

## Art and Nonviolence in Apartheid South Africa

Review of: Ronald Harrison, *The Black Christ: A Journey to Freedom*. Foreword by Albertina Luthuli. Claremont, South Africa: David Philip Publishers, 2006. 180 pp.

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Before Nelson Mandela, there was Albert Luthuli. A majestic figure, a hereditary Chief of the Zulus, Luthuli was clearly the most inspirational figure of his generation in South Africa, and his untimely death at the age of 69 in circumstances that can only be described as suspicious robbed South Africa of its most creative exponent of nonviolent resistance to apartheid. Luthuli had joined the African National Congress (ANC) in 1945, and he rose to become president of the provincial Natal branch of the ANC in 1951; the following year, Luthuli was among those who orchestrated resistance to the notorious pass laws. His part in the Defiance Campaign earned him the opprobrium of the government, and he was offered the choice of renouncing his membership in the ANC or being stripped of his Chieftainship. Luthuli, characteristically, was never in doubt about his decision – but even as the South African government sought to demote him in the eyes of his people, he was elevated to the Presidency of the ANC. Many honors were to come Luthuli's way, including the Nobel Prize, the first ever awarded to an African, for Peace: but the most lasting testimony of this gentle colossus's fortitude and valor is the fact that the apartheid regime 'banned' him for much of the last fifteen years of his life, restricting his movements and preventing any mention of his name in public. Luthuli nonetheless remained President of the ANC until his death, allegedly an accident on a train track close to his home, on 21 July 1967.

It is under Luthuli that Mandela, who was his deputy and president of the ANC branch in Transvaal, attained political maturity. Though robbed of his Chieftainship, Luthuli clearly remained Chief to all his people – not only black South Africans, but all the oppressed of his nation. Among those who viewed Luthuli as their political and spiritual mentor is the Capetown-based artist, Ronald Harrison, who was born in 1940 and grew into adolescence as Luthuli was coming into his own as one of the principal architects of the anti-apartheid movement. Harrison was nearly fifteen years old when apartheid's enforcers arrived at Sophiatown, near Johannesburg, and dismantled the entire black township within a few hours. Later that summer, in 1955, the ANC adopted the Freedom Charter, whose Preamble stated that "South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white, and that no government can justly claim authority unless it is based upon the will of the people". Twenty thousand women – African, colored, Indian, white – marched the following year to demand an end to injustices against African women. The government's response to the rising tide of resistance appears to have been to unleash more oppression: at Sharpeville, nearly 60 peaceful demonstrators were killed in a police firing.

Harrison, meanwhile, had been gravitating towards art, and he has described himself as having the feelings of an angry young man as oppressive political events unfolded around him. His "role model", Chief Luthuli, had been exiled from the political world, and the ascendancy of Hendrik Verwoerd, described in Luthuli's autobiography as "the author of our destruction", to the Prime Ministership of South Africa in 1958 signalled to apartheid's opponents that the regime would step up its repression. In his inaugural speech, Verwoerd declared himself as "absolutely convinced that integration in a country like South Africa cannot possibly succeed". Where the US Supreme Court, in its famous 1954 decision, *Brown*

v. Board of Education, had signified that it was prepared to overturn the century-old dogma of 'separate but equal', in South Africa Verwoerd was reaffirming precisely that discredited view: "The policy of separate development is designed for the happiness, security and stability provided by their home language and administration for the Bantu as well as the whites." Verwoerd appointed as his Minister of Justice and Police B. J. Vorster, who lost little time in introducing the notorious Detention Without Trial Act: though it conferred on the state the right to hold detainees without any right to legal representation for a period of 90 days, in actuality it was designed to permit detention for indefinite periods of time. Verwoerd had described himself as a seeker "of justice for all groups"; similarly, Vorster characterized himself as a believer "in the right of free speech, in the right of people to assemble, and protest," adding only that "these rights are not without qualification."

Faced by apartheid's onslaught on humanity, Harrison pondered whether he, as an artist, could somehow contribute to the liberation movement. As a Christian, Harrison felt immensely troubled that the apartheid regime claimed the mantle of Christianity; however, Luthuli, himself a man of intense if quiet religious conviction, represented the other, more ennobling and emancipatory, face of their faith. Late in 1961, Harrison writes, he was struck by something of an epiphany: what if he were to signify the suffering of South Africa's black people by equating it with the crucifixion of Christ, rendering Luthuli as a modern-day Christ and apartheid's ideologues, Verwoerd and Vorster, as Roman centurions, "the tormentors of Christ" (p. 26)? An Asian St. John and a coloured Madonna, Harrison surmised, would complete the picture. So came about the birth of "The Black Christ", the painting around which revolves Harrison's multi-layered narrative of the struggle against apartheid, the terror tactics of the South African state, the relation of art to politics, his own troubled life until the dismantling of apartheid, and the fate of "The Black Christ" itself.

