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Christof Heyns: a Renaissance man's living legacies

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In this brief contribution, I portray Christof Heyns as a renaissance man because he had an indomitable spirit and will to change the world as he found it because of his deep love for humanity. Referencing his wife Fearika Heyns, he was on a whole big adventure to change the world as we know it and he put all of his efforts into it. He was on an adventure to make his family and personal life the best it could be, despite the fact that his family had to share it with the rest of the world. He lived ahead of his time and envisioned a just world that defied the reality of a world and humanity caught in multiple complications of seemingly endless injustice.

Many contributions in this volume and many obituaries after his passing called him a human rights or legal scholar. That is indeed correct. That was his primary identity and his legacy in human rights scholarship will live on. But Christof was more than a human rights and legal scholar. He was a transdisciplinary or interdisciplinary scholar. This positionality follows on him being a renaissance spirit full of incredible intellectual energies. Just as interdisciplinarity or transdisciplinarity subverts and transgresses to provide the new and better insights that can kind transformative change, Christof wanted to see something different from the world as it was. He saw the world as a terrible beauty, terrible in the things that happen that should not happen, that stifle our humanity but at the same time full of potential for change. He had the morality, integrity and ethics that said this must change and it ought to change now.

Christof Heyns was in a hurry but he was not impatient with fellow human beings. He was in a hurry to change the world. Renaissance persons want to change the world, they use their energies to change the world, they work across boundaries and borders, they work cross-generationally. A number of the students he trained testified at memorial ceremonies in this regard and the human rights programmes he set up in schools are just but many examples. He did not treat people as if they were of a specific generation, but rather as part of a broader humanity connecting us all. He believed that humanity can be beautiful. Christof Heyns was on a mission to make human beings realise their beauty.

He rebelled against the circumstances that distorted the beauty of humanity. His rebelliousness was imbued with humanity, with a greater spirit to advance justice. So, it is that he fought against apartheid (among many other crimes against humanity) and contributed to the writing of an exemplary constitution. His life's work to create a just society was endless and his energy visibly boundless.

So, as a renaissance man he built and created spaces, structures, institutions – centres, institutes, moods, an atmosphere. In all of this creativity he connected people because a renaissance person sees the links beyond the immediate and the disparate.

He saw, in the worlds of a line in a William Blake poem, 'the world in a grain of sand', and the world as a whole was for him a creative space for building a better future. He was a creator. That is why he loved music and played it. He created all of these spaces, created scholars, created in others or instigated, incited and invited others to join the renaissance and to change the world as we know it.

Although rooted academically as he was at the University of Pretoria (UP), he was not confined to UP. Rooted as he was in South Africa in the apartheid era and beyond, he was not confined to South Africa. He extended his efforts to our continent Africa. Rooted as he was to Africa, he did not confine himself to Africa. He extended himself to the whole world and that is why he worked with the United Nations (UN) and other global institutions. In that way he inspired a generation of people who also want to change the world. His contribution is the living legacies of a renaissance man, who was in a hurry, had an indomitable spirit, and wanted to leave world better than he found it.

Christof contributed to the sometimes gradual or quicker, chipping away at the terrible things that happen in the world and laid the foundations for the beautiful world that he wanted to see. For that his living legacies abound. He leaves behind immeasurable inspiration, immense influence and living impact.

There are likely many more, but I would like to draw attention to and celebrate four areas where Christof's hard work and dedication has created a legacy that will live on.

The first is his contribution to weaving the fabric of democratic South Africa. Justice Dikgang Moseneke, former Deputy Chief Justice of South Africa, says in his tribute that he personally knew Christof in the dark days of apartheid and colonialism. Unlike many others, he says, Christof opposed apartheid openly and embraced notions of an inclusive and socially just society. As a founding father of the Centre for Human Rights, at what was then a white conservative UP, his implementation of the Integrated Bar Project in the late 1980's, ensuring the access of black students to traditionally white law firms, as well as his passion for SASVO, the South African Student Volunteer

Organisation, which aimed to improve the quality of life in rural areas by working with community members on various projects, are just two examples of how he lived his motto, 'From human wrongs to human rights'. The alumni of the Masters' degree programme in Human Rights and Democratisation in Africa recall his optimism about a non-racial future for South Africa based on human rights and the rule of law, and how he worked tirelessly for a new democratic South Africa. His contribution towards the South Africa Constitution is notable not only as it is the supreme law, but even more importantly, it is an articulation of the values and spirit of humans in our country.

The second area where Christof lit little fires everywhere was in his tireless efforts in educating several generations of students to become accomplished human rights lawyers. Having been the Director of the Centre for Human Rights from 1999 to 2006, he served as Dean of the Faculty of Law for four years, before becoming the founding Co-Director of the Institute for International and Comparative Law in Africa (ICLA). He was also an adjunct professor at the Washington College of Law of the American University and since 2005 a Visiting Fellow at Kellogg College at Oxford University. His profound impact in kindling a passion for human rights is seen in the thousands of notes of appreciation from past and present students that have flowed in. A past student from UP's Moot Society writes: 'Only when I read his obituary did I fully realise how many of the experiences that shaped me I owed to Prof Heyns. He was behind everything, from my first international moot and the journal I was first published in, to my LLM programme and my first pay cheque. His legacy will be more than his achievements. It will be the many, many young lives like mine that he changed completely. I will always be grateful.' Another student writes: 'Prof Heyns was a mentor, an inspiration, a supporter, a giant. Generations of law students benefitted from the tradition that he has established, and his influence will resonate with many more over the years to come – especially those who use their skills to make the world a better place.'

The third sphere where Christof has left indelible footprints is in his role as an international activist. From 2010 to 2016, he was UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions. His many important achievements in that role included a ground-breaking report on Lethal Autonomous Robotics and the right to life. He also played a key role in helping update the Minnesota Protocol on the Investigation of Potentially Unlawful Death, published in 2016, and in the same year chaired the UN Independent Investigation on Burundi. From 2017 he took on his most recent role of being a member of the UN Human Rights Committee. He led the drafting of the widely acclaimed General Comment 37 on the right of peaceful assembly, which was published in July 2020. He also led the team that drafted the UN Human Rights

Guidance on Less-Lethal Weapons in Law Enforcement, launched two months earlier in May 2020. These two documents provide important analysis and guidance on the international law and UN standards relating to peaceful and not-so-peaceful assembly, and their significance and relevance will long outlive their principal creator.

Lastly, and perhaps most profoundly, is Christof's legacy in having lived a life that was an embodiment of ubuntu, the ideology that says: 'I am only well if you are well.' The Botswana Centre for Human Rights shared that they were always struck by how genuinely respectful Christof was, reflecting this spirit. He was always keen to learn about the experiences of others, regardless of their age and experience. This is the basis of human rights, they say, respecting the dignity of all, above all else!

At the tribute hosted by the Faculty of Law, I spoke of the first time Christof and I sat together in my office and how, through his spirit of generosity, he agreed to assist me with some things. From then on, we were fairly close, and I asked for his advice on a number of occasions. He gifted me with a book recently, *Humankind: a hopeful history*, and we were due to meet up to discuss it. This is just a small example of how he genuinely cared for people, and while he may have been an international giant, it is likely that those who were privileged to meet him and know him, were most touched by his deep humanity.

Son of Africa, your untimely passing has left us in cold, dark grief. But let us be comforted by your unforgettable glow, and go on to shine brighter for having known you.

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