



Chief Albert Luthuli as a nation builder inhabiting and respecting a range of identities

Raymond Suttner

This paper explores Chief Luthuli's role as a "nation builder", not merely as a unifying figure but also as a bearer of a message relating to the link between the aspiration of a unified South African identity and the diversity, or distinct identities that South Africans bear.

The starting point and this is found in Luthuli's life, is the need to build a "new South Africa" not his words, but referred to by Luthuli as a "common society" and to simultaneously build unity and respect a range of distinct identities, not all of these given the conscious attention in Luthuli's time, that they receive now. One thinks of race, language, gender, notably including masculinities, sexualities, and political identity. In Luthuli's case as a member of an African nationalist organisation, but also committed to non-racialism.

In the light of our recent experiences in South Africa, one needs a model that does not relate to identities on a chauvinist or essentialist, unchanging or static basis nor with individuals seeing themselves as bearer of identities that are superior to others.

Luthuli's inhabited a range of identities, and he did not see any of these standing in a hierarchically superior position to other ways of being. Apart from those mentioned in the paper Luthuli was involved in Zulu cultural life and organisations, in sport, choral and other activities.

As indicated, Luthuli became ANC president at a time of challenge -the rise of the National Party to ruling party, the Indian-African killings in the then Natal and the rise of a narrow Africanism in the PAC split.

Although Luthuli described himself as a militant, he was conciliatory towards the PAC, trying to avoid a split and he also tried to find ways of meeting with the apartheid government, to prevent resort to force by followers of the ANC as a response to apartheid violence.

Unlike present-day developments with the recent "unrest" in Phoenix, where the leadership has been largely absent, Luthuli built close and long enduring relationships with the Indian organisations and communities. When people receive this type of example from their leaders, they are less likely to attack members of other communities.

Interestingly, Luthuli was starting to build a following amongst whites, probably the first African leader to achieve this. And that may have posed a greater threat to apartheid than the stance of more aggressive opponents. (Insofar as his family do not believe his death was an accident, this developing support base amongst whites could have been a motive for murder).

Luthuli's Christianity was his core belief system, but he was open to learning from other belief systems and political orientations and related to the Liberal Party leader, Alan Paton, even though he disagreed, with the party's policies. One of the most trusted members of his support base while under house arrest was Liberal Party member EV Mohamed. He was also very close to Communist leader Moses Kotane, even though he was not himself a communist.

Although he was a devout Christian, he respected the wisdom of tribal councillors who followed other belief systems and counselled his children to learn from the amaBheshu.

The paper refers to Luthuli's gender awareness - how he related to women and how he lived out his masculinity. This is a very important question in South Africa today in the light of the high levels of gender-based violence. Luthuli is an example of a person who was both strong and gentle -a model of manhood that others may be counselled to follow.

At the same time, Luthuli was a child of his time and his discourse around women sometimes lagged behind his practice which may have been evolving towards a feminist awareness.

Much of Luthuli's personal conduct is also manifested in imagery surrounding him -notably the type of dress he wore at various times, in receiving the Nobel Peace Prize and the Congress volunteers' uniform, imagery that I have argued in other studies bear ambiguities that can include reading support for military type action. This paper follows the work of others in using dress as a signifier of personal characteristics or that of organisations.

Introduction

Chief Albert Luthuli was born into a society where identity mattered a great deal and South Africa continues to be a state where identities are both divisive and inclusive. Throughout the country's existence, identities have been points of demarcation of rights and rightlessness, inclusion and exclusion, or inclusion on a full and equal basis as opposed to a limited basis, representing elements of or total exclusion.

The current constitution provides the foundation for respectful interaction between people who identify themselves in a range of ways -culturally, in relation to language, religion and a number of other factors that go to form who or how people see themselves as being. Nevertheless, identities remain divisive, and abuses continue against those who are marginalised or are victimised as part of a discourse that tried to disqualify some people or voices.

Luthuli's political life emerged in a period when the discourse of inferiority of black people and Africans in particular, and inequality of conditions, was central to apartheid.

But identities do not manifest nor are they related to by oppressors in a static manner, In Luthuli's time African identities were manipulated in an attempt to depict

“separate development” as emulating the movement to independence of peoples in other parts of Africa and other former colonies.

