

## **Faith and politics in the context of struggle: the legacy of Inkosi Albert John Luthuli's Christian-centred political leadership**

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### *Abstract*

Albert John Mvumbi Luthuli, a Zulu Inkosi and former President-General of the African National Congress (ANC) and a lay-preacher in the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA) is a significant figure as he represents the last generation of ANC presidents who were opposed to violence in their execution of the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. He attributed his opposition to violence to his Christian faith and theology. As a result he is remembered as a peace-maker, a reputation that earned him the honour of being the first African to win the Nobel Peace Prize. Also central to Luthuli's leadership of the ANC and his people at Groutville was democratic values of leadership where the voices of people mattered including those of the youth and women and his teaching on non-violence, much of which is shaped by his Christian faith and theology. This article seeks to examine Luthuli's legacy as a leader who used peaceful means not only to resist apartheid but also to execute his duties both in the party and the community. The study is a contribution to the struggle of maintaining peace in the political sphere in South Africa which is marked by inter and intra party violence. The aim is to examine Luthuli's legacy for lessons that can be used in a democratic South Africa.

### **Introduction: contextual issues on faith and politics**

In December 1961, Albert John Mvumbi Luthuli<sup>i</sup> a Zulu Inkosi,<sup>ii</sup> a teacher by profession, lay-preacher in the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA), and former President-General of the African National Congress (ANC), stood in front of the Nobel Peace Prize Committee in Oslo, Norway, to receive the highly acclaimed and coveted Nobel Peace Prize. Although many Africans have since received the Nobel Peace Prize, Luthuli became its first African recipient.<sup>iii</sup> While it is now forty-two years since his untimely death, his legacy still casts its proud and lasting shadow upon the religious and political landscape of South Africa.

Since its liberation in 1994, there have been a number of ways in which South Africa has commemorated Inkosi Albert Luthuli, one of its most illustrious sons. These include the proclamation of his home in Groutville, KwaZulu-Natal as a national museum;<sup>iv</sup> the naming of one of the most up-to-date and technologically replete state teaching hospitals in South Africa (the Inkosi Albert Luthuli Memorial Hospital in Cato Manor, Durban); the International Convention Centre in Durban; the Albert Luthuli choral music Eisteddfod choir festival, as well as the recent renaming of a central arterial main road in Pietermaritzburg, the provincial capital of KwaZulu-Natal. His name also appears on the Sikhumbuto National Monument among the names of 76 000 prominent South Africans who died in the struggle for South Africa's freedom.<sup>v</sup> Finally, the University of KwaZulu-Natal has recently established the Inkosi Albert Luthuli Peace Chair and an annual Memorial Lecture in his honour. So far, over two dozen commemoration celebrations have been held, the purpose of which, according to Sibusiso Ndebele, the former premier of KwaZulu-Natal is to "immortalise his legacy".<sup>vi</sup> In one of these commemorations, while paying tribute to Luthuli, former President Nelson Mandela described him as a "colossus" and "foot soldier of our people who chose persecution and taught us the non-violent strategies of engaging government".<sup>vii</sup>

Excellent as these commemorations are, they are deliberately one-sided, being facilitated by the ANC to honour his political contribution towards the struggle. Conversely, there is hardly any celebration of his work that is primarily focused on his contribution as a Christian leader, which historically, preceded his political involvement. In point of fact, very little is mentioned of Luthuli's faith and how it influenced his growth as a political leader. The emphasis is always upon the political role that he played in the ANC as if the ANC influenced him into politics. Indeed, the opposite is true, for it was the Christian faith that motivated him to join the struggle, seeing his political journey in the ANC as an extension of his Christian pilgrimage.<sup>viii</sup> To be specific, Luthuli's politics were not shaped

by nationalist ideologies but rather by Christian theology. In the current, often volatile and intolerant political climate in South Africa, characterised as it is by inter- and intra-party conflict and violence, it has become imperative to re-visit Luthuli's legacy in order to draw lessons that can shape South Africa's future political direction, especially in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, Luthuli's home and base.

While political organisations have been re-visiting Luthuli's legacy through the commemorations and naming of public buildings and roads, this does not seem to have influenced their politics. Party politics in South Africa is still dominated by intolerance, bitter rivalry and threats of violence. It is therefore imperative that the church is reminded of Luthuli's immense contribution and bring about the perspective that is conveniently forgotten in political circles of his Christian-centred political values of non-violence, peace, tolerance and the basic principles of democratic leadership that were demonstrated both in his leadership in the ANC and as Inkosi at Groutville. This article therefore analyses and evaluates the themes in Luthuli's understanding of Christian-centred politics. Some of the more interesting and important issues are highlighted and discussed from a contextual perspective. The article not only presents Luthuli's ideas of Christian-centred leadership, but also provides a critical assessment of his understanding of the role Christian theology plays in the political ideology of non-violent resistance. This essay is thus divided into four sections: Part 1 looks at the making of Albert Luthuli; Part 2 looks at his legacy, while Part 3 looks at the lessons from his Christian-centred approach to politics; finally, Part 4 draws the discussion to a conclusion by proposing the view that Luthuli's legacy as a Christian-centred politician and personal espousal of traditional democratic leadership can become a new model for contemporary politics in a democratic South Africa.

