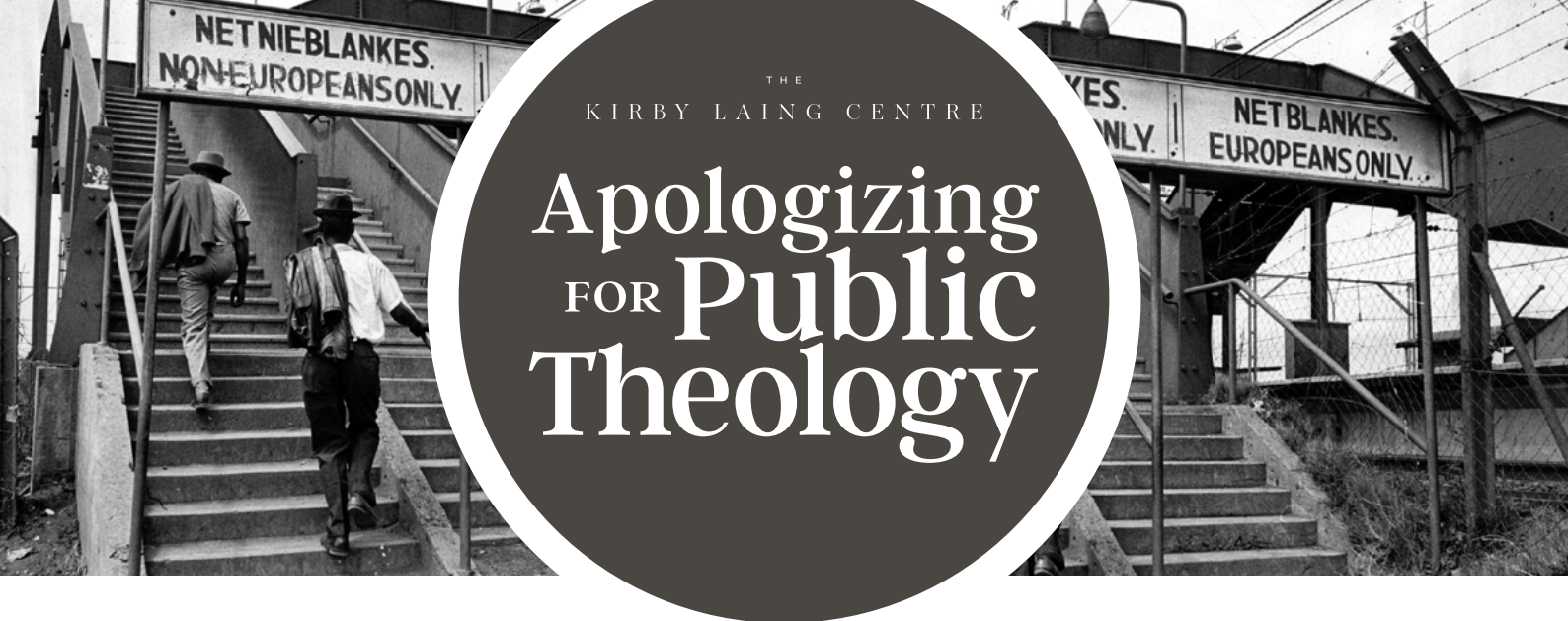




THE
KIRBY LAING CENTRE

Apologizing FOR Public Theology

PART 2 • CHAPTER 17

Chief Albert John Mvumbi Luthuli as Public Theologian

“A SPECIFICALLY CHRISTIAN
MODE OF GOING ABOUT WORK
IN SOCIETY”

DAMBUDZO MUSHAMBI

It's always a bit perilous to go about appending labels to things, and especially to people. There is every possibility that they will resist your label, whether by rejecting it outright or by seeking to nuance it in some way. Applying a label to someone may be a form of “speaking for” them, which is not an uncomplicated matter,¹ specifically because those labels may carry content that is disagreeable for one reason or another. For instance, South African theologian Tinyiko Maluleke has sought to create distance between himself and the designation of “public theologian” in his work.² In his reading of the global public theology movement, Maluleke sees what he deems to be a creeping totalising tendency in its methodology – the “desire

to annex, possess, homogenise, and globalise,” to the point where it could minimise and even become blind to the differences, realities, histories and pain that shape publics across the world.³ Maluleke's concern is that the generic label of “public theology” might swallow up other local theologies that work at the margins – such as Black, feminist, and African theologies – erasing their unique contributions and critiques.

