Stellenbosch Theological Journal 2020, Vol 6, No 2, 253–274
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2020.v6n2.a11
Online ISSN 2226-2385 | Print ISSN 0028-2006
2020 © Pieter de Waal Neethling Trust

Allan Boesak: A theology of prophetic resistance (1976-1990) Some historical-theological reflections

Eugene Fortein[1]
University of the Free State
Bloemfontein, South Africa
ForteinEA@ufs.ac.za

Abstract

This article attempts to exhibit the theology of prophetic resistance presented by Allan Boesak during the church struggle against apartheid and how it influenced the theological landscape. Firstly, the methodology applied in this article is to place Boesak against the backdrop of the significant historical events of the 1960s and 1970s. The purpose of this is to illustrate both the growing resistance of the oppressed black people and the unjust rule of apartheid against which Boesak will assert himself. The article goes on to focus on the theological contribution of Boesak between 1976 and 1990. The author will investigate specific events during the 1980s to showcase Boesak's involvement within the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and beyond.

Keywords

Boesak; apartheid; Dutch Reformed Church; Dutch Reformed Mission Church; theology of prophetic resistance; black consciousness

Introduction

Allan Boesak became synonymous with the struggle (both church & political) against apartheid over the years. A possible reason for this is that Boesak's participation in the struggle against apartheid was so public and prominent that it pushed him to the forefront. With that being said, this

1 Lecturer in Church History, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of the Free State, South Africa.

article in no way argues that Boesak was the lone figure in the church's struggle against apartheid or that the end of apartheid exclusively came about by the contributions of esteemed and recognized figures like him, Desmond Tutu, Beyers Naudé, Frank Chikane, among others. The struggle against apartheid was waged on various levels, and the historical narrative thereof is rather one-sided.2 The names of leaders and theologians like Allan Boesak will forever be entrenched in the history books of South Africa. Then, there are the names of those whom we will never know. Those who anonymously sacrificed and endangered their lives for the freedom and liberation of South Africa and will feature nowhere in the narrative of the struggle against apartheid. The end of apartheid would not have come as soon as it did if it were not for those brave and visionary individuals who contributed immensely towards the struggle for liberation in South Africa. Steve de Gruchy aptly affirms this in the introduction of the book, The Church Struggle in South Africa, when he professed the following:

> The Church Struggle is so concerned with the "meta-narrative" of the grand and glorious struggle against apartheid that it cannot possibly do justice to thousands of micro-narratives that make up the story: to the ambiguities of those caught in the middle, the voices of the silent and silenced (such as women and the rural poor), the contribution of the laity – those who really are the "church" – the failures of witness, the incredible sacrifices of ordinary people, the personality clashes, the financial and sexual scandals, the act of compassion and integrity, the textures and sights and sounds that are uppermost in the minds of those who happened "to be there."[3]

Having said this, why focus on the life and work of such an icon and hero of the liberation struggle? Two reasons serve as motivation: firstly, even

---

2 Traditionally, the historiography presenting the struggle against apartheid was rather one-sided, and the church's contribution to the struggle for liberation often downplayed or omitted, particularly those coming from the political fraternity. Perhaps the most prime example of this is Nelson Mandela's memoirs on his struggle against apartheid: N. Mandela, *Long walk to freedom: the autobiography of Nelson Mandela*. Little Brown & Co. 1995). However, there are more contemporary works displaying a more holistic view of the struggle. See J. W. De Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa* (London: SCM Press, 2004) and A. A. Boesak, *Running with Horses. Reflections of an accidental politician* (Cape Town: Joho Publishers, 2009).

3 In De Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, xxix.

the life and work of icons and heroes can become intertwined with more sumptuous icons and heroes' life and work. Secondly, not all regard Allan Boesak as an icon or hero. Perhaps this study can serve as a reminder of Boesak's contribution or provide some new insights. This article's focus is on the life and theology of Allan Boesak between 1976 and 1990 because it was during this period, I argue, that his theological impact was at its height.