### **The making of a Christian-activist and traditional leader**

Albert John Mvumbi Luthuli was born in 1898 at Mount Solusi Mission near Bulawayo in Zimbabwe to a family with a tradition of both Christian and tribal leadership. His parents were John Bunyan Luthuli and Mutonya Luthuli (née Gumede). His grandfather, Ntaba was an Inkosi of a small tribe at Groutville in the Umvoti Mission Reserve (a Mission of the American Board Mission).<sup>ix</sup> Ntaba and his wife Ntitisi were the first converts of Rev. Aldin Grout when he arrived at Groutville.<sup>x</sup> Groutville is near Stanger (also known as KwaDukuza), and used to be King Shaka's base; it is also where the Zulu nation was defeated by the British at the battle of Isandhlwana in January 1879, resulting in the capture and exile of King Cetshwayo to Cape Town.<sup>xi</sup> The mission was named after the first missionary who founded it in 1847, the Rev. Aldin Grout. Luthuli's father, John Bunyan Luthuli was a younger son, who became a Seventh Day Adventist missionary spending most of his last days in mission work among the Ndebele people of then Rhodesia (present day Zimbabwe). His mother Mutonya (née Gumede) joined her husband in Rhodesia where her third son, Albert John Mvumbi<sup>xii</sup> was born. After the death of her husband in 1909, Mutonya Luthuli and her sons Alfred and Albert came back to South Africa. They settled at Vryheid, Northern KwaZulu-Natal, where her elder son Alfred worked for the Seventh Day Adventist as a pastor and Albert was sent to Groutville to stay with his uncle Martin Luthuli who was by now the Inkosi of Groutville so that he could be educated at the mission school. Martin Luthuli had taken the throne after his father (Albert's grandfather) Ntaba Luthuli who had also been Inkosi of the *Abasemakholweni* community of Groutville. Martin Luthuli was also a founder member of the Natal National Congress, a regional branch of the ANC.

Albert Luthuli received his education at mission schools, beginning at Groutville United Congregational Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA) Mission School, and then proceeding in 1914 to John Langalibalele Dube's Ohlange<sup>xiii</sup> (another UCCSA institution). He attended Edendale Methodist Mission School and College for his secondary school education, where he also did his teacher's training which he completed in 1917. He later taught at a Methodist School at Blaauwbosch, a mission school under the granteehip of Rev. GG Mtembu. Luthuli remembers that it was through Rev. Mtembu's influence that he became more committed to the church and was ultimately confirmed, offering himself as a lay preacher in the local Methodist church circuit. In 1921, Luthuli received a bursary to continue with his teacher training at Adams College, Amanzimtoti, KwaZulu-Natal.<sup>xiv</sup> In 1927, Luthuli married Nokukhanya Bhengu umaNgcolosi. After finishing his studies at Adams College, the institution offered him a position as a teacher and later lecturer at the Training College at Adams Mission. Among his colleagues was the acclaimed Z. K. Mathews, who was head of the High School.<sup>xv</sup> Luthuli taught at Adams Mission for a total of thirteen years. In 1933, he was elected the Secretary of the African Teachers Association, and in 1935 was appointed as president of the same organisation. In 1936, being one of four candidates who stood for election, Luthuli was elected by the elders of his tribe to be the Inkosi of the Umvoti Mission Reserve also known as Groutville.<sup>xvi</sup> He succeeded Inkosi Josiah Mqwebu who was deposed through collaboration of the American Board

Mission and the Department of Native Affairs.<sup>xvii</sup> With a population of over 5 000 people, Luthuli became their leader handling issues ranging from legal disputes as well as land issues involving government's administration of the Mission Reserve. He also performed the judicial function of a magistrate, the mediating function of an official acting as representative of his people and at the same time, representative of the central government, the tribal function of a presiding dignitary at traditional festivities, and the executive function of a leader seeking a better life for his people. This he did with much skill and dedication until he was deposed by the government because of his political activities.<sup>xviii</sup> He also had to work according to the expectations of the American Board Mission, a responsibility he carried with honour as a committed Christian and lay-preacher. Luthuli thus fitted well in both the secular and ecclesial requirements as Inkosi of a Mission Reserve. Groutville exposed him to the poverty, struggle, oppression and exploitation of the black people, thus compelling him to join the ANC at national level to fight the system that was responsible for oppressing black people in general. In addition, as a teacher and active member of a sporting institution and choral music association, this experience at the coal face of human existence even more exposed him to the plight and suffering of his people.

In 1944, Luthuli joined the ANC, which at the time was under the leadership of Allison Wessels George Champion. Soon afterwards, Luthuli was elected to the Executive of the organisation. He was also elected to the membership of the Native Representative Council, following the death of John Langalibalele Dube who was the leader of the Natal Region of the ANC. The more Luthuli became entrenched in politics, the government found Luthuli to be less cooperative. In 1945, he was elected to the Committee of the Natal Provincial Division of ANC, and in 1952 to the presidency of the organisation nationally. This meant that he was an Inkosi and leader of the ANC and he had to travel the country mobilising people to join the ANC and address various meetings. In 1952, the government responded briskly to his election as president-general of the ANC by wanting to depose him from the position of Inkosi. This marked the beginning of his suffering which he had to endure at the hands of the police. He was arrested and banned several times, not being allowed to attend meetings and placed under house arrest for several years. Having had a banning order for two years imposed upon him, this was renewed in 1954 for a further two years.<sup>xix</sup> In 1955, the ANC hosted the Congress of the People at Kliptown in Soweto Johannesburg, which was a gathering of a coalition of organisations of the oppressed coming together to produce a vision and charter for a free, democratic and racially inclusive South Africa. This document was called the Freedom Charter; a declaration that became and still is the manifesto of the ANC.<sup>xx</sup> Luthuli could not participate nor chair the meeting as president since he was banned at the time. In 1956, Luthuli was accused of treason by the apartheid regime, although these charges were later dropped after a traumatic and lengthy trial.

