

South Africa Through The Eyes Of Allan Boesak

In 1986 Dr. Allan Boesak went to Holland to receive the first copy of "*Als din verroad is ben ik schuldig*" ("*If This Is Treason I Am Guilty*"). The book is forwarded by Professor Dr. G. Rothuizen of the Theological School of the Reformed Churches of The Netherlands (GKN), where Boesak studied and received his doctorate. In a specially written essay for this collection of his speeches and sermons, Boesak reflects on his stay in The Netherlands and what he has experienced since. On the basis of this book, plus readings in related literature, I want to raise some questions about Boesak for serious reflection.

Dr. Boesak is a gifted and dynamic speaker, able to move crowds; a controversial leader of the black resistance movement, president of the WARC (World Alliance of Reformed Churches), founder of the UDF (United Democratic Front), the nonviolent arm of the ANC (African National Congress) and president of the ABRESCA (Alliance of Black Reformed Churches in South Africa). He has also authored several books: *The Finger of God*, *Walking on Thorns*, *Coming Out of the Wilderness*, and *Black and Reformed*. Who is this man? What does he believe? In what direction does he want to lead South - Africa?

1. Dr. Boesak, the Politician

Boesak charges that the South African government is not legitimate. It is not just, not legal. It is antidemocratic and oppressive. The government is not the servant of Romans 13 but the beast of Revelation 13. It has no right to rule the land. He dreams about a democratic South Africa. Even the militant ANC is viewed as democratic at heart. If only the democratic countries would help the ANC then the democratic forces within that movement would receive a real boost. According to Boesak 99% of the blacks are behind the ideals of the ANC. The UDF's ideals also include a call for an open, democratic and non-racial government. Some day there will be a new South Africa; a land without apartheid, a land without death and chaos, but where joy, freedom and peace reign. For this land we must fight. And it need be not only the whites but the blacks as well. On the occasion of the founding of the UDF in 1983 Boesak said that the struggle is not only against the white government, but also against those in the black community who through their collaboration with the whites give the government an appearance of credibility.

Boesak is convinced that the South African government is nearing its end. Therefore he pleads with the international community to put pressure on the South African government through economic sanctions and disinvestment. In this regard the United States under President Reagan is seen more as a hindrance than as a help. President Reagan's policies supposedly undermine all that is worthwhile in the world. The blacks are ready to sacrifice for their liberty, Boesak says. They don't have to obey the South African government. It is nothing but a fascist police state. Since it is illegal and

undemocratic, it has to go. Christians and adherents of other faiths are called upon to pray for the fall of the government.

Boesak is called a Reformed leader. But the blacks and the whites differ in their expression of the Reformed faith. According to Boesak the Reformed theology of the white churches is a mixture of pietism, German romanticism, Volkstheologie, and the negative aspects of the teachings of Abraham Kuyper. Yet Abraham Kuyper did give Boesak a vision for the Lordship of Christ over every area of life, including the political sphere. However, Boesak does not distinguish between the church as an institute and the church as an organism. Because politics deals with people, the church as church has to be politically engaged.

2. Dr. Boesak, the Critical Liberation Theologian

Dr. G. Rothuizen called Boesak a socialist. He should know, Boesak was one of his students. Dr. Boesak is one of South Africa's leading liberation theologians. He belongs to the Broederkring of the black Dutch Reformed Church, which is committed to a critical theology of liberation. This movement has taken a clear stand in the struggle for liberation within the black community.

Boesak calls for battle against the sinful structures in South Africa, and for human dignity, equality and justice. God is the God of the poor, the helpless and the needy. The church too should be completely on the side of the poor. Yet he clearly presupposes that not all participating in the struggle for liberation should be regarded as Christians. A differentiation must be made between the church and the world. Not everyone who advocates liberation is necessarily one of the Lord's people. Because of this view he is called a critical liberation theologian over against those who embrace in the kingdom every fighter for liberty from oppression.

3. Dr. Boesak, South Africa's Kai Munk?

When Boesak was a student in Kampen, The Netherlands, he was introduced to the thinking of Kaj Munk. He studied his books and became intrigued by their powerful message. In 1983 Boesak received the Kaj Munk prize during the Kaj Munk week at the theological faculty of West-Kaapland. For the occasion he delivered an address entitled "Holy Wrath: Kaj Munk and South Africa." I believe that this address gives a good insight into Boesak's opinion of the South African government. But my question is: Has he done justice to Kaj Munk? Can he really compare himself to him? Has he not misunderstood the devastating nature of Kaj Munk's archenemy, and thereby condemning as pagan everyone associated with the South African government?

When I studied in The Netherlands I too was introduced to the thinking of Kaj Munk, a fascinating experience for which I am still grateful. Kaj Munk (1898-1944) was a Danish Lutheran parish minister. Traditionally Lutheran in theology, he was influenced by the Pietist movement and Søren Kierkegaard. He was a poet, a journalist and Denmark's greatest dramatist. His preaching was fiery, outspoken, moving, using unique methods

to relate the Gospel to the present day. He never belonged to a political party, and never voted. For years he was seen as an anti-democrat. He even believed for some time in an enlightened dictatorship. He longed for an authority which would be worthy of his obedience. He accused the Danish democracy of undermining the strength of Denmark's sovereignty, nationhood and moral fiber. For a while he was impressed and influenced by Mussolini and Hitler, and their law and order policies. But earlier than most leaders of his time he saw through the demonic intentions of these men. He saw the church's voice stifled; he heard the cries of the Jews led to their extermination. He became convinced that National Socialism and Christianity were irreconcilable. And from a Nazi sympathizer he turned into one of its courageous opponents. His name became a symbol of resistance for both the Danish and the Germans. As he saw the Nazi evil spreading in his beloved land, he called his people to battle. In a sermon preached in Copenhagen, he said that with the help of God "we will try to bring the people to resistance." In 1944 Kaj Munk was brutally murdered by the Germans.

