

Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu as living icons of reconciliation

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The word icon is derived from the Greek word *eikon* meaning image. It is an artefact that embodies a set of mental associations that surpasses its functionality and immediate environment.¹ An icon must influence an individual's cultural experiences. They exist in one's perceptions and are created by means of communication. Persons have become icons post-hoc by being perceived to embody a particular vigorous set of associations of time, place and culture. The dictionary definitions of 'reconciliation' have underlay of restoration, of re-establishing things in their original state. The Oxford says: to make friendly again after an estrangement; make resigned; harmonize; make compatible, able to coexist.

1. Mandela's years before freedom in 1990

At the end of the previous millennium there was a type of a game to pick a 'man of the century' and one of the names kept cropping up was that of Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. There can be little doubt about Mandela's fingerprints on the past fifteen years. Mandela was born in 1918 to a polygamous family with ethnically royal status, and his mother converted to Christianity when he was seven. His subsequent mission school education was balanced by the oral history that he learned from his tribal elders. His father died when he was nine. He wrote in his autobiography that he is a Christian² and that will explain his convictions and actions later in life. He studied law and established the first black law firm in South Africa in 1952 with Oliver Tambo. From the start of his stay in Johannesburg he was a leader in the African National Congress (ANC) and became the president of the ANC in the Transvaal and later deputy president of the national ANC.

Ten years of struggle against the apartheid-regime in the fifties and early sixties inside the country and abroad lead to the Rivonia trial. This trial lasted nearly one year and Mandela conducted his own defence. In his historic speech at the end of the trial he said he was prepared to die for the struggle for freedom. Mandela and his comrades were sent to Robben Island, where they

¹ S. LAVERICK & K. JOHNSON: *The marketing of a consumer icon. Internet: information access company* (1999) 1.

² N.R. MANDELA: *Long walk to freedom. The autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (London 1995) 620.

were isolated from other prisoners, and subjected to hard labour and dehumanising treatment, so much so that he was even refused to attend the funerals of his mother and son. This must have had a very serious influence on the spirit of this remarkable person. The banning of Mandela had a significant outcome: it inadvertently increased his mythical status, making Mandela an unassailable icon of struggle against racial injustice.³ But how did an icon of struggle later become an icon of reconciliation?

The authorities tried to turn him into a non-person: he could not be quoted, no pictures of him were allowed and they hoped that he would disappear into the limbo of amnesia. But he became the world's most famous political prisoner and during those twenty-seven years he prepared himself physically, mentally, emotionally, philosophically and morally for the task he was ultimately destined for. He had numerous opportunities to be released, but every time on certain conditions that he could not accept due to his principles and loyalty to the struggle. When it was eventually decided that he would be released unconditionally, there were fears that the country would turn into turmoil. But although there was overwhelming reason for him to be a bitter and aggressive person, the years in prison and his personal wisdom changed him completely. On emerging from prison, he defined the task he had set himself as one of "reconciliation, of binding wounds of the country, of engendering trust and confidence".⁴

2. Mandela's reconciliation actions

In spite of the prophetic name he had been given at birth – Rolihlahla, 'troublemaker' – he is a person with integrity, sound principles and one with a soft spot for children. His dignity rooted in a profound sense of self, based not on contempt for one's enemy but on an acknowledgement of a shared humanity. It is a self-worth acknowledged with both pride and humility, and which from an early age prompted him to deal with others (including, specifically, whites, at a time when he was 'merely' a black) on an equal footing, and with what he himself called his "stubborn sense of fairness", never in terms of inferiority and superiority.⁵ From this springs an almost childlike reverence of life. He has a soft side in his personality, especially in his emphasis on the importance of children for the country's future. When Mandela tells a small child he has just met, "I am very honoured to meet you" it is neither posturing nor condescension, but the genuine feeling of a man whose greatest privation

³ M. PISSARA: *Nelson Rolihlabla Mandela: Profiles*, on

<http://www.africaexpert.org/people/profiles/profilesforperson2922.html> (2002).

⁴ A.P. BRINK: Mandela: a tiger for our time, in *Mail & Guardian* (4 June 1999) 16-24, p. 23.

⁵ *Ibidem* 23.

during the twenty-seven years in prison was the absence of children. Although he is not outspoken about his Christianity, his attitude and personal testimony in his autobiography that he is a Christian and has always been a Christian,⁶ shows that his actions and words flow from his conviction.