In 1960, Luthuli publicly burned his passbook in solidarity with the people of Sharpeville who were killed after marching to a police station to hand over their passes in a march that had been organised by the Pan African Congress. Soon afterwards, he was detained under the State Emergency Act.

Luthuli had worked for the church both locally and overseas. He was in the executive once the chairperson of the Christian Council of South African which is the precursor of the South African Council of Churches. In 1938, Luthuli went to Madras, India, as part of the South African delegation to the International Missionary Conference. Later, he was to look back with excitement on this visit and the many experiences he had, no doubt grateful to the church for making the trip possible for him. In 1948, Luthuli had the opportunity to visit United States of America to undertake a lecture tour on Christian missions facilitated by the American Board Mission and the North American Missionary Conference.<sup>xxi</sup> If anything came out of these church-facilitated trips for Luthuli, he was reminded, as he put it that, "I was spoilt by being made in the image of God."<sup>xxii</sup>

At the end of 1960, Luthuli was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize but would only collect it in 1961. In 1964, the government imposed a banning order upon him for a further five years.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Luthuli died at the untimely age of sixty-nine on July 21, 1967. He was found dead next to a railway line close to his home, purportedly hit by a freight train. While there is little evidence to support this allegation made by the state authorities, his family has continued to refuse to accept this official version of the story of his death, believing instead that he was assassinated. While there is no firm evidence to prove this allegation, there is also no evidence that he was hit by a train. This leaves the conclusion open as to whether Luthuli was assassinated or accidentally killed in a train accident. Others, such as Couper,<sup>xxiv</sup> have argued that he was killed in a train accident, since all the available evidence points this way. However, this is not convincing, because there is insufficient evidence to prove that he was killed in a train incident. Knowing the capability of the security agents of the apartheid era, it is still possible that they killed him and then covered their tracks in order to subvert the

facts. Luthuli was buried at the grounds of the Groutville UCCSA grounds, a church to which he and his family belonged and cherished and which he had led as a deacon and lay-preacher.

### **The legacy of Albert Luthuli**

Having discussed in brief Luthuli's life and work, there is a need to capture the legacy of this great man in order for future generations to learn from him.

#### *Taking Christian-centred political leadership to the people*

The roots of Luthuli's Christian-centred political leadership are found in the teachings of the church which natured him. Steve de Gruchy has outlined the key "impulses" of the UCCSA as:

A strong commitment against state interference in the church, a democratic church order locates property ownership and decision-making in the hands of the gathered congregation' at local level, a commitment to unity and ecumenism; a valuing of human dignity, justice and freedom as key elements in its praxis in the world and a desire to share the message abroad.<sup>xxv</sup>

These were the impulses that formed Luthuli as he grew up and was nurtured by the teachings and sermons of the UCCSA. While his political practice was necessarily motivated by some political ideology, it was the progressive teaching of his church and his faith as a Christian that were among his main influential factors.<sup>xxvi</sup> In his own words, he could boldly acclaim:

For myself, I am in the Congress precisely because I am a Christian. My belief about human society must find expression here and now. Congress is the spearhead of the real struggle ... My own urge because I am a Christian, is to get into the thick of the struggle with other Christians, taking my Christianity with me and praying that it may be used to influence for good the character of the resistance.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Unlike other leaders who went before him in the ANC who were involved in the struggle as Christians but could not articulate the theology that lay behind it, Luthuli gave a convincing theological argument why he could not be neutral or aloof to the suffering of his people under apartheid. For him as a Christian this had to do with his unwavering belief in God, thereby understanding his involvement in the political struggle as part of his calling as a Christian. As he would later observe:

I also, as a Christian and patriot, could not look on while systematic attempts, to debase almost in every department of life, to debase the God-factor in Man or to set a limit beyond which the human being in his black form might not strive to serve his grace creator to the best of his ability. To remain neutral in a situation where the laws of the land virtually criticized God for having created men of colour was the sort of thing I could not, as a Christian, tolerate.<sup>xxviii</sup>

He travelled throughout the country preaching the gospel of standing up against the apartheid system as part of the requirement of a Christian believer carrying the burden of the cross and following Jesus. The use of the metaphor of the cross demonstrates the extent of the relevance of the gospel, especially the life and death of Christ for political liberation as he understood it. He once wrote in a statement entitled, "The Road to Freedom is via the Cross":

In this effort I always pursued what liberal-minded people rightly regarded as the path of moderation. Over this great length of time I have, year after year, gladly spent hours of my time with such organisations of the church and its various agencies such as the Christian Council of South Africa, the Joint Council of Europeans and Africans and the now defunct Native Representative Council.<sup>xxix</sup>

For Luthuli, being involved in the struggle was following Christ, it was nothing less or nothing more, but part of a Christian's pilgrimage. He did not subscribe to the dichotomisation of faith and politics; for him, the two complemented and informed each other:

As for myself, with a full sense of responsibility and a clear conviction, I decided to remain in the struggle for extending democratic rights and responsibilities to all sections of the South African community. I have embraced the non-violent passive resistance technique in fighting for freedom because I am convinced it is the only non-revolutionary, legitimate and humane way that could be used by people denied, as we are, of effective constitutional means to further their aspirations....It is inevitable that in working for freedom some individuals and families must take lead and suffer: The Road to Freedom is via the Cross.<sup>xxx</sup>

Luthuli's faith was so deep that not even the banning orders could stop him from being part of a worshipping community. On Sundays, he defied his banning order to participate in spiritual worship even though he could not be there physically. His daughter Thandeka explains how he defied the banning order on Sunday mornings.

