

The *ubuntu*-theology of Desmond Tutu: A theological interplay between religious pluralism and the universal validity of human rights

Wilhelm Gräß

Abstract

The author emphasises that the development of human rights has not been achieved by one or more concrete religions but by a universal religion of humanity; this is illustrated with a South-African example, Desmond Tutu. Human Rights are not the result of a religion, or of Christian faith, but the fundamental basis of religion; it is a religious consciousness that was given initially to human beings. The emergence of human rights shows that people from all cultures all over the world can agree to humanistic beliefs like an inherent dignity to which every human being is entitled. This contribution attempts the mediation of the universality of human rights with the particularity of religious traditions.

The particularity of religious traditions and the universality of human rights

The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) did not emerge from any concrete religion, not even from Christianity and its churches. Its starting point was the experience of pain and harm, the experience of brutal non-recognition, “barbarous acts” (*Universal Declaration of Human Rights* 1948, Preamble). The cries of those deprived of their right to live by the totalitarian regimes of National Socialism and Stalinism, of those tormented, tortured, and killed because of racial, national, political or religious reasons or because of their sexuality, can still be heard in the declaration. Even today, it is the violations of human rights that provide the appeal to keep and enforce them. Yet, this is only possible because such rights have a global status as a universally valid norm under international law and were turned into enforceable rights in the constitutions of many countries. If a blatant violation becomes public anywhere in the world, one will immediately appeal to human rights.

For this reason, the defense and enforcement of human rights is often suspected of acting in a cultural-imperialistic way. Furthermore, when wars are declared under the pretext that they contribute to supporting human rights – although in reality the main interest is more mundane, e.g., rights to oil production – these suspicions are clearly supported. Hence, human rights are often understood as a continuation of western colonialism. Nevertheless, it must be said that only through an intervention in the affairs of a state that either threatens the security of its citizens or is not able to ensure it, legitimated by international law, is it possible to prevent further violations.

The question is whether international interventions for the enforcement of human rights – especially if they induce a military conflict that creates additional more harm – have cultural-imperialistic features, even if the intention for such is good. This question opens a quite difficult issue because the intention behind such interventions to enforce the human rights is the claim of a universal validity. A theological concept of Desmond Tutu offers a good example how to deal theologically with the tension between the universal validity of the human rights and the particularity of religious traditions. Tutu shows us that the African concept of an *ubuntu*-theology provides a special possibility to convey an African understanding of being human with the Christian concept of human dignity and the universal normativity of the declaration of human rights as well.

The *ubuntu*-theology of Desmond Tutu addressing the human right debate

Desmond Tutu's book *God is not a Christian* is a collection of sermons, speeches and statements from the former Anglican bishop of Cape Town. In a sermon delivered in the church of St. Martin in The Fields near Trafalgar-Square in London, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and at the end of apartheid in South Africa, Tutu insisted "God is clearly not a Christian. His concern is for all his children" (Tutu 2012, 12).

For Tutu, there is no conflict between human rights' universal validity and the obligation of Christians to speak up for human rights out of their Christian belief. This is not because Christianity might have invented human rights and their worldwide distribution would be more successful under the Christian prefix. Such a cultural imperialistic interpretation of the relationship between human rights and Christianity was far from what Tutu had in mind. It was rather his deep concern to win over all religions in the universal enforcement of human rights, something that marked his global speaking and preaching since the 1980's.

Tutu confesses his Christian faith in strong terms. He often underlines that it is essential for him to take his own faith seriously. Yet, taking his own religion

seriously does not mean devaluing other religions or refusing to believe in the idea of a natural universal religion that is inherent in the very nature of human beings from the beginning. Religions are different; the Gods in whom they believe are different. Despite all that they have something in common: they reveal a transcendent element in humanity.

“God is clearly not a Christian. His concern is for all his children.” Christians do not have an exclusive relationship to God, and God has no exclusive relationship to Christians. He is the God of all human beings and they have their different relations to him. This also is important to Tutu: religions are not identical; “the” God can be understood in many different ways. As God is never without the individual relation, “we must hold to our particular and peculiar beliefs tenaciously” (Tutu 2012, 6). Tutu combines these confessions with a religious individuality through the opinion that God generally could only be thought of and believed in through the different relationships people have with Him. God is only God in the plurality of individual religious perspectives about Him. For relations among religions, Tutu stresses, this means that “we must be ready to learn from another, not claiming that we alone possess all truth and that somehow we have a corner on God” (Tutu 2012, 6).

