

An alternate reading of a charismatic figure

Scott Couper, *Albert Luthuli: Bound by Faith*

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At the outset of his biography of Albert Luthuli, Scott Couper makes clear his claim that he wishes to consider the influence of his Christian beliefs on Luthuli's political philosophy which, in turn, impacted upon the way he desired to carry out the struggle against the apartheid state. Not without controversy, *Albert Luthuli: Bound by Faith* offers an alternate reading of a charismatic and influential figure that departs from the dominant nationalist discourse. This point of departure comes in the form of the decision to initiate the armed struggle on the part of the African National Congress (ANC). Couper builds a painstaking case to convince the reader of his argument, tracing the life of Albert Luthuli from his birth in Natal to the suspicious circumstances surrounding his death in 1967.

The first chapter, "The Home of My Fathers pre 1897–1927" focuses on Luthuli's Christian background. His grandparents, Ntaba and Titisi Luthuli, were converted by Aldin Grout of the American Mission Board who established a mission station in Umvoti – present-day Groutville – in rural Natal. They were of the Congregationalist faith which was to have repercussions for Albert later on. Some aspects of Congregationalism included a firm stance on democracy and resistance to oppression. Other Protestant missionaries who were also concerned about the exploitation of the indigenous people included David Livingstone and John Philip who established a mission at the Cape in 1860. In addition, the impetus was on liberalism in the form of individual land tenure, class mobility and progress.

Ntaba Luthuli was elected chief by the *amakholwa* at Groutville with his son, Martin, following in the same vein. Albert was born in Bulawayo and after the death of his father when he was an infant,

returned to Natal to be raised by his widowed mother and his uncle, Martin. He was educated in the manner of his class, attending John Dube's Ohlange Institute for a short period as well as Edendale College, where he engaged in student protest – his first form of activism. It was here that his exposure to white teachers inculcated his belief that the African ideal was a synthesis of both indigenous and European cultures. Albert went on to become school principal at Blaauwbosch while serving as a Methodist preacher. He was subsequently awarded a bursary for Adams College where he was further strengthened in his belief that the ultimate role of a Christian was to act positively in the world. This, and the next chapter, “The Christian Mode, 1928–1959”, focus in some detail on the impact of various institutions in shaping Albert's character and subsequent political activism. He joined the Natal Native Teachers' Association; the Zulu Language and Culture Society; and the Native Representative Council – the latter confirming his belief in the futility of working closely with the government for change.

By 1935, Albert had followed in the family tradition of being elected chief of the *amakholwa* community at Groutville. He found his role less than rewarding, perceiving himself to be a mere mouthpiece for state policies, with little real power to implement necessary change. As chief, he was also exposed to the social and economic difficulties and injustices perpetuated on his people daily. By 1944, he had joined the ANC at a time when the organisation was becoming increasingly radicalised due to the efforts of its Youth League which began to advocate civil disobedience in opposing the apartheid state in 1949. Two years later Albert was elected president of the Natal ANC and was arrested for the first time in 1952 for his participation in the Defiance Campaign. He was accused by the state of allegedly not fulfilling his role as a chief and was thus removed from his position. The same year saw him become president general of the ANC. His election to the position was supported by the Youth League and Nelson Mandela was named as Luthuli's deputy.

Even as he rose to the highest echelons of nationalist struggle, Luthuli remained loyal to the church whilst aware of its shortcomings.

For him, the church should assume a pragmatic role in addressing people's needs rather than just holding onto what he termed "disembodied principles" (p 62). His political activism reflected this and he received his first banning order in May 1953. By 1955, increasing ill health meant that he did not attend the Congress of the People in Kliptown where the Freedom Charter was signed. Luthuli was not involved in the drawing up of the Charter either and while approving its broad principles, had reservations on certain aspects, particularly its stance on "multiracialism"; although he favoured "non-racialism", he bowed to the majority decision on its adoption.

The mid to late-1950s marked a turbulent time in South African politics. Luthuli was arrested under the Suppression of Communism Act in 1956 but was acquitted a year later. He continued in his belief that white Christian liberals had an integral role to play in the liberation struggle even as growing radicalism was evident in the black nationalist movements. The Pan Africanist Congress was formed with its strong identification with the anti-colonial struggles on the continent but Luthuli was steadfast in his belief in "South African exceptionalism" (p 77) where the white population was an important component of the country and its future. The Bantustans were created by the end of the decade and while Luthuli opposed their formation on "economic, social and political grounds" (p 80), he also did so based on his religious belief that tribalism was un-Christian.

