H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Scott Couper. *Albert Luthuli: Bound by Faith.* Scottsville, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2010. Illustrations. xi + 291 pp. $45.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-86914-192-9.

Reviewed by Jon Soske (McGill University)
Published on H-SAfrica (January, 2013)
Commissioned by Alex Lichtenstein

Since its publication in 2010, Scott Couper's biography, *Albert Luthuli*: *Bound by Faith*, has been at the center of academic and public controversy, including a fiery exchange with Raymond Suttner in the pages of the *South African Historical Journal* and a critique by the current South African president, Jacob Zuma. Albert Luthuli served as the African National Congress (ANC) president from 1952 to his death in 1967, a period during which the ANC first emerged as a truly mass organization and, following the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960, remade itself into an underground organization for the purposes of armed struggle. Internationally respected during his lifetime, Luthuli embodied the democratic aspirations of many South Africans well beyond his death and remains a central figure in the national pantheon of the post-apartheid state. The debates over Luthuli's legacy are therefore closely tied to the ANC's efforts to ground its legitimacy as a ruling party in a particular narrative of the past and the enormous symbolic importance of the 1950s, the period when many of the canonical figures, ideas, and symbolism of today's party first emerged.

The contentious issue is Luthuli's attitude toward the formation of the ANC's armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), and the "turn to violence" of late 1961. Did Luthuli–a Congregationalist Christian, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, and a passionate defender of nonviolent civil disobedience–endorse the armed struggle as the ANC has always claimed? Although Luthuli never condemned MK and praised its combatants as "brave just men" at the Treason Trial, his original misgivings over the campaign of sabotage and his repeated, eloquent statements in favor of nonviolence raise serious questions on this score. Couper is unambiguous in his assessment. Drawing on a large body of circumstantial evidence and secondhand testimony, he argues that Luthuli only reluctantly yielded to a course that the ANC president saw as both avoidable and likely disastrous. Couper deserves much credit for unsettling a set of received verities. Along with other contributions to this debate, especially the groundbreaking articles by Stephen Ellis and Paul Landau, *Bound by Faith* is a forceful reminder to South Africa's historians that a great deal remains unknown regarding even the most significant moments in the anti-apartheid struggle.[1]

The first chapter of *Bound by Faith* explores the Luthuli family's strong grounding in Congregationalist Christianity; his own early education at the mission-run Edendale and Adams College (famed for training a significant section of Natal's African intelligentsia); and the contradictions of a church that oscillated between paternalism and forms of black autonomy. Couper is particularly insightful in showing how the church created a space for forms of interracial dialogue and mentorship that would heavily influence Luthuli's later approach to race. The second chapter develops these same themes by looking at the central role of Christianity and Natal's powerful tradition of self-help organizations in shaping Luthuli's worldview. Couper insists that Luthuli's faith should not be seen merely as personal, but as absolutely central to his politics. Unfortunately, these chapters add very little to the published literature on the ANC in Natal during this period despite the existence of such sources as the newspaper *Ilanga Lase Natal* and unpublished memoirs by Luthuli's close associates M. B. Yengwa and Jordan Ngubane. Couper emphasizes Luthuli's relationship with Christian whites at the expense of exploring his positioning within the world of African nationalist politics.

The third and fourth chapters cover the period from the March 18, 1960, Sharpeville Massacre to the launching of MK on December 16, 1961. This section contains an especially poignant description of Luthuli's 1961 trip to Oslo to accept the Nobel Peace Prize, including a meditation on what the ANC president might have been thinking as he delivered a speech urging peace and Christian understanding even while a section of the ANC was establishing an armed organization. Chapter 5 describes

Luthuli's growing alienation from the direction of the ANC, his increasing marginality within the organization, and his conflicts with Nelson Mandela. A final, mournful section describes an ailing Luthuli's accidental death after being struck by a train on July 21, 1967. Reviewing the witness reports and other documents, Couper makes a convincing case against the widely held conviction that the apartheid government assassinated the ANC president.

