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Interviewee: Archbishop Desmond Tutu Session #1

Interviewer: Mary Marshall Clark Date: September 15, 1999

Q: Archbishop Tutu, you resigned from being a teacher in 1957 in South Africa, and you went into a religious life. Could you tell me about your motivations for that?

Tutu: Dr. [Hendrik Frensch] Verwoerd introduced what was called Bantu Education, which was a travesty of education for black kids, and I really didn't want to be part of a process where I knew that our children were being prepared for perpetual serfdom, and so I didn't have too many options, and wondered whether perhaps I shouldn't consider ordination training. Mercifully for me, the Bishop of Johannesburg at that time accepted me for ordination training, and that is why I left teaching, which was my first love.

Q: During those years, in the 1960s, the late fifties and early sixties, by '61, the ANC [African National Congress] had all been put in jail or left the country, and repression was very much in full force. At that time, how did you feel about the future of South Africa? Did you think there would be a possibility for freedom?

Tutu: Let me say that I don't think I was as politicized as kids are today, or the kids of 1976, who rose up against apartheid. I was aware of the passive resistance campaign of the ANC in the fifties, of the signing of the Freedom Charter in Cape Town. And then, of course, in 1960, the year when I was ordained to the Diaconate,

March of that year, Sharpeville happened, and I think many of us--that was a devastating episode when our bishop, the Bishop of Johannesburg, was deported back to England, and I think one was then beginning to become a great deal more politically conscious, and things looked very bleak.

I happened to, when I finished my studies in my ordination, to go to England with my family, and you got to be aware of the way people were feeling, that when Dr. Verwoerd was assassinated, my son, who was quite young then, when he saw the posters, he was out with his mother, shopping, yelled, I mean, with excitement, "Mommy, Mommy! They have killed Verwoerd!"

Q: And he knew that there was some possibility of hope.

Tutu: I suppose what he was saying was to articulate a deep frustration and anger, which was very widespread, that maybe things would change likely for the better, but things actually got horrendously worse from that moment on, right up to when freedom came. Apartheid just got more and more repressive. Many more of our people were being detained, others going into exile, and, of course, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has revealed the quite gruesome atrocities that were perpetrated to maintain apartheid, and, of course, also perpetrated by those who sought to oppose apartheid.

Q: I want to go back a little bit to your theological beliefs. Could you describe Ubuntu theology for me?

Tutu: Yes. On the whole, I think that, even with the training that I went to get at King's College, London, I was fairly traditional, and when I came back, I went to teach, and I was more or less regurgitating sort of Western theology. The change came over me, I believe, when I went to work for the World Council of Churches, for something called the Theological Education Fund [TEF], and were based in Bromley, London.

Amongst my colleagues were people from various parts of the world. One was someone from Latin America. I then encountered, for the first time, the heady stuff of liberation theology. The TEF worked under a mandate called contextualization, where you were saying, "You've got try and make, or help to make, the gospel relevant to its particular setting." It's the same thing as people used to call "indigenization," rooting the faith in the soil of whatever it might have been. This, as I say, was quite heady stuff and really began to make the scriptures come alive, and it was quite exhilarating.

So when one went back, as I did, when I was asked to become Dean of Johannesburg, there were not too many of us blacks in prominent positions, and it seemed then that I was being afforded a platform that didn't fall to too many of our people, and for some reason, too, the media were somehow willing me to succeed, and so I had the very great privilege of being in a fairly prominent position, where I might just be able to articulate the aspirations of our people.

It was then in 1975-'76 that I wrote to Mr. [Balthazar Johannes] Vorster, warning him, because I did have this very powerful foreboding that we were on the verge of a

catastrophe. We seemed to be about to have an explosion. I wrote seeking to warn him that there was still the possibility, if the government did something fairly dramatic and we gave things that were not too radical, really, as suggestions, about what to do. And he dismissed my letter contemptuously. In fact, he said he didn't think I had written it. [Laughter] And that was about May 1976. A few weeks later, June the 16th happened, when Soweto erupted. And South Africa has never been the same.