When he could not go to church because he had been banned he would wake up every Sunday morning dress himself in a suit and a tie, everything formally. Sit down and follow the service in the radio and read his Bible. When there was singing he would sing and even conduct the music in the radio as if the choir was in front of him. Not even the banning order would stop him from connecting with his faith community.<sup>xxxi</sup>

This was his way of defying the banning orders. The government could restrict his movements but they could not take away his right to worship as a Christian. That in a way was a form of resistance and coping mechanism for a man who had been forcibly confined in his house. Worship was a way of escaping the world of loneliness and restriction. Luthuli was committed to the struggle right up to the point that he even thought of death, knowing that it might find him and be caused by his political activities. He was so committed to it that even death could not scare him. Instead, he saw it as part of God's will of his life if he died in the struggle. He echoed these sentiments in what may be regarded as a word of prophecy in one of his sermons:

What the future holds in store for me I do not know. It might be ridicule, imprisonment, a concentration camp, flogging, banishment and even death.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Demonstrating the care for his wife and their seven children, while still recognising that even they were not to be compared with the calling that God had given to him towards total sacrifice, he went on to say:

My only painful concern at times is for the welfare of my family but I try even in this regard, in a spirit of trust and surrender to God's will as I see it, to say: God will provide.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

These startling words demonstrate the level of commitment that Luthuli displayed towards the service of God in the dangerous ministry of opposing the heretical system of apartheid.<sup>xxxiv</sup> It also places emphasis on the fact that for Luthuli, political involvement was part of Christian pilgrimage. As Couper observes:

To his faith-based community, Luthuli communicates that through politics, one implements faith. To his political audience, Luthuli communicates that the basis and impetus for politics is a calling from God to serve others. One is a mere extension of the other; neither of the two can be separated.<sup>xxxv</sup>

Luthuli did not separate the two as fundamentalist Christians often have done; instead, he saw an important continuity between faith and politics.

#### *A non-violent approach to resistance*

One of the key themes in Luthuli's work was that he chose passive resistance and non-violence as an essential approach to the struggle. This was informed by his Christian theology and based on the beliefs and practices of the UCCSA. While the UCCSA advocated for democracy and human rights, it emphasised that these values must only be gained through non-violence. Making a case for his

involvement in the struggle and reflecting on the theological reasons for the choice of non-violence as a chosen method of struggle, Luthuli could state that:

My own belief as I have said are to a certain extent motivated by Christian leanings. Because of my Christian leanings I would hesitate to be a party to violence.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

His commitment to non-violence was recognised in December 1961 when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. It is therefore not surprising that during the award ceremony the following eulogy was read out by the Committee honouring him:

Never has he ever succumbed to the temptation to use violent means in the struggle for his people. Nothing has shaken him from this firm resolve, so firmly rooted is his conviction that violence and terrorist must not be employed.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

The ANC welcomed Luthuli being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. It was a vindication for all black people everywhere for the struggle they had engaged in to free themselves. The Nobel Peace Prize was also a tribute to the Defiance Campaign which had pushed him right to the top of the international world for using peaceful means to fight the struggle. Persecuted by apartheid, an African artist even painted him as a black messiah. Luthuli thus dedicated the struggle, not only to the people of South African, but to all the peoples of Africa.

Some however have raised questions as to Luthuli's commitment towards peace and passive, non-violent resistance. Soon after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, the ANC, upon his return from Norway, Nelson Mandela and others (particularly whites, such as Rusty Bernstein, Joe Slovo and Jack Hogson), formed the armed wing, Umkhonto weSizwe (MK), (lit: "Spear of the Nation"). A campaign was soon launched which resulted in explosive devices being placed at electricity generating stations and government offices. As Nelson Mandela records:

One warm December afternoon, while I sat in the kitchen at Liliesfontein Farm, I listened on the radio to the announcement that Chief Luthuli had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize ... I was- we all were- enormously pleased. It was first of all an acknowledgement of our struggle and of the achievements of the Chief as the leader of the struggle and as a man ... The honour came at an awkward time for it was juxtaposed against an announcement that seemed to call the award itself into question. The day after Luthuli returned from Oslo, MK dramatically announced its emergence.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

This is what compelled Mandela in 1961 to respond by forming the armed wing after it had violently crushed a peaceful strike. As Mandela was to later recall:

There are many people, who feel that it is useless and futile to continue using non-violent means by violence. They feel that we must change out tactics. It was clear for the government that apartheid can only be maintained with violence to the black masses especially those who were mobilising the people to fight against the system. On the other hand it was clear that the ANC would need to change strategies.<sup>xxxix</sup>

Was however Luthuli part of the plan to form MK? Indeed, it was Mandela who took the responsibility of forming the army for which ultimately became Commander-in-Chief. As he could later state:

At the beginning of June 1961, after a long anxious assessment of the South African situation, I and some of my colleagues came to the conclusion that as violence in this country was inevitable, it would be wrong and unrealistic for African leaders to continue preaching peace and non-violence at a time when the government met our demands with force.<sup>xli</sup>

