

Eighth Global Ethic Lecture

**Global Ethic and Human Dignity:
An African Perspective**

*By Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and former Archbishop of Cape Town Desmond Tutu
at the University of Tübingen on June 15, 2009*

Mister Rector, Honourable Minister, Your Excellency the South African Consul General, and the very young mayor [Boris Palmer], who is wearing a suit today, all of you very distinguished ladies and gentlemen,

it is a very great joy and great privilege to be here with you today. I've sometimes said that when you come to meetings like this, they sometimes say: Oh, he's very well known, he does not need to be introduced. Well, I don't know about that. After a certain lady a few years ago – I was in San Francisco – and this dear lady rushed up to me and she was very warm and came and greeted me: "Hello, Archbishop Mandela!". Sort of getting two for the price of one.

I crave your indulgence by an extended introduction that I am going to give, which will end really in a richly deserved tribute to my distinguished friend Hans Küng. We have since September 11, 2001 been bombarded with diatribes asserting, most of them, that Islam was a violent faith, that it encouraged terrorism. Unfortunately, these patently untrue assertions have been accepted by a too gullible public who – especially since the end of the Cold War – had lost their bearings. In the days of the Cold War it seemed relatively simple to define oneself. One was either anti-communist, or anti-west.

When this global reference point was removed with the fall of the Berlin Wall and Perestroika, many were disorientated, because they had found an identity only as defined over against a foe. In this time of transition people still longed for very straightforward, uncomplicated answers for often complex questions. They did not like nuanced responses that contained too many qualifying clauses. They saw or wanted to see issues in stark black and white terms. And had a stubborn allergy to those who pointed out that there were far more shades of grey in fact. They did not like those who differed from them in opinion, in faith, in language, in culture, in ethnicity.

And thus it is not surprising that this period spawned the awful ethnic cleansing in former Yugoslavia, though it was by no means the only reason, and the genocide in Rwanda. There was a kind of nostalgia for the Cold War, when we knew who our

enemies were. So 9/11 came as a much-desired relief: it provided the long sought after enemy, who seemed to be an indispensable element in defining identity. Saddam Hussein filled the void that had been left by the Soviets. No wonder President Bush and his cohorts were unpersuaded by all the arguments against the foolhardiness of invading Iraq. Hence the sustained maligning of Islam as a religion that fosters terrorism.

Out of thought that *we* Christians would have been the *last* people who could gloatingly accuse another faith of nurturing violence, given our often so gory history. We should be hanging our heads in shame and contrition when we think of the Crusades, of so-called heretics being burned at the stake, or more recently Christians giving the world the Nazi Holocaust. Christians who supported Apartheid in South Africa, as being justified biblically. Or who were at each others throats in Northern Ireland, who committed horrendous atrocities in Rwanda and in Bosnia. No, we certainly should not gloat or think we are morally superior to those of other faiths.

The question of the role of religion in encouraging goodness or evil is a little more complex. Christianity could produce a Hitler, but it also produced a Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It could produce the Ku Klux Klan in the United States, but it also gave us Martin Luther King Junior. Buddhism produced the abominable military dictatorship in Burma that could delay much-needed relief to its countries citizens in the wake of [cyclone] Nagis. But Buddhism has also given the world an amazing person in his Holiness, the Dalai Lama. And I wanted to say to you about this dear person that even after fifty years of being in exile from his beloved Tibet, he still has a remarkable mischievousness. And sometimes when we are together and he is at his old tricks, I sometimes have to say to him: “Sssh, the cameras are on us. Try to behave like a holy man.”

I’ve sought to say that in a way religion is morally neutral. I am not necessarily praising you, when I say that you are a religious person. Religion can be likened to a knife on a table. If I take that knife to cut bread and make sandwiches, it is good. On the other hand if I take that knife and stick it in your guts, then it is bad. Before he stepped down as the Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, a former lecturer here, appointed a group of us who had the somewhat pretentious title of the “High-level group of the alliance of civilizations” as opposed to the so-called clash of civilizations. Who were the most diverse group in religion, in gender, in ethnicity etc. There were people like Sheikh Khatami.

Kofi Annan was responding to the initiative sponsored by the prime ministers of Spain and Turkey. Amazingly, this diverse group of Rabbis, Sheikhs, Sheikhas and others, produced a unanimous report which Mr. Annan received in Istanbul and he summed up the nub of the matter, when he said: “It is clear, it is not the faiths that are

the problem, but the faithful.” It should have been obvious: there are Muslims who are good persons, there are Muslims who are bad, there are Christians who are good, there are Christians who are bad and you can say that about almost every major religion.

