



Chief Albert Luthuli: How did he translate his faith into action?

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Three questions were asked in the invitation that encouraged your presence here tonight.

1. Why should Christians be involved in politics?
2. Are Christian principles compatible with the increasing radicalized party politics, or do they make one obsolete as a political leader?
3. What is the potential danger of sacrificing one's ethos at the altar of political expediency?

The first question, 'Why should Christians be involved in politics?' makes an assumption in the affirmative that Christians should be involved in politics. I agree wholeheartedly. Politics, at its essence, discerns 'Who gets what, how much, where and when.' 'Who gets what, how much, where and when' are essentially issues of "justice". And "justice" is, in part, love implemented. Love, and therefore so also justice, are at the heart of the Christian gospel, the Good News.

The first question may also recognize that removing oneself from even consideration of political activity already makes a political affirmation. Our participation or non-participation remain both a claim about our faith but also our actual politics. Political life will continue to unfold and effect our life even if we decide to exclude oneself from the process.

The second question asks, “Are Christian principles compatible with radicalised party politics?” I would argue “No” not because party politics are necessarily incompatible with Christian principles, but because when radicalized, party politics supersede faith and values. The party’s significance expands to such that it becomes synonymous with what Paul Tillich called the “Ground of One’s Being” and that which is our “ultimate concern”, or what Martin Buber called the “Thou” (both theologians, of course, use these terms to refer to God) and yet when applied to the political party it becomes the god and thus becomes an object of idolatry. Radicalised party politics makes the political party the very source of one’s existential and material existence, without which the individual experiences what he or she perceives as an intellectual, social and economic death.

Do Christian principles make one obsolete as a Christian leader? No. Christians must always tell the truth. And truth is not bound by time. Truth telling transcends time. And therefore, one’s truth telling, even if ignored in the present, is a record of the truth. So long as there are people of faith, truth never becomes obsolete. We must acknowledge that often the prophets were ignored. The prophets who told the truth were canonized and thus one cannot consider their prophetic voices to be obsolete. Christ was crucified in part for his politics, his truth telling. Did he overthrow the Roman hegemony in Palestine? No. But, his ministry changed the course of history and provides meaning for my life. What is obsolete in the present often is not obsolete in the future, if it is the truth. Was Bonhoeffer’s witness obsolete? At the time, maybe. But, now, certainly not. Relevance is not bound to the present. Hence, Luthuli’s then apparent obsolescence then is today pertinent, even indispensable.

The third question “What is the potential danger of sacrificing one’s ethos at the altar of political expediency?” relates essentially to ‘strategy’. At one extreme we can be zealots, never compromising to the extent that we drive stakes through the hearts of evil doers. On the other hand, in the interests of accommodation, compromise and conflict minimization we can stand for basically nothing – become so watered down and devoid of salt that we cease to be who we claim we are. Luthuli precariously balanced on the edge between the slippery slopes of inefficacy due to extreme intransigency or

inefficacy due to extreme malleability. A tree, a spine and a Christian must be as flexible as they are sturdy to be effective. So, compromise is essential, but too much or too little can be dangerous.

With this brief preface, with excerpts from *Bound by Faith* let us unpack the above three questions in the light of Albert Luthuli.

1. Why should Christians be involved in politics?

Albert Luthuli's view is clear. Luthuli is known to have declared, "I am in politics because I am a Christian." Luthuli also stated in his Nobel lecture:

I also, as a Christian and patriot, could not look on while systematic attempts were made, 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 Creator to the best of his ability. To remain neutral in a situation where the laws of the land virtually criticised God for having created men of colour was the sort of thing I could not, as a Christian, tolerate.

The thesis of *Bound by Faith* is that Luthuli's Christian faith, particularly the unique brand of faith, Congregationalism, was the seminal influence upon his life and politics. Luthuli primarily held himself accountable to the Christian faith, and not the African National Congress (ANC), and the ethos and polity of Congregationalism primarily informed Luthuli style of political leadership.

Luthuli's choice of a title *Let My People Go* for his autobiography was, obviously, biblically (rather than politically) motivated and it provides a clue to understanding the life and leadership of the man. He understood his life and political work along the lines of a typological re-enactment, by which is meant a method or lens of biblical hermeneutics whereby one discerns one's context, calling or life direction, by identifying with personalities in the biblical narrative. Typological re-enactment encourages one to emulate faithful biblical personalities or, conversely, to learn from them if they failed in some way. If Luthuli understood his life's purpose to be a re-enactment of the role of

Moses in the Bible, it would have provided for him a framework for both understanding the past and discerning the will of God for the future. His emulation of Moses became a simple method of making relevant the biblical text to his life. To understand the role of the biblical Moses is to understand Luthuli. In choosing the title *Let My People Go* for his autobiography, Luthuli invoked the Prophet Moses' divinely inspired biblical refrain to the Egyptian Pharaoh who oppressed the Hebrew nation. One perceives that Luthuli saw himself as obedient rather than successful, an ethical as much as (if not more than) a political leader, non-violent rather than militarist and even a tragic rather than a triumphant character in his inability to reach the Promised Land. Also with 'The Road to Freedom is Via the Cross', the choice of title strongly suggested that he perceived himself to be a spiritual leader as much as, if not more than, a political leader.