Bound by Faith is passionately argued and contains important insights into its subject. Nonetheless, the volume is less a full biography than an extended brief for two related arguments: the centrality of the Christian faith to Luthuli's politics and his purported rejection of the turn to armed struggle. Couper attempts to illuminate Luthuli's positions on these questions by tracing the development of his character and moral worldview from childhood onward. As a result, *Bound by Faith* relates each stage in Luthuli's life to what Couper sees as his stance during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Unfortunately, this technique tends to overwrite Luthuli's multifaceted biography in terms of future events, while introducing Couper's own conclusions as established in advance.

This circularity feeds into a second aspect of the text: Couper's tendency to ventriloquize on Luthuli's behalf. At several of the book's most critical moments, Couper presents Luthuli's opinions on specific matters without providing quotations or references. It is impossible for the reader to evaluate these passages. They appear to be the author's own speculations regarding what Luthuli *might* have thought based on his estimation of Luthuli's character and the overall context. In many cases, these interpretations are compelling. But they obscure a significant methodological problem. Couper relies on a contradictory body of sources produced in conditions of state repression and underground political organization. In the face of this forensic difficulty, he appeals to his own reconstructions in order to judge the reliability of conflicting accounts. This approach does not necessarily invalidate Couper's broader contentions, but it does make it difficult to untangle the evidence and judge it on its own terms.

There is another dimension to Couper's handling of archival materials that merits some discussion. In his introduction, Couper positions himself as a scholarly historian who relies on the documentary record in order to critique the ANC's nationalist mythology. However, the divide between evidence and myth is not nearly as clear as he supposes. During the period of struggle and in power, the ANC (like every other political organization in existence) has produced self-serving "usable histories" that simplify and distort past events while marginalizing perspectives contrary to the prevailing line of the organization. Couper aptly critiques several instances of this practice. But the ANC is not, and has never been, a homogeneous organization, and its members often voice sharply contrasting versions of the organization's history. Moreover, some of the Congress Alliance figures whose previously available accounts Couper rejects, like Ismail Meer, Billy Nair, or Zuma, were politically active in Natal during the years in question and either knew Luthuli well or were trained by his close comrades. How and why they came to see Luthuli in a certain way should be of tremendous interest to a biographer. Yet Couper forecloses such questions by dismissing their evidence in favor of "credible" testimony by liberal and Christian whites (or ex-Congress members like Rowley Arenstein) whose views parallel his own. Not once does he suggest that liberal Christians might have had their own interests in representing Luthuli in a particular fashion, or that Luthuli–as an experienced and canny politician–may have tailored his position for different audiences. This bias is further reinforced by the fact that Couper did not conduct a single interview with an ANC member who worked with Luthuli, although he does footnote discussions with liberals like Jean Hill and the ordained minister Edward Hawley.

Couper's argument regarding the turn to armed struggle rests on his interpretation of two meetings that occurred in Natal during July 1961. In *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela establishes that Luthuli was present at these gatherings–indeed, they were held in Stanger so that he could attend–and suggests that, after an exhaustive discussion, the ANC president "ultimately agreed that a military campaign was inevitable."[2] If Couper can demonstrate that Luthuli did not come to this conclusion, he can then proceed to represent the ANC president's subsequent public statements in support of nonviolence as a disavowal of the ANC's new course (rather than, for example, a defensive strategy in the wake of state repression). Couper's interpretation of these debates relies almost entirely on the material presented in Mandela's account, but he disputes Mandela's version of events by highlighting alleged inconsistencies. This approach requires that Couper discredit corroborating sources by showing that they derive from Mandela's autobiography. He therefore rejects the version presented in Meer's *A Fortunate Man* (2003) solely on the basis of the fact that Mandela wrote the introduction.[3]