By acting in this way we will discover many things we have in common. What we actually have in common depends on what that for which we search. For Tutu the direction is clear. For him all religions have a transcendent referent that is compassionate and concerned; all see human beings as “creatures of this supreme, supra-mundane reality, with a high destiny that hopes for an everlasting life lived in close association with the divine” (Tutu 2012, 7). This distinction of human beings as “creatures” of a higher reality in “close association with the divine” is what Tutu hopes to find as the common ground of the different religions. Each human being is holy; thus, it would be a taboo to hurt her or him.

Tutu is delighted that he finds this holiness of human beings in the Christian tradition as well. “Surely, it is good to know that God (in the Christian tradition) created us all (not just Christians) in his image, thus investing us all with infinite worth” (Tutu 2012, 7). It is equally important for Tutu to emphasise that just like Christianity other religious traditions regard human beings with holiness as well:

Surely we can rejoice that the eternal word, the Logos of God, enlightens everyone – not just Christians, but everyone who comes into the world; that what we call the Spirit of God is not a Christian preserve, for the Spirit of God existed long before there were Christians, inspiring and nurturing women and men in the ways of holiness, bringing them to fruition, bringing them to fruition what was best in all. We do scant justice and honour to our God if we want, for instance, to deny that Mahatma Gandhi was a truly great soul, a holy man who walks closely with God. Our God would be too small if he was not also the God of Gandhi (Tutu 2012, 7).

Christianity is neither allowed to claim to be the religion that discovered the ho-

liness of human beings (which would also be historically inaccurate), nor is it allowed to claim that Christianity alone is the best and only vehicle for the promotion of humanity's holiness. The access to the "holy sanctuary" of humanity and work towards the preservation of this sanctuary can be found in other religious teachings as well.

Tutu is obviously illustrating that religion – and the relation between humanity and the transcendent – are expressed in various ways within different religions. Each religion has its own specific way to express this relation. Today many religions are even respectful of people who have abandoned their original religious affiliation or who do not believe in God.

Religion provocatively insists that one has dignity simply because one is a human being, regardless of one's characteristics or affiliations, independent from one's deeds or misdeeds. Religion shifts one's being into an unconditioned horizon. One's right to exist derives from conditions that are independent of oneself. A human being is not able to and does not have to earn this right. One's right to exist is derived from something that is beyond oneself, it derives from God. In Christian discourse this means that a person is God's creature, his beloved child, and a justified sinner. But Tutu only speaks rarely and cautiously in this biblical language. Tutu counts on a transversal theology to which all humans with good will are responding. This transversal theology articulates the truly religious matter in all religions, i.e., religion sees the individual human being from the perspective of a self-transcended humanity founded in the Unconditioned. Religion is a transcendent determination of human existence that, then in a twist, revokes itself and gives humanity back to itself.

Tutu's theology used such common religious language, compelling even for secular people, in referring to the "essential humanity of the perpetrator of even the most gruesome atrocity" (Tutu 2012, 42) in his plead for a path of reconciliation. He could have spoken about the public-political force of Christian belief in reconciliation. Instead he makes recourse to the "essential humanity" even of "the perpetrator." He notes that no one could deny the human dignity of a person, however heinous his deed. This is a reformulation of a religious interpretation of human rights discourse from Tutu's Christian orientation. Tutu emphasises that the evidences of what religion generally contributes to human life and society show religion indispensable in the realisation of humanity.

In this way the path of restorative justice should become passable for people who come from other non-Christian, religious worldviews too. Tutu specifically points towards the African worldview of the *ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* is a Xhosa-word that expresses the essential individual's affiliation to a community. *Ubuntu* also stands for the transcending of each individual human being in a larger, infinite reaching reality. For the community of *ubuntu*, the being of an individual is not only linked

to the visible tribal community but also to the ancestors. The African worldview of *ubuntu*, together with the idea that human beings are made in God's image found in the Hebrew Bible, and the Christian understanding of the unconditioned justification of the sinner, together represent for Tutu an integral expression of a natural theology grounding the universal validity of the human rights (cf. Tutu 2012, 21-24).

Everyone of God's human creatures has the capacity to know something about God from the evidence God leaves in his handiworks (Romans 1:18-20); this is the basis for natural theology and natural law. Immanuel Kant spoke about categorical imperative. All human creatures have a sense that some things ought to be done just as others not to be done. This is a universal phenomenon – what varies is the content of natural law. [...] In his speech before the Areopagus, Paul speaks about how God created all human beings from one stock and given everyone the urge, the hunger, for divine things so that all will seek after God and perhaps find him, adding that God is not far from us since all (not just Christians) live and move and have their being in him (Act. 17: 22-31). Talking to pagans, Paul declares that all are God's offspring (Tutu 2012, 10).