Reviewing the evidence, Couper asserts that Luthuli could not have agreed to the formation of MK.<sup>xli</sup> Others have felt that while Luthuli knew, he could not object to it because the younger people were determined to form it. Indeed, as Anthony Simpson remembers, "in a meeting that the issue of the formation of the MK, Luthuli immediately made clear his Christian concerns about the move to violence".<sup>xlii</sup> There is general agreement that while Luthuli gave in to the younger generation's demand, he made his position clear that he was not for it. He was thereby admitting by default that he was powerless to stop them. This is confirmed by a number of commentators and researchers.<sup>xliii</sup> Luthuli's

ambivalence as far as the suspension of the non-violence approach towards the struggle was not necessarily because he was a pacifist. As he once said, "If any body thinks I am a pacifist, let him go and take my chickens, he will know how wrong he is."<sup>xliv</sup> However, as Sampson notes, Luthuli would later complain that he had not been properly consulted, but had deliberately kept his distance. The decision not to support the armed struggle was simply because it was in direct collision with his Christian faith. Meli thus argues that the decision to form the armed wing was "one taken by individual members of the liberation movement not the ANC as an organisation". Of significance to this argument is the fact that "nowhere on the manifesto of Umkhonto weSizwe is the ANC mentioned".<sup>xlv</sup>

ANC insiders ranging from Nelson Mandela, Jacob Zuma, Monty Naicker, Kader Asmal and Joe Mathews, argue that Luthuli was not only aware of the change from non-violence to armed struggle, but was duly convinced when he realised that a campaign of non-violence against the brutal apartheid regime was simply not working. Jacob Zuma argues that Luthuli went on to say that:

When a man's family is attacked he has no alternative, but to get his spear to defend his property. Zuma goes on to say that in fact it was Luthuli who named the armed wing Umkhonto weSizwe, the spear of the nation.<sup>xlvi</sup>

While Jacob Zuma and Kader Asmal give the impression that Luthuli gave his unreserved blessing towards the use of violence, there is no hard evidence to back their proposals. Mandela himself does not suggest that Luthuli supported the armed struggle, in fact he demonstrates Luthuli's commitment to the old tradition of non-violent resistance whose Christian roots formed the foundation of the ANC. However, Mandela does speak of a number of meetings that he had with the Luthuli at his home in Groutville while under a banning order to report to him about the progress he was making in the establishment of MK.<sup>xlvii</sup> In his autobiography, *Long walk to freedom*, Mandela writes about the time he spent at the sugarcane hostel where he stayed with the labourers so as to be close to the Inkosi with whom he was discussing the formation of the armed wing. It is a fact that Luthuli became the last president of the ANC to preach and teach the non-violence approach towards the struggle.

#### *Christian-centred traditional leadership*

From time immemorial, traditional African leadership has been characterised by heredity, polygamy, an uncritical acceptance of African Traditional Religion and unlimited suspicion toward other forms of religion, including Christianity. Luthuli is one of the few traditional leaders who sought to reform the office of traditional leadership, in order to align in to modernity. First, Luthuli was *elected* to the position of Inkosi, which was a total departure from the traditional way of appointing an Inkosi, which was normally through heredity. Of course, while Luthuli's ascendance to the throne is not ironic, it is not altogether surprising, since though he was elected he came from an Inkosi line. His grandfather Ntaba, the first to be converted to Christianity by Rev. Aldin Grout and his guardian and uncle, Martin Luthuli were both Inkosi at Groutville. However, the family had lost the throne to Josiah Mqwebu. It was only when the community expressed their unhappiness with Mqwebu's leadership that the people of *Abasemakholweni* decided to nominate Luthuli.<sup>xlviii</sup> In a way he was chosen by the people to come back to the throne, but not through heredity, but through a democratic process where he defeated three other candidates who contested for the same position. It was unprecedented that an Inkosi could be elected, but Luthuli was. Second, traditional leadership was ordinarily accompanied by polygamy. As an Inkosi, Luthuli was one of the few who did not practice polygamy, but was rather a monogamist, guided by his Christian belief to be committed to his wife and the empowerment of women in society. Third, Luthuli combined the role of traditional leader with the role of a deacon in the local assembly of the UCCSA, thus emulating the Old Testament model of *priest and political leader or priest-king*.

Building upon the foundation laid by the American Board Mission which established Groutville, Luthuli brought a clear connection between religion and the democratic form of politic which was typical of his church. In Luthuli's community at Groutville, there was no doubt as to the relationship between church and politics, for all understood it to be the holistic way of life. They were simply different sides of the same coin. Compared to other communities, a different approach was maintained, where traditional leaders were opposed to Christianity or religion in general. Groutville benefitted because it became one of the few places where black people could own land and be encouraged to go to school and adapt to a rapidly changing world. It was also one of the few communities where political activities were part of the business of both the traditional council and also the church leadership.

Fourth, Groutville had an element of *theocracy* in its governing structure. This was possible because of Luthuli's Christian-centred approach towards political leadership which was consistent with the principles held by the Mission Reserve. Fifth, Luthuli held his *Christian faith, Zulu identity and*

*essential Africaness* in creative tension. His appreciation of African culture was demonstrated when he went to Norway to receive the Nobel Peace Award. He ascended the podium to address the crowds clad in his Zulu traditional attire. Wearing Zulu regalia in 1961 in the Northern hemisphere made a firm and impervious statement of the African Renaissance, whose spirit was already blowing throughout Africa. This was a courageous step, one that demonstrated that his being Christian, educated and an activist did not mean that he had discarded his Zulu identity and culture including being an Inkosi. Indeed, he once declared that:

I think as an African, I speak as an African, I act as an African and as an African I worship the God whose children we all are. I do not see how it should be otherwise.<sup>xlix</sup>

Luthuli was a phenomenon, one who combined religion, African tradition and political activism. He held these three in creative tension, a factor necessary for the total liberation of the African people. This tension had eluded many African leaders, but Luthuli managed to bring all these together without losing who he was, what he stood for and his mission as a liberator of his people. Hence, although Luthuli had an appreciation for western democratic values and western civilization, he infused them with African culture and his understanding of Christianity. Together, these completed the *mega-narrative* of Albert John Mvumbi Luthuli, an Inkosi of *Abasemakholweni*, a lay-preacher of the UCCSA, a national leader and former president of ANC, and Nobel Peace Prize laureate.