So, dear friends, it is as a preamble for me to say that I want to pay very warm tribute to Hans Küng who has devoted a great deal of time promoting the idea that all faiths seek to encourage their adherence to lead the good life. He drafted the initial Global Ethic Declaration, which was later accepted by the Parliament of World Religions in 1993. This is a crucial instrument in the business of persuading the gullible and the demagogic that no worthwhile faith promotes violence. They all seek to make their adherence truthful, peace-loving, compassionate, gentle and caring. And politicians and their followers need to be convinced of these crucial truths.

Our earth home is under serious threat and we need to be persuaded that our destiny is indeed in our hands. And that the faith to which we belong is so frequently just a matter of the accident of birth or geography than of deliberate choice. If one is born in Pakistan the chances are quite overwhelming that one would be a Muslim, just as equally, if one were to be born in Austria or in Italy, it would be highly probable that one would be a Roman Catholic Christian. It therefore may be prudent to be cautious with something in which chance plays such a prominent role. We ought to be more conciliatory and accommodating. We could so easily have been numbered amongst those we are condemning so wrongly.

Such insights and the greater tolerance that we are finding among the world religions, we owe in very great measure to the work that Professor Hans Küng and his Global Ethic Foundation have done and for this we want to commend you most fervently and give thanks to God for you. We ought to give you a warm clap. [Applause]

And so: to Africa. Even those who are reasonably well disposed towards my home continent, and there are many, might sometimes wonder whether Africa was intent on providing incontrovertible evidence that it was a doomed continent. A continent that was adept at producing really only stuff to make the so-called afro-sceptics gleeful. Civil wars galore, in Sudan, in Somalia, in Uganda, and recently ended ones in Liberia and Sierra Leone, where unspeakable atrocities were committed. It doesn't seem the same Africa, which gave refuge to an Abraham, to a Jacob, when there was famine in the holy land. It doesn't seem to be the same Africa that welcomed the holy family, escaping from Herod's persecution. It doesn't seem to be the same Africa that gave the world a Simon of Cyrene, who helped Jesus carry his cross on that first Good Friday. It doesn't seem to be the same Africa that produced such stalwarts as Athanasius, as Origen, as Augustine of Hippo to mention but a few who are given to the early church.

This Africa, in such disarray, with far too many absolute rulers unaccountable to the people. A continent ravaged by poverty, corruption, conflict and disease. The epicentre of the HIV and AIDS epidemic is to be found in Sub-Saharan Africa. Yes, in fact it is to be found in my beloved motherland South Africa, where every day 1.000 people die. We have quite rightly been shattered by the fact that just over 200 people lost their lives when the Air France Airbus crashed in the Atlantic Ocean. Can we imagine that you had four such planes crashing every day. That gives you an idea of how HIV and AIDS are ravaging our people. It seems that those who love Africa have to look hard and long to find any ameliorating evidence. It was as if Africans were really God's stepchildren. But would this be a fair assessment? You see, it is no use denying the harsh facts: that things are in far too many African countries not what they should be. Perhaps it is a positive attribute that you find people rising against many such bad rulers. But the fact is that there are still far too many "baddies" out there.

When I visit oil-rich countries such as Qatar, Dubai, and I see what they have done with their oil revenues to benefit their admittedly small populations, where education is free up to university level; splendid houses provided even for Beduin tribes; educated healthcare available for all free of charge. And then you ask: For goodness sake, why is it that Africa's equally oil-rich countries such as Nigeria, why aren't they able to have emulated their Arab counterparts? Is there something wrong with Africans? Is there something congenital?

My friends, the answer is a resounding "No". For one thing there are quite a few African countries that are doing not too badly at all: Botswana, Mozambique, Namibia, Ghana and South Africa. It is a good thing to remember that most African countries have only recently thrown off the colonial yoke. In many of these countries there was hardly any proper preparation for the demanding business of self-rule. There was no electorate that was able to hold rulers accountable. People were thrown in at the deep end and told to swim or sink, and in many cases we should say they made a good go of it. The African Union has a charter of human rights containing the conventional list of rights. It has a code that sets out the attribute of good governance. It has a peer review system trying to hold member states accountable with a review of a standard set of criteria. South Africa probably possesses one of the most liberal constitutions, which outlaws discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, belief, gender, sexual orientation, disability and even ageism. No, Africans are emphatically not God's stepchildren. They may often be like those traversing the wilderness of forty years wandering, having crossed the Red Sea. And many are still on this side of the Jordan waiting to cross into the Promised Land.

Yes, it is maybe a gloomy picture, maybe not so gloomy. Why should we believe that there is anything worthwhile, why should we in our care and business ensure that we

have a different kind of world? Well, you know, in most of Africa the worldview is one that embraces something called “Ubuntu”. “Ubuntu” is the essence of being human, a person. We say: I need you to be all you can be, so that I can be all that I can be. It is that my humanity is caught up in your humanity. The solitary human being is a contradiction in terms. We say: a person is a person through other persons. I have gifts that you don’t have. And you have gifts that I don’t have. And then God says: “Voilà, it’s exactly so that you know your need of one another, that you are created to exist in a delicate network of interdependence.” The completely self-sufficient person is really sub-human.