The theology of prophetic resistance in this study refers to the theology of Boesak, which, among other things, set out to respond to the apartheid-theology of the Dutch Reformed Church (hereafter DRC). Boesak writes as follows:

> I am speaking of the tradition represented by the theology of prophetic resistance, which early on the struggle history had broken with the theology of accommodation to existing situations of oppression. I mean that a theology of protest would never be enough, understanding that protest is always a form of begging, and that only a theology of resistance could respond adequately to the call of costly discipleship.[4]

Boesak's theology of prophetic resistance drinks from diverse wells combines it in a potent and creative mix. These wells are Black Theology, which emerged from Black Consciousness (Biko), South American Liberation Theology (in particular Gustavo Gutiérrez), and Reformed Theology (John Calvin, Abraham Kuyper, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (who was Lutheran), among others)[5] With the theology of prophetic resistance, Boesak not only expressed his dissatisfaction with apartheid, but it also

---

4 A. A. Boesak, *Kairos, Crisis, and Global Apartheid. The Challenge to Prophetic Resistance* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 26.

5 These are all theological influences that shaped Allan Boesak's theology of prophetic resistance. Consult the following works for a comprehensive overview of the various theological influences on Allan Boesak: see Boesak, *Running with Horses; Farewell to Innocence. A Social-Ethical Study on Black Theology and Black Power* (Kampen: Uitgeversmaatschapij J. H. Kok and Wallis, T 1989); "At the Apocalypse: The South African Church Claims Its Hope. An interview with Allan Boesak," in J. Wallis & J. Holiday (eds.), *Crucible of Fire. The Church confronts apartheid* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), 41–61.

served as a personal testimony.[6] This is not just a testimony over and against the evils of apartheid. Still, it also serves as a witness for an alternative, a society where justice and peace reign supreme. This is a witness that both black and white are created after God's image, and that black people do not have to be ashamed of their skin colour. It is striking and ironic that the apartheid-theology and the theology of prophetic resistance both have the Reformed tradition as their reference frame. This aspect will be dealt with later in the article.

The recognizance done in this article attempts to corroborate the hypothesis that Allan Boesak, with his theology of prophetic resistance, had a tremendous influence in the former Dutch Reformed Mission Church (hereafter DRMC) and the broader theological landscape in South Africa. This article attempts to demonstrate how Allan Boesak's theology of prophetic resistance is a theology that prophetically protested against the inequality and inhumanity of apartheid, which functioned as the dominant paradigm before 1994. Firstly, Boesak is positioned against the backdrop of crucial black resistance events during the 1960s and 1970s to accentuate his contribution. The rationale behind this is that Boesak came into an existing climate of growing black resistance when he returned from the Netherlands in 1976. Secondly, the focus shifts to Boesak's involvement within the DRMC and broader ecumenical circles and how his theology of prophetic resistance influenced both the theological and political landscape.

Winds of change lead to a farewell to innocence

On February 3 1960, the former British Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, addressed an informal gathering of the Houses of Parliament in Cape Town. During this gathering, he delivered a speech as prophetic as those prophetic messages of the Old Testament. This speech became known in history as the "winds of change" speech.[7]

---

6 Many over the years have questioned and even challenged Boesak's intentions for his theological and political critique against apartheid. The South African press during the 1980s were relentless in their articles as Boesak joined the political arena.

7 The full speech is available at Harold Macmillan & Philippe-Joseph Salazar (ed.), "The wind of change (the original text)." *African Yearbook of Rhetoric* 6, no. 2 (2015): 5–43.

Macmillan's speech's significance had more to do with its recognition of the already existing force of African nationalism on the rise when he delivered the speech.[8] The winds of change were indeed starting to blow. Boesak himself indicates three key strands that ushered in a wave of resistance by the end of the 1960s.[9] The banning of the liberation movements left a vacuum amid the black resistance. This vacuum was now being occupied by a young, new, militant generation with a new vision. Secondly, this new vision of the younger generation was deeply intertwined with a sense of urgency and inclusivity unknown to the older generation. Thirdly, this new, younger generation understood the importance of trans-national black solidarity. From this solidarity emerged a new phrase, "black power," which, in turn, gave rise to another phrase, "black consciousness." The philosophy of the Black Consciousness Movement influenced much of Boesak's generation as they began to interpret "the Gospel in the light of black experience and the black experience in the light of the Gospel".[10]