2. Are Christian principles compatible with the increasing radicalized party politics, or do they make one obsolete as a political leader?

A second thesis of *Bound by Faith* is that Congregational emphases embodied in Luthuli, namely dissent, democracy, education, human rights, ecumenism, egalitarianism and multiracial cooperation, propelled him to the heights of political leadership and attributed to his political marginalization when the South African environment became increasingly radicalized, desperate and violent.

Luthuli's defiant political stances, directly inspired by theological considerations, captured the attention of the ANC and propelled him to the heights of political leadership. The Defiance Campaign and the Treason Trial broadened Luthuli's appeal as many of all races recognised in him a potential head of state. Luthuli's ability to establish close relationships solidified his influence in the alliance of the congresses. During the 1956 Treason Trial, many testified to the fact that those involved in the struggle for freedom undoubtedly viewed Luthuli to be the leader. Those who interacted with him sensed a deep integrity and became loyal to him.

The archives uncompromisingly identify Luthuli as the leader of the liberation movement and bear testimony to his strength of character, intelligence and charismatic leadership

style. Luthuli firmly held the reins of the ANC and the joint congresses. Tensions were often high and those less secure tended to gravitate and follow those leaders who exhibited a sense of purpose and optimism. While held in detention, Luthuli chaired meetings, led discussions and organised lectures and seminars. He was, according to Ben Turok 'the obvious leader'.

After the 1960 Sharpeville massacres, Mandela and others began to discuss and plan for a violent option. From here, Luthuli began to lose his substantive influence on ANC strategy to fight apartheid. He lost more influence after the ANC was banned. He lost more influence when Mandela perceived that the May 1961 strike was a failure and he announced to the press that new tactics may be considered. For this statement, Mandela was disciplined. Luthuli lost more influence when in July 1961 a meeting of the congresses' joint executive democratically decided to *not to discipline* Mandela should he decide to *form* an organization, *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (MK) that would be prepared to use violence. Luthuli objected to the formation of the organisation. Luthuli objected to the ANC being linked to the organization. It was agreed that MK would nonetheless be subject to the ANC. Luthuli and the ANC certainly did not decide to launch MK, that is, they did not decide to initiate violence. These meetings nonetheless demonstrated Luthuli's waning influence and Mandela's waxing influence.

In October 1961, the Nobel committee announced Luthuli as the 1960 Nobel Peace Prize winner, and for Luthuli, this changed everything! The Peace Prize cemented Luthuli's strategic understanding that the non-violent road was viable. The road to freedom via non-violent methods was suddenly reopened as the South Africa government became the polecat of the world and the liberation movement received a tidal wave of international support. Mandela's position and justification for armed violence quickly evaporated. As soon as Luthuli returned from Oslo exhausted from preaching non-violence, his position had to be rendered anachronistic. Therefore, MK was launched; this assured that there would be no going back to Luthuli's position. Mandela's *Conversations with Myself* reveal that he was not averse to making unilateral decisions to move a reluctant movement in a new direction. I suggest Mandela launched MK on the eve of Luthuli's return from receiving the Peace Prize to neutralise

him, so that 'the road to freedom' was no longer 'the cross'. I argue that Luthuli viewed Mandela's launch of MK to be strategically reckless and insubordinate. Luthuli did not know about or agree to MK's launch.

From 1962 to 1967, Luthuli's leadership had little if any substantive influence on the liberation struggle. His bannings, his health and his own movement's marginalization of him, rendered him in his time obsolete. However, Luthuli's vision and his tactics proved in time to me to be relevant. As *Bound by Faith* concludes, "In time, Mandela would also earn the Nobel Peace Prize. Mandela befriended his warders, led a Government of National Unity in partnership with a party that imprisoned him for over two decades, wore the Springbok rugby jersey, had tea with the widow of apartheid's architect and orchestrated a miracle by leading a political and social revolution without civil war. Luthuli would have been proud, very proud, of his lieutenant in 1994. Despite their political differences in July 1961, Mandela never forgot the lessons Luthuli taught. Yet, Mandela and Luthuli were not the same. By articulating their differences, the purveyors of history can best accurately remember them and honour the reasons for which they fought."