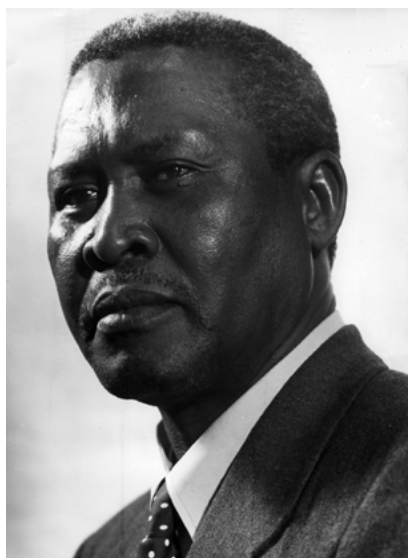
Such is the peril inherent in describing Chief Albert John Mvumbi Luthuli as a “public theologian,” but it is important to note that public theology is not a monolith, and there are a variety of approaches and concerns implied by that term.

Despite these complexities, Chief Luthuli is worth considering for how he understood his Christian faith and its implications for society. Chief Luthuli was born around 1898

1 Jeanne Perreault, “Chain Gang Narratives and the Politics of ‘Speaking For,’” *Biography* 24, no. 1 (2001): 152-171.

2 Tinyiko S. Maluleke, “Why I Am Not a Public Theologian,” *The Ecumenical Review* 73, no. 2, (2021): 297-315; Tinyiko Maluleke, “The Elusive Public of Public Theology: A Response to William Storrar,” *International Journal of Public Theology* 5, no. 1 (2011): 79-89.

3 Maluleke, “Why I am Not a Public Theologian,” 301.



in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). He was the first African Nobel Laureate, a confessing and practicing Christian within the Congregational Church, and an anti-apartheid activist who was President-General of the African National Congress (ANC) from 1952 until his untimely death in 1967.

Luthuli's Context and Situation⁴

The church in South Africa faced a constellation of questions both before and after 1948, when apartheid was instituted as national policy. Some of these questions included what the role of the church was within the country, and how the church was to respond to the policies instituted by the Nationalist government. Other questions included whether the equality of believers – and the broader societal implications of that idea – was a reality to which the church should consistently witness, and whether there indeed was a true equality of believers.

Following the National Party's electoral victory in 1948 and the subsequent institution of apartheid as state policy, South Africa entered a tumultuous period that generated some of the more momentous events in the country's history – the Defiance Campaign (1952); the Congress of the People in Kliptown that produced the Freedom Charter (1955); the Treason Trial (1956); the bulldozing of Sophiatown (1958) to make way for a white suburb that was named *Triomf* (triumph); the Sharpeville massacre of March 1960 and the subsequent banning of the ANC and Pan African Congress, and the Rivonia Trial of ANC leaders that included Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Govan Mbeki (1963). Further afield, countries such as Ghana (1957), Cameroon (1960), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (1960) and Nigeria (1961) were

attaining their independence from colonial rule. Luthuli noted that "Africa as a whole is sick of colonial 'partnership,' with whites as perpetual 'senior partner.'"⁵

The issue of racial inequality, which existed both within and outside the church, was not a problem generated by the institution of apartheid in 1948. The Protestant church in South Africa struggled from its earliest days to recognise black Africans as equals (spiritual and otherwise) with their white counterparts. Sol Plaatje's important work titled *Native Life in South Africa* was written as a "sincere narrative of a melancholy situation" as he endeavoured to describe the effects of the Natives Land Act of 1913, which displaced and disenfranchised the black majority, effectively rendering them pariahs in their land of birth.⁶

South African society, including the church, was shaped in various ways by a social imagination that assigned value to people according to the colour of their skin. Black Africans and others designated "non-Europeans" were often subjected to violence through the state security apparatus. Thus, the question of the colour bar,⁷ which Chief Luthuli termed a "fictitious and beastly thing,"⁸ could reasonably be considered the key question within South Africa at that time.