The philosophy upon which he based his conviction of reconciliation was that all men, even the most seemingly cold-blooded, have a core of decency, and that if their heart is touched, they are capable of changing. He said of two warders, warrant officers Swart and Brand: "Men like Swart and Brand reinforced my belief in the essential humanity even of those who had kept me behind bars for the previous twenty-seven and a half years."⁷ Despite his twenty-seven years in prison at the hands of the former apartheid government, with its cabinet and parliament made up of exclusively whites, nothing can move him from the belief that all people were born equal, regardless of race, colour or creed, and should, therefore, be treated as such. Mandela believes that through reconciliation, racism can be eliminated. He himself has unreservedly reconciled with some of his former captors.⁸ Therefore, after his victory in the first democratic election in 1994, he wanted a true government of national unity.⁹

Mandela believed that the struggle could be best pushed forward through negotiations, because otherwise both sides would soon be plunged into a dark night of oppression, violence and war. This would be extremely sensitive, because both sides regarded diplomatic discussions as a sign of weakness and betrayal. Mandela chose to tell no one of his fellow comrades what he was about to do, a step that was very risky because his colleagues could turn their backs on him. He mentioned that he was obligated to obtain permission from the ANC leadership first before embarking on such a radical initiative. But he was also well aware of the fact that the ANC would never consent. And so he had to place his own future at risk, knowing that if the endeavour failed any future role he might have hoped to play would be forfeited.¹⁰ "There are times when a leader must move out ahead of the flock, go off in a new direction, confident that he is leading his people the right way."¹¹

In the spirit of reconciliation Mandela has the extraordinary capacity to resolve conflicts. First, there is respect and understanding for each group's position, as well as for the distress and anger that has arisen. In the second place he exhibits a willingness to resolve differences through negotiation, seeking a resolution that is both just and reasonable. Thirdly, he subscribed to

⁶ MANDELA: *Long walk to freedom* 620.

⁷ *Ibidem* 672.

⁸ K. NYATSUMBA: Let's reconcile and fight racism, in *Daily news* (27 July 2000) 22.

⁹ MANDELA: *Long walk to freedom* 743.

¹⁰ M. DANDALA: Versoening in SA. Dialoog is nie lafhartigheid nie, in *Beeld* (18 June 2000) 8.

¹¹ MANDELA: *Long walk to freedom* 627.

the principle of being prepared for mutual acceptance and cooperation in a spirit of humanity, wisdom and economic and social practicality, not denying the history that has brought each side to the point of collision, but not allowing it to obstruct the path to a harmonious and sensible future. Mandela approached seemingly intractable human conflicts with a mindset guided by humanity, understanding and magnanimity, and so he was able to bring peace. A good example of his way to deal with people in conflict situations is this: he praised Mr. F.W. de Klerk, the President at that time, for his emphasis on reconciliation, enunciated in his inaugural address. But on the other hand, when he felt justice was not being served, he was also very direct in his confrontation with Mr. De Klerk.

His positive actions to promote reconciliation were not always accepted by his followers.

Was Mandela the same man who went to prison twenty-seven years before, or was this a different Mandela? Had he survived or had he been broken? Some whispered, 'Madiba has become soft. The authorities have bought him off. He is wearing three-piece suits, drinking wine and eating fine food'.¹²

It still remains difficult to deny that by emphasising reconciliation and through the gestures that represented his policy, he effectively neutralised both the militarised, far-right thread that had fed on the ogre of the diabolic, white hating 'communist', as well as the dangers posed by an armed, Zulu nationalism.¹³

Ever since his ascent to power Mandela has done one thing with single-mindedness and resolute consistency; and that is the business of promoting national unity and reconciliation. The policy of domestic reconciliation, which, at first, seemed to be a trick to lull his political opponents into a false sense of security, has proved enduring. It is now the foundation not only of South Africa's democracy, but of a new way of seeing the world.¹⁴ The essence of the Mandela philosophy is that the crude conclusions reached at the heat of confrontation should not be allowed to cloud the judgement when deciding on the right way to move forward. Viewed for years as an uncompromising freedom fighter (or 'terrorist') Mandela shocked the world by rising above bitterness and promoting reconciliation. This was most vividly represented in the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, instead of a 'Nuremberg-type' trial, as is common in many countries emerging from oppression. Less significant events such as Mandela's inviting his jailer or his prosecutor to lunch with him, or having tea with the widow of Hendrik

¹² *Ibidem* 684.

¹³ PISSARA: *Nelson Rolihlabla Mandela*.

¹⁴ R. HARTLEY: Madiba says goodbye at the end of history, in *Sunday Times* (16 May 1999) 22.

