

**DESMOND TUTU, ALLAN BOESAK, AND NELSON MANDELA:
GIANTS OF SOUTH AFRICAN LIBERATION**

By Nick Gier

We are the rainbow people of God! We are unstoppable!
Nobody can stop us on our march to victory! No one, no guns, nothing!
Nothing will stop us, for we are moving to freedom!

--Bishop Desmond Tutu, Cape Town Protest, September 13, 1989

On September 2, 2009, I visited St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town, South Africa. For ten years this church was led by Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the first black bishop in South African history and recipient of the 1984 Nobel Peace Prize. When he was appointed archbishop in 1986, Tutu knew, replacing a white bishop, that it was illegal for him and his family to live in Bishop's Place. He courageously defied the racist law and moved in anyway. The authorities did not dare arrest him.

The Brutal Removal of Non-Whites from Cape Town's District Six

In 1966 central Cape Town was declared a white's only area and all non-white people--most walking to work and living in thriving multiracial neighborhoods for decades--were forced to move to segregated townships 20 miles outside the city. During my stay in Cape Town, I visited the museum for District Six, which has been compared to the French Quarter of New Orleans. Muslims, Jews, Christians, and Hindus of all races enjoyed jazz together and celebrated each other's holidays. At the museum I met a Muslim man who had written a poignant account of his life there and the agony of his family's removal.

Protests and technicalities slowed the exodus, but in the end 60,000 people were forced out. Except for the original churches and the mosques, District Six, renamed Zonnebloem (Afrikaans for "blooming zone"), now lies empty. It is essentially a land of shame that whites and certainly international companies are afraid to develop. Ironically, District Six will eventually bloom again with the return of many of the families who were ruthlessly uprooted from their homes.

The Cape Town March for Freedom on September 13, 1989

On September 13 St. George's Cathedral was the scene of the celebration of the 20th anniversary of a protest march led by Bishop Tutu, theologian Allan Boesak, and the mayor of Cape Town. The 30,000 marchers were incensed that 23 people had been killed by police in protests against the exclusion of blacks, coloreds (those of mixed race), and Indians from parliamentary elections earlier in the month. While 25 million non-whites stood by without vote, 2.2 million whites had determined the leaders of their nation.

The police were determined to stop the September 13th peace march, but Cape Town's white mayor Gordon Oliver convinced the national government to allow the protest, the first ever official permission granted in the thirty-year liberation struggle. The September 13th march was a great success and it meant the beginning of the end of "apartheid" (Afrikaans for "separateness.") This was a brutal policy that declared that blacks were citizens only in their "homelands," 13 percent of the country's worst land set aside for them. Most of the work was in the cities, and the integrity of black families was undermined as single males stayed in hostels at their places of employment. Blacks not carrying an official "pass" were arrested and thrown in jail.

As a boy growing up in Johannesburg, Tutu remembered the indignities of apartheid. Even the ambulances were segregated, and Tutu remembers blacks dying in their homes and on the streets because there was no transport for them.

But Tutu also remembered the day that a white Anglican priest tipped his hat to his mother. It was liberal ministers of all races, those most immune from arrest, who were active in bringing down this vicious regime of discrimination and oppression.

Allan Boesak: Colored Dutch Reformed Theologian

Another leader in the September 13 march was Allan Boesak, a colored Dutch Reformed theologian and leader in the African National Congress. Boesak rightly criticized theologians who glorified the suffering of the poor and the oppressed as redemptive in the same way that Christ's sacrifice was. First, this inadvertently deifies the poor; and second, it would lead to the absurd conclusion that the poor should suffer even more.

Boesak grew up in a mixed-race family, hence his categorization as "colored." The all white and racist Dutch Reformed Church graciously set up a "mission" church for colored people, and at the age of 14, Boesak became a sexton in his local segregated church. After obtaining a Bachelor of Divinity in South Africa, Boesak traveled to the Netherlands for six years of graduate work. His dissertation was published as *Farewell to Innocence* and among his seven books, I chose *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation, and the Calvinist Tradition* for my class on liberation theology.