In Tutu's theology the "universal phenomenon" is the phenomenon of a religious consciousness that was given initially to each human being. This religious consciousness becomes concrete in openness to transcendence: searching for and questioning something that is beyond oneself. Particular religions build themselves up on this natural religion. But they also presuppose this natural religion as the universal resonance chamber that outlives their own history. Natural religion exists in the particular religions but not exclusively. There is one universal faith in all concrete religions that acts through and beyond them, a faith that we should by all means call: the faith in human rights.

Although Tutu has not articulated it in such an explicit way, it seems implied by his argumentation in the way he describes the particular, concrete religions – and not only Christianity – by interrogating their contribution to the enforcement of human rights. Doing this he tries to see the best in each of them as something that serves the humanity of human beings.

We must not make the mistake of judging other faiths by their least attractive features and adherents: It is possible to demolish the case for Christianity by, for instance, quoting the Crusades, or the atrocities of the Holocaust, or the excess of apartheid. But we know that that would be unfair in the extreme, since we claim them to be aberrations, distortions and deviations. What about Francis of Assisi, Mother Teresa, Albert Schweitzer, and all the wonderful and beautiful people and things that belong to Christianity? We should want to deal with other faiths and their best and highest, as they define themselves, and not shoot down the caricatures that we want to put up (Tutu 2012, 16).

A cultural transformation and adaption is in fact what happened at the beginning and merged in the process of placing the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* in different cultural and religious traditions. The process is not at all completed and is, with regard to religion, often controversial because the role of religion in human rights discourse often becomes closely related to specific religions. Then one often sees oneself quickly involved in a very ambivalent history. One has to confess that Christian churches accepted the idea of human rights quite late and even today are often accused of not advocating for human rights very strongly. Religions have their own legal orders that can lead to conflicts with national law and even with human rights, especially in cases where human rights have entered into state legal systems. Yet a theology like the transversal natural theology of Desmond Tutu enables us to make explicit that a religious faith constitutively belongs to human beings. The transversal natural theology of Tutu is his *ubuntu*-theology. In the context of this *ubuntu*-theology it is possible to register the faith based implications of the declarations of human rights from their beginning, i.e., we can call the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* the confessional base of a universal belief on Human Rights. Tutu's concept of an *ubuntu*-theology combines elements of an African ethics of humanity with a non-exclusive understanding of the Christian implications of human rights.

The mediation of the universal validity of human rights with the particularity of religious traditions

It must be generally accepted that, on the one hand, human rights require self-determined values and on the other they support certain values that are not equally appreciated and practiced in all cultures and religions around the world. Next to the universal claim of the validity of the human rights, cultural and religious differences will also continue to exist. Religious ties supply these values with a strong potential of motivation for daily living. All religious cultures are different in what they consider law and rights and in how they appreciate individual choice with regard to sexual orientation and the choice of partnership, profession and residence. One can find many different cultural opinions about the relation between the individual and the community, about the idea of physical integrity, about who takes precedence in the relation of individual and community and in the hierarchy of individual and community (e.g., family, clan, and nation). They might all be different but at the same time, they all have a religious foundation. Likewise, one will find different but always religiously founded opinions about the idea of equality of men and women, about religious tolerance or about the estimation of democratic participation.

During the drafting phase of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, the UN-Commission already knew that there was great tension between a universal normativity of human rights and the pluralism of all the different religious cultures. In his book on human rights' genealogy, sociologist Hans Joas offers a helpful insight into the work of the UN-Commission, comprised of delegates from 18 nations (cf. Joas 2012, 251-281, 273f). He especially focuses on two particular delegates, i.e., the Lebanese representative Charles Malik and the Chinese representative Peng-Chun Chang. Charles Malik, speaker for the Arabian world, was an orthodox Christian whereas Pen-Chun Chang, according to Joas, often referred to his Confucian background during the drafting process. Yet Pen-Chun Chang was also the person who warned on the one hand against a foundation for the human rights that is limited to reason and on the other against a special emphasis of one single religious tradition. He was interested in a synthesis of all the different religious traditions of vindication into one common value system. This is consistent with the fact that there is no reference to a universal *ratio* of humans but to a universal "faith" in a human religious' conviction, i.e., "the faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person" (*Universal Declaration of Human Rights* 1948, Preamble).¹ As Hannah Arendt² interpreted the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights'* fundamental claim, it proclaims the human rights movement as something like a religious movement, as a movement that is based on a confession of faith, faith in the possibility of creating conditions around the world that gives every human being access to the right, to have basic rights as a human being, especially to be acknowledged as a human being.