Is Boesak another Kaj Munk? He makes indirect comparisons. South Africa is likened to Denmark under the Nazi regime. Apartheid is as terrible an evil as Nazism. He claims that the roots of African nationalism are identical to the ideas of Hitler. The South African government leaders are called the spiritual children of Hitler. When he was questioned whether this was a just assessment, Boesak asked, "Why may South Africa not be compared to Nazi Germany? Why do so many call the Botha government legal?"

4. Dr. Boesak, South Africa's Real Spokesman?

Does Boesak give a clear picture of the troubled South African situation? South Africa is hurting, grieving and suffering. Apartheid is a terrible injustice. But support for this system is crumbling. In October 1986 the synod of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (NGK), the country's major Dutch Reformed Church, denounced apartheid as unjust. Its congregations were allowed to admit persons of all races. A landmark achievement for South Africa! Not only black leaders, but also an increasing number of white leaders, voice their deep anguish about the suffering of the blacks. Professor Lourens du Plessis of Potchefstroom observed, "We live in a country and a region where injustice has become interwoven with social patterns and where 'harming others as you never dream of harming yourself' is legally part of the structures of society."

Despite Boesak's claims, not all blacks are fervent supporters of the ANC or the UDF. Christians and denominations in South Africa are often radically divided in their understanding of the Gospel and its implications for society as a whole. For example, the Reformed Independent Churches Association in South Africa, with its four and one-half million members and its leader Bishop Isaac Mokoena, seeks a peaceful solution and rejects Boesak's views and methods.

Not all blacks are in agreement with economic sanctions. The well known Zulu leader Chief Mangosuthu B. Buthelezi commented, "Sanctions will radicalize what is already a very volatile South African situation. Sanctions will work to radicalize black politics and this is precisely why the more revolutionary a Black South African, the more fervently he

calls for sanctions. For revolutionaries, the application of sanctions is not the last step in non-violent action. It is a first step toward violent action. Deepening poverty suits the revolutionaries. It undermines non-violent, democratic opposition to apartheid." Economic sanctions appear to be a form of institutional violence. Dr. Kenneth D. Kaunda, President of Zambia, once said, "But economic sanctions if firmly applied . . . are only more humane than war in the sense that starving someone to death is more humane than shooting him." And aren't leaders exploiting the plight of the poor for the fulfillment of their political dreams? Is the increased burden of the poor justified? Boesak will neither eat nor earn less when the sanctions start to work their way through the South African economy, but the poor will, as fewer jobs become available and unemployment becomes widespread.

Is Boesak justified in equating the South African government with Hitler and his cohorts? I don't believe so. Boesak is not another Kaj Munk. This Danish prophet was a man for his time, addressing Denmark reeling under the weight of Nazi conquerors. Nazism has been called "The Revolution of Nihilism." Its myth of blood, soil and super race was rooted in ancient paganism. It imposed totalitarian ideas upon Western culture. Science, art, education, industry, technology and labor organizations – all were made serviceable to the pan-Germanic ideal. Dr. Herman Dooyeweerd rightly noted, "National socialism tried to restore new life into the petrified remains of a primitive and pagan Germanic culture." The Nazis understood human nature better than the neoliberals of their day. They saw man in his brokenness, fear, boredom and sadism. And they accommodated themselves to man's depraved human nature. The French Christian Democratic statesman Robert Schuman (1886-1963), who had first-hand experience with the cruelties of Nazism, wrote, "Nazism has its own religion which appeals to God but which is in fact a type of materialistic pantheism. This religion is not a minor matter but the center of the ideology itself. This is why Nazism wants to abolish all other religions. It is essentially at war with Christianity." If this is true then the South African government may not be equated with Nazism. It does not oppress or intend to abolish the Christian faith. Within the South African government there are Christians who are Boesak's fellow travellers to the new heaven and earth. Should Boesak not work for reconciliation instead of perennial confrontation, healing rather than wounding? Is there no room for forgiveness, but only condemnation of the whites? One wrong does not justify another wrong. Instead of praying for the downfall of the South African government should prayer not be offered for change, for revival, for repentance? When the Nazis were in power during World War 11, Christians united in prayer for their defeat. And rightly so! But South Africa is not Nazi Germany, despite all the injustice and legitimate griefs. Associate Professor John De Gruchy of the University of Cape Town wrote, "It is the responsibility of the Christian to respect and pray for those in authority. This can be very difficult for those in society for whom the state is not worthy of respect, and it is not unknown for Christians to pray for the downfall of those in power. There is a sense in which the state has to earn the respect of those it governs. This is problematic in Southern Africa today because so often those in authority are unrepresentative of those who are governed. But it must be kept in mind that Christians respect those in authority out of respect for God, and they pray for them not in order to

justify their deeds but in order that they may become more faithful servants and stewards of God's kingdom."

Boesak's impassionate speeches and sermons are impressive. In the midst of his suffering nation, he wants to be a biblical prophet. But many of his own countrymen do not agree with his prophetic stance. Will his dream of a new open, democratic, happy, peaceful, completely just South Africa ever be fulfilled? South Africa's independent neighbors do not give an encouraging example. Some of those nations are extremely poor. None of them are open and true democracies.

South Africa must change. In the Lord's eyes there is no difference between race and color. Justice must come for all, both for black and white, and for every tribe. But I believe that Boesak is too optimistic about political possibilities before Christ's second coming. A perfect world will not come until Jesus returns. Let Christians everywhere unite in prayer for revival, reformation, renewal and justice in South Africa!

Johan D. Tangeider
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