



The Journal of Traditions & Beliefs

Volume 6


Article 10

10-27-2019

The Spiritual Mandela: Faith and Religion in the Life of Nelson Mandela

Jenni L. Shelton

Follow this and additional works at: <https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/jtb>

 Part of the [Continental Philosophy Commons](#), [History of Religion Commons](#), [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#), and the [Social History Commons](#)

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Recommended Citation

Shelton, Jenni L. (2019) "The Spiritual Mandela: Faith and Religion in the Life of Nelson Mandela," *The Journal of Traditions & Beliefs*: Vol. 6 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/jtb/vol6/iss1/10>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Michael Schwartz Library at EngagedScholarship@CSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Traditions & Beliefs by an authorized editor of EngagedScholarship@CSU. For more information, please contact library.es@csuohio.edu.

The Spiritual Mandela: Faith and Religion in the Life of Nelson Mandela

Dennis Cruywagen. 2018, Imagine, \$24.99 (240 pages), ISBN: 978-1-62354-530-7

Cruywagen's biography about the faith and religion of President Nelson Mandela reveals that it was because of rather than in spite of his religion that he was inspired to fight against Apartheid in South Africa. Unlike the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who championed non-violent protest, Mandela was willing to use violence to end Apartheid. As a result, conservative backed media outlets such as the *Washington Times* described Nelson Mandela as violent, communist, and atheist during his imprisonment. Cruywagen complicates this narrative with providing the reader with knowledge of the roles that religion and spirituality played during Mandela's lifetime.

While Mandela was briefly a member of the Communist Party before his arrest, as well as commander of the African National Congress's armed forces, he self-identified as a Methodist throughout his life. His experiences were different from King's. The ANC's non-violent protests had been met with violence, and Mandela knew the survival of the organization was dependent upon overthrowing the Apartheid government. Being a Christian encouraged him to fight for racial equality in South Africa. His faith gave him the strength to be a liberator for his people.

Cruywagen begins the biography with a history of the first Methodists in South Africa. These Europeans established missionary schools that gave African children an opportunity to be educated alongside children of European descent. Nelson Mandela, whose parents originally named him Rolihlahla, was renamed Nelson by his first teacher at a missionary school. Despite the attitudes of British superiority at these schools, Mandela saw the schools as empowering because they provided him with the education necessary to become a lawyer and politician. Cruywagen also shows that Mandela's Christianity coexisted alongside his participation in Xhosa culture. He provides the reader with a window into the rituals and traditions of the Xhosa during puberty and marriage. Mandela was raised in and continued to belong to a kinship network of Africans who identified as both Methodist and Xhosa throughout his life. After his release from prison, his supporters called him "Madiba," his clan name. Madiba was an 18th century Thembu chief, an ancestor of Mandela's. Mandela's father was a chief before the colonists dethroned him, and the clan name was representative of Mandela's royal ancestry.

Cruywagen's investigation of religion and faith in Mandela's life reveals not only the important role that organized religion had in providing resources for Mandela (such as access to education as well as money for a legal defense) but also how ministers encouraged his faith throughout the many years he spent in prison. Due to political necessity, Mandela rarely discussed his faith publicly. When Mandela became a member of the ANC, his faith became a private matter. Since the ANC was open to people of all faiths and no faith, he did not want to alienate the members by publicly belonging to the Methodist Church. Even after he was imprisoned on Robben Island for his involvement with the ANC, he did not make his adherence to the teachings of the Methodist Church public information. He attended services of a variety of traditions, including both Muslim and Christian. As a result, he developed an interfaith outlook on life, encouraging people of different faiths to work together in order to form community.

After his transfer to Pollsmoor Prison in Cape Town, he was only allowed to attend services of one faith and chose Christianity. He was allowed to attend both Anglican and Methodist services and take communion. Many Anglicans and Methodists supported the overthrow of the Apartheid regime, and their support led to international condemnation of the South African government and Mandela's eventual release from prison. These clergymen ministered to Mandela while in prison, providing him with a feeling of belonging to a greater community. Through community worship, Bible reading, and prayer, Mandela developed spiritually within prison, transforming into a person who became known for reconciliation and forgiveness rather than revenge. Knowing that going public with his Methodist faith would cause division, he chose to keep it private in order to promote peace after his release from prison and during his presidency.

Jenni Shelton, M.A.
Notre Dame College