> It set in motion an unprecedented wave of resistance after a long vacuum in the politics of resistance in South Africa that would not stop until the white minority regime finally had to give in to pressure.[11]

During his ministry in Paarl (from 1968), Boesak was faced with the unjust laws of apartheid as the Group Areas Act.[12] The Group Areas Act wreaked havoc among his congregation. He soon apprehended that his theological education was unfit to equip him to engage in the theological discourses around the injustices as the apartheid laws were sweeping through the country. He came to the realization that "the theology taught to me by the white Dutch Reformed missionaries was totally inadequate to deal with

---

8 S. Dubow, "Macmillan, Verwoerd, and the 1960 "Wind of Change" Speech." The Historical Journal, 54, no. 4 (2011):1088.

9 *The Tenderness of Conscience. African Rennaisance and the Spirituality of Politics* (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2005).

10 B. Moore, "Black Theology Revisited." *Bulletin for Contextual Theology in South Africa and Africa*, September 1994. [Online]. Available: <http://www.hs.unp.ac.za/theology/moore.htm> [Accessed: 8 October 8 2020].

11 *The Tenderness of Conscience*, 8.

12 The Group Areas Act of 1950 was established to ascribe specific areas for each race, and members of other races were barred from living, operating businesses, or owning land in them.

the crises of faith that grew out of poverty, socioeconomic injustices, and political oppression. For this devastation, we had no words in our creeds, doctrines and theology; or in the Bible. Or so they made us believe."[13] This discovery placed the young Boesak on a quest to gear himself theologically to speak prophetically in the situation of oppression and injustice. This quest lead Boesak to Kampen in the Netherlands in 1973 after obtaining an opportunity to study abroad.[14] Stephen Martin, in his article "Faithful Treason: The Theology and Politics of Allan A. Boesak," notes quite correctly that several black young critical voices, like Takatso Mofokeng, Bonganjalo Goba, Allan Boesak, began to arise from the black churches, and went on to do doctoral research abroad.[15]

In 1973 Boesak left for a study visit to the U.S.A., where he met James Cone, the father of modern black theology, and Gayraud Willmore, who opened his eyes for radical black Christianity in the U.S.A.[16] This visit resulted in Boesak writing a dissertation as partial fulfilment for the requirements of his doctoral examination. The Theological Hogeschool of Kampen published this study as *Coming out of the Wilderness: A Comparative Interpretation of the Ethics of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X*.[17] Within this study, Boesak juxtaposes these two iconic figures. Martin Luther King Junior's option for non-violence left a lasting impression on Boesak. This remained a feature of Boesak's approach to the struggle for liberation. Even when the state retaliated with brutal force during the state of emergencies and many of his generation opting to take up the armed struggle, Boesak repeatedly pleaded for non-violence. In this publication, Boesak concludes that for King Jr., God was a personal God, a living force moving through history to bless those who want to be His co-workers and a God who works through His Spirit in the hearts of those who oppose the progress of His kingdom.

---

13 Running with Horses, 34.

14 A. A. Boesak, *Om het zwart te zeggen* (Kampen: Uitgeversmaatschapij J. H. Kok, 1975).

15 S. W. Martin, "Faithful Treason: The Theology and Politics of Allan A. Boesak." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* (2004): 80 – 99.

16 See *Running with Horses.*

17 A. A. Boesak,. *Coming out of the Wilderness: A Comparative Interpretation of the Ethics of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X* (Kampen: Uitgeversmaatschapij J. H. Kok, 1974).

The ethics of King Jr. will go on to influence and motivate much of Boesak's generation in their struggle for liberation.