“Ubuntu” speaks about compassion, about generosity, about hospitality. When you are welcoming, when you are generous, then the highest accolade that we can give you in our part of the world, is to say: “This person, hey, has *ubuntu*.” He yearns for social, for communal harmony. Revenge, anger, hatred, nursing grudges, all of these undermine, corrode the social harmony. And so “ubuntu” encourages forgiveness, encourages reconciliation. And says: to forgive, you know, is actually good for your health. It lowers your blood pressure. It is the best form of self-interest. It prescribes restorative rather than retributive justice. Its purpose is to heal a bridge rather than seeking to be punitive. And so it is not surprising that a Nelson Mandela emerging out of prison after 27 years by rights should have been consumed by bitterness and anger amazed the world by the magnanimity and generosity of spirit that he demonstrated. He comes out and urges his people to follow the path not of retribution, not of revenge, but the path of forgiveness and reconciliation. And so today Nelson Mandela from Africa has become a global icon of reconciliation and forgiveness.

Who wouldn’t agree that you and I are so bound up in one another that to dehumanize one person is to dehumanize oneself. And we saw it in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission when someone would say: We shot him in the head and burned his body – and it takes eight, nine hours for a human body to burn – and whilst the body was burning here, we were having a barbecue next to it, drinking beer. And you wonder: what could have happened to the humanity of anyone that they would be able to have done that. Kill and have a body burning here and flesh burning there. “Ubuntu” was not something demonstrated only in South Africa. After Mau-Mau in Kenya they thought that when “uhuru” (freedom) comes, Jomo Kenyatta would lead his people into an orgy of revenge. It didn’t happen. When freedom came in Zimbabwe there was no revenge and retribution. Ian Smith remained a member of parliament after freedom. This was before Mr. Mugabe had changed. It was the same in Namibia. No, to revenge is ultimately to act against your own best interests.

“Ubuntu” really speaks about the worth of persons, about their dignity, about their worth. “Ubuntu” speaks about the fact that we belong in one family. We belong in the

human family, God's family. As I grow older and I am a great deal more decrepit each day, I think I have discovered what I believe to be the most radical thing that Jesus ever said. And I am sure it will fill people with surprise. You remember, on the first resurrection morning our Lord encounters Mary Magdalene and he says something very, very strange to her. Mary Magdalene, a woman. You'll recall that St. Paul said, the qualification to be an apostle was to have seen the risen Lord. So, in fact, the first Apostle it seems, was a woman. That is in parentheses.

Our Lord said something very strange to her: Go and tell my *brothers*. That's the first time he's called them "brothers". He had said: The highest title he could give them was to call them his friends. He calls them "my brothers". These, one of whom betrayed him, another denied him three times and all of them forsook him. He calls them brothers. "Go and tell my brothers that I am ascending to my God and their God, to my father and their father." It was a very solemn moment. And one thinks that Jesus meant those words. Jesus meant that you and I and all of us are brothers and sisters in this family. In this family that has no outsiders, this family where all are insiders. You remember how Jesus said: I, if I be lifted up, will draw, he didn't say "I will draw some", he said "I will draw all". All, all, all. Rich, poor, white, black, yellow, red, Palestinian, Israeli. All, all, all. Lesbian, gay, so-called straight. All, all, all.

Can you imagine? George Bush, bin Laden. All, all, all! Fantastic! For how can you be dignified when you're poor? How can you have a dignity when you are ill? How can you be dignified when you're ignorant? And you're made so, deliberately. How can you be? All, all, all. In the ethic of family you don't say: How much do you contribute to the family budget? You get only as much in proportion to what you give. Not in a good family! You don't say to a baby: Baby, what do you contribute? A baby contributes nothing, so far as we can see. And yet babies are showered with incredible loving. No, in a good family we say: from each according to their ability to each according to their need.

You think we will win wars against terror? Well, one prediction I can make for you is: we will never win any war against terror as long as there are conditions that make people desperate. We are family. How can we spend as we do in so many countries obscene amounts on budgets of death and destruction? Making bombs that are going to kill. When we know that it's only a fraction of those budgets that would ensure that children everywhere in the world would have clean water to drink, would have enough food to eat, would have a decent home, would have a good education.

How can we? And God says: Can you help make this world a more compassionate world? Can you help me make this world, a world where each person matters more than things? Can you help me make this world more generous? Can you help me make this world one where every single person can enjoy their inalienable rights?

And God says: Please, please, please, help me. Help me to make this world a world of compassion, a world of generosity, a world of caring, a world of laughter and joy, a world where poverty is history, a world where there's no war no more.

Help me. Help me. Help me.

Thank you.