#### *The empowerment of women in the African National Congress*

It was during Luthuli's tenure as president of the ANC that the role of women in the ANC was defined, being encouraged to actively participate in the struggle. While women had always been members of the ANC, even such giants as Charlotte Maxeke, whose struggle credentials were impeccable, had not been given a central role to play in the movement, but had remained on the periphery, having to do with issues concerning women. During Luthuli's time, a protected space was created for women. This caused the rise of such women leaders as Lilian Ngoyi, Gertrude Shope, Albertina Sisulu and others. Even the 1955 Freedom Charter included a Women's Charter, thereby demonstrating the extent to which women's participation was making headway within the ANC.<sup>l</sup> As a result, it was when Luthuli was president that the historic women's march of 1956 was organised, whereby thousands of women marched to Pretoria to protest against the pass laws. Before he died, Luthuli had prophetically pronounced that before the end of the twentieth century, South Africa would have transformed and women would play a significant role in bringing about political change:

There will be enormous, peaceful change in South Africa before the end of this century. People of all races will eventually live together in harmony because no one, white, black or brown, wants to destroy this beautiful land of ours. *Women* must play an increasingly important role in all areas of the life of the future. They were and remain the most loyal supporters in all our struggles. The big powers will eventually turn away from all of Africa, so we must dedicate ourselves to solving our own problems.<sup>li</sup>

#### *Internationalisation of the South African struggle*

While some of the leaders of the ANC before Luthuli had taken the struggle of the African people beyond the borders of South Africa, no one had placed the struggle for freedom on the international stage as Luthuli had done. For example, John Langalibalele Dube had led delegations to the United Kingdom twice, Josiah Gumede had visited Russia and AB Xuma had addressed the United Nations General Assembly. However, Luthuli's work in promoting the South African struggle abroad was unique, even though he only undertook three trips abroad, namely Madras, India, in 1938 where he participated in a meeting under the auspices of the World Council of Churches; in 1948, when he went to the United States of America on a three month lecture tour addressing groups on the South African situation, through the auspices of the American Board Mission. This presented an opportunity for Luthuli to raise the plight of the South African people and to invite support from different groups. In 1953, Luthuli made contact with the relatively unknown African-American leader Martin Luther King Jnr. and together they co-signed a declaration against racism. Again in 1967, in a joint statement with King, Luthuli called for economic and arms sanctions against South Africa in the light of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1948. In this statement, Luthuli and King were to declare:

So there exists another alternative and the only solution which represents sanity-transition to a society based upon equality for all without regard to colour.<sup>lvi</sup>

The final international trip undertaken by Luthuli was when he travelled in December 1961 to Oslo, Norway to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. Albeit brief, this trip was to prove more significant because it highlighted the situation of the African people, who having welcomed Europeans with open arms of hospitality to their continent, were later to be oppressed by them. As Luthuli could state:

Many years ago, the people of my continent Africa, extended a hand of friendship and hospitality to the people when they came, but what happened to that friendship only history can tell.<sup>lvi</sup>

Through his acceptance speech, Luthuli placed the experience of the African people at a global level, demonstrating that it was not only Africa's problem, but also Europe's, for it was their people who had come to Africa and colonised the African people. Linked to this is the fact that he was the *first African* to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize since its institution in 1895.<sup>lvii</sup> As a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Luthuli lifted up the African people to the level of all citizens of the world. He demonstrated that even African people were capable of achieving the highest honour. Luthuli himself was conscious of this fact when he declared in his acceptance speech that the prize is not his alone, but belonged to the people of South Africa and Africa as a whole who together were struggling for political and economic liberation. As a result, the rest of the continent celebrated with him and took ownership. Since then, only two achievements by African persons have bestowed such honour and hope for African people. The first was the inauguration of President Nelson Mandela as the first president of a democratic South Africa and Barack Obama as the first African to be elected president of the United States of America. No other freedom fighter has ever been so committed to a peaceful struggle in the history of the struggle of freedom in the rest of Africa. Thus Luthuli, through his religious tradition and teaching made a unique contribution and deserves to be remembered and celebrated for this different approach towards the struggle for freedom. In the words of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela:

His strong Christian convictions helped swell the ranks of the organisation, thus strengthening and building the foundations of the ANC as a people's revolutionary movement.<sup>lviii</sup>

### Conclusion

By way of conclusion, we should note that Albert Luthuli was a product of mission school education that developed his own political theology which undergirded his involvement in South Africa's struggle for freedom. As Couper has noted, his political theology "formed the basis of his being",<sup>lvii</sup> so much so, that Luthuli was not simply a Christian involved in politics, but a Christian politician. He was not simply a Christian but a Congregationalist Christian who had allowed his faith tradition (Congregationalism) to influence his whole being, especially in the way that he executed his struggle against apartheid. He displayed no schizophrenic tendencies. He was a complete African Christian man, whose vocation was to fight for the liberation of his people, drawing resources from his liberating and democratic Christianity. Unlike Kwame Nkrumah, who proposed that people must "seek political freedom first, then all shall be added to them",<sup>lviii</sup> Luthuli, sought the kingdom of God as taught by the UCCSA from the home, school and church first, using this knowledge to gain political independence. What we have seen recently with the fourth democratic national assembly election in South Africa, is political aspirants using religion in order to get votes, not because they really believed in what religion has to offer in the development of foundational motivations for political involvement, but simply to garner support. In this situation, religion was hijacked by political opportunism in order to achieve the political goal of obtaining outright political power. Prominent pastors and religious ministers have jumped into bed as it were with political leaders, inviting them to take over their pulpits and pledging their prayerful support. Luthuli's legacy challenges people of faith to be loyal to their faith convictions, allowing them to influence their political practice, rather than the other way round. If there is a reason for celebrating Luthuli's legacy by the church, it must be because he is the epitome of how a true and mature Christian political leader should conduct his or her political business, driven and motivated by deep, purposeful and theologically sound convictions. We should therefore gratefully exclaim:

*E Nkosi Mandla Nduna, Sibamba Ngazibili  
(Thanks Mandlanduna, we appreciate it)*

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## Endnotes

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1 Luthuli used to sign his surname as “Lutuli”, without an ‘h’ although most members of his family have decided to retain the ‘h’ and so sign as ‘Luthuli.’ Here, I will follow the family convention in the spelling of the name ‘Luthuli.’

2 I have decided to use the title “Inkosi” instead of “chief” which has been rejected by African leaders as a creation of the colonisers with the aim of reducing their status to that of an inferior one. The first to reject this title was King Sobhuza II of Swaziland who when the British called him Paramount Chief, it was met with a refusal, preferring to use the title, King Ingwenyama yemaSwati (lit: “Lion of the nation”). See Kuper, H. 1978. *Sobhuza II Ngwenyama and King of Swaziland*. London: Duckworth Publishers, 11. The British wanted to reserve the title of King or Queen solely for the British monarch that colonised the African people. The rejection of the title of “chief” by African leaders was a form of defiance against the system of Western colonisation.

3 The first black person to receive it before him was the African-American political scientist and diplomat, Dr. Ralph Johnson Bunche in 1950. Dr. Martin Luther King Jnr. received his Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. A second Black South African, Archbishop Desmond Mpilo Tutu received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984.

4 This is because of the role his home came to play as a meeting place for domestic and international leaders who consulted him on issues of justice, human rights and the struggle against apartheid.

5 MediaClubSouthAfrica.com. Freedom Park Celebrating Peace, <[http://www.mediaclubsouthafrica.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=338:freedompark080408&catid=44:developmentnews&Itemid=111](http://www.mediaclubsouthafrica.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=338:freedompark080408&catid=44:developmentnews&Itemid=111)>, [Accessed May 28, 2009].

6 Sibusiso J. Ndebele, Remarks by KwaZulu-Natal Premier Sibusiso Ndebele at the Commemoration of Forty Years since the Death of Inkosi Albert Luthuli,” KwaDukuza, (November 4, 2008), 2.

7 Cited in Sibusiso J. Ndebele, “Speech by the Honourable Premier of KwaZulu-Natal Mr. S. J. Ndebele during Freedom Day Celebrations held in Entumeni at Eshowe on April 27, 2007, ANC Daily News Briefing, (April 30), 1987.” <<http://70.84.171.10/~etools/newsbrief/2007/news0430.txt>>. Accessed: May 28, 2009.

8 The same sentiments are expressed by Scott Everett Couper, *Bound by Faith: A Biographic and Ecclesiastical Examination (1898-1967) of Chief Albert Luthuli’s Stance on Violence as a Strategy to Liberate South Africa*. Unpublished PhD Dissertation, (University of KwaZulu Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 2008).

9 Ntaba was the eldest son of Madunjini Luthuli a polygamist who is the patriarch of the Luthuli families of Groutville. See, Couper, *Bound by Faith*.

10 Roberts, B. *Albert Luthuli*. Cape Town: Longman, 2006), 1.

11 John Pampallis, *Foundations of the new South Africa*, (Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman, 1991), 10-11.

12 Mvumbi in the Zulu language means rain; hence, it is possible that Luthuli was born on a rainy day or season.

13 John Langalibalele Dube opened the only industrial mission school built by an African in South Africa to promote holistic education e.g., education for the head, heart and hands.

14 Also a part of the mission station of the UCCSA, Adams College was named after its founder, the Rev. Newton Adams.

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15 Z. K. Mathews was the leader of the ANC in the Cape, a professor and head of Fort Hare University. A highly respected leader and intellectual, Mathews was the main driving force behind the Congress of the People held in Kliptown, Soweto, in 1955, a gathering which drafted the Freedom Charter. Three months before his retirement, Mathews was forced to resign his position at Fort Hare when Bantu Education was introduced by the apartheid regime, thereby forfeiting his pension of £7000. Luthuli was mentored by Mathews who was himself a committed member of the UCCSA. See, Z. K. Mathews, *Freedom for my people*, (Cape Town: David Philip, 1981).

16 Luthuli was recruited by the Mzoneli brothers, Martin and Fakazi. Fakazi Mzoneli, who was teaching at Adams Mission with Luthuli, was responsible for recruiting Luthuli for the position of Inkosi of Groutville, the town where Mzoneli came from. When the elders of Groutville were looking for a replacement following the deposing of Mqwebu, Fakazi raised Luthuli's name and a delegation was sent to Adams Mission to have discussions with him. Following Luthuli's successful election as Inkosi, he was given land within the Mzoneli homestead so that he could be closer to Fakazi and the Mzoneli families who had recruited him. Even today, his house stands on the land that belonged to the Mzoneli family and is surrounded by the homestead of one of the most successful and powerful clans in Groutville. See, T. Mzoneli, Interview #1, by R. Simangaliso Kumalo, Tape Recording, (February 2, 2009), Umvoti; Qonda Mzoneli, Interview #1, by R. Simangaliso Kumalo, Tape Recording, (February 2, 2009), Umvoti.