Around 1975 the winds of change began to blow in the black churches as the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa's (hereafter DRCA) synod made far-reaching decisions in her stance against apartheid. At this historical synod in Worcester, a report was tabled concerning the Bible and apartheid. The late professor Hannes Adonis, who attended this synod, mentions that he was instead inspired by how the synod engaged and addressed this crucial matter. The decisions taken at this synod were the first in the history of the Dutch Reformed family of churches that witnessed so palpably against the unscriptural nature of apartheid.[18] This report was later published under the title *The Bible and the relationship between races and people*. This action by the DRCA was indeed a brave voice of protest during that specific period, mainly for two reasons. Firstly, the DRC firmly reaffirmed their theological justification of apartheid with the release of *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture* in 1974. Secondly, the DRCA was, at that time, financially dependent on the DRC.[19] The DRCA took an enormous risk by witnessing against the apartheid and the white DRC as they did, considering the DRCA's financial dependency.

Boesak returned from the Netherlands in 1976 after completing his doctoral studies with his doctoral dissertation title *A Farewell to Innocence. A Social-Ethical Study on Black Theology and Black Power*, in which Boesak provided a systematic exposition on Black Theology. During his studies in the Netherlands, Boesak became reacquainted with John Calvin and Abraham Kuyper, among others.[20] This was a crucial rediscovery as Calvin and Kuyper have been employed in the Reformed tradition's theological justification of apartheid. Boesak also employs Calvin and Kuyper as part of his endeavour to reclaim the Reformed tradition in South Africa. Gerard

---

18 J. C. Adonis, "Bevryding tot Eenwording en Getuienis: Die Geskiedenis van die Verenigende Gereformeerde Kerk in Suider-Afrika 1950-2001." *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif*, vol 43, no. 3-4 (Sep 2002): 327–341.

19 "Bevryding tot Eenwording en Getuienis."

20 E. A. Fortein, *Allan Boesak en die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sendingkerk: 'n Teologies-historiese ondersoek* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation: Universiteit van Stellenbosch, 2008). Also, see Boesak, *Running with Horses;* Boesak, *Black and Reformed. Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition* (New York: Orbis Books, 1984).

Rothuizen, under whom Boesak studied at Kampen and fortuitously so, was an expert on Dietrich Bonhoeffer.[21] It was Rothuizen who exposed Boesak to the writings of Bonhoeffer.

After the South African government banned some of the works of James Cone and other influential literature regarding Black Theology, Boesak's *A Farewell to Innocence* became an epoch-making text for Black Theological education in South African seminaries.[22] The title of his dissertation emanated from what Boesak classified as "pseudo innocence." According to Boesak,[23] this type of innocence refuses to face reality, allowed whites to feel guilt-free, and legitimizes the racist apartheid government's lies. This pseudo innocence is something that whites need to dispose of because they can no longer claim their innocence in destroying blacks' lives. Even blacks needed, and perhaps still need, to break the yoke of pseudo innocence that was ever-present in the oppressed's mind. This innocence was for long prominent in the oppressed's psyche that they began to accept it as their fate to be slaves to white minority rule. Martin mentions that this pseudo innocence was also present in the "slave mentality" of oppressed blacks, which led them to cooperate in their oppression with whites.[24] For Boesak, the time has arrived for both black and white to bid farewell to innocence.

Boesak argues that to say "farewell" to innocence is to say "hello" to contextuality. Martin notes that authenticity is closely linked to truth, something that lies at the heart of Boesak's contestation of the Christian tradition.[25] When he spoke of Afrikaner Christian theology compared to Black theology, Boesak did not refer to the plurality of different interpretations of the one message; instead, he spoke of the one as true and the other as false.[26] While Christianity has been used by the powerful

---

21 *Allan Boesak en die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sendingkerk*. Also, see A. A. Boesak, "What Dietrich Bonhoeffer Has Meant to Me." Keynote address at the Fifth International Bonhoeffer Congress, Amsterdam, 1988. Published in *Bonhoeffer's Ethics: Old Europe and New Frontiers*, edited by Guy Christopher Carter, René van Eyden, Hans-Dirk van Hoogstraten, Jurjen Wiersma. Kampen (The Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1991).