Verwoerd, the ‘architect of apartheid’, all served to illustrate reconciliation as a personal as well as political act.

What is the testimony that Archbishop Desmond Tutu gave of Mandela? Tutu once told this joke: “Once when I was in San Francisco a lady accosted me and very cheerily called out, ‘Hello, Archbishop Mandela!’” Tutu evaluates the twenty-seven years of Mandela in prison as a time of growth.

When you heard some of his utterances before going to jail on the subject of violence, for instance, you are aware that a transformation happened. He was not the fire-eater twenty-seven years later that he had been. What happened to him in prison was something that you have to now accept my authority for it, that suffering can do one of two things to a person. It can make you bitter and hard and really resentful of things. Or as it seems to do with many people – it is like fires of adversity that toughen someone.¹⁵

When Tutu was asked: ‘What will Mandela be remembered for?’ he answered: “The icon of reconciliation and forgiveness, of holding together a country that everybody kept predicting ‘...give them six months, and this country will be down the tubes’.”¹⁶

3. Madiba magic

What is the secret of the so-called Madiba (a nickname for Mandela) magic? Desmond Tutu’s answer was: “He is God’s gift to South Africa and he is our gift to the world.”¹⁷ Mandela’s approach assumed a moral and ethical dimension. His astonishing lack of bitterness contributed greatly to the spiritual dimension of his reconciliation and he has emerged as a towering figure representative of good humanity.¹⁸ It is perhaps only just that apartheid, declared ‘a crime against humanity’ by the United Nations, should produce a man whose humanity humbles the world. He could use seminal events such as massacres in the early nineties or the assassination of a leader like Hani, to whip up the ready anger of millions of black people resentful after three centuries of apartheid. Instead Mandela chose the path of peace, often to the chagrin of young lions who sometimes booed and ripped his image from their T-shirts when he told them to throw their weapons into the sea. As individual and a symbol of those who have suffered under the hands of an oppressing

¹⁵ D.M. Tutu in an interview with John Cablin: Archbishop Desmond Tutu on the long walk of Nelson Mandela (1999).

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ C. LANDSBERG & D. HLOPIHE: No reconciliation if inequality persists, in *City press* (13 June 1999) 7.

government, he showed that retaliation is not the key to the process. Reconciliation is what will allow life to continue. Because of his exemplary life, everyone will know that reconciliation does work. He exhibits some rare attributes such as doggedness for a just cause, self-denial, vision and forgiveness based on justice. His task of reconciliation remains incomplete, but by leading by example, he has laid a foundation for the rest to build upon.

Because of his gifts and experience Mandela is still called upon to influence international politics, particularly where conflicts require negotiation settlements, as in central Africa. As comforter of a nation still with many wounds, like the HIV (Aids) pandemic, Mandela has no equal. His very presence resembled a feel good factor – Mandela was reconciliation and reconciliation was Mandela. Tutu gives this testimony: “Mandela’s miracle is that some people forgive despite the horrors committed against them and their loved ones in the name of apartheid.”¹⁹

4. Why is Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela an icon of reconciliation?

The context in which politicians find themselves, plays a fundamental role in determining if they will reach icon status or not. At the time of Mandela’s imprisonment African liberation was a significant international issue. The liberation of black South Africans was therefore not just a local issue but became to symbolize the liberation of all black people. Mandela’s imprisonment became a symbolic of oppression vs. liberation for the entire world. This context encouraged the seeking of an icon – there needed to be an entity, a face and persona that could embody and sell the philosophy of liberation. Enter Nelson Mandela.²⁰

But he was not only the icon of liberation. At an iconic level he was the people’s president. Mandela will always be an icon of peaceful transition and liberation. He was an advocate of liberation and an apostle of reconciliation.²¹ The exposure to visual images of Mandela heightened his people’s appeal. He was seen in the streets with children, elderly, embracing AIDS patients and doing the so-called Madiba shuffle. All these images reiterated that he was busy with his campaign of reconciliation.²² He influenced fashion, was found on a variety of products from umbrellas to salt-cellars and the term ‘Madiba magic’ became part and parcel of language.

¹⁹ Tutu, interview with Cablin.

²⁰ A. CRYSTAL: M&Ms – Will they be remembered?, in *Aambeeld* 2 (1999) 16-21, p. 17.

²¹ D. GELDENHUYS: ‘n ‘Normale’ SA gaan groot eise aan Mbeki stel, in *Rapport* (20 June 1999) 11.

²² CRYSTAL: Will they be remembered? 19.