Many are very uncomfortable with the thesis that Luthuli was marginalized by his own movement because he did not countenance the armed struggle. One member of the family recently stated: "He might have his religious beliefs that had him believe in non-violence but because he was a democrat operating within a democratic party, we believe that he would have set aside his own personal beliefs and done what the majority of the party thought was right to fight the Apartheid government." Even within the Christian church, my findings on Luthuli are held at arms' length because they offend ANC members. In short, many people's loyalties are to a political party and not to a 'higher', be it divinely inspired or not, authority. Luthuli did not "set aside his own personal beliefs" in order to tow a party line. To say so dishonours Luthuli. Within radicalized party politics, the political party becomes a god to which even one's religious beliefs can be sacrificed at the altar of political power and patronage. However, as I stated in my introduction, I pray that as long as there are people of faith, Luthuli's "own personal beliefs" will never be rendered obsolete.

3. What is the potential danger of sacrificing one's ethos at the altar of political expediency?

In questions one and two, I have already alluded to the answer. Idolatry.

A third thesis of the book is that Luthuli's life demonstrated that his ultimate allegiance was to his God and not to a political party. What may be perceived to be politically expedient is not always right. Luthuli's politics were subservient to his Christian faith, not his Christian faith subservient to his politics.

Luthuli gave up a relatively lucrative life in academics to serve his people as their chief for a pittance. Very politically inexpedient. Luthuli forfeited a relatively secure position as a chief, effectively a civil servant, for an unpaid position leader a nation under bondage with the likely result being banned, jailed or dead. Again, very politically inexpedient. Yet sacrificial service was Luthuli's life ethic.

An examination of Luthuli's sermon, 'Christian Life: A Constant Adventure', an immediate theological source of material for his political statement, 'The Road to Freedom Is Via the Cross', reveals that contrary to the nationalist perspective, the statement (...for thirty years of my life have been spent knocking in vain, patiently, moderately and modestly at a closed and barred door? What have been the fruits of my many years of moderation?) is *not* a rallying call to abandon non-violent methods of resistance, but rather a call to continue them *despite* their seeming inefficacy. The title and the continuing text of the statement confirm this. Juxtaposed with the sermon, the conclusion that the statement advocates a continuance of non-violent methods becomes irrefutable. A key biblical verse upon which the sermon, and thus the statement, rest, advocate that despite the apparent futility of previous strategies, they ought to be continually implemented in faith. The scripture of emphasis from which Luthuli preached reads as follows:

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, '*Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.*' *Simon answered, 'Master, we have worked all night long*

but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets' (emphasis added).
Luke 5:4–5.

The biblical texts relate that at the time of Jesus' command, Simon Peter and the disciples were at the 'shore of the lake' (Luke 5:2), cleaning out their nets. Jesus calls the disciples to '*put out into the deep water*' (Luke 5:3). This is not a change of tactics, but rather a re-doubling of past efforts. One of Luthuli's themes, as expounded upon above, is that all are called to a 'larger worthy cause', that is, an intensification of what is currently being done, for the purpose of establishing the 'kingdom of God'. Simon Peter protests: 'We have been there, done that. And we have nothing to show for it. But, because you are asking, we will continue to do what we believe to be futile. We do so, if not out of faith, then out of obedience'. Luthuli emphasised in his sermon that often humans are 'paralysed or discouraged with [their] failures' and it is only in 'complete obedience' that we are called forward. Understanding this story for himself as a *typological re-enactment*, Luthuli understands that he is to 'launch into the deep', from chieftaincy to full-time ANC leader, and from local leader to national leader. The sermon emphasises that neither vocation nor methods are being altered, despite past failures. The statement, sourcing the sermon, indicates that only scope or degree of the vocation and methods is being increased.

In the same sermon, Luthuli names those "who failed God by failing to launch into God's deep." Saul. Samson. Jonah. Luthuli states in his sermon that as Christians, "we must rid ourselves of our timid hesitations. We must rid ourselves of the urge to give paramouncy to ensuring earthly security and comfort at the expense of a spiritual and moral growth. This divine recklessness, this holy foolishness is the beginning of salvation. Put out into the deep! What a reproach this is to our earthbound loyalties, our timid clinging to shallow waters!"

Luthuli understood the Bantustan framework to be a heresy, for it worshipped a tribalism that Luthuli wished would die a dignified death. Luthuli considered Apartheid as a heresy for it worshipped and sought to attain the kingdom of the *volk* rather than the kingdom of God. I consider the United States' militarism and materialism heresies for

they see power and money as gods. That to which we give allegiance over and above our faith is an idol. For many, political parties have become idols. An allegiance to a political party, a blind defense of it, is idolatry. *Bound by Faith* is not a text that belittles Albert Luthuli by saying he was rendered politically obsolete. Rather, it honours him because it states that he was, is, and, I pray, always will be, spiritually and politically relevant. It is not a text that denigrates the ANC or those who sacrificed their lives in the armed struggle. It honours them by reminding those who are its members that in proper perspective a political party should be a means to an end and not an end in itself. A political party was not Albert Luthuli's god.