17 Allison Wessels George Champion, *History in the making*, Notes Written by George Champion. Wits Archives A922, File A1-11, (1952). The reason for Mqwebu's deposition was that he had failed to govern the Christian community as required. He was blamed for various infractions, including allowing the proliferation of African Independent Churches (AICs); failure to control the growth of sheebens (Drinking Halls), and allowing the holding of meetings and football matches on Sunday mornings during church worship times which was not the norm within the Christian community. Qonda Mzoneli, Interview #1.

18 Albert Luthuli, *Let my people go: the autobiography of a great African leader*, (Cape Town: Mafube Publishers, 2006), 44.

19 Sue Heese, *African Gold: The story of African Nobel Laureates*, (Pietermaritzburg: Shuter & Shooter Publishers, 2007), 24.

20 For more on the Freedom Charter see, Raymond Suttner and Jeremy Cronin, *Fifty years of the freedom charter*, (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2007). In his presidential speech at the 1953 annual meeting of the Cape branch of the ANC of which he was president, Mathews could state: "I wonder whether the time has not come for the African National Congress to consider the question of convening a national convention, a congress of the people, representing all the people of this country irrespective of race colour, to draw up a Freedom Charter for the democratic South Africa of the future." See, Mathews, *Freedom for my people*, 167. The resolution was carried and preparations began for the Congress which would meet in 1955 and chart a new direction to the struggle of the South African people against apartheid. Today, the name Congress of the People has been taken over by a splinter political party of the ANC. However, its roots belong to Z. K. Mathews during the time of Luthuli's leadership of the ANC.

21 Luthuli, *Let my people go*, 70.

22 Luthuli, *Let my people go*, 75

23 Luthuli, *Let my people go*, 75.

24 Couper, Scott Everett. *Bound by faith: a biographic and ecclesiastical examination (1898-1967) of Chief Albert Luthuli's stance on violence as a strategy to liberate South Africa*. Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 2008, 434.

25 Steve de Gruchy, Graham Philpott and David Ntseng, "The United Congregational Church of Southern Africa: An Inventory of its Landholdings," (Pietermaritzburg: Church Land Programme, n.d.), 5.

26 The same sentiments are echoed in Scott Everett Couper, "When Chief Albert Luthuli Launched 'Into the Deep' A Theological Reflection on a Homiletic Resource of Political Significance," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 130, (2008), 76-89.

27 Luthuli, *Let my people go*, 147-148.

28 Luthuli, *Let my people go*, 61.

29 Cited in Mary Benson, *Chief Albert Luthuli of South Africa*, (London: Oxford Press, 1963), 123.

30 Cited in Kadar Asmal, David Chidester, and Wilmot James, eds. *South Africa's Nobel Laureates*, (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2004), 4.

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31 Cited in KwaZulu-Natal Department of Arts and Culture, Documentary on Chief Albert Luthuli, (2007).

32 Luthuli, *Let my people go*, 131.

33 Luthuli, *Let my people go*, 131.

34 See, John de Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio, eds., *Apartheid is a heresy*, (Cape Town: David Philip, 1983).

35 Couper, *Bound by Faith*, 7.

36 Excerpts from Luthuli's evidence at the Treason Trial (1956-1961), explaining his understanding of nonviolent liberation struggle. Pillay, G. ed. *Voices of Liberation*, Albert Luthuli, Vol.1, (Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council, 1993).364.

37 Heese, *African gold*, 23.

38 Nelson Mandela. *Long walk to freedom: the autobiography of Nelson Mandela*, (London: Abacus, 1994), 338.

39 Nelson Mandela in an archival footage in the documentary, Video News Services, Ulibambe Lingashoni (Hold up the sun), Episode Two: Enter the Masses 1949-1958, Documentary Film, (2002).

40 Nelson Mandela, *Long walk to freedom*, 322.

41 Couper, *Bound by Faith*, 6.

42 Anthony Sampson, *Mandela: the authorised biography*, (Johannesburg: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999), 150.

43 Luthuli Museum, Luthuli: The legacy of a legend, Documentary Film, (2005).

44 Sampson, *Mandela*, 151.

45 Francis Meli, *South Africa belongs to us*, (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1998), 146.

46 Luthuli Museum, Luthuli: The legacy of a legend, Documentary Film, (2005).

47 Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, "We stand today on the shoulders of such giants," In *Umrabulo Special edition: a tribute to Luthuli*, (July), 2007. <<http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?doc=ancdocs/pubs/umrabulo/special-july07/art1.html>>. [Accessed May 28, 2009].

48 Qonda Mzoneli, Interview #1.

49 Luthuli, *Let my people go*, 132.

50 Suttner and Cronin, *Fifty years*, 148.

51 Donal Brody, "The Chief: Albert John Mvumbi Luthuli, Part 4." *Great Epics Newsletter* 3, no. 10, (1999), <[http://great epicsbooks.com/epics/october99.html](http://greatepicsbooks.com/epics/october99.html)>,[Accessed March 30, 2009].

52 Couper, *Bound by Faith*, 362.

53 Luthuli, *Let my people go*, 66.

54 Heese, *African gold*, 6.

55 Nomzamo Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, "A person of immense dignity and noble bearing." In *Umrabulo Special Edition: A Tribute to Luthuli*, (July), 2007. <<http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?doc=ancdocs/pubs/umrabulo/special-july07/art9.html>> [Accessed May 28, 2009].

56 Couper, *Bound by Faith*, 55.

57 Kwame Nkrumah, *I speak of freedom: selected speeches made between 1947 and 1960*, (Accra: PANAFT Publishers, 1960), 142.