Q: When you say that South Africa was never the same after Soweto, could you say what you mean by that?

Tutu: Well, from that point on, it became quite clear that our people had had it up to their back teeth, as it were, and even more, it was the fact that we had a new generation. These kids were scared, really, of nothing. You know, I mean, you said to them about the police. So what? I mean, police dogs. They were being detained at a very early age and going into exile. They really showed us up, we, the older ones who had often thought that we were opposed to apartheid, but they were ready to lay down their lives. And it was quite--in a way it was quite devastating, to find that children were almost--they were not entirely fatalistic, but I mean, they said, "If I die and that is the price of freedom, I don't mind."

Well, you were thrilled also to know that there was something in us that could not be manipulated, because, you see, these were products of Bantu Education which had sought to produce docile kids, and what it produced was anything but. So it was

an affirmation of a theological verity that we are made for freedom, and that ultimately nothing can subvert that.

Of course, I mean, we've come almost full circle, with South Africa free, and sometimes we used to say, nobody will be free. White people won't be free until black people are free. It sounded often like it was sloganeering, and now white South Africans are discovering that the freedom that we were striving for was actually freedom for all South Africans, black and white, and they are reveling in the wonder of that freedom.

Q: Going back then a little bit to the struggle, between 1976 and 1979, when the student associations were forming, at that point did you believe then that freedom would come in your lifetime?

Tutu: I knew that it was going to come, yes. But in my lifetime, there were very many moments when that was doubtful. In fact, I often used to say, "Well, the things that one believed, you often held on to them by the skin of your teeth." The fact that this was God's world, that goodness would ultimately prevail, it was almost like whistling in the dark. There were many moments when you were saying it really to keep your own morale up, let alone seeking to boost the morale of our people.

But there was no doubt at all that it would ultimately be okay, that freedom would come, but when it came, it was so breathtakingly quick, you know, and even now, one has to keep pinching oneself to say, "Is this for real?" I sometimes go to our

Parliament when I'm feeling a little low, and I sit in the public gallery and I look down on all of those guys, and here are all these "terrorists" and now they are cabinet ministers, and the "chief terrorist" is the president at the time, Nelson Mandela, and you say, "God does have an incredible sense of humor."

Q: Going back to the struggle a little bit, back in time again, mid-1980s, even the beginning of the 1980s, the Carnegie Corporation had a long and very complicated history in South Africa. In fact, Mamphela Ramphele said to me, "I told Carnegie, 'You made a big mess in that White Poverty Study. It's time you come and clean it up.'" [Tutu laughs.] Could you talk a little bit and reflect on what you knew about the impact of Carnegie's presence in South Africa?

Tutu: Yes. I think that one of the important things to say whenever we talk about our struggle is how significant it was that we had the support of the international community, and I certainly would, myself, want to pay a very warm tribute to my friendship and the support that I had from David Hamburg.

The important thing about the Carnegie Corporation and its involvement was that it had established its credentials for the whites by its involvement in the poverty study amongst whites in the thirties, that they would not easily dismiss it as being a radical organization from the United States, if it came in, if it was supportive of, to the extent that it would be, of the struggle against apartheid. They couldn't easily just pooh-pooh it, because it had been important in establishing for them what the score was with regard to the poor white problem, because that had very significant impact, that poverty thing, on the psyche of whites.

It in many ways influenced their ideologies. It influenced what they did get to do ultimately with apartheid, because it's something that was, for them, an unforgettable experience, and they wished that nothing of the sort would happen to them again, and in many ways, you would say that what they then did was to ensure that white people never again found themselves in the kind of straits that they had in the thirties.

