s image and likeness is a staggering claim which the Bible makes on our behalf. It is to claim that each one of us is in fact God’s representative, God’s stand-in, God’s viceroy. The Old Testament prohibited any images to be made of the God the Israelites worshipped because there could really be only this one—the human person.

And to be God’s representative means that you have a worth that is lasting and intrinsic. My friends, I have often said that we do not need political or other ideologies to oppose apartheid. They would not have been radical enough. The Bible turns out to be the most revolutionary thing around in a situation of injustice and oppression. Racism opposes God. It is contrary to the Bible. It is contrary to the tenets of Christian faith. In the Christian faith we are taught that each one of us is a temple of the Holy Spirit, we are tabernacles indwelt by the most holy and blessed Trinity. In some of our churches, you have a sanctuary lamp that alerts the worshipper that the Reserved Sacrament is kept in the tabernacle. We then genuflect as we pass the tabernacle and do not just reverence the altar. Strictly, if we took our theology seriously we would not just greet each other. No, we would genuflect before each other because we would be acknowledging that we are God’s viceroys, tabernacles indwelt by God.

Therefore, to treat one such person as if they were less than this is not just evil, which it undoubtedly is, it is not just painful, as it often must be for the victim, but it is downright blasphemous and sacrilegious. For it is really like spitting in the face of God. Thus racism is evil, immoral, unbiblical and unchristian comprehensively and without remainder.

I have sometimes said. “Suppose we did not use skin colour as what gave people their imagined racial superiority, but because I have a large nose, we were to say it is a large nose.” And so instead of signs saying “Whites Only” for this or that facility, we said “Large Noses Only.” If you wanted to use a toilet and you had a small nose you would experience some inconvenience. In South Africa there was a time when certain universities were reserved for Whites Only. Academic ability was not the first necessary admission qualification. Suppose then we had said the university was reserved for “Large Noses Only”—if you had a small nose then you had to apply to the Minister for Small Nose Affairs for permission to attend the university. That is patently so utterly ridiculous. What does the size of my nose tell you of any significance about me? It cannot let you know whether I am intelligent or warmhearted or humorous. And yet, my friends, we have often used an equally arbitrary and uninformative criterion to form judgements about what kind of life people would be allowed to live, what jobs they might be permitted to do, where they could live, whom they might marry—unspeakable anguish and injustice have been visited on those created in God’s image because of our folly.

Christians have no option. In the face of racism they must stand up and be counted as part of a determined and passionate opposition. Not to oppose this evil is indeed to disobey God.

Persons made for community

Racism, because it classifies people on the basis of what are biological and other irrelevancies, splits the human family up into mutually exclusive and antagonistic camps. It claims that we are made for separation, for apartness, for alienation. The different races should not mix except in unavoidable circumstances which are usually strictly controlled, preferably when the member of the purportedly inferior group is in a servile position vis-a-vis the one from the imagined superior caste. Normally the former should always be ostracized as untouchables described in derogatory and self-reinforcing and self-fulfilling stereotypes. Otherwise there should ideally be separate residential areas, separate schools, hospitals and clinics, even separate churches, separate public transport or separate parts on the same bus. Yes, and even separate cemeteries. There must be no miscegenation. Without batting an eyelid, racists have used biblical texts prohibiting mixing as justification for prohibiting racial mixing. That is a remarkable giveaway about what they really think of their “inferior” compatriots—that they are not really as human as the perpetrators of racism.

Others have tried to find a biblical justification of racism’s obsession with separation and discrimination in the story of the Tower of Babel, where God declared that human beings will be separate and scattered, unable to communicate since they cannot understand one another’s languages, because God has confused the languages. This interpretation ought not really to be taken seriously since it is such a bizarre exegesis, except that so many did believe they had biblical support for their unbiblical practice that we have to point out two very obvious points about that story. Originally, God had not intended to confuse human tongues. He was compelled into this action as punishment for the human sin of presumptuousness in wanting to scale heaven and assault the precincts of God. It is odd in the extreme to claim divine punishment as what God had intended from the beginning to be the lot of humankind. Second, for Christians the story of the Tower of Babel is considered to have been reversed in the story of the first Christian Pentecost where St Luke deliberately and of set purpose describes the ingathering of the people of the oikoumene—the inhabited world of that day—in the list of the nations assembled in Jerusalem and by stressing that these people from different nations heard the Good News preached by the Apostles each in his own tongue. They understood and they were gathered into a new community, the followers of Jesus Christ.

The Bible tells of profound truths through imaginative stories such as those in Genesis 1–11. In the delightful story of the Garden of Eden, Adam is pictured as enjoying an idyllic existence. Everything is lovely in the garden. No, not quite God says, “It is not good for man to be alone.” And so God asks Adam to choose a mate from among the animals which come in procession before him. God asks, “What about this one?” Adam says “Nope!” “What about this one?” “Not on your life!” And then God decides to put Adam to sleep and out of his rib forms that delectable creature Eve and when Adam awakes he exclaims, “Wow—that’s just what the doctor ordered!”