22 Martin, "Faithful Treason."

23 See *Farewell to Innocence*.

24 Martin, "Faithful Treason."

25 Martin, "Faithful Treason."

26 Martin, "Faithful Treason."

to support the illusion, "authentic Christianity" is a Christianity that places God on the side of the poor, seeing God's love and righteousness manifested in God's "deeds of liberation."[27] Boesak is therefore correct in his observation that this is not a new message: indeed, "it is simply the age-old gospel, now liberated from the deadly hold of the mighty and the powerful and made relevant to the situation of the oppressed and poor."[28]

Thus, black consciousness was a vital force to help blacks rid themselves of the pseudo innocence that captivated their minds for so long. Boesak describes black consciousness as the black population's awareness that their blackness shapes their humanity. This means that black people no longer have to be ashamed of their blackness, that they also have a black history and culture, one that is different from that of whites. In simple terms, black consciousness means that black people realized that the recognition of their blackness is essential to their humanity. With black theology, black consciousness appraises "blackness" as a crucial factor and hermeneutical key in black peoples' understanding of Jesus Christ as Lord.

The intensity of black consciousness must be understood in the light of centuries of intellectual and cultural domination and indoctrination. It was a unifying factor among all the oppressed in South Africa, a solidarity that stretched across ethnic, racial, and cultural boundaries.[29] Black consciousness was the most liberating experience for the young generation of that time. It aroused a fundamental paradigm shift in their thinking and political engagements. Through black consciousness, the oppressed embraced their diversity and "otherness" as a source of inspiration. It rendered the oppressed in South Africa the courage to be "black." One of the central themes occurring within black theology is liberation; therefore, black theology is often rightly referred to as liberation theology. Basil Moore correctly asserts when he refers to Black Theology, "It is a theology of the oppressed, by the oppressed, for the liberation of the oppressed."[30] Black theology then wants to serve as an antidote to blacks' spiritual captivity

---

27 *Farewell to Innocence*.

28 *Farewell to Innocence*, 15.

29 *The Tenderness of Conscience*.

30 B. Moore, B (ed.), *Black Theology. The South African Voice* (London: C. Hurst & Company, 1973), ix.

and is therefore against the loss of human dignity. Moore confirms that black theology seeks new symbols to restore human dignity to blacks. It is a fitting theology for people living within a reality of slavery, injustice, and poverty. Biko aptly writes in one of his columns:

> The Bible must not be seen to preach that all authority is divinely instituted. It must rather preach that it is a sin to allow oneself to be oppressed. The Bible must continually be shown to have something to say to the black man to keep him going in his long towards realizing the self. This is the message implicit in "black theology." Black Theology seeks to do away with the spiritual poverty of black people.[31]

The black church as site of struggle

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the theology of prophetic resistance, as voiced by Boesak, was on the rise and began to influence the voice of critique within the black Reformed churches and DRMC in particular. This will give rise to the DRMC becoming a site of struggle. *Die Ligdraer* (the official mouthpiece of the former DRMC) during this period bears testimony to the struggle that raged in the DRMC. During this time, two factions were facing off in the DRMC.[32] On the one hand, there was the younger, progressive generation, inspired by black consciousness and Black Theology (in many ways led by Boesak). On the other hand, there was a more conservative camp who sought to maintain the status quo. Ultimately it came down to this question, which theology will determine the identity of DRMC and her role in the fight against apartheid?

These two factions came to a head at the 1978 synod in Belhar and will be in continuous contestations during the 1980s. By this time, Boesak already took up a post as a student chaplain at the University of the Western Cape and was an ordained minister, serving the congregation of Belville South.[33] Boesak was, therefore, present at the 1978 synod. At this meeting, synod

---

31 A. Stubbs in *Steve Biko: I write what I like – A selection of his Writings* (Johannesburg: Picador, Africa, 2004), 31.

32 *Allan Boesak en die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sendingkerk*.

33 Martin, "Faithful Treason."

declared that although the DRMC was initially convinced that it was not within the mandate of the church to design or to prescribe a particular party political policy for South Africa, the DRMC now calls on her obligation, by virtue of her prophetic calling, to criticize and object to the apartheid policy.[34] The 1978 synod took a clear prophetic stance against apartheid by declaring the theological justification of apartheid as heresy and sin.[35] This decision comes after the synod of the DRMC of 1950 decided "that the mission policy of the Mother Church, as practically executed since the founding of the DRMC, is welcomed by the Mission Church."[36] Like DRCA in 1975 at Worcester, the DRMC now began to speak prophetically against apartheid.