Carnegie helped to give the sort of scientific layover for that, and when we had the support of people like the president of Carnegie, who very unobtrusively, very quietly were putting pressures and making representations unobtrusively, quietly, those were important for us. Of course, the new study of poverty, how, for instance, I mean, women were, in particular, a constituency, the feminization of poverty, where many of the victims were women, and how it all sort of came about, that phenomenon in South Africa. I would want to say that when we write the history of our country, your corporation, Carnegie Corporation, will have a very significant niche and we are glad they were on our side. [Laughter]

Q: In terms of their support of legal centers, like the Center for Applied Legal Studies and the Legal Resources Center, what kind of impact did that sustained support of free legal clinics, do you think, have on apartheid in South Africa? Did it help to loosen the bonds of apartheid?

Tutu: Well, you know, I mean, that some of the most important of our legal persons were involved in the Legal Resources Center, because they were sort of the ones who

were ready to take on cases in the public-interest arena that not too many other people would have easily been ready to take on. And today, I mean, I talked about divine sense of humor. You know, when you think that the president of our Constitutional Court was a very, very important member of the Legal Resources Center, and you look at people like Fikile Bam, who is now president of the Land [Claims] Court, he, too, had, as it were, earned his spurs working in Legal Resources.

Those who supported institutions of that kind can see we did make a significant contribution. The people we helped are now playing a very prominent role in the new South Africa. Even where the assistance in money terms might well have been huge, it was also what you were doing for the morale of people.

It was important for us that institutions with the prestige of the Carnegie Corporation were on our side. I mean, I said it facetiously earlier on, but it was actually quite crucial for us when things were very dark.

Maybe it's good to suffer a little bit from amnesia, because if you keep thinking about the details of repression, such as have been revealed in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission proceedings, maybe you'd get mad. You'd really go crazy. And often we said we have to laugh, because if we didn't laugh, we'd cry so much. And for us it was important when repression was on the rampage. When, in fact, apartheid looked invincible, it was important for us to know that good people, good institutions, supported us. And to the extent that I'm able to do so, I do want to express, on behalf of our people, our very deep gratitude.

Q: Archbishop Tutu, back to the subject of your life and your role in South Africa. We've heard a lot in the press around the world about the role of the ANC and the great leaders like Mandela and so forth and so on. I'm very intrigued by the role that religion was able to play in the struggle in South Africa, since most of those people were out of the country, or underground, or in jail, or dead. Could you talk a little bit about that, particularly, the South African Council of Churches, and then your own role?

Tutu: One of the things, of course, is that Africans, you could almost say instinctively are religious. I once asked a president of one of the African countries, newly independent, which claimed to be Communist, I said, "Can you show me a real Marxist African who is atheistic?" And he had a great deal of difficulty producing one, because I think--and it isn't anything to be boasting about, but we do have a very deep sense of the spiritual, and so we are very deeply religious, which doesn't translate into, therefore, you are good. [Laughter] Because being religious doesn't mean you--religion can be good and can be bad, but it does mean that it plays a very, very important role in our lives, and it does, too, in the lives of the Afrikaners.

That was part of our strength that you could attack them on the basis of what they were saying about themselves. See, they were saying they were Christian and they said they were civilized, they were the last bastion of western civilization, so you were able to use their own words against themselves, and that gave us a leg up, as it were. And then it also meant that we belonged in a worldwide community. Many people aren't always aware of how important it was to know that we were being prayed for all over the place.

Q: I read one place where you had written that you heard that there was a woman who was praying for you in the [California] redwood forest at 2 a.m., and you thought if she were, then you were safe.

Tutu: Yes. The thing is, again, many people think that this is sort of a nebulous thing, but in fact it was a great deal more than this. I mean, it was almost a physical sensation you had, that you were part of this worldwide community. You had dear old ladies in remote, maybe, places, upholding you, and that was important. And to them, too, one would want to say a very big thank you, that the victory that we won was as much their victory as it was ours. That was the other thing about our faith. And then to discover the significance of the scriptures. One found that the scriptures were so utterly, utterly subversive of injustice and oppression. It was great fun, actually, being a Christian. I often told people that it was probably a great deal easier to be a Christian in South Africa in the days of the struggle, than being a Christian, say, in the United States, that the issues were so much more clear. You knew what you were standing for. It was to stand for the truth against the lies of apartheid, so that the ambivalences that are now present, even in the new South Africa, you didn't have. Things were very clear.