This process encouraged artificial and frozen forms of African cultures, advanced as a way of Africans realising themselves, notably in conferring powers to Traditional Leaders and in using Bantu law/Native law, the colonial and apartheid versions of customary law in a manner that reduced the rights of African women below that which they experienced in pre -colonial society. (HJ Simons, *African Women. Their legal status in South Africa*. C Hurst, London, 1968, Monica Hunter, *Reaction to Conquest*, Oxford University Press, 3 ed 1964).

By the time Albert Luthuli entered politics, African identities in the political sphere had undergone a range of manifestations and there were a variety of reactions. From early on, there were those who collaborated with the apartheid or colonial regimes. There were those who sought admission to the white-dominated order, on whatever basis was possible at the time. And there were others, especially represented in the non-racial tradition that the ANC inherited, who wanted equality for all. The non- racial, or multi- racial identity advanced by the ANC was always contested within African political developments, from very early on. It was some decades before the ANC became a dominant force. (See



Raymond Suttner “African Nationalism” in Peter Vale, Lawrence Hamilton and Estelle H Prinsloo (eds), *South African intellectual traditions*, (UKZN Press, Pietermaritzburg, 2014), pp.121-145.

In religious contexts as well as in politics, there was an Africanist trend. This Africanist trend was not uniform but it sometimes claimed that “Africa was for the Africans” alone (meaning the Bantu-speaking peoples), and denied the right of whites and sometimes Indians to be in South Africa as well as being unwilling to cooperate politically in resisting apartheid, with other racial groups.

But, what was significant about Luthuli was that he did not deny an African identity but unlike “separate development”, saw “being African” as a constantly evolving and expanding identity. That was a dominant trend in the ANC leadership of his time, that there was no desire to deny or refuse to identify as an African, but also as a member of an ethnic or tribal group, as well as the speaker of certain languages. In the case of Luthuli, he was immersed in the cultural expression of Zulu-speaking people, advancing their language, promoting choral and other musical interventions, as well as involvement in the sporting field.

Luthuli’s Christianity and openness to other belief systems

Luthuli said “I am in Congress because I am a Christian”. His understanding of his Christianity did not set him in inevitable opposition to others, who were not religious in the Congress movement or the broader society.

The evidence does not contradict his own statement:

“I am not aware that I have ever been dominated by a stereotyped set of ideas –it could probably be said that I have spent a lifetime modifying my views in the attempt to fit them to the realities as I have been able to understand them. My ambitions are, I think, modest-they scarcely go beyond the desire to serve God and my neighbour, both at full stretch. But contact with people is the very breath of life to me.” (*Let My People Go*, Tafelberg, Cape Town, p. 24. See also Robert Trent Vinson, *Albert Luthuli*. Ohio Short Histories of Africa. 2018, pp. 62-3).

He read Mohandas “Mahatma” Gandhi, he interacted with Communists and liberals. Although he was not a Communist he said he would work with all who

struggled for freedom. (*Let My People Go*, 2006, p. 24. See also Vinson pp. 62-3). He is known to have had a close relationship with Alan Paton, famous author and leader of the Liberal Party. One of his key logistical supports insofar as Luthuli had to evade banning orders through clandestine meetings was EV Mohamed, a member of the Liberal Party, (along with Goolam Suleman). Vinson refers to Mohamed as a member of the Natal Indian Congress. (p. 67). I do not think this is correct, and Vinson does not cite any source. (On the logistical support, see Vinson pp 67-8).

His trust of Mohamed went so far as Luthuli writing a special request to Oliver Tambo, then ANC Secretary-General, to allow Mohamed to attend the Congress of the People, where the Freedom Charter was adopted in 1955, so that he, Luthuli, could receive what he considered, a reliable report on deliberations. (Letter from Luthuli to Oliver Tambo, Wits Historical Papers, provided to me initially by Gail Gerhart.)