In the following year, Boesak's sermon volume *Die Vinger van God* (1979) was published.[37] This volume contains sermons that Boesak delivered as the student chaplain. This publication paints a good picture of the type of theology that was on the rise in the DRMC, and what theological trends the students were exposed to. In this volume, the sermons focus mainly on the theology of prophetic resistance and how God is on the side of the poor and oppressed. These sermons testify to Boesak's relevant preaching within the South African situation of the time. The sermon volume reflects Boesak's belief that relevant preaching should be related to the socio-political reality. These sermons are admonishing, prophetic, sometimes wrestling with his faith demands, yet it is clear-minded and inspiring.

Other than the struggle for theological superiority within the DRMC, another tug-of-war was raging for the Reformed tradition's heart within the Reformed churches in South Africa. The main reason for this is that apartheid and the theological justification of apartheid were born out of

34 Acta Synodi, NG Sendingkerk (1978).

35 Acta Synodi, NG Sendingkerk (1978).

36 Acta Synodi, NG Sendingkerk (1950).

37 A. A. Boesak, *Die Vinger van God* (Kaapstad: ABC-pers (Edms) BPK, 1977). Boesak went on to publish more of his sermons in A. A. Boesak, *Walking on Thorns. The Call to Christian Obedience (*Switzerland, 1984). See also his commentary on the book of Revelation in A. A. Boesak, A.A. 1987. *Comfort and Protest, The Apocalypse from a South African Perspective* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987).

the Reformed tradition, specifically a brainchild of the white DRC.[38] For Boesak, the God of the white Reformed tradition was the God of slavery, fear, persecution, economic exploitation, and death. This required a response from the black Reformed churches. Boesak maintained that the white DRC version of the Reformed tradition was not the tradition's heart. Instead, Boesak offered the following as the heart of the Reformed tradition: making choices, giving voice to the voiceless, social justice, and divine obedience.[39]

Beyers Naudé and the Christian Institute (CI) was a decisive force in the development of Allan Boesak's critique of apartheid by contesting the Reformed tradition's ownership in South Africa as presented in *Black and Reformed*, which was published in 1984.[40] The relationship between Boesak and Naudé developed in a close partnership. It was Naudé who drew Boesak's mind to the fact that the Reformed Tradition, as presented by the DRCs justification of apartheid, was not a faithful and accurate interpretation of the tradition. Naudé alerted Boesak with the following words:

> Allan, the Reformed tradition is not what the white DRCs are making of it. I don't know enough, but I know enough to know that they are totally wrong. People with credibility will have to challenge the white DRC on this, and I see this challenge coming only from the black Reformed churches. And this is where you have to concentrate because you must understand that apartheid is not just politics; the heart of apartheid is its theology.[41]

Even when Boesak and the South African Council of Churches (hereafter SACC) were threatened by the former minister of Justice, Alwyn Schlebusch,

---

38 See R. Elphick, *The Equality of Believers. Protestant Missionaries and the Racial Politics of South Africa* (University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2012) to follow the theological consequences of this justification.

39 A. A. Boesak, "At the heart of it all – perspectives on the struggle for the relevance of the Reformed tradition in South Africa." *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif*, 51 (2010): 289–301.

40 Martin, "Faithful Treason."

41 "An interview with Allan Boesak on Beyers Naudé," in M. Coetzee, R. Muller, L. Hansen L (eds.), *Cultivating Seeds of Hope. Conversations on the Life of Beyers Naudé* (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2015), 122.

to "keep them busy with preaching the gospel," Boesak replied with an open letter by placing himself squarely within the Reformed tradition by quoting John Calvin's Institutes on civil disobedience. This threat came after Boesak made a call for civil disobedience at the annual conference of the SACC in 1979. Boesak, based on Calvin and Augustine, stated that one could only be obedient to earthly authorities insofar that earthly authority is obedient to the Word of God. Hence the state's response by way of minister Schlebusch.[42]