5. Desmond Tutu's involvement in the struggle against apartheid before 1994

Desmond Mpilo Tutu is, perhaps, one of the most famous churchmen in the world. He has played a leading role both in the struggle against apartheid and in helping to oversee its demise, as well as in helping his country come to terms with apartheid's bitter legacy through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). He is a man who rejoices in the human spirit. His optimism as a devoted Christian, belief in the triumph of good over evil and the remarkable strength of the human spirit help him to overcome the different struggles in his life – such as his battling with prostate cancer.

He was born in 1931 as the son of a teacher, and initially he also decided to follow a career as a teacher. In 1958, however, he experienced the vocation to become a minister in the Anglican Church, and continued his studies in England where he obtained a Master of Theology degree. He lectured at several theological seminaries and this is still his forte to speak to organisations and institutions worldwide. As general secretary of the South African Council of Churches he pursued virtues like ecumenicity, justice, the social-political responsibility of Christianity and reconciliation. His criticism, on biblical grounds, of apartheid and his struggle for a non-racial, democratic South Africa was internationally acknowledged when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984. In 1986 he was elected as archbishop of Cape Town and in 1987 he became the president of the All Africa Conference of Churches. Throughout the difficult 1980's – in spite of severe criticism from sections of his own black community – he continued his role as mediator and reconciler.

A very good example of this role was eminent when Tutu was asked: "How can we (the international Church community) help you in the struggle against apartheid?" He responded to everyone's surprise: "Have you tried prayer?" Tutu saw no dichotomy between prayer and the struggle for social justice in South Africa because he saw the latter as a profoundly spiritual and theological matter.²³ He maintained that spiritual experience cannot be separated from everyday life. "Our meeting with God through prayer, meditation and bible study will only become reality once it also manifests in our attitudes towards our neighbours."²⁴ In his strive towards reconciliation he was not inspired by political aspirations, but by the gospel.

In 1985, when the struggle was very intense, Tutu said: "It is surprising that our people should still be prepared to accept me as a leader when I have

²³ P. LODBERG: Apartheid as a church-dividing ethical issue, in *The ecumenical review* 48 (1996) 173-177, p. 173.

²⁴ D. TUTU: *Geen vrede met apartheid* (Amsterdam 1985) 30.

nothing to show for my advocacy of peaceful change.”²⁵ In 1988 he confirms this viewpoint:

Many people try to make out that we condone and even encourage violence, whereas we've said times without number we oppose all violence, which is the position of the Church, the violence of an unjust system and the violence of those who seek to overthrow it.²⁶

In the years before the fall of apartheid he was truly a genuine opponent of apartheid, but also convinced that violence is not the answer. He deserved his award as Nobel Prize winner because, in those days, he was a symbol of peaceful change. Former president Mandela said on the day of his release in February 1990 of Tutu: “Here is a man who had inspired an entire nation with his words and his courage, who had revived the people’s hope during the darkest of times.”²⁷

6. Tutu’s theology

Pieterse²⁸ analysed a sample of Tutu’s published sermons, a few speeches and a statement by means of content analysis in a qualitative empirical approach. He found that Tutu used in this sample the theme of liberation theology 30% of the times, and he preached regularly that God is on the side of the oppressed. His argumentation led to the conclusion that the Christian faith as interpreted in liberation theology is stronger than the politics of apartheid.²⁹ A political theme, the system of apartheid, is changed from negative to neutral by equalizing it with a theological theme: the evil that has been defeated by the liberator God, a liberation-theological theme.³⁰ The research shows that his theology is built on the concept of salvation (Jesus’ victory over evil through his death and resurrection³¹). Archbishop Tutu describes his worldview in the following words:

It is the fact that each of us has been created in the image of God. This is something intrinsic. It comes as it were with the package. It means that each of us is a God-carrier, God’s viceroy, and God’s representative. This is why treating

²⁵ Tutu, interview with Cablin.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ MANDELA: *Long walk to freedom* 678.

²⁸ H.J.C. PIETERSE (ed.): *Desmond Tutu’s message. A qualitative analysis* (Kampen 1995).

²⁹ *Ibidem* 49.

³⁰ *Ibidem* 45.