This lovely story tells us that we are really made for togetherness, for family, for communion, for fellowship. In our African idiom we say “a person is a person through other persons.” None of us comes into the world fully formed. We would not know how to think or walk or speak as human beings unless we learned it from other human beings. We need other human beings to help us to be human. The solitary isolated human being really is a contradiction in terms. We are made for interdependence, for complementarity. I have gifts which you do not have and you have gifts that I do not have. God is smart for He does not make us too self-sufficient so that we should know our need for one another. The totally self-sufficient person, if ever there could be one, is sub-human. We have our own gifts and that makes us unique, but the first law of our being is that we are made for interdependence. We are made to exist in a delicate network of interdependence with our fellow human beings and with the rest of God’s creation. When we break that fundamental law then all kinds of things go horribly badly wrong.

Not even the world’s superpowers can exist in total self-sufficiency. They need other nations if they are to survive, hence concerns about balance of payment. God wants us to know that on a personal, national and international level we are made for family, the human family, God’s family, and anything that undermines this global human solidarity is almost certainly bad and perhaps even evil—immoral. If we recognized and lived by the fact that we are one family, how could we ever justify the huge and obscene amounts that we spend in our defense budgets, budgets of death and destruction, when a minute fraction of those budgets would ensure that God’s children everywhere would have a supply of clean water, adequate and affordable health care, proper education and housing, and a secure and safe environment? That is why we are striving to persuade the new democratic government of Mr. Mandela to extricate itself as quickly as it can from the arms trade which our Synod of Bishops recently described as obscene. It is quite unbearable to think that South African arms were used in Rwanda, and may be being deployed in the Sudan. In ending apartheid and the manner of its ending, South Africans have come to occupy the moral high ground. This will be undermined and totally subverted by our involvement in the arms trade. Those who supported our struggle are the self-same people campaigning for global peace and an end to the traffic in arms. South Africa’s trade is largely within so-called Third World countries whose rulers have tended to be repressive and totalitarian, using scarce resources to maintain armies that do not defend the citizenry from external aggression, but help to keep in power corrupt undemocratic elites who have enriched themselves at the expense of the majority of the people.

God was in Christ

Racism postulates that human beings from different races are ultimately irreconcilable, that humanity is inexorably divided up into fiercely hostile ethnic camps and the best thing to contain the inevitable ethnic conflict that will result is to keep the racial groups apart. That was the basis of the so-called Jim Crow laws in the USA. That was why Jews had to wear yellow arm bands with the Star of David embossed on them to

identify them and to keep them in a kind of quarantine from their superior Aryan compatriots. That was why apartheid was spawned.

But what does the Bible and Christianity teach? We could say that reconciliation is really the heart of the Gospel message. Therefore to say that people are fundamentally irreconcilable is to deny not just this or that peripheral Christian verity. It is really to deny the central tenet of Christianity. Jesus said of Himself. "I, if I be lifted up, will draw all to me." Saint Paul describes the commission of apostles as that of ambassadors to proclaim the central message that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, and to them had been entrusted the ministry of reconciliation. The Epistle to the Ephesians teaches that it was God's intention to bring to a unity, a veritable cosmic unity, all things in Christ, things in heaven and on earth.

Sin is basically in and of itself divisive and fissiparous. It breaks up and alienates. God's activity in Jesus Christ is the precise opposite. Its forces are centripetal, drawing all into a *koinonia*. Jesus becomes our peace who has broken down all 'sorts of middle walls of all kinds of separation and makes of all peoples one people, for in Him there 'is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for we are indeed one in Him.

Thus racism is the ultimate denial of the Gospel and it cannot be but that all believers would oppose vehemently this false gospel that would have people place their hope of salvation in a pseudo-gospel. Saint Paul declared that those who would subvert the gospel are anathema. He, more than most, recognized that ethnicity could not really be set up as a necessary condition or bar to salvation. That was, what was so revolutionary about his teaching and what ultimately led to his death. He was being true to the best Jewish and biblical traditions. Abraham was blessed so that he could be a blessing to all peoples. Israel Was chosen not for her own glorification, but for the 'sake of the nations, to be a light to the gentiles according to deuterio-Isaiah. The books of Ruth and Jonah were composed to counter the chauvinist particularism of, for instance, Ezra and Nehemiah.

It is interesting to note the tension in the Gospel according to Saint Matthew between a Jewish particularism and the broader universalisms inherent in the Gospel. Jesus can say that he has been sent to none but the lost sheep of Israel and yet the Gospel which records those words ends with the commission: "Go therefore to all nations to make them my disciples. Baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teach them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Mt 28:19-20).