The search for authentic unity through reformed prophetic witness

By the late 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, the need arose to take the theological discourse against apartheid beyond the institutionalized church's confines. Once again, the resistance within the leadership of the black Reformed churches prompted this move. This move led to two crucial Reformed anti-apartheid organizations, the "Broederkring" (later the "Belydende Kring." Hereafter BK) and the Alliance for Black Reformed Christians in Southern Africa (Hereafter ABRECSA). Z. E. Mokgoebo terms the context within the Dutch Reformed Church family of churches, which reflected the racial structures of oppression in society, together with the DRC relationship with the government, as the main contributing factors for the formation of the BK.[43]

The BK was an essential movement in the development of theological anti-apartheid arguments. This body originated due to black ministers' desire in the DRCA to establish an organization that resists apartheid within the NG Church family. They were soon followed by their colleagues from the DRMC and RCA. The BK established talks and contacts with Reformed churches and groupings from the Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany, England, Scotland, the U.S.A., and Canada. Kritzinger discusses the BK's relationship and cooperation with their German partners in detail in the

42 *Black and Reformed*.

43 Z. E. Mokgoebo, "Broederkring: From 1974 to …," in S. P. Govender (ed.), *Unity and Justice, The witness of the Belydende Kring* (Braamfontein, South Africa, 1984), 13–17.

article "Standing together for Unity and Justice."[44] These churches also attended the celebrations of the BK's tenth year of existence. Boesak was one of the leading and influential figures within the BK and was often the mouthpiece through which the organization spoke. One just has to inspect *Die Ligdraer of the late 1970s and the early 1980s to appreciate the role Boesak depicted in the BK.*

ABRECSA reinforced in the dialogue against apartheid with the ecumenical church, and with that came elaborations of the arguments against apartheid and racism. This contributed that the liberation struggle became known worldwide and enjoyed solidarity from various resorts. Boesak was elected as chairman at the organization's annual conference in 1981 and as president in 1982.[45] ABRECSA, with Boesak at the foreground, played a decisive role at the general assembly of the World Council of Churches (hereafter WCC) at Ottawa in 1982. At this meeting, Boesak was requested to conduct two tasks before and during the meeting. One of those tasks was to write a preparatory study paper on racism in advance. The piece, entitled *He made us all but …,* would play a role in the WCC's decision on apartheid as a sin and the theological statement as heresy.[46] This study paper was pre-circulated and would be part of the discussions for that week. This study also included ABRECSA's proposal that the ecumenical body should take a stand and declare apartheid as a sin and declares its theological justification as heresy.

Delegates from both the DRC and the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika (also Dutch Reformed Church in English. Hereafter, NHKA) were also present. Ten South African delegates from South Africa, who also belonged to ABRECSA, brought the South African situation to light when they refused to submit to the Holy Communion during the opening service.[47] One of these delegates was Boesak. This group issued a statement

---

44 J. N. J. Kritzinger, "Standing together for Unity and Justice," in K. Koschorke & J. Meier (eds.), *Studies in the History of Christianity in the non-Western World* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2015).

45 *Allan Boesak en die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sendingkerk*.

46 J. W. De Gruchy & C. Villa-Vicencio, *Apartheid is a Heresy* (Cape Town: David Philip Publisher (Pty) Ltd., 1983).

47 J. C. Pauw, *Anti-Apartheid Theology in the Dutch Reformed Family of Churches*. Published doctoral dissertation (The Free University of Amsterdam, 2007).

in which they refer to the 1857 synod of the DRC, which justifies separate worship. This statement also mentions that this group of delegates did not want to participate in the Lord's Supper because in South Africa there was no occasion where all population groups can celebrate Holy Communion together. Pauw mentions that Chris Loff perceived these delegates' actions not only as a mere protest but as a confession of faith. This action ultimately resulted in Boesak being elected as president of the WCC and in the expulsion of the DRC and NHKA from the WCC, but more importantly, the WCC declared a *status confessionis* concerning the situation in South Africa.[48] The WCC argued that the DRC misconstrued the gospel of Jesus Christ to such an extent that it constituted a state of confession. We will return to the consequences of this profound decision for the South African situation.