Completed in June 1962, "The Black Christ" could be exhibited in public only briefly before the state pounced upon Harrison. The Dutch Reformed Church, to which apartheid's proponents belonged, asked Luthuli to repudiate publicly this representation of him as a crucified 'Black Saviour', little realizing that, as Luthuli was under banning and gagging orders, it was strictly illegal for any newspaper or other media to even mention his name, much less reproduce anything attributed to him (p. 31). Summoned to appear at a police station to explain his conduct, Harrison issued a statement describing Luthuli as a man of peace, someone in whom the artist had found his "perfect image of Christ" in the here and now. Urging everyone to recognize the "predominant spiritual atmosphere of the painting", Harrison felt that the painting showed that "racial discrimination should not be practiced, for we are all united in one bond with Christ" (p. 35). Harrison was not only let go, but shortly thereafter informed that he could hang the painting in any church of his choice – one of those gestures through which a totalitarian state lulls its subjects and even opponents into a false sense of security. Apartheid's "two main icons" had been ridiculed, and Harrison never supposed that his offence would be overlooked. Sure enough, only a week or two after it appeared that Harrison had been granted a reprieve, the Ministry of Interior issued orders prohibiting any further display of "The Black Christ" until the Board of Censors had certified that the painting was not calculated to offend the religious sentiments of a section of the public (p. 39). Harrison himself was briefly taken into custody and roughed up: this may have sufficed to persuade him to heed the advice of friends and activists, who were keen that the painting be smuggled into London where funds obtained from its public displays would be channeled to the political victims of apartheid (p. 41).

Even as “The Black Christ” found its way to Britain, Harrison’s own crucifixion commenced. Over the following year, he would be hauled into torture chambers on several occasions. His interrogators sought to know at whose instigation he had painted “The Black Christ”: they wanted an account of a conspiracy to humiliate Verwoerd and South African whites when there was none. Harrison describes the merciless beatings, the constant abuse, the nights in dark cold cells huddled up in the nude (pp. 47-60). There is a chilling account of a doctor brought to ‘heal’ Harrison’s wounds: as two men held Harrison down, the doctor yanked out the nail of his right foot’s infected big toe with a huge pair of pliers (p. 57). After several days of confinement, Harrison was released; but several months later, he was again hauled into custody and ruthlessly beaten up into a piece of pulp (pp. 71-85). Enveloped by darkness, Harrison might well have become a statistic were it not for the unexpected kindness of two jailors, in particular an African woman whose gentle touch brought him back to life (pp. 79, 83-84).

Though Harrison never disappears from the narrative, the second half of the book moves in considerable measure from the travails of his own life to the turmoil in the nation and the history of resistance to apartheid. Harrison recalls major landmarks, from the trial and conviction of Mandela, Walter Sisulu and others (pp. 88-89) to the Sharpeville Massacre (p. 126), from the Soweto Uprising (p. 109) and the death in police custody of Steve Biko, ideologue of ‘Black Consciousness’ (p. 102, 112), to the isolation of South Africa in the international realm and the eventual dismantling of apartheid. The odious nature of apartheid is recalled in such barbarisms as the Group Areas Act (1950), which entailed large-scale uprooting of coloreds, blacks, and Indians and decimated entire communities, among them the famous District Six in Cape Town (p. 93). The forcible removal of people deemed not only inferior but as incapable of making ‘productive’ use of their land has long been one of the ways in which colonial powers sought to leave their imprint on colonized peoples, and the apartheid regime’s land and settlement policies should also be viewed as having a family resemblance to the doctrine of terra nullis, whereby European colonizers justified their occupation of land with the declaration that they were merely filling up ‘empty’ space or ‘waste’ land. Harrison, even as his narrative moves to the early 1990s, to the period when Mandela and ANC leaders were released from jail, and Mandela was elected to the office of the President of South Africa, recalls the long-term effects of apartheid. He notes with sadness how a majority of colored people in many Western Cape communities, who had doubtless imbibed some of the racist rhetoric about the unworthiness of black people, voted for their former oppressors rather than the ANC, declaring that they would not consent to be ruled by ‘kaffirs’ (p. 157).

At long last, the book returns to its ostensible subject, “The Black Christ”. Over a period of 35 years, Harrison’s painting had found shelter in the basement of an English home, and Harrison movingly recounts the painting’s triumphant return home and its eventual acquisition by the South African National Gallery. But what is perhaps even more moving is that there is not a touch of hatred against his former oppressors, and even the assassination in September 1966 of apartheid’s chief architect, Hendrik Verwoerd, elicits from Harrison the remark that he could not share in the jubilation experienced by apartheid’s victims: “Verwoerd had been a monster; he had been a tormentor. But he had also been a loving husband, a caring father, someone’s friend, the beloved son of proud parents.” As he cautions us, we must ever endeavor not to become like those whom we despise (p. 96). The

author's generosity is present throughout, in his celebration of somewhat lesser known heroes of the struggle such as Barney Desai, who was instrumental in having the UN declare apartheid a 'crime against humanity' (p. 147), and equally in his willingness to accept the most elevated thoughts, whether their source be the Quran, the teachings of Christ, or the life of Gandhi. The Black Christ is palpable proof of how fortitude, equanimity, and a simple faith in the goodness of people might yet prevail amidst crushing adversity.