The colour bar Chief Luthuli confronted in his time was not a new phenomenon *per se*, but the advent of apartheid certainly sharpened the crisis and placed even greater emphasis and scrutiny on the question of racial inequality, not only for society at large, but for the

5 Albert Luthuli, *Let My People Go* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962), 188.

6 Sol T. Plaatje, *Native Life in South Africa* (1916; repr., Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2007), 15, 21.

7 The "colour bar" refers to the fact that in apartheid South Africa, race played a determinative role in everyday life, including who you could marry and associate with, where you could live, what work you could do, or if you could vote.

8 Luthuli, *Let My People Go*, 171.



4 Elements of this section have been taken and adapted from an upcoming publication, Dambudzo Mushambi, "Chief Albert Luthuli's Ecclesiology and Praxis in *Let My People Go*: An Evangelical Witness During Apartheid?", *Faith & Flourishing* vol. 6, (2027): 1-25.



Godfrey Rubens, *Murder at Sharpeville, 21 March 1960*.

church specifically. As Peter Walshe put it, “[t]he struggle against apartheid in South Africa was theological, as well as political. When prophetic Christianity confronted segregation and the apartheid state, it challenged the passivity of the diverse denominations and the *de facto* acceptance of the *status quo* – the Christian church itself became a site of political struggle.”⁹ Scott Couper wrote that Chief Luthuli’s autobiography “prophetically demonstrated (decades before the Kairos Document was published) that the Apartheid context was as much a theological issue as it was a political issue.”¹⁰

Luthuli as Public Theologian

Albert Luthuli was raised in a Christian household. His grandparents, Ntaba and Titisi Luthuli, were the first two converts to Christianity when Reverend Aldin Grout of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions settled near the Umvoti River and built a mission station, and they became founders of what their grandson later called “the Luthuli Christian line.”¹¹ Luthuli credits CW Atkins, who was at one time the principal of Adams College, with the ethos that shaped his outlook. He wrote the following in his autobiography:

Among my many debts to Adams and its people the greatest was the gift of an ethos gradually absorbed, and profoundly lasting in its effects. It became clear to me that the Christian faith was not a private affair without relevance to society. It was, rather, a belief which equipped us in a unique way to meet the challenges of our society. It was a

belief which had to be applied to the conditions of our lives; and our many works – they ranged from Sunday School teaching to road-building – became meaningful as the outflow of Christian belief.

Adams taught me what Edendale did not, that I had to *do* something about being a Christian, and that this something must identify me with my neighbour, not dissociate me from him. Adams taught me more. It inculcated, by example rather than precept, a specifically Christian mode of going about work in society, and I have had frequent reason to be grateful for this in later life.¹²

Luthuli was involved in many initiatives, including serving as the president of the African Teacher’s Association, founding the Zulu Language and Cultural Society, and organising African sugar producers so that they could receive fair compensation. In 1936, the community of Groutville, in which Luthuli had been raised, issued a call for him to become their Chief, and he embraced this call to public service.¹³ He became keenly aware, in ways he hadn’t been before, of the abject poverty that people lived in. His path gradually led him to join and become part of the leadership structures of the ANC, and he was voted in as President-General of the ANC on the 16th of October 1952. In response, the apartheid government deposed him as chief on the 14th of November 1952.¹⁴

For Luthuli, the desire for what he termed “normal human relations” between people of different ethnicities flowed from being made in the image of God.¹⁵ One of the outworkings of this was to work with all who sought to free South Africa from the thrall of white supremacy. Thus, he worked with others across the racial lines designated by the apartheid government.

Luthuli saw how African and other “non-European” peoples were dehumanised, and he opposed that vehemently with what he termed “militant defiance.”¹⁶ Though “militant,” this defiance was pursued under a policy of nonviolence. In this regard, he wrote:

I am identified with those who love South Africa, and will resist with them the attempt to smash a noble land with base and ignoble doctrines, and sub-human practices... I make it clear that we mean to cling to methods such

9 P. Walshe, “Christianity and the Anti-Apartheid Struggle: The Prophetic Voice Within Divided Churches,” in *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social, and Cultural History*, ed. R. Elphick, and R. Davenport (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 383.