And to be able then to seek to uphold the fervor and the faith of our people, being able to say to them that we had a god who was not deaf, who was not blind, who didn't give advice from a safe distance. We had a god who enters the fiery furnace with you and doesn't say to you, "Well, you know, when you are exposed to fire, you ought to wear asbestos and protective--" No, God comes into the fire with you,

because this is Emmanuel. Incredible. I mean, it was almost as if the scriptures were a textbook written specifically for your particular situation. It's been an incredible privilege, a very incredible privilege.

Q: It also must have been incredible for you to be the co-chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and I know that Carnegie has chosen to support you in writing about that. If you could talk a little bit about that part -- that piece of the peace process, the reconciliation, the forgiveness.

Tutu: One of the things that has got to hit me very strongly is the fact that we human beings have an incredible capacity for evil, and what has emerged in the Commission, the things of which we are capable, and that is devastating, but that's just part of the story.

The other part of the story is the exhilaration. I mean, it is actually an extraordinary sense that you have. Yes, we have this capacity for evil, but even more wonderfully, we have a capacity for good. We have a capacity for being magnanimous, for being generous, for being willing, even after considerable suffering, willing to be forgiving. And that fills you with so much hope.

It's almost a paradox that having looked the beast in the eye, instead of being dumped in despair and despondency, one comes away from that experience with a glorious view of what human beings are, what human beings can do, that we are actually made for goodness, and that there is a great deal of good in the world. Yes, there's a lot of evil, but there's also a great deal of good, and not necessarily the good

that hits front pages. It's people doing things that don't get sensational headlines. People just being good, people just being caring. People being compassionate, often at great risk to themselves. I mean, when you read stories of genocide, it's almost always the awful things. We don't hear of how people in those situations were ready to risk their lives to protect someone who was at risk.

And I would want to be able to say maybe as one of the last things I'd love to do, as I ride out into the sunset, is to say to all of us, we were made by God to be like God and we're made for God, we're made for goodness, we're made for transcendence, we're made for beauty, we're made for truth, we're made for generosity, for laughter, for goodness.

Q: The book, *South Africa: The Cordoned Heart*, was also a very important part of the dissemination of the findings of the study of black poverty, and in it there's a picture of you at one of the removals, after having held a prayer vigil, and I just wanted to know the story behind that vigil a little bit--because it's interesting, the role of prayer and the role of vigils in this whole struggle. [Clark is referring to a picture that shows Tutu standing with residents of Mogopa after an all-night vigil to protest against removals in 1983. The photograph, included in *South Africa: The Cordoned Heart*, was taken by Wendy Schwegmann.]

Tutu: Those people were fantastic. I mean, we went to them because they had been told that they were going to be forcibly removed from their ancestral lands, and the government had done everything to harass them. They'd stopped their water supply, they'd demolished schools and clinics and churches and shops. These people were

just remarkable. I mean, we went--and often you thought you were going to be ministering to them, and you discover that it is people, who, by rights, ought to have been feeling that they are down there, who are the ones who minister to you and you had people praying through the night, and this old man praying, "God, hear us. God, we are your people," with no sense of hate or resentment. I mean, a strong sense of the presence of God and you felt very privileged to be there, you felt this is where you should be taking off your shoes because you're standing on holy ground. And now those people who were uprooted and removed from their home have returned. What vindication.

Q: I'll let you go.

Tutu: Mercy. [Laughter]

Q: [Laughter] I don't want you to hate me.

[END OF INTERVIEW]