Chapter 3, "Storm on the Horizon, 1960" hints at the upcoming divisions between Luthuli and increasing radical ANC policy. In the wake of Sharpeville, Luthuli protested by publicly burning his passbook. His decision to do so at the home of Tony Brink of the Liberal Party was a means of affirming the role he perceived for white liberals in the struggle. As the leader of the ANC, an organisation that had by now, been banned, he was imprisoned during the Treason Trial. This isolation from ANC leaders symbolised the gap between him and the rest of the movement's leadership. Luthuli continued to advocate non-violent resistance because a move to violence would result in the increased use of state force as well as alienating white supporters. Increasingly, however, Mandela began to move towards

pan-Africanism and he and other leaders felt that their existing mode of resistance was proving ineffective.

The following chapter, "The Tempo Quickens, 1961" is arguably the heart of the book where Couper draws the threads of his argument together. Mandela's rise as the charismatic leader of the organisation was accompanied by the relegation of Luthuli to a figurehead. Before the release of Mandela's autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Couper argues that the literature suggests that Luthuli was unaware of the ANC's decision to form MK. *Long Walk to Freedom* and subsequent accounts, however, imply that Luthuli was, in fact, cognisant of such a decision. At the National Executive Committee of the ANC in June 1961, Mandela made an argument for the abandonment of non-violence. Luthuli dissented, suggesting that this would be too great a policy shift without adequate consultation with all those involved in the struggle. His compromise was the formation of an armed wing that was distinct from the ANC but nevertheless remained under its control. Drawing upon the work of Meer, Couper suggests that Luthuli wanted to re-open the discussion at the meeting of the Congress's Joint Executive where he could possibly gain further support from those who favoured continuance of non-violent resistance. The resolution taken here, after much debate, was that those who formed a military wing would not be disciplined for their actions.

As the ANC was moving towards a change in policy, Luthuli was awarded the Christopher Gell Memorial Award for his commitment to non-violence as well as the Nobel Peace Prize. In his many speeches during that period he continuously affirmed his advocacy of non-violent protest in the light of Gandhian principles. After his return from Norway, MK went public by orchestrating a number of explosions around the country. Luthuli, until then unaware of the formation of the armed wing, was upset by these events. Despite this, he refused to condemn the movement and Couper cites three reasons for this: Luthuli blamed the repression of the apartheid state for the move to violent resistance; MK had been formed through consensus; and once it came into existence, acceptance was the only option left to him.

The years after this saw the increasing marginalisation of Luthuli from the ANC. He continued to publicly advocate non-violent resistance. He published his autobiography, *Let My People Go*, in 1962 and the title once again was a reflection of Luthuli's spiritual beliefs where he perceived himself akin to the biblical Moses leading his people out of bondage. He also maintained ties with other international leaders who shared similar views such as Martin Luther King Jr in the "Appeal for Action against Apartheid". A fear shared by King and Luthuli was that within the context of the Cold War, the ANC's use of violence would alienate the Western powers, especially as the ANC began to make overtures to Communist governments for assistance. Nevertheless, during the Rivonia Trial, Luthuli maintained his support of his comrades. This support has been taken to mean that he tacitly approved of the armed struggle. Couper, however, argues that this was not the case – solidarity did not mean consent.

The final chapter, "Alone on the Tracks, 1967" paints a picture of a man in frail health, with hypertension and failing sight. Marginalised by the ANC and banned by the apartheid state, he was no longer considered a political threat. For Couper, then, Luthuli's fatal accident on the train tracks was not part of a conspiracy to silence him but was instead simply a tragic accident.

Couper's biography portrays a complex but deeply consistent man who was motivated by his spiritual concerns above his political ones. His stance against the use of violent protest would prove to be prophetic, culminating in the arrest of most of the ANC leadership. While parallels have been drawn between Mandela and Luthuli, Couper shows that they had little in common other than their desire for liberation. However, to acknowledge the differences between them is not to do either a disservice but to present a more nuanced account of the country's long struggle towards freedom. By writing an account of one of the more neglected figures in the anti-apartheid struggle, Scott Couper has made an invaluable contribution to the existing historiography.

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