

THE TRIUMPH OF TUTU

By Emma Kelly

To celebrate their 75th anniversary, the British Council is holding a series of lectures entitled 'Talking without Borders'. The series will bring together some of the greatest minds from all over the world to discuss the importance of cultural relations in encouraging global dialogue, relations that the British Council has been building since its formation in 1934. The first in the series took place on 19 February 2009 and saw Desmond Tutu speaking about 'The Triumph of Goodness' in our world today.

Nearly two weeks have passed since I attended Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu's inspirational speech to the British Council audience; even as I type these words I can still hear his remarkable wheezy giggle reverberating in my ears. It was not his laugh that had attracted the crowds (although the laughter in itself it is worthy of an audience); it was the guarantee that he would deliver a truly inspirational speech with such grace and humbleness that had ensured that the Ondaatje Theatre of the Royal Geographic Society would be brimming with both people and enthusiasm on 19 February.

We were gathered together for the inaugural lecture of the British Council's series of lectures entitled *Talking without Borders*. The series brings together some of the greatest minds from a variety of fields (including Nobel prize winners Amartya Sen and Muhammed Yunus) to discuss and highlight the issues that have come to shape our world today, issues that have become global not only in scope and concern but also in action – poverty, climate change and terrorism. The task fell to Desmond Tutu to occupy the introductory spot. Speaking about *The Triumph of Goodness*, he emphasised the trust and faith he has in mankind to work together on the solutions to these global issues, a faith that many today would argue is misplaced given the mess that continues to unravel itself as a result of financial greed and malpractice. To the surprise of myself and many others, there was no mention of the dreaded 'R-word', nor was his speech eclipsed by the oppressing pessimism that permeates newspapers, lectures and casual coffees with friends. This was the breath of fresh air that the invitation had carefully concealed in the small print. For the duration of the lecture, Desmond Tutu was the surprise tonic to the inescapable global ills we are overexposed to on a daily basis, overexposure that the UK market is well aware of. His words, although not offering a fix-all solution, formed a platform for people regardless of their role prior to these turbulent times, a platform to build on and from which to make a positive change.

Bearing witness to the victory of black South Africans fifteen years ago has perhaps enriched the message of truth Desmond Tutu brings to people; his conviction in right and goodness prevailing over the oppression and injustice of the world is unfaltering even in light of the many active and very present evils we face. Instilling a sense of worth in every member of the audience and reminding us of our role in these challenges, Tutu stressed that the goodness needed to face these evils is to be found in each and every one of us. Emphasising the importance of the younger generations, he reminded us that the idealism that time and experience has erased from older generations is to be found in the young, and should not be forgotten when facing these challenges; South Africa is proof of this. He reminded us of 'the doleful catalogue' of 'oppression, injustice and suffering' (Tutu, 2009) that seems to manifest itself as an endless to-do list found at the back of the agendas of the developed world, rather than a serious concern worthy enough to warrant its place in the daily schedule. The emergence of the many financial problems the developed nations face is set to push this 'to-do' list into the desk drawer. While the players in this catalogue have changed slightly, the issues at hand have not; with time, they have become graver in nature and greater in scope. And as this change has taken place, so too has the greatest change of all – globalisation. I talk of greatest here in terms of size, as the nature of globalisation and the consequences it has given rise to are highly controversial. Out of

globalisation a new world of interdependence has been born, a world that promises hope, while seeking to deliver security to all parts. However, the level of interdependence that has developed unfortunately draws a line among its participants. Putting the controversial benefits aside, the vast majority of states, supposedly connected through this process, are exposed largely to its ill effects. These are ill effects that we as global citizens must address as a moral concern as well as a political and economic one.

Global citizenship continues to be viewed largely as a moral concept which fails to gather legitimate weight in the international community. The presence of borders makes it difficult to mentally construct such an idea, while a practical application would be nearly impossible even if borders were deconstructed. Global citizenship and the approach it embodies is at the heart of the cosmopolitan theory; put simply, it is the idea that all individuals (within nations) form one community (among nations) within which inclusiveness, equal worth and dignity are prevalent, regardless of the differences between them. Attempts at the international level to generate this inclusive principle is witnessed in The United Nation's Declaration on Human Rights, which has seen states publicly acknowledge principles related to the promotion of a common standard of treatment for all citizens, regardless of geography. Public commitment alone has not achieved a consistent practical commitment on the ground, but that is not to say that the international community has made no efforts. Success is believed to have been made in East Timor (although this too remains a divisive issue), yet there remains some ambiguity surrounding the efforts made in other parts of the world – ambiguity that the developed states would prefer to use as a cloak either to conceal their failures, or to drape over their triumphs,. Whether globalisation has initiated this attention to international rights is unclear; could such priorities have arisen without the dominance of capitalism spreading throughout the international community offering economic incentives to achieve these moral priorities? It seems unlikely that international agreements could have been reached without these incentives to guide or support them. Globalisation has successfully created real political and economic interdependence, yet continues to fail to match this 'success' in the social sphere.

Tutu's reference to the African concept of *Ubuntu*, despite lacking a direct translation, captures this sense of globalisation and interdependence in the context of human nature – the social context. This wonderful sense of interdependence between humans renders any notion of a human being's solitariness in nature a contradiction. *Ubuntu* sees individuals through the relationships and connections they make with other individuals; no single person is born into the world knowledgeable of everything and lacking in nothing. In order to become human we must live through those around us, learning from and appreciating the differences that exist in order to achieve a true interdependence among global citizens that does not rest on any economic motives or incentives but on a shared understanding of who we are, why we are here and how we can achieve it together, united and not divided. Ironically, the international community has side-stepped such views, and some argue the community has deliberately stepped over these ideas, and in doing so has called into question the true successes of the political and economic cooperation created thus far; the international cooperation has been and continues to be eroded as a consequence of the social independence that it has cultivated. There is a clear lack of importance placed on the despair of the wider international community by individuals in developed states; this has arisen from the misguided notion that any form of action is outside of our individual undertaking. While shocking, it is regrettably understandable because of the narrow individually-focused mindsets many individuals have. The 'economic hurricane' (Brown, 2009) brought about by the greed-induced events of recent years in the financial world is a clear illustration of the lack of respect that some hold for those immediately around them. Unlike the problems of the international community, there is no safety net for the architects of this disaster to fall back on; a potential solution was well within reach. This underlines the true reason why little can be achieved internationally and why we need Tutu's words now more than ever as we experience disaster at home. Individually, we are merely parts to the greater and more triumphant whole that requires everyone to be present — a whole of goodness, not greed.

Any attempt to pin down one message within Tutu's speech would fail to do justice to its complexity. Rich in religious rhetoric and punctuated with humorous anecdotes and asides, Tutu's speech did not disappoint; his words are as inspirational as his laughter is infectious. Entertaining yet thought-provoking, he was met with at least three standing ovations and frequent rounds of applause as the audience, hanging on his every word, demonstrated their agreement. His tribute to Britain's efforts in the abolition of Apartheid and polite self-censorship surrounding the equally prominent and highly contentious role in Iraq and Afghanistan has raised a few eyebrows. Knowing where to draw the line is one of his admirable qualities, of which many governments should take note; perhaps if they had, the Triumph of Goodness would not be a distant goal but a feat within our reach.

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