10 Scott E. Couper, “My People Let Go: A Historical Examination of Chief Albert Luthuli and his Position on the Use of Violence as a Means by which to Achieve South Africa’s Liberation from Apartheid,” *International Congregational Journal* 5, no. 1 (2005): 104.

11 Luthuli, *Let My People Go*, 21.

12 Luthuli, *Let My People Go*, 42, emphasis original.

13 See <https://www.thoughtco.com/chief-albert-luthuli-4069406>.

14 See <https://www.ialch.co.za/the-albert-luthuli-story/>. Luthuli also made a public statement titled “The Road to Freedom is Via the Cross” which he made immediately after his deposition; see *Let My People Go*, 235-238.

15 Luthuli, *Let My People Go*, 85.

16 Luthuli, *Let My People Go*, 136.

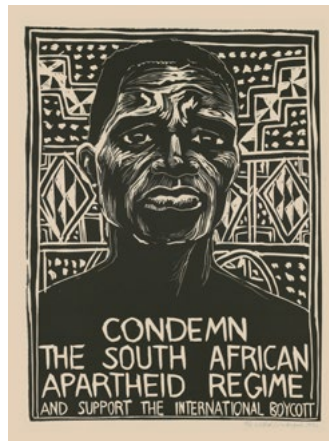
as this, to non-violence, and we mean increasingly to use these weapons even against such tyrants as South Africa's present government. This is not only a question of morality. As long as our patience can be made to hold out, we shall not jeopardise the South Africa of tomorrow by precipitating violence today.¹⁷

He also reiterated that the resistance movement was deploying against apartheid as a system of governance and not a race, saying, "We made it abundantly clear long before the campaign was launched that it was a system, not a race, which we were opposing."¹⁸ The issue of non-violence and Luthuli is complex because it was while the ANC was under his leadership that *uMkhonto weSizwe* (Spear of the Nation), the military wing of the ANC, was founded and began operations. There is ongoing debate among scholars as to the extent, if any, to which Luthuli supported the turn toward violent resistance against apartheid.¹⁹

17 Luthuli, *Let My People Go*, 15, 219-220.

18 Luthuli, *Let My People Go*, 116.

19 See Vuyisile Msila, "Chief Albert Luthuli: The Ambivalent or Ambidextrous ANC Leader?", *SAJCH/SATKG* 38, no. 1 (2024): 154-175; Allan A. Boesak, "Testing the Inescapable Network of Mutuality: Albert Luthuli, Martin Luther King Jr and the Challenges of Post-Liberation South Africa," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75, no. 4 (2019); R. Vinson and B. Carton, "Albert Luthuli's Private Struggle: How an Icon of Peace Came to Accept Sabotage in South Africa," *Journal Of African History* 59, no. 1 (2018): 69-96; Scott Couper, "An Embarrassment To The Congresses? The Silencing of Chief Albert Luthuli and the Production of ANC History," *Journal Of Southern African Studies* 35, no. 2 (2009): 331-348; R. Suttner, "The Road To Freedom Is Via The Cross: 'Just Means' in Chief Albert Luthuli's Life", *South African Historical Journal* 62, no. 4 (2010): 693-715.



Luthuli desired churches *as churches* to participate in the struggle against racial inequality.²⁰ After the Defiance Campaign of 1952, an organised mass protest against pass laws, many churches and denominations spoke officially and stated their position regarding apartheid and the organised efforts to undermine it. Though the churches didn't reach a united position, this was Luthuli's take: "I cannot speak authoritatively of all that the churches did and said at this time. The point is

that whatever their reaction they were participating, instead of taking the stand, 'Politics is not our business'."²¹ While welcoming the participation of churches, Luthuli was nonetheless distressed at the positions different churches took, leading him to say:

The churches above all were to have brought us not apartheid but fellowship one with another. Have they? Some measure of human failure is inevitable. Even so, have not many of the churches simply submitted to a secular state which opposes expressions of fellowship and our membership one of another? Have not some even gone so far as to *support* the outlook of the secular state?²²

Luthuli desired for Christians, whether black or white, to "look at the Gospels and redefine their allegiance"²³ in alignment with Scripture, and not the ideology of apartheid.

20 Luthuli, *Let My People Go*, 136.

21 Luthuli, *Let My people Go*, 137.

22 Luthuli, *Let My People Go*, 132, emphasis original.

23 Luthuli, *Let My People Go*, 132.



The Challenges of Operating in Public as a Christian

Engaging public issues using a shared platform can be challenging for various reasons, not least because it could raise questions about the nature or authenticity of one's faith. In 1953, the apartheid government issued Luthuli a year-long ban, meaning that he could not participate in public meetings; in July of the following year, he was banned for a further two years. Around the time when various political and social activist groups ratified the Freedom Charter, Luthuli was at a house near Freedom Square in Sophiatown, where he was beset by reporters. This was when the communist scare and McCarthyism were at their height, and a "rather haughty" American reporter asked him, "How is it that you, alleged to be a Christian, can cooperate with Communists?" In other words, the reporter was suggesting that the ideological differences between a Christian and a Communist ought to render cooperation a non-starter, and the framing of the question would seem to call Luthuli's *bona fides* into question. Luthuli's response to this line of questioning and thinking is thus:

For myself, I am in Congress precisely because I am a Christian. My Christian belief about society must find expression here and now, and Congress is the spearhead of the real struggle. Some would have Communists excluded, others would have all non-Communists withdraw from Congress. 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... The strength to combat and rectify their false doctrines, as with the false doctrines of white supremacists, does not lie in my depersonalising them and going apart into an anti-somebody camp. It lies rather in the things I believe in, it lies within me. I am confident enough in the Christian faith to believe that I can serve my neighbour best by remaining in his company. Men doubtful about the inner strength of their own cause will put their faith in exclusiveness, discriminatory laws, apartheid, guns – their fear makes materialists of them, the spirit is weak and they seek to make the flesh strong.²⁴

This, then, was one outworking of Luthuli's understanding of a "specifically Christian mode of going about work in society." It entailed engaging issues with others (even Communist others) for



the common good, but bringing one's Christian distinctives along to influence the character of that engagement. The common goal Luthuli was working toward, and the reason he joined the struggle against apartheid was to build "one South Africa embodying all simply as fellow-citizens," with the outcome being "the ideal of a raceless South Africa" with a hierarchy based on ability, not colour.²⁵

Luthuli never got to see the South Africa he'd dedicated his life to bring about. His tragic death, which has recently been declared the result of an assault by apartheid police,²⁶ cut his life and work short. However, he was hopeful that change would come. The closing words of his autobiography, somewhat echoing the ending of John's apocalypse, read:

The struggle must go on – the struggle to make the opportunity for the building to begin. The struggle will go on. I speak humbly and without levity when I say that, God giving me strength and courage enough, I shall die, if need be, for this cause. But I do not want to die until I have seen the building begun. *Mayibuye iAfrika! Come, Africa, come!*²⁷

Conclusion

Chief Luthuli's life was one of public service informed by his faith as a Christian. He didn't shy away from engaging the issues of his day, refusing to be drawn into ideological camps that excluded others. Propelled by his understanding that he and his fellow South Africans were created in God's image, he eschewed violence while seeking the demise of the system of apartheid. He leveraged and even created platforms of various kinds, working for the betterment of society through a specifically Christian mode of working in public for the common good. Chief Luthuli played an important role in bringing about the birth of a non-racial democratic order in South Africa, and his is an enduring legacy in South Africa and beyond.

Dambudzo Mushambi is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Pretoria's Department of Systematic and Historical Theology. His research interests are in life narratives and political theology, and he lives and works in Cape Town.

²⁵ Luthuli, *Let My People Go*, 134-5; 209-210.

²⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c874yqvdr13o>

²⁷ Luthuli, *Let My People Go*, 232.

²⁴ Luthuli, *Let My People Go*, 154-155.