

Reluctant Prophet: Tributes to Albert Nolan, edited by Mike Deeb, Phillippe Denis and Mark James

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It has taken just over a year for this massive collection, *Reluctant Prophet: Tributes to Albert Nolan*, edited by Mike Deeb, Phillippe Denis and Mark James (2023), to be compiled with contributions from almost 80 people. What an achievement for the editors! In the Roman Catholic Church and other spheres of his life, the late Father Albert Nolan OP (1934–2022) shone forth as a diamond with many facets. However we look at each facet we see a slightly aspect of his nature, activities and personality. In his many and varied roles he was a priest, theologian, intellectual, lecturer, student, chaplain, apostle, pastor, counsellor, prior, spiritual director, saint, doctor of the church, leader, spiritual activist, change agent, struggle hero, transformer, networker, friend, mentor, critic, missionary, evangelist, author, public speaker, underground operator, listener, philanthropist and discerner.

These were all external roles, but there was also the Nolan whose qualities shone from within through the refraction of his many lights. In character, he was insightful, formidable, reserved, tough, gifted, principled, visionary, open-minded, independent, committed, critical, self-effacing, empowering, positive in nature, responsible, heroic, thoughtful, encouraging, inspiring, simplistic, consistent, formidable, patient, unprejudiced, persuasive, self-emptying, dignified, and stable. Together, these roles and qualities number 58 – the number of facets of an authentic diamond! And doubtless he had many more engaging facets.

The book is organised chronologically though it is difficult to maintain this approach at times – early life, student chaplain, life in the Mayfair community in Johannesburg, struggle theology, creator of space for debate and reflection, editor of *Challenge* magazine, spiritual renewal and conclusion. All of this is bound together with a time



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life of Nolan's life. No chapter is required for his writings as they are repeatedly referred to throughout the text.

Numerous contributors refer to Nolan's development of the already existing See-Judge-Act method of social analysis. This has become a norm in social sciences and also in some theological writing. The ongoing value of the *praxis* approach as it is now referred to (reflective action) is well attested.

Phillippe Denis (2023, 416) is correct when he suggests that this book presents a kind of biography of Nolan from his birth. I doubt if anyone could have produced anything more comprehensive. This book could promote the way for a new type of biographical writing. As a historian I have never been impressed by the idea of objectivity. Here is a collection of subjective contributions which show readers the authentic Nolan. Together, they form a type of biography that no single author could imitate even with the availability of countless documents. The one potential criticism that this method invites relates to the constant repetition of several aspects of Nolan's life. However, they also demonstrate what was important about it. It would also be true to say that this book is also a partial history of South Africa in the twentieth century.

The abiding impression that this book makes is its authenticity and the impression of its subject is integrity. This is the result of the commitment and contribution of the wide and diverse list of contributors who knew Nolan in all of his life and work. His was a life full of hope for the future for South Africa and its peoples, for the world and the environment. Three major themes emerge as one contributor, Lionel Green Thompson (2023, 395) states: "compassion as action, humility as practice, and justice as expression".

Much more could be said about this excellent and inspiring book, but I have a better idea – why not read it for yourself?