

Mandela: An icon, but of what?

By [Steve Hayes](#)

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Nelson Mandela has died, and most of the TV stations have programs paying tribute to him. Over and over again journalists are referring to him as an “icon.” An “icon” of what? It still sounds vaguely blasphemous.

He has repeatedly told journalists (and the world) that he is not a saint, and that he rejects the depiction of him as any kind of saint. So if he is not a saint and not the icon of a saint, what is he?

When I think of what Nelson Mandela means to me, what difference he has made to my life here in South Africa, a song comes to mind, a song we used to sing 30 years ago:

Thou hast turned my mourning into dancing for me  
Thou hast put off my sackcloth  
Thou has turned my mourning into dancing for me  
And girded me with gladness.

That is a quotation from Psalm 29/30, and the whole psalm is one that Nelson Mandela could have sung the day he was released from prison. But that is not quite what it means to me.

For 30 years, from 1964 to 1994, another psalm was never far from my thoughts, Psalm 125/126.

When the Lord turned again the captivity of Sion, then were we like unto them that dream.

But for 30 years it seemed that it was no more than a dream, and the captivity was never turned, and whenever a friend was banned or detained without trial I thought of the other verses:

Turn our captivity O Lord, as the rivers in the south.  
They that sow in tears shall reap in joy.  
He that now goeth on his way weeping, and beareth forth good seed  
Shall doubtless come again with joy, bringing his sheaves with him.

Then, after 30 years of waiting, that day finally came—on April 27, 1994, when we were able to vote for the first democratically elected government in South Africa.

The Lord did eventually turn our captivity, and the instrument he used to do it, the image, the icon of our liberation, was Nelson Mandela.

So yes, there is a sense in which he was an icon. But in the context of those psalms, he can be seen as more than an icon, but rather something like a messiah. And political messianism is a very dangerous thing.

But whatever the dangers may be, Nelson Mandela seems to have avoided them, perhaps because he fit a role described by G.K. Chesterton:

Much vague and sentimental journalism has been poured out to the effect that Christianity is akin to democracy, and most of it is scarcely strong or clear enough to refute the fact that the two things have often quarrelled. The real ground upon which Christianity and democracy are one is very much deeper. The one specially and peculiarly un-Christian idea is the idea of Carlyle—the idea that the man should rule who feels that he can rule. Whatever else is Christian, this is heathen. If our faith comments on government at all, its comment must be this—that the man should rule who does NOT think that he can rule. Carlyle's hero may say, "I will be king"; but the Christian saint must say "Nolo episcopari." If the great paradox of Christianity means anything, it means this—that we must take the crown in our hands, and go hunting in dry places and dark corners of the earth until we find the one man who feels himself unfit to wear it. Carlyle was quite wrong; we have not got to crown the exceptional man who knows he can rule. Rather we must crown the much more exceptional man who knows he can't.

And if there is one thing that stands out in Nelson Mandela's career it's that he did not see himself as a messiah, nor did he ever claim to be. He denied that he was a

saint, and did not portray himself as a Moses-like figure, come to lead his people to freedom. He saw his position as leader of the ANC, and president of the country when the ANC won the 1994 election, as a matter of “cadre deployment.” It was a position in which he could serve the people, and he saw it as servant leadership.

“Cadre deployment” has a somewhat tarnished image nowadays. It is seen by many as a way in which party hacks and benefactors can be rewarded by giving them positions that they are often incompetent to hold. But for Nelson Mandela and his contemporaries it meant that he was not self-willed, choosing the job he liked, but served where his comrades wanted him to serve.

He was not perfect; two failed marriages bear witness to that. But he was aware of his imperfections, and reminded people of them when they seemed inclined to treat him as a saint.

So I think yes, for me he is an icon, an icon of liberation and icon of servant leadership. But I wonder if that is what the media mean when they describe him as an “icon.”

In the Orthodox prayer of absolution after confession, the priest prays over the penitent, “Do thou thyself now be merciful to thy servant N. and grant unto him (her) an image of repentance, pardon and remission of sins.”

I can think of two politicians who were icons, images, of repentance—[John Profumo](#) and [Adriaan Vlok](#). But I suspect that those are the kinds of images that the media prefer to overlook, and they are not “icons” in the judgement of the media.

Nelson Mandela denied that he was a saint, but then all true saints did. He denied that he achieved anything on his own, claiming he was simply one of the people who struggled together. When he gave his first public speech after being released from prison, he said it was the efforts of the people that had released him.

Many saints have also withdrawn from public life for a period, or even for their whole lives. St Seraphim of Sarov lived as a hermit for 17 years before he was called to any public ministry. And in a sense, Nelson Mandela’s 27 years in prison were a similar kind of preparation. He emerged with a kind of wisdom analogous to that of *startsi*, Orthodox spiritual elders.

He may not have been a saint, in the formal sense. But perhaps he was the image of a saint, an icon of liberation and servant leadership.

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