Boesak returned to South Africa fully prepared unseat national leaders whom he called "spiritual children of Hitler," not an inaccurate description of politicians who had supported Nazi Germany before their election victory in 1948. In 1982 Boesak was elected president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. He became the spiritual leader of 50 million Calvinists in 76 countries. Before electing him, the delegates in Geneva had voted to ban white South African Calvinists from the Alliance.

Boesak convinced black religious leaders to join hands with the coloreds and Indians, and 1983 he helped found the multiracial Democratic Alliance, which was

able to carry on the work of the ANC, which had been banned and had gone underground. The Democratic Alliance was instrumental in the success of the September 13th Cape Town march.

In the post-liberation years Boesak spoke out against the government's irrational position on AIDS (now rescinded) and its luke-warm opposition to Mugabe's madness in Zimbabwe. He has also come out in favor of gay marriage, and he has criticized South African religious leaders who protest racial discrimination but not bias based on sexual orientation.

Unfortunately, Boesak's reputation has been tarnished by charges of adultery, which he does not deny, and misappropriating \$60,000 meant for his Boesak Foundation for Peace and Justice. After spending one year in jail, he was granted a pardon from President Thabo Mbeki. Many may disagree, but I still consider Boesak one of the giants (albeit flawed) of South African liberation.

Nelson Mandela's Religious Background

The September 13th protest inspired thousands of others to march across the nation, and it eventually led to the release of Nelson Mandela from 27-years of imprisonment on February 11, 1990. (In four short years he would be elected the president of his nation.) One week earlier President F. W. de Klerk had stunned the nation and the world by unbanning the African National Congress and the Pan African Congress, freeing all political prisoners, and ending the state of emergency. Mandela and de Klerk had been in secret negotiations for months before this momentous public announcement.

In his book *Long Road to Freedom* Mandela maintains that there was far more good than bad in the education he received from the Christian schools and colleges he attended. "The missionaries built and ran schools when the government was unwilling or unable to do so. The learning environment of the missionary schools, while often morally rigid, was far more open than the racist principles

underlying the government." He adds that "virtually all of the achievements of Africans have come about through the missionary work of the Church."

In his book Mandela relates that he "was a member of the Students Christian Association and taught Bible classes on Sundays in neighboring villages." He has remained a devout Methodist all his life, and he claims that his religious views prevented him from joining the South African Communist Party. He explains that "the party's antipathy to religion put me off."

Many black activists were initially suspicious of Communist support for their cause, but the Communists proved to be sincere and courageous allies. South African Communists were key in persuading Indians, coloreds, and blacks to overcome their differences, on which the racist government had capitalized, and form a unified front against apartheid.

One of Tutu's first appointments was as chaplain at the University College of Fort Hare, where Mandela studied in 1937-39. Mandela left the school after a stand-off with the principal over a student council election. He had decided that standing by his principles was better than continuing his education. Noting that he had his "first taste of protesting authority," Mandela had begun his career as a political activist.

Once one of the best post-secondary institutions in Southern Africa, Fort Hare declined dramatically when the apartheid government nationalized it in 1959. When the Bantu education act was passed, most religious schools, except the Dutch Reformed, resisted government take-over, but in the end only the Roman Catholic, Seventh Day Adventists, and Jewish school remained independent. The government's education minister made the incredible statement that black kids did not need to learn mathematics.

The Radicalization of Mandela and the African National Congress

Mandela moved to Johannesburg and lived with a devout Anglican family while he started work in a law office. He finished his B.A. and law degree by going to law school and before his imprisonment in 1962. Ten years before that, Mandela and Oliver Tambo, who also left Fort Hare because of the same student council affair, opened a successful law practice catering to black clients. Tambo rose in the ranks of the ANC and eventually went abroad to raise funds and represent the ANC in international venues. The international airport in Johannesburg was renamed in his honor.