³¹ H.J.C. PIETERSE: Sentrale temas in die prediking van Desmond Tutu, in *Skrif en kerk* 17 (1996) 191-201, p. 191.

anybody as if they were less than this is very blasphemous. It is like spitting in the face of God.³²

Tutu's theology, derived from his culture and ecclesiology, is best described through an *ubuntu* theology, which is about the achievement of absolute dependence on God and neighbour in such a way that the eventuality of human identity is discovered therein. In short, Tutu's view of the *imago Dei* as human interdependence develops into this theology of *ubuntu*.³³ Battle³⁴ quotes from a sermon of Tutu where he explained his view on *ubuntu*:

A person is human precisely in being enveloped in the community of other human beings, in being caught up in the bundle of life. To be is to participate. The *summum bonum* here is not independence but sharing, interdependence. And what is true of the human person is surely true of human aggregations. (...) God does not love us because we are loveable, but we are loveable precisely because God loves us. God's love is what gives us our worth. (...) So we are liberated from the desire to achieve, to impress. We are children of the divine love and nothing can change that fundamental fact about us.³⁵

Tutu brought this philosophy of *ubuntu* into practice in his life. He taught people how being prepared to speak about painful experiences forms an integral part of the healing process. He said:

For black people *ubuntu* is the essence of being human. I am human because you are human. My humanity is caught up in yours and if you are dehumanised, I am dehumanised, and anger and resentment and retribution are corrosive of this great good, the harmony that has got to exist between people. And that is why our people have been committed to the reconciliation where we use restorative rather than retributive justice, which is a kind of justice that says we are looking to the healing of relationships, we are seeking to open wounds, yes, but to open them so that we can cleanse them and they don't fester; we cleanse them and then pour oil on them, and then we can move into the glorious future that God is opening up for us.³⁶

As Tutu's *ubuntu* theology unfolds it gives access to a new identity for South Africans, it also appeals to ancient African concepts of the harmony between

³² D.M. TUTU: *No future without forgiveness* (London 1999) 11.

³³ M. BATTLE: The ubuntu theology of Desmond Tutu, in L. HULLY, L. KRETZSCHMAR & L.L. PATO: *Archbishop Tutu: prophetic witness in South Africa* (Cape Town 1996) 93-108, p. 93.

³⁴ *Ibidem* 100.

³⁵ *Ibidem* 105.

³⁶ D.M. Tutu in an interview with Ray Suarez: Archbishop Desmond Tutu on the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/africa/july-dec99/tutu_10-6.html, 1999).

individual and community which John Mbiti concludes as: “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.”³⁷ Tutu stresses the Christian definition of relationships, as opposed to other social forms of communalism, to define *ubuntu*. Influenced deeply by the spirituality of the Anglican Church, Tutu is able to overcome the tendency to discount personality for the sake of community. For Tutu, being properly related in *ubuntu* theology does not denigrate individuality.³⁸

7. The Tutu ‘magic’ and the TRC

Desmond Tutu used the following words to describe the principles on which the TRC was based:

What we experienced in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission process is that retributive justice is not the only and certainly not the best kind of justice particularly for societies that have survived a conflict and are making the transition from repressive conflict-ridden past to a new dispensation of democracy, freedom and justice. There were those who called for a Nuremberg-type of trial especially for the perpetrators of atrocities designed to maintain the vicious apartheid system. They wanted them to be brought to book. It was a mercy that for various reasons our country chose to go the way of the TRC – granting amnesty in exchange for the truth. This was ultimately based on the principles of restorative justice and *ubuntu*.³⁹

Tutu used an example of the gruesome details about horrendous atrocities that were committed to uphold or to oppose apartheid. He quotes the testimony of one of the persons who applied for amnesty: “We gave him drugged coffee and shot him in the head and then we burned his body. As it takes 7-8 hours for a human body to burn, we had a *braai* on the side, drinking beer and eating meat.” Tutu comments on this:

How low we could sink in our humanity to one another. And just think of the necklace – pouring petrol into a tyre and tying it around the victim’s neck and setting it alight, and our children could dance around someone being killed so

³⁷ BATTLE: *Ubuntu theology* 105.

³⁸ M. BATTLE: *A theology of community. The ubuntu theology of Desmond Tutu*, in *Interpretation* 54 (2000) 173-182, p. 179.

³⁹ D.M. TUTU: *The Truth and Reconciliation Commission process – a restorative justice approach* (unpublished paper of the address at the launch of the Department of Correctional Services’ restorative justice program, 26 November 2001) 2.

gruesomely. What happened to the humanity of our children that they could do such an unthinkable thing? Restorative justice and *ubuntu* are based firmly on the recognition of the fundamental humanity of even the worst possible offender. Restoration justice is, unlike retributive justice, not basically concerned with punishment, it is not fundamentally punitive. It sets high store by healing.⁴⁰

His philosophy of *ubuntu* and the conviction that Jesus conquered evil through his death and resurrection steer his view on restorative justice.