However, another witness supports Mandela. Couper

quotes ANC member Yengwa's unpublished 1976 autobiography in an earlier section of *Bound by Faith* but then overlooks its relevance for evaluating Luthuli's position at the Stanger meetings. Yengwa was one of the ANC youth leaders who supported Luthuli against A. W. G. Champion in 1951. He often acted as Luthuli's secretary and travelled with him to accept the Nobel Peace Prize in 1961. Since Yengwa was critical of the turn to armed struggle, his testimony carries particular weight. Yengwa states clearly: "Some of us were still sceptical about the use of violence, including Chief Luthuli, on the grounds that the people had yet to be consulted and we would not be seen to be democratic in changing without consultation from one policy to another. But *we* had to accept the logic" (p. 113, emphasis added). Couper also passes over sources that suggest Luthuli's views may have shifted in the aftermath of the Natal meetings. Although he quotes Curnick Ndlovo's South African Democracy Education Trust (SADET) interview with respect to Luthuli's leadership style, he never discusses Ndlovo's claim in the same interview that Luthuli did not oppose the "feeling" of the leaflet announcing MK's launch.[4] Based on his own reconstruction of the Natal meeting, Couper dismisses testimony by one of Luthuli's contacts in Norway that indicates that "notwithstanding his own feelings, [Luthuli] had felt bound at a meeting with the ANC's leaders some months earlier to accept a decision to embark on sabotage" (p. 136). This amounts to a selective use of evidence.

Despite Couper's assertions of objectivity, his aims are clearly political as well as historiographical. *Bound by Faith* attempts to demonstrate that a Christian, nonviolent approach could have achieved the peaceful social transformation of South Africa. To this end, Couper resuscitates an old South African liberal argument to the effect that the turn to armed struggle foreclosed significant opportunities for legal opposition to the regime and provided the state with a justification for repressing oppositional forces, thus artificially extending the life of apartheid. It is possible to make a counterfactual case that space continued to exist for an open protest movement after the Sharpeville Massacre and the banning of the liberation organizations. Couper points to Mandela's premature decision to call off the 1961 general strike in order to buttress this argument. Unfortunately, Couper advances a series of hypothetical propositions until he reaches the rather astonishing conclusion that Luthuli could have achieved the presidency of South Africa in the late 1950s on the basis of his "immense popularity outside the black community" (p. 81). By this point, Couper's agenda has outstripped the sources.

What then should we make of Luthuli's views on the inauguration of sabotage? Reading *Bound by Faith* in tandem with other recent contributions, like research by SADET, Ellis, and Landau, the following picture emerges. By the late 1950s, significant forces within and outside of the ANC had begun to move toward some form of insurrectionary activity. Recognizing the volatility of the situation, several factions within the ANC and Communist Party, including Mandela's "Sophiatown Group," began to prepare for the eventuality of armed struggle, motivated in part by fear over the consequences of popular violence erupting outside of political direction. Some senior ANC members–most notably, Luthuli and Moses Kotane (one of the most respected leaders in the Congress Alliance at the time)–opposed this new course. Luthuli still believed that militant, nonviolent protest could convince white South Africans to reject the Nationalist regime. Because of his banning and residency in Natal, Luthuli had long been marginal to the day-to-day administration of the ANC. Mandela's group and others connected to the Communist Party took advantage of this fact in laying the groundwork for the ANC's new direction. In June 1961, Mandela convinced Kotane to allow him to raise the question of armed struggle in the ANC National Executive Committee.

During two evenings of discussion within and then between the ANC and Indian Congress, Luthuli forcefully raised his concerns. After exhaustive consultation, the Congress leadership arrived at a compromise allowing the formation of an armed organization, distinct but accountable to ANC leadership, while continuing other forms of political activity. Separate and reliable accounts indicate that Luthuli assented to this course of action along with the rest of the ANC leadership. Indeed, Mandela claims that Luthuli himself proposed the consensus position that led to the creation of MK, a suggestion that sits ill at ease with the image of Luthuli passively acceding to a virtual inevitability. However, Luthuli was surprised by the timing of MK's launch, and Couper assembles a compelling body of circumstantial evidence indicating that Mandela and Luthuli argued over this question in January 1962. Luthuli still believed in the potential efficacy of civil disobedience, and his continued advocacy of this path eventually led to his sanction by the ANC Joint Executive Committee in March 1962. By this point, the de facto policy of the ANC had changed.