It has been observed that monotheism logically demands the recognition that all are ultimately the children of the one God and therefore form one family. What other conclusion can flow from the fact that we say, "Our Father"? Racism attacks the foundations of the biblical faith and the heart of Christianity. For that reason it is unbiblical, immoral, and unchristian.

Evil consequences from evil causes

Moralists will sometimes, when a little uncertain about the ethical quality of an action or policy, examine its consequences. If the consequences are immoral or evil, then the particular act will be adjudged to be immoral. In the opening of the paper I referred to the awfulness of slavery, to the suffering meted out unjustly to God's children in the honor of the Holocaust. I pointed to the agony suffered by blacks in the persecutions and lynchings carried out by groups such as the Ku Klux Klan in the southern USA, and alluded to the

unnecessary pain inflicted on God's children by the apartheid policies of successive governments in South Africa. For instance, in the years since 1948 over 3.5 million people were forcibly moved from their traditional homes to satisfy the racist obsessions of apartheid. They were dumped, as you dump rubbish or you dump things, in poverty-stricken barren resettlement camps in the unviable Bantustan homelands.

I once visited such a resettlement dumping ground and saw a little girl with her widowed mother and a sister in their hovel. I asked her, "Does your mother get a grant or a pension?" and she replied, "N.r." "What do you do for food?" "We borrow food." "Have you returned the food you borrowed?" "No." "What do you do when you can't borrow food?" "We drink water to fill our stomachs."

"We drank water to fill our stomachs" in a land that was a net, exporter of food. Children were starving not because there was no food, not accidentally, but by deliberate government policy. At the time I swore I would tell her story everywhere in the world I could until apartheid was destroyed. I am telling it only so that we should never forget the totally unnecessary suffering inflicted on God's children in the name of racism. I tell it here so that we should never suffer from a convenient amnesia and ever reckon that racism could somehow be a benign thing, that it could be made respectable. I tell it here so 'that it will never happen again to God's children anywhere in the world. Racism is ghastly and evil and immoral and we must stand up against it and oppose it with every fibre of our being.

Economic Nonsense of Racism

Racism makes no sense morally or politically. Wherever it is practiced there will always be strife and turmoil because there are those who are being ill-treated and oppressed. Even a wonderful country like the USA knows that there is always tension lurking just below the surface and, despite all appearances to the contrary, the situation is always volatile and it does not take a great deal to provoke a racial outburst. There are frustrations and anger and bitterness which are not always acknowledged in decent society. But we know that there are subtle forms of racism even in the most egalitarian of societies, and they spawn the black power and black consciousness movements. Why are people so fascinated there with the O. J. Simpson case? In no other situation would they consider that an entire racial group was on trial and yet when a black person gets into that kind of trouble, it is not just an individual. No, it is his people who are also involved. They say of black people that they are really in a "no win" situation. If one of them succeeds at whatever they undertake, then they say "Oh well, he/she is an exception." And if he fails, then they fairly gloat, "What did you expect?"

But racism does not make sense even economically. Generally it means that blacks, those discriminated against, will have the thin end of the stick. They will usually live in the most depressing and unsalubrious areas of our cities—that is, the slums with their squalor, their lack of facilities, their general degradation and deprivation. Now you don't have to be too smart to be able to predict that many of these are going to drop out of school, many of these are going to be delinquents abusing alcohol and drugs, many of these are going to swell our prison population, many of these will have the highest divorce rate, and the largest number of broken and single family homes and teenage pregnancies will come from here. It has all the inevitability of self-fulfilling prophecies. It actually has very little to do with the colour of a person's skin. It is a socio-pathological phenomenon that happens when the socioeconomic circumstances are those of deprivation and squalor as found in the ghettos. Society then has to pay for all these casualties through welfare programs and in maintaining our prison systems, etc. Whichever way we look at it, ultimately it will cost society dearly.

Why don't we try to approach it from the positive side of investing in people to help them develop their God-given potential? Why don't we discriminate in their favour so that they don't become casualties and thus become a drag on and a charge to the public exchequer? Why don't we try to make them more productive persons who have a dignity that we acknowledge and respect, who have a culture and *Weltanschauung* which are, yes, different, but certainly not inferior, who have a place in the sun and who, if given the chance, will make a wonderful contribution to the body politic?

You in this country have sometimes been castigated for your racist policies, as with your "Whites Only" immigration policy of old, and that has been fully justified. We give thanks to God the many Australians acknowledged that there was something wrong. That is an important step on the way to finding a solution. I want to commend you for your positive efforts to deal justly with the claims of your indigenous peoples. I want to commend you for seeking to let them speak for themselves through their authentic and recognized spokespersons. I want to commend you for being so forthright about their land rights and want to urge you to work for their rehabilitation, for their restitution and compensation so that your wonderful society, which gave us such magnificent support during our struggles against apartheid, will be seen to be based on justice, equity and fairness to all Australians regardless of race, gender or creed.

God bless you richly always.