A broken person needed to be helped to be healed and so what the offence had disturbed should be restored and the offender and the victim had to be helped to be reconciled. Retribution justice has often ignored the victim and the system has been impersonal and cold. Restorative justice is hugely hopeful. It believes that even the worst offender can become a better person.⁴¹

This is what may be called the ‘Tutu magic’.

In operating restorative justice the telling of the awesome stories of the past played a decisive role. Recognising what a person has done in the past is recognition of him or her. Remembering the past and telling the gruesome stories of the past was a way to get rid of emotions that were carried in the heart for a very long time. Tutu gave an example in his book:

At this point in her evidence, Mrs. Calata broke down, uttering a piercing wail which in many ways was the defining sound that characterised the Truth and Reconciliation Commission – as a place where people could come to cry, to open their hearts, to expose the anguish that had remained locked up for so long, unacknowledged, ignored and denied.⁴²

To face these profound emotions is the beginning of healing. By recalling their memories, women and men are again faced with pain and anguish. And yet, as these persons face their suffering and as they name it in public, they leave the witness stand with their heads held high. They have been recognised in their pain, and this marks the beginning of a renewed dignity. There is deep satisfaction, of course. Were they not destined to be annihilated? Now they are poised as heroes. They were made voiceless, now their voices can be heard on radio and television. This correction of history is restorative for all that had been humiliated.⁴³

Of this need to be heard the ubiquitous Truth Commission microphone with its red indicator light and translation headphones was a symbol. The symbol is that the

⁴⁰ *Ibidem* 2.

⁴¹ *Ibidem* 3.

⁴² TUTU: *No future* 114.

⁴³ BATTLE: *A theology of community* 181.

microphone guarantees the marginalized voice access to the public ear. The translation of the unspeakable, the words and the voice of the unformulateable. The repetitive of the stories, the faces, and the voices in translation: all have a cumulative effect.⁴⁴

Tutu mostly opened the hearings with scripture or a prayer, a song, or time for silent prayer. At the end of a person's story Tutu managed to transcend the particularity of a story: he fitted it into a broader, higher scheme of things. He assessed the victim's mood and pain quite instinctively and then explained to her the deeper meaning of her story.

Tutu salutes the remarkable magnanimity and generousities of spirit of South Africans who have exposed their pain to the world. He said:

It is quite incredible the capacity people have shown to be magnanimous – refusing to be consumed by bitterness and hatred, willing to meet with those who have violated their persons and their rights. They are willing to meet in a spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation. Eager only to know the truth, to know the perpetrator so that they could forgive them. Forgiveness will follow confession and healing will happen, and so contribute to national unity and reconciliation.⁴⁵

He also stressed:

Theology reminded me that however diabolic the act, it did not turn the perpetrator into a demon. We had to distinguish between the deed and the perpetrator, between the sinner and the sin: to hate and condemn the sin whilst being filled with compassion for the sinner. In this theology we can never give up on anyone because our God was one who had a particularly soft spot for sinners.⁴⁶

What was the effect of Tutu's work in the TRC on the broader South African population? Tutu evaluated in a rhetorical question: "Who would doubt that a significant contribution was being made to healing, to reconciliation?"⁴⁷ A theologian from Germany, Ralf Wustenberg, compared the handling of transition led by Tutu and that of the German Democratic Republic. His conclusion is:

The South African Commission had a definite representative function. It anticipated in miniature what was supposed to happen in society as a whole: in its work Blacks and Whites together confronted one another with the past – without any bitterness. The TRC became itself the symbol of the new South Africa. South

⁴⁴ A. KROG: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission – a national ritual?, in *Missionalia* 26 (1998) 5-16, p. 7-8.

⁴⁵ TUTU: *No future* 91.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem* 74.

⁴⁷ D.M. TUTU: Speech to the South African Press Club, available on the TRC internet web-page (21 October 1997) 3.

Africa was able to open up the way to the political dimension of reconciliation by means of the ritual procedures of the TRC and the symbolic meaning this forum was able to have on a national level. Moreover the most heterogeneous dimensions of reconciliation intersected with one another: the personal, interpersonal, communal and national dimensions.⁴⁸

The TRC was a pioneering experiment with potentially far-reaching international implications on the way humans deal with conflict. Normally when a country experiences the difficult move from oppression to democracy, it deals with the past in one of two ways: either the previous injustices are swept under the carpet and the suffering of those subjected to violence is ignored, or the leaders of the old regime are put on trial. Under the chairmanship of archbishop Tutu, South Africa followed a unique third way of both truth and reconciliation. His lasting contribution to the TRC was that it became as much a juridical undertaking as a deeply spiritual-Christian process of repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation.

