

A Tribute to Nelson Mandela (1918-2013): “A Master of Forgiveness”

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Never, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another and suffer the indignity of being the skunk of the world. Let freedom reign. The sun shall never set on so glorious a human achievement! God bless Africa!
—South African President Nelson Mandela, 1994 Inaugural Speech

I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.

—Nelson Mandela, at his high treason trial in 1962

We've lost our greatest son. Our nation has lost its greatest son. Our people have lost a father.

—Jacob Zuma, South Africa's President

Mandela's Christian Education and Faith

In his autobiography *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.”

Mandela Rejects Communism, but accepts Members' Support

Many South African black activists were initially suspicious of Communist support for their cause, but the Communists proved to be sincere and courageous allies. American Communists, such as Bayard Rustin—the man who organized the 1963 March on Washington and recently given a posthumous Medal of Freedom—played a similar role in the civil rights movement.

The African National Congress (ANC), the current majority party in South Africa, was established by Christian Africans in 1912. The founders were both educated in mission schools, and the ANC's religious orientation prevented it from allying itself with the South African Communist Party until the 1940s. The ANC was losing credibility and realized that it had to join

with those leading the fight against discrimination. South African Communists were key in persuading Indians, mixed race Coloreds, and Blacks to overcome their differences, on which the racist government had capitalized, and form a unified front against apartheid.

Apartheid is the Afrikaans word “separateness,” which the white South African government used to divide their people. This was a brutal policy that dictated that blacks were citizens only in their “homelands,” 13 percent of the country's worst land set aside for them. With a population of 27 million in the late 1970s, 2.2 million whites voters could determine the destiny of the nation. Most of the work was in the cities, and the integrity of black families was undermined as alienated single males stayed in hostels at their places of employment. Blacks not carrying an official “pass” were arrested and thrown in jail.

Mandela’s Formative Years at Fort Hare College

From 1937-39 Mandela studied at the University College of Fort Hare, where Desmond Tutu, later a leading anti-apartheid activist, was chaplain. 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 takeover, 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 children 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 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 50 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, and, ironically, it was the Communist Moses Kotane who objected saying that “we will be exposing innocent people to massacres by the enemy.”

“The Spear of the Nation”: The ANC’s Military Wing

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 was banned and its leaders were arrested and given life sentences. Mandela spent most of his 27-year prison time on Robben Island, breaking stones during the day and freezing in shorts (blacks were not allowed to wear long pants), and sleeping on a thin mattress. The tuberculosis he contracted in prison caused Mandela to suffer respiratory difficulties for the rest of his life, but the tenacity by which he clung to it was a sign of both his stamina and strong character.

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 President F. W. 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.

Bishop Tutu and colored Dutch Reformed theologian Allan Boesak organized a protest march in Cape Town on September 13, 1989. The 30,000 marchers were incensed that 23 people had been killed by police in protests against the exclusion of Blacks, Coloreds, and Indians from parliamentary elections earlier in the month. 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. The protest inspired thousands of others to rally across the nation, and it eventually led to the release of Nelson Mandela from Robben Island on February 11, 1990. In four short years he would be elected the president of his nation. One week earlier 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. In 1993 Mandela and de Klerk would share the Nobel Peace Prize.

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 national 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. Sadly, President Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher stoked the fears about Communism and stood against the application of sanctions, which, in the end, were the principal reason de Klerk gave in.

Reagan vetoed the Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986, calling it “immoral” and “utterly repugnant,” but both the House (313-83) and the Senate (78-12) overrode the President. Reagan argued that South Africa was a strong anti-Communist ally, and, instead of sanctions, he offered “constructive engagement,” which meant expanding trade with South Africa. Thatcher joined her good friend in rejecting sanctions, but she had very personal reasons as well: her husband had business interests in the apartheid country. Conservative MP Teddy Taylor said that Mandela “should be shot,” and, until embarrassed party leaders banned it, members of the young wing of the Conservative Party wore stickers that declared “Hang Mandela.”

During a 6-week tour of the four countries of Southern Africa in 2009, I witnessed, except for Zimbabwe, robust democracies and a capitalist economy. Everywhere I went there were signs 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 in what was then German Southwest Africa. White Lutheran ministers were instrumental in the movement to end apartheid in Namibia. Black Africans remember well the white religious allies they had in their long struggle. I was struck by the high morale of the Namibians and the absence of ill will towards their small Afrikaner minority, who still owned most of the wealth in the country.

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 Jesus’ ethics compassion and forgiveness more than any other religious institution in human history. I agree with Marcus Eliason of the Associated Press that Mandela, and I will add Tutu, were “masters of forgiveness.”

Nick Gier taught religion and philosophy at the University of Idaho. His book “The Origins of Religious Violence: An Asian Perspective” will be published by Lexington Books in 2015. For more on Tutu and Boesak go to the tab on columns from Southern Africa at www.NickGier.com.