While this picture is more complicated than some existing narratives, it does not necessarily support the contention that Luthuli opposed the campaign of sabotage after the 1961 Natal meetings. It seems likely that he accepted the decision to establish an organization for the

purpose of armed struggle although his personal feelings on the matter were conflicted. But Luthuli almost certainly disagreed with the abandonment of nonviolent resistance by the ANC. *Bound by Faith* is conclusive on this point. Along with other senior ANC leaders, he was also angered and worried by the initial failures of MK. Nonetheless, Luthuli never repudiated MK and, perhaps more significant, he remained the ANC's president during and after the organization's turn to violence. Despite simplifications and elisions, the ANC does seem to be correct in claiming that Luthuli "stayed the course." In the end, Luthuli's commitment to the party was stronger than his reservations concerning its new direction. He did not, for example, follow some Natal figures and leave the ANC for the Liberal Party.

The full significance of this revised account, however, depends on the way that one interprets the political context of the early 1960s. If the continuation of legal struggle not only was feasible, but also could have potentially succeeded in shifting the political commitments of the majority of white South Africans, then Luthuli's stance was prescient. But the evidence supporting this counterfactual scenario is thin. In reality, almost a decade of mass, nonviolent protest had failed to win any real concessions from the state. By the late 1950s, the apartheid influx control and labor bureau apparatuses were in crisis, and the regime knew that it would have to crush urban African resistance in order to implement the large-scale forced removals necessary to shore up the system. White support had consolidated behind the Nationalist Party: the Progressive Party (whose tepid advocacy of a qualified franchise fell considerably short of the ANC's demands) received a mere 8.6 percent of the vote in October 1961. Elements within and outside of the ANC had already begun to prepare for armed revolt.

Confronting this situation, Luthuli–a man of tremendous courage and integrity–continued to appeal to the conscience of white South Africa and interracial Christian fellowship. Read in this light, his story embodies the failure of the ANC's policies during the 1950s, and the tremendous difficulties that a section of Congress leadership had in reorienting to the post-Sharpeville era. Couper sets out to vindicate a truly extraordinary figure. He does so with evident devotion. But the genre of great man history often inverts itself, producing the opposite of its intended effect. There is something genuinely tragic about Luthuli's continued belief in the possibility of white moral awakening as the Nationalist Party entrenched its grip on power.

Notes

[1]. See especially Bernard Magubane, Philip Bonner, Jabulani Sithole, Peter Delius, Janet Cherry, Pat Gibbs, and Thozama April, "The Turn to Armed Struggle," in *The Road to Democracy in South Africa: Volume 1 (1960-70)*, by South African Democracy Education Trust (SADET) (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2004), 53-145; Stephen Ellis, "The Genesis of the ANC's Armed Struggle in South Africa 1948-1961," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 37, no. 4 (2011): 657-676; and Paul Landau, "The ANC, MK, and 'The Turn to Violence' (1960-1962)," *South African Historical Journal* 64, no. 3 (2012): 538-563.

[2]. Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1995), 165.

[3]. *A Fortunate Man* was assembled by Meer's wife, the late sociologist and ANC figure Fatima Meer, based on notes left by Meer before he passed away in 2000, his earlier writings for such newspapers as *The Leader*, taped interviews with Hassim Seedat, and their own extensive discussions over the course of decades. Not only does Couper make no effort to determine the original source of the book's account of the July 1961 meetings, but he also offers no evidence to substantiate his serious allegation that Meer deliberately tailored his account to match Mandela's version. By this logic, the very fact that a set of sources agree mutually discredits them.

[4]. Magubane, et al., "Turn to Armed Struggle," 90.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Jon Soske. Review of Couper, Scott, *Albert Luthuli: Bound by Faith.* H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. January, 2013.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=34065

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.