8. Why is Desmond Mpilo Tutu an icon of reconciliation?

Reconciliation is for Tutu the beginning of a transformative process (one must be able to transcend one's selfish inclinations before one can transform oneself and one's society). You can only be human in a humane society. If you live with hatred and revenge in your heart, you dehumanise not only yourself, but also your community.⁴⁹ Tutu says:

Glorious Gospel words have fallen into disrepute and have been horribly devaluated so that many have come to think that 'reconciliation' meant making peace with evil, immorality, injustice, oppression and viciousness, of which they are the victims, and, quite rightly, they have rejected such travesty of the genuine article. True reconciliation is based on forgiveness, and forgiveness is based on true confession, and confession is based on contrition, on sorrow for what you have done. Equally, confession, forgiveness and reconciliation in the lives of nations are not just airy-fairy religious and spiritual things, nebulous and unrealistic. They are the stuff of practical politics. Forgiveness is the grace by which you enable the other person to get up, and get up with dignity, to begin anew. Not to forgive leads to bitterness and hatred, which gnaw away at the vitals of one's being.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ R.K. WUSTENBERG: Reconciliation with a 'new' lustre: the South African example as a paradigm for dealing with the political past of the German Democratic Republic, in *Journal of theology for Southern Africa* 113 (2002) 19-40, p. 34-35.

⁴⁹ A. KROG: *Country of my skull* (Johannesburg 1998) 110.

⁵⁰ J. ALLEN: *The essential Desmond Tutu* (Bellville 1997) 59-61.

In the sense that Tutu understands reconciliation he is truly an icon of reconciliation. His own life is a clear testimony of foundational Christian principles, especially love, compassion, justice, peace and reconciliation amongst humans, and dependence on God. He made a remarkable and outstanding contribution towards Christianity in South Africa, Africa and the rest of the world.

It is true that religious language and symbolism in the sphere of the TRC is in a sense hi-jacked for the benefit of political ideals. We should not equate 'full disclosure' with sorrowful Christian confession or the granting of amnesty with the Christian practice of absolution. Central to the gesticulations, symbols, signs and rituals of the previous government of Mandela was the idea of reconciliation. There is little question about the need for the Church and Christian theologians to evaluate the TRC process in a positive light because the notions of truth and reconciliation lie at the heart of the Christian tradition. Christianity is the religion of reconciliation⁵¹ so truth and reconciliation "is our job, the industry we work in ... (and the) reason for our existence."⁵²

9. The essence and boundaries of reconciliation

The verb *katallassein* 'to reconcile', is used 13 times in the New Testament epistles, always in relation to God or Christ. Reconciliation is portrayed as a necessary part of the divine justification of sinners, which is characterised by peace. Enmity is for Paul removed by reconciliation in two directions – sinful humanity's hostility to God (Rom 8,7) and God's hostility to sinful humanity (Rom 11,28) – thus creating a new proximity of relationship. In the active voice, *katallassein* is used only of God. The letter to the Romans uses the passive voice in relation to humanity, indicating that the initiative rests with God, while in II Cor 5,18-19 the action is explicitly God's:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God reconciled the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

In II Cor 5,19 reconciliation is portrayed as the fundamental purpose of the Christ event. The use of the aorist tense in the preceding verse indicates that the Christ-event effected reconciliation objectively before human response, though the imperative 'be reconciled' (v. 20) requires participation. An active response is also implied by the idea of a 'ministry of reconciliation' (v. 18) and

⁵¹ J. MOLTSMANN: *God means freedom* (Nairobi 1992) 63.

⁵² D.J. SMIT: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Tentative religious and theological perspectives, in *Journal of theology for Southern Africa* 90 (1995) 3-16, p. 3.

the task, in which Paul is already participating, of proclamation (v. 20).⁵³ Eph 2,11-16 and Col 1,22 attribute reconciliation to Christ, who is portrayed as the bringer of peace affecting reconciliation through the cross. Reconciliation here involves a dimension beyond that in Rom and II Cor: reconciliation to God of both Jew and Gentile, thereby making peace between the two as 'one new humanity', which is said to be 'in one body'. This identification of the body on the cross with the Church pulls the Church into the immediate vicinity of the cross, which is the location of reconciliation.⁵⁴ The unity is as a community of those to whom Jesus Christ has entrusted the word of reconciliation.