In 1961, after police had once again thwarted a national strike, ANC leaders started to reconsider its policy of non-violence, a principle by which it abided for 60 years. Recognizing truth in the African proverb: "The attacks of the wild beast cannot be averted with only bare hands," Mandela reluctantly came to the realization that the ANC needed a military wing, Ironically, it was the Communist Moses Kotane who objected saying that "we will be exposing innocent people to massacres by the enemy."

After very careful study of military tactics, ANC leaders decided that "The Spear of the Nation," ANC's military wing, would participate in carefully planned acts of sabotage that would involve no civilians. What appeared to be a clean distinction in theory proved to be impossible to execute on the ground. Just as American commanders always regret the inevitable civilian casualties, so did ANC leaders realize that their clean sabotage theory did not work.

The ANC's turn to violence not only led to intensified responses by the security forces, it also encouraged terrorist acts by blacks, not only against whites but also blacks whom they believed were not sympathetic enough to the liberation struggle. When Mandela and de Klerk started their secret negotiations, they were aware that if they did not succeed, all of Southern Africa would explode in a paroxysm of violence.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission

In 1996 Bishop Tutu was looking forward to retirement, but President Mandela chose him to chair the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, one of the most remarkable and successful experiments in overcoming emotional wounds ever attempted. In his book *No Future Without Forgiveness* Tutu explains how his fellow commissioners rejected the Nuremberg trial model, primarily because there were no victors in this largely non-military conflict. Furthermore, as Tutu adds, "while the Allies could pack up and go home after Nuremberg, we in South Africa had to live with one another." Long, costly trials would have built up resentment and would most likely have led to violent reaction by heavily armed whites.

In his book Tutu recalls the movie *The Defiant Ones* in which Sidney Poitier was chained together with a white prisoner, and they had to work together to get out of a ditch in which they had fallen. Tutu submits that this is exactly the teamwork that is needed for all South Africans to move forward, and he reminds everyone that Nelson Mandela had set the tone for this mode of reconciliation.

The commissioners also rejected the concept of blanket amnesty, a process used in Chile after the resignation of dictator Augusto Pinochet. Pinochet did set up a "truth" commission, but its proceedings were secret and very little accountability was achieved with regard to the 3,000 people tortured and/or disappeared during Pinochet's rule.

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission wisely chose a middle way between these extremes. One might call it "earned" amnesty, because perpetrators who came forward and told the truth were then granted immunity from both civil and criminal liability. In return many victims and their families were able to obtain closure on their grief. In some cases perpetrators were able to lead the police to places where bodies had been dumped in make-shift graves. It must be emphasized that those who came forward confessing their crimes were black as well as white.

No Communist Take-Over and No End to Christian Civilization

The white South African government was able to gain the support of conservatives around the world by declaring that black rule would mean a Communist take-over and the end of Christian civilization in South Africa. The fall of the Soviet Union in 1989 took away the red scare, and it is not a coincidence that this was the time that the racist leaders started to change their minds. Except for Zimbabwe, democracy and capitalism are thriving in the four Southern African countries that I visited on my 6-week tour.

Everywhere I went I saw abundant evidence of a very vibrant religious life, especially in the townships where Christian worship services were being held in metal and wood scrap shacks. In Namibia 80-90 percent of the people are Christian and 50 percent of those are Lutherans, even though the German Imperial Army, losing only 400 of their own, killed 75,000 natives during the 1903-1907 war. White Lutheran ministers were instrumental in the movement to end apartheid in their country. Black Africans remember well the white religious allies they had in their long struggle.

I am writing a book about how the Hindu and Buddhist fundamentalists have caused violence their share of violence, but not as much as Christian and Islamic extremists have. But we should also remember that religions have played a positive role as well. During a tour of the magnificent ruins at Angkor Wat, I was amazed at how well our Buddhist guide, who has lost most of his family to the Khmer Rouge, had processed his grief and anger. With both this man and the black Africans I met on my trip, I found myself more angry and more filled with resentment than they were about the trauma they had experienced.

As a student of Christian theology I can say with confidence that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission--led by black and white religious leaders,

attorneys, and civil rights leaders-- embodied the ethics of Jesus more than any other Christian institution in history.