Boesak was instrumental in the drafting and formulation of both the theological declarations of the BK (1979) and ABRECSA (1981), respectively.[49] The walls of racial segregation within the Dutch Reformed Church family made it virtually impossible to oppose apartheid within the church structures. Other ways, therefore, had to be sought to bring about unity in church and reconciliation in society. Therefore, the BK and ABRECSA were Christians' attempts (black and white) to achieve these goals outside the ecclesiastical structures.

The turbulent 1980s

The theology of prophetic resistance and the involvement of Boesak reached its pinnacle point during the 1980s, which saw him at the forefront of the struggle for liberation on various levels. The adoption of The Belhar Confession (1982; 1986), the launch of the UDF (1983), and the theological rationale for the day of prayer for the fall of the unjust government (1985) were all borne within the tradition of the theology of prophetic resistance. It is impossible to consider all of Boesak's involvements during this period; therefore, only three events will be considered.

---

48 G. D. Cloete & D. J. Smit, *'n Oomblik van Waarheid* (Kaapstad: Tafelberg-Uitgewers Beperk, 1984).

49 *Allan Boesak en die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sendingkerk*.

The first important involvement for Boesak came with his role in drafting the Belhar Confession and beyond. Belhar's path goes back to the occurrences at the 1978 synod of the DRMC along with what transpired at the general meeting of the WCC in Ottawa in 1982, where a *status confessionis* was declared. One must beware not to overlook or to underplay this significant development. Now that the theological justification, which underpinned the apartheid policy for so long, has been declared unscriptural and a heresy, this left the DRC with no more moral justification for apartheid. Boesak played a pivotal role in the repercussions of the *status confessionis*. During the 1982 synod of the DRMC, where the *status confessionis* was discussed thoroughly, Boesak was elected as assessor (vice-moderator) and drafted on the ad-hoc commission to draft a new draft-confession.[50] The draft-confession centred on critical beliefs that were already living in the oppressed's hearts, (viz unity, reconciliation, and justice). These themes can be traced back to ABRECSA, the BK, even further. The draft-confession concludes with one of the oldest confessions from the early church (viz Jesus is Lord). The draft-confession was accepted as a fully-fledged confession at the 1986 synod of the Mission Church, with Boesak being elected as moderator.[51]

The second significant involvement for Boesak came in the form of the United Democratic Front (hereafter UDF) in 1983, the same year former president P.W. Botha introduced the Tricameral Parliament in his attempts to reform the apartheid policy. In January of 1983, Boesak spoke politically about these issues during a speech at reflected the Transvaal Indian Congress. During this speech, he spoke of a "politics of refusal and the need for a united democratic front." Boesak believed that a united front would be an effective way of opposing the Tricameral Parliament. The scribble marks of the handwritten notes may have indicated the nervousness with which Boesak addressed the thousands of listeners that day. The words "make the call clear" were on the side-lines, almost as an adjunct to the speech pinned down. Boesak notes that the call was almost aside, "but it was what the people had been waiting to hear, it seemed."[52] Seven months

50 Acta Synodi, NG Sendingkerk (1982)

51 Acta Synodi, NG Sendingkerk (1986).

52 *Running with Horses*, 107.

later, on August 20, 1983, the UDF was launched at Rocklands, Mitchell's Plain, to the applause of 15,000 people.

The growth and development of the UDF were undoubtedly phenomenal. With more than 500 organizations initially, the movement grew to almost 1000 in the following years. Almost every city and township joined, and the only criteria was a real commitment to the liberation movement. Boesak regards the UDF as a real movement of the people because people from both the city and the countryside joined the organization. For most, their participation in UDF was their first real sense of non-racialism. Boesak always regarded his involvement in political matters as removed and distinct from his calling and interpretation of the Reformed tradition. For Boesak, Jesus Christ is Lord over all of life, and there is not one sphere of life that does not fall under the authority and Lordship of Jesus Christ. Martin notes the vital remark that Boesak contested