The Christian community exists only in relation to its task to confess Christ who is the reconciliation of the world to God ..., is the kingdom of God which with its comfort and healing has approached and invaded torn humanity suffering from thousand wounds, and put an end to its misery. In facing its role, the Church is challenged itself to become a model of reconciled and united humanity under the call of divine reconciliation.⁵⁵ Reconciliation consists of certain elements like truth, guilt, confession of guilt, forgiveness and the restoration of relationships.

Confession literally means to acknowledge, to agree with God's judgement on your nature, your distinctive identity, your particular past, your personal deeds. For a Christian, confession no longer means attempting to suppress or deny your deepest nature, but to acknowledge the rightness of God's judgement on you, to see yourself and your past as God and those closest to you, your neighbours, see and remember you and your past. Without such remembrance and such acknowledgement or confession there can be no liberation or reconciliation.⁵⁶

For Christians their past stands in the sign of the cross. In the knowledge that they have been crucified with Christ (Rom 6,6) they accept that the old things have passed away (or II Cor 5,17).

Forgiveness from the side of God frees Christians to confess, and reconciliation with God evokes shame and contrition. This undeserved love of God makes it possible to repent and to change the heart.

The guilt spoken about in the Old and New Testaments almost always has a social dimension. We commit an offence against God because we commit offences against one another. Christian faith without reconciliation with those aggrieved people amongst our fellow humans is impossible.⁵⁷

⁵³ J. UDAL: Reconciliation among nations: the role of the Church, in *The ecumenical review* 49 (1997) 61-77, p. 70.

⁵⁴ R. SCHNACKENBURG: *Ephesians* (Edinburgh 1991) 126.

⁵⁵ UDAL: Reconciliation 76.

⁵⁶ SMIT: TRC Commission 3.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem* 7.

The boundaries of reconciliation for Christians also include the relationship with our neighbours. It is not only to remember and cope with the past, but also to see future relationships in a positive way. It is very important for the painful process of reconciliation to repent and to forgive, but without dealing with the past truthfully, and without a vision of a common future, deeds of repentance and forgiveness become empty gestures. “No reconciliation, justice or peace through repentance and forgiveness are possible without *truthful memory* and *hopeful vision*.”⁵⁸ Jones makes the statement that

forgiveness is not so much a word spoken, an action performed, or a feeling felt as it is an embodied way of life in an ever-deepening relationship with the Triune God and with others. As such, a Christian account of forgiveness ought not simply or even primarily to be focused on the absolution of guilt: rather, it ought to be focused on the reconciliation of brokenness, the restoration of community – with God, with one another, and with the whole creation.⁵⁹

In this broad sense of the term ‘reconciliation’ the work of Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu was a gift from God. The presence of reconciliation language in doctrine, theology and liturgics means that there are resources, which can be tapped by the churches to foster processes of reconciliation in the society. Tutu did that with great success. There was also the gift of the human factor in the work of these two leaders. Maluleke points it out:

What both the critics and the praise-singers often miss is what I call the ‘human factor’. By this I mean (1) the human nature of the TRC instrument – especially the human nature of its process and its final report; (2) the human influence of having two influential global icons who put all their weight behind the process – namely Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu. (...) To this extent the much celebrated ‘success’ of the South African TRC is nothing but a powerful testimony to the moral integrity of these two leaders. It is in this regard that Tutu’s role as head can be described as that of a ritual performer and one who minted our political discourse. As for Mandela, I would contend that for now South Africa, and perhaps the whole world, has no greater moral and political saint. Unlike many he comes with no fixed programme – which meant that people get the impression that he was willing to listen, that he came bearing no complex ideology.⁶⁰

Can one nation have two icons of reconciliation at the same time? Gevisser said of Mandela and Tutu:

⁵⁸ R. VOSLOO: Reconciliation as the embodiment of memory and hope, in *Journal of theology for Southern Africa* 109 (2001) 25-40, p. 26.

⁵⁹ L.G. JONES: *Embodying forgiveness: a theological analysis* (Grand Rapids 1995) xii.

⁶⁰ T.S. MALULEKE: Can lions and rabbits reconcile? The South African TRC as an instrument for peace-building, in *The ecumenical review* 53 (2001) 190-201, p. 197-198.

If the grave and plodding Nelson Mandela is our reliable father, then that hyperactive little figure in ermine at his side is our naughty uncle; the one who carries all the family's emotional baggage, weeping for us when we grieve, dancing when we celebrate.⁶¹

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⁶¹ M. GEVISSER: The ultimate test of faith, in *Mail & Guardian* (18 April 1996) 12.