He became close to the leader of the then underground Communist Party, Moses Kotane, during the Treason Trial and his trust for Kotane was so great that he is quoted as saying that if “Moses” asked me to become a Communist I do not know what I would say. (*SADET Road to Democracy* volume 1. See also Vinson p 75). Billy Nair, a leading Communist, claimed that after the Treason trial the Chief became interested in reading Marxist literature, not because he was becoming a Communist but because of his openness. (Interview with Billy Nair, 2009). See Vinson, *Albert Luthuli*, p. 76). Nair said that the underground structures used to take the underground *African Communist* to the Chief in Groutville. This tendency to read banned literature may be corroborated by Goolam Suleiman, being asked by security police to explain why illegal literature was arriving in his post box. (See *In The Shadow of Chief Albert Luthuli: Reflections of Goolam Suleiman*, ed Logan Naidoo, Luthuli Museum, 2010).

Luthuli respecting diverse identities

The sense of concern and respect for other people is also manifested in respect for and openness to the contributions of other belief systems and identities and Luthuli himself lived out a range of identities. Luthuli was a Christian, part of the amaKholwa (Christian converts) and elected chief of the Umvoti mission reserve in Groutville, established by early Christians. In his understanding, his Christian identity did not stand in a hierarchical relationship to the other identities nor was



there any opposition in their connection with each other. He lived them as an integrated and harmonious whole.

In recollecting his decision to agree to the request to make himself available for election as Chief, Luthuli entitles the chapter "The call of my village". The connotations evoked by the word "call" need to be noted, both a summons to salvation or a vocation, to do particular work of service. This is found in Moses being called by God. (Exodus 3:4) and Jesus calling apostles (Matthew 4: 21; Romans 1:1.)

Luthuli relates how he had been reluctant to make himself available for election because he regarded teaching as his calling. Economically, as the breadwinner at the time, he refers to his income as a teacher at Adams as being "relatively high" (His wife, Nokukhanya MaBhengu refers to it as "meagre", P Rule, with M Aitken, and J van Dyk, *Nokukhanya: Mother of Light* (Johannesburg: The Grail Press, 1993.) "just sufficient to make it possible for me to support my wife and the family which was beginning to appear...I knew full well that if I became chief the struggle to subsist would become harder, though not desperate." Vinson says the chief's salary amounted to 20 per cent of what he received at Adams. (Vinson at p. 24). He and his wife, Nokukhanya, who was to become breadwinner, discussed this during Luthuli's holidays and each time decided it was best to continue as a teacher, in the interests of the children (*Let My People Go*, p. 41) But:

"I changed my mind quite suddenly. I think that perhaps all the emphasis which Adams had placed on service to the community bore fruit. I recognised now that the call of my people was insistent, and the reasons I gave for declining the request of the tribal elders seemed to me to be excuses for not going to their aid. I was at Adams when I decided to accept, and I wrote to my wife about this decision. I cannot account for the fact that, quite independently, she too had changed her mind about where our duty lay". (At p. 43).

The imagery evoked by Luthuli reinforces the notion of a man who was comfortable in a number of worlds, which were distinct but integrated parts of his life.

Photographs show Luthuli wearing ANC Defiance Campaign uniform, the attire of a Zulu chief in 1960, again at the wedding of his first daughter Albertinah (Ntombazana) and on receiving the Nobel Prize in 1961. He can be seen in photographs with the Cross of Jesus in the background or praying or in Congress volunteers uniform or reading Gandhi. The Congress volunteers uniform carries ambiguity -at once bearing militaristic

connotations and also that of peace, in the cap derived from Gandhi. (Some of these photographs are in Raymond Suttner, "Dress, gestures and other cultural representations and manifestations and Indian influence on the formation of ANC masculinities" *Historia*, May 2009, pp. 41-81.) Equally, his Nobel Prize attire carries a range of meanings, some of which are conducive to taking up war. (See Suttner, "The road to freedom is via the Cross": chief Albert Luthuli and "just means", *South African Historical Journal*, 2010 (December), pp. 693-715 at p.702).