The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* was the work of people from different contexts, cultures, religions and parts of the world. What becomes evident is that this declaration never would have gained such popularity if it was not to a large extent compatible with the different value systems that are practiced in the different religions, cultures and contexts in so many different ways. Still, what remains important is the question of who will take charge when the concrete religions and cultural traditions merge to be mediated through the normative moral claims of the *Universal Declaration of Human Right*. Will it be the normative universality of human rights with its attempt to find recognition as official rights? Or will it be the particular religious traditions who only want to assign human rights

¹ Jan Smuts was responsible for the drafting of the United-Nations Charter's preamble and penned these words. Smuts was head of the South-African government several times in the 1930s and the early 1940s although he was not responsible directly for the policy of racial apartheid, enacted in the same year of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948).

² Cf. Hannah Arendt, Es gibt nur ein einziges Menschenrecht. In *Die Wandlung* 4, Dezember 1949.

to own fellow believers as they think them to be maintained according to their own norms of faith this way?

There is no doubt, that the validity of universal human rights has to be transmitted in accordance with the self-understanding of particular and regional religious cultures and contexts. To a certain extent, to establish a motivational basis for action, human rights have to incarnate in the minds and hearts of people in the different contexts, cultures and religions. Therefore, one speaks of a necessary cultural-contextual synthesis and value generalisation in human rights discourse. Yet, in this process of synthesis and generalisation it has to be ensured that human rights remain intact and inviolable and that states and societies follow their requirements. Cultural-contextual synthesis and value generalisation will only be helpful if they support the enforcement of human rights within historical religions, and if the human rights find recognition in the particular religions and in the cultures and contexts that are merged with them. This will have practical consequences for religious as well as for judicial practice in the countries in which human rights claim validity.

First of all, this means that religious cultures have to legitimise themselves according to the standards of human rights and not vice versa. Religions, their practices and legal interpretations have to prove themselves to be compatible with human rights. Secondly, one has to insist on the validity of human rights, in particular on the right to self-determination, even if they are opposed to religious ideas of morality. When the human right for self-determination, for justice and security is valid in a state, these rights have to be valid for all people, independent of their religious denomination or ethnicity, even if this right might contradict the norms of a religious community, for instance freedom of sexual expression and self-identification.

The universal validity of human rights can hardly be enforced without conflicts with religious and political powers. Hence this religion will be all the more vigorous the more states implement human rights into their constitutions and the more people are committed to human rights. People might come from concrete religions, they might stay in contact with them or just pass them by, but they are all connected in a worldwide community with the same spirit of something like a universal confession of human rights. It is also clear that faith in the holiness of every human being, confessed by the global movement of human rights, will gradually change the different religions. It is a faith in the holiness of the human being – not a human being formed and acting in thus and such a way, but of each human being just the way she or he already exists. This faith alone will change the world. It changes the world through the way that justice in the sense of love, mercy and forgiveness are practiced, that there will be help where people are vic-

timised by violence and state terror, where hungry people suffer from starvation and have to escape from their home countries.

Many things need to be done from this perspective. Without the implementation of human rights into the constitutions of states and the enforcement of their validity under international law, much less would have been achieved towards a more human world. Yet, all this effort is based on a faith in the holiness of the human being. It is this faith that encourages people to fight for adherence to and enforcement of human rights, whether they are members of a religious community or not.

However, it should be underscored that people with religious backgrounds and motivations, just like Desmond Tutu, do fight for human rights worldwide – and so do with theological reasons. Tutu's *ubuntu*-theology realises an integration of different religious traditions by itself. Doing so this theological concept establishes a theological base upon which the universal validity of human dignity is religiously grounded.

In conclusion, the possible impact of an *ubuntu*-theology on the practice of churches and Christian communities could become obvious. At the end the *ubuntu*-theology of Desmond Tutu gives the format of a theological base for an active collaboration of Christian communities with NGO's on human rights issues. It also stimulates churches and Christian communities to offer room and financial help to human right groups.

References

- Arendt, Hannah. "Es gibt nur ein einziges Menschenrecht." In: *Praktische Philosophie/Ethik, Reader zum Funk-Kolleg*, Frankfurt am Main, 1981, 152-167. (originally published as Essay, in: *Die Wandlung*, 4, 1949, 754-770)
- Joas, Hans. *Die Sakralität der Person: Eine neue Genealogie der Menschenrechte*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2012; English translation, *The Sacredness of the Person: A New Genealogy of Human Rights*. Georgetown: Georgetown University Press, 2013.
- Tutu, Desmond Mpilo. *God is not a Christian*, edited by John Allen. New York: Harper One, 2012.
- Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Preamble: 1948. http://www.ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Documents/UDHR_Translations/eng.pdf³

³ The person, who was responsible for the drafting of the United-Nations Charter's preamble, was Jan Smuts. He wrote the impressive words of "the faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person" that I just quoted (Preamble, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*). Smuts was head of the South-African government several times in the 1930s and the early 1940s although he was not responsible directly for the policy of racial apartheid, enacted in 1948, the same year the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* was enacted.