Respect for those who did not accept the Christian message

At one point he refers to non-Christians as heathens (*Let My People Go*, p.4) which may be interpreted as a derogatory term but his interactions with the amaBheshu (or amaBhinca), non-Christians, were amicable and respectful. He advised his children to listen carefully to the amaBheshu elders and to learn from their wisdom. (Interviews with Albertinah Luthuli and Thembekile Ngobese, 2009). Indeed, when he was a chief, amaBheshu were the majority of his council. (Rule et al, *Nokukhanya*, p56. Interviews with Thandeka Luthuli-Gcabashe and Albertinah Luthuli, 2009). The amaBheshu themselves had great respect for Luthuli and used to sing his praises when they arrived at his gate:

"Chief Luthuli came from Mzilikazi's Rhodesia and had an impact on the history of the southern part of the African continent. "He grew up very fast"; that is, he rose very quickly in the political world, first as elected chief in Groutville and then in the ANC.

He was still very young when these successive achievements occurred.

He turned his back on Botha, Malan, Jansen and Swart [National Party cabinet ministers of the time] sitting at their table in Pretoria. He left them there at their wits' end and returned to MaBhengu and his home in Groutville" (Rule et al at p. 94).

Note the emphasis on Luthuli's power in relation to the apartheid rulers –turning his back on them and leaving them sitting at their table in Pretoria.

For Luthuli, being a chief was not a different world into which he entered periodically and then departed into another. It was an office through which he grew in understanding of the hardships of ordinary people and



also one where he faced tests to his integrity. (See previous paper in this series: Raymond Suttner, *What is the relevance of Luthuli's thinking and practices on 60th anniversary of his receiving the Nobel Peace Prize?*)

Luthuli as leader of all people in South Africa

Luthuli was the first leader in South Africa, with a following amongst all population groups. He was in close relationship with the Indian communities and congresses and the first African to have a following amongst whites. Robert Trent Vinson, in his fine short biography, speaks of him as “Mandela before Mandela” or rather, it could be that Mandela should be described as “Luthuli after Luthuli”? (See Robert Trent Vinson, *Albert Luthuli*, pp 49-50)

Luthuli became Natal ANC president only two years after the African-Indian conflicts of 1949. His presidency of the Natal and national ANC was characterised by close relationships with the Indian Congresses especially in Natal. (Vinson, pp. 49-50). Many important speeches were delivered to these bodies and he is often pictured eating with Indians. His daughter Albertinah describes how she used to “hang around” after these meetings because she knew that there would be well catered Indian food afterwards. (Interview, 2009).

The rapprochement at leadership level was one of the factors that led to fairly good relationships between Africans and Indians on the ground. But such close relationships already existed in Luthuli's home environment, in Groutville. (See Rule et al, *Nokukhanya*).

Dorothy Nyembe, an ANC leader who served 18 years in prison, and was initially sceptical of Indians told Julie Frederikse “Chief Luthuli taught us that every person born in this country had a right to stay and be free, whether he is Indian, African or white. We fought side by side.” (Julie Frederikse, *The unbreakable thread. Non-racialism in South Africa*. Ravan Press 1990 p. 54.)

In an interview, the late Ben Magubane who was an ANC member at the time of Luthuli's presidency describes emerging from an ANC rally in Durban to see police harassing Indian traders. ANC members then formed a cordon around the traders, shielding them from the police, thus giving material substance to the alliance between the Congresses of the two communities. (Interview, 2011).

Luthuli made considerable efforts to reach out to whites and for his pains he was assaulted on one such occasion in Pretoria. During a brief interlude between banning orders Luthuli addressed large audiences including whites in Cape Town. Mary Benson describes these meetings in 1959:

“His theme was ‘European fears and non-white aspirations:

We are not callous to the situation of the white man in this country, who entertains certain fears-fears that he may be swamped and may lose his racial identity because of our numerical superiority. But must the white man, because of those fears, be excused for refusing his fellow man rights?...the question is not the preservation of one group or another, but to preserve values which have been developed over generations and to pass those values on to generations to come.”

Benson remarks that his lucid and uncompromising approach inspired enthusiasm. “After one meeting a crocodile of men and women of all races followed him down the street, singing ‘Somlandela Luthuli...’-‘We will follow Luthuli’. Swinging and swaying in the traditional steps-one, two, three, kick- ‘we will follow, we will follow Luthuli...’ His visit to the Cape was described as a ‘triumphal tour’ by the Johannesburg *Star*....” (Mary Benson, *South Africa. The Struggle for a Birthright*. International Defence and Aid fund. London 1985, pp. 208-9. See also Vinson, pp 79-83).

Luthuli's masculinity, Luthuli as a gendered subject

In contemporary South Africa violence is closely linked to dominant notions of masculinity, attached to displays of valour, and simultaneously apparently legitimating militarism and acts of violence against political opponents. All of this is part of a tendency of all nationalisms to be patriarchal and potentially violent and militaristic. (Ivekovic, R, Mostov, J. 2004. *From Gender to Nation*. Zubaan. New Delhi.)

These are tendencies and not inevitabilities and the tendencies may not be realised if steps are taken to prevent this. Amongst the steps may be to provide examples of alternative models of masculinity, and in this regard Luthuli (like Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Oliver Tambo and Chris Hani) may be of importance.(On Hani, see my interview with MK soldier Dipuo Mvelase,



1993, where she describes how Hani introduced her to feminism).

I understand an enquiry into Luthuli as a gendered subject to relate to how Luthuli interacted in specific relationships, with women, children and other men. This concerns relationships in the family and the question of how the public and the private interface, which under patriarchy tends to see men performing in the public domain as breadwinners and figures in politics or other activities outside the home, while women tend to be consigned to the household as caregivers and performers of domestic duties.

It is not possible on the evidence to which I have had access to draw substantial and final conclusions on Luthuli and patriarchy or gender equality, although he grew over time and his marriage was one of equality. (See Suttner, "Road to freedom" pp 712-3. and Vinson p 23)

His relationship to his children manifested a tenderness, gentleness and other attributes that advance a notion of masculinity that has relevance for conditions in contemporary South Africa. Luthuli was the product of and engaged with a range of influences, in particular Christianity and drawing on the bible.

The bible, of course, has multiple readings, some of which bear more or less patriarchal implications. This may be why we must not expect all Luthuli's statements and actions to be more than was likely in the time, when he had not had the opportunity to be exposed to feminist readings or liberation theology.

Luthuli's evolving gender consciousness and the discourse he employs reflects this and the contradictions of the missionary message as he interpreted it and the gender relationships within the ANC.

Luthuli's gender awareness and practices and their evolution were greatly influenced by his marriage to Nokukhanya, MaBhengu, a relationship which appears to have been amicably negotiated and re-negotiated over time. (See Suttner, "Road to freedom", at pp. 712ff)

While MaBhengu was primarily responsible for child-rearing in the sense of teaching children to wash and cook and drawing no distinction between sons and daughters (This was not exceptional according to MaBhengu but was part of the ethos of the Groutville Christian community. One area, which distinguished them from the amaBheshu, she claims, was in the Christians rejecting notions of 'women's work'. See Rule

et al, *Nokukhanya*). But MaBhengu was not confined to the home and worked the fields.

Women, the chieftdom and the ANC

The means for achieving freedom envisaged by Luthuli included and needed equal participation of men and women in Congress activities. Even in his early days as a chief, Luthuli began to address the question of gender equality (without using those words) in his insistence on women being part of community deliberations, thus entering spaces women had never been in before in the chieftdom and possibly in the country as a whole (Luthuli, *Let My People Go*, pp. 56–57.)

He also facilitated their economic advancement by disregarding government prohibitions on their brewing and selling beer and their operating shebeens. (Vinson, *Albert Luthuli*, at p. 27, citing *Let My People Go* pp 56-7 and Naidoo ed., *In the shadow of Chief Luthuli* p 15). He also made specific pleas for the involvement of women in the ANC and is said to have played a significant role in promoting the advancement of specific women leaders like Dorothy Nyembe and Lillian Ngoyi.

But advancement of numbers of women, we know, is a quantitative matter; empowerment in relation to private and public patriarchy is a different phenomenon. It appears that the specific relationship with people like Ngoyi and Nyembe entailed encouragement and empowerment in a manner that would have had a qualitative effect.

Practice and discourse

But some of Luthuli's discourse lagged behind his practice insofar as that may have indicated an embryonic feminism. At the level of consciousness at least in his public voice Luthuli continued to use masculinist language, referring to attacks on African rights as "emasculatation." (*Let My People Go* at p. 38). This is in line with the discourse of much liberation history. (See Natasha Erlank, "Gender and Masculinity in South African Nationalist Discourse 1912-1950", *Feminist Studies*, 2003, p. 653 and critique in Suttner, *The ANC Underground*, Jacana Media, Johannesburg, 2008, pp. 107-8). With regard to women's protests his public statements did not always appear to take women as seriously as men in politics, and verge on the patronising. Referring to the December Annual Conference of the ANC, Luthuli writes:



“Our decision was to intensify the campaign against all passes by all non-violent means in our power, emphasising particularly our opposition to passes for our women. A feature of this Conference was the large number of women who came from the most remote country regions, dressed in blankets and bangles and beads. *Among men, political awareness presupposes a certain sophistication. Among women, awareness of the fundamentals presupposes no such thing.*” (*Let My People Go*, at p.189. Italics inserted.)

At the same time Luthuli is full of admiration for the growing resistance and courage shown by women in a range of struggles, including against beer halls, dipping tanks and passes. (*Let My People Go*, pp. 186ff). It remains unclear whether the value of women's struggles is seen by him as primarily in nudging men or important in its own right but still necessary to contain within certain limits:

“One thing is clear. Our army of ‘legal minors’ is on the march, and the gap between city women and their country sisters is rapidly being closed. [The reference to “legal minors” is to the status of African women under “Native law” and especially the Natal Code of Native Law as legal minors.] The question which we men *who lead the movement* and who see the suffering of our women ask ourselves is this: just how long can our women be expected to keep within bounds their indignation?” (*Let My People Go*, p 192. My emphasis)

The last passage seems to assume that men are to be the leaders and that it is a fact of life, not something that could possibly be transitory, or modified by women being part of the leadership corps. At the same time nothing can be taken as final in a period where feminist discourse had not emerged as a feature of debates in the ANC and other organisations in South Africa.

Whatever the limits on Luthuli's gender discourse this must be contextualised in the times and the social and political institutions in which he interacted. His private life was lived out in an emancipated manner, with the public and private occupied by both MaBhengu and Luthuli.

While Luthuli was a public political figure and MaBhengu remained mainly in the background, Luthuli was not an absent father and was deeply involved in nurturing his children. This I learnt primarily through interviews and conversations with his three daughters from 2009 onwards. One of these, the youngest, Thembekile, has subsequently died. This related to

MaBhengu occupying the conventional male role in becoming the breadwinner and being the earliest riser amongst the Groutville farmers. This meant she had to go to bed early while Luthuli stayed up discussing issues with his children and when he stayed up reading and writing (and eating sweets), he watched over the children. (Rule et al, *Nokukhanya*, p. 82, quoting Thandeka Luthuli-Gcabashe). If any child were walking in his or her sleep, he would carefully guide the child back to bed.

Luthuli took a close interest in the school work of his children but never used his hierarchical status as father to impose his views and encouraged debate and a questioning spirit amongst his children. (Vinson, *Albert Luthuli*, p. 23, Suttner, ‘Road to Freedom’ at pp 712, 713). Ntombazana notes: “Ubaba never imposed his status as family head upon us. Everybody had an equal opportunity to talk and no one was considered too young to have his views respected”. (“Ubaba: Recollections by Ntombazana[Albertinah Luthuli]”, in E. Reddy, compiler, *Luthuli: Speeches of Chief Albert John Luthuli* (Durban and Bellville: Madiba Publishers and UWC Historical and Cultural Centre, 1991, pp. 13 at 15.)

Far from Luthuli being the heroic male figure of patriarchal mythology, that set out alone to do his mighty deeds, his speeches had to pass through the careful scrutiny of MaBhengu, herself a former teacher. Luthuli would read his speeches to MaBhengu who would make comments. Albertinah Luthuli writes:

“Ubaba's respect for UMama was such that there was nothing he did without consulting her. Every speech he wrote was first presented to her, for her criticism and approval before he presented it to the audience for which he had prepared it. And mother, for her part, would interrupt her work, no matter how urgent, and sit and listen to him, *making an input when necessary, and generally strengthening his confidence.*” (“Ubaba: Recollections by Ntombazana, p.13 at 15. My emphasis).

This is an important statement not only in indicating the mutual respect but also in showing that Luthuli's vulnerability (Umama's inputs “generally strengthening his confidence”) was observed by his children. The image we tend to have of heroic men tends to be that of tough people who stand no nonsense and reveal no weaknesses. Luthuli was strong but he was also tender and he, like all of us, had his vulnerabilities, which his children could observe.



Obviously, we cannot read a developed gender consciousness or feminism into Luthuli. But the signs of gender awareness were there from an early stage.

Luthuli advances idea of a “common society”

In advancing an alternative to apartheid, Luthuli, in works that are not given sufficient attention, articulated the notion of a “common society”, (a concept also advanced by Professor Jack Simons). It is not very different from the inclusive conceptions of the Freedom Charter to the effect that “South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white”. In a letter to the then Prime Minister JG Strijdom, in 1957, Luthuli spelt out his understanding of the inclusive alternative:

“Firstly, we believe in a common society because we honestly hold that anything to the contrary unduly works against normal human behaviour, for the gregarious nature of man enables him to flourish to his best association with others who cherish lofty ideals. ‘Not for good or for worse’, but for spiritual values inherent in the fundamental concepts of what, for lack of better terminology, is called ‘Western Civilisation’. Apartheid, so far, has revealed itself as an attempt by white South Africa to shunt the African off the tried, civilised road by getting him to glorify unduly his tribal past.

“Secondly, we believe that the close spiritual and moral contact facilitated by a common society structure in one nation makes it easier to develop friendship and mutual respect and understanding among various groups in a nation; this is especially valuable in a multi-racial nation like ours and these qualities - friendship, mutual respect and understanding, and a common loyalty - are a *sine qua non* to the building of a truly united nation from a heterogeneous society. In our view, it will not be easy to develop a common loyalty to South Africa when its people by law are kept strictly apart spiritually and socially. Such a state of affairs is likely to give rise to unjustified fears and suspicions which often lead to deadly hatreds among the people and, more often than not, end in disastrous antagonisms within the nation.

“Lastly, we hold the view that the concept of a common society conforms more than does apartheid to early traditional closer Black-White contact. This, undoubtedly, accounts for the relatively rapid way in which Africans, from the days

of these early contacts, to their advantage and that of South Africa as a whole, took to and absorbed fairly rapidly Christian teachings and the education that accompanied it.”

Chief Luthuli addressed this letter to the Prime Minister, Mr J. G. Strijdom, on behalf of the African National Congress, on May 28, 1957, suggesting a multi-racial convention to seek a solution to the country’s pressing problems. Apart from a formal acknowledgement on June 7, 1957, from the Private Secretary to the Prime Minister, the letter received no response from the Government. (See *Lutuli. Speeches of Chief Albert John Lutuli*, Compiled by ES Reddy. It is listed as published by Madiba Publishers, Durban, in 1991, as with an earlier citation. My impression, however, is that it was not published in the full version. That was why the Luthuli Museum embarked on a project to publish his speeches in 2011, which was not completed. I have the full text from the late Dr Reddy and am ready to share, on request).

No finality in our reading of the life of Chief Luthuli

This re-reading tries to elucidate and integrate the various strands in Luthuli’s life united by his Christianity, a particular active brand of Christianity, sometimes leading to contradictory and still developing notions as with his ideas on gender questions.

Certainly, some of Luthuli’s practices present alternative conduct that has a bearing on the present, notably how he acted as a Chief, his integrity in that role and in broader politics.

Luthuli’s life needs to be studied at this time because it is suffused with ethical responsibility, which may be of value in communicating to new generations. Perhaps, most important for the present are the steps he took to reach out to all communities. He wanted to ensure that South Africa would become a “common society”, where all belonged as equals and enjoyed mutual respect, irrespective of the range of identities they may have inhabited.

Raymond Suttner is an emeritus professor at the University of South Africa. He has published extensively on Chief Luthuli. This article has been written to mark the 60th anniversary of Luthuli receiving the Nobel



*Peace Prize and the 10th anniversary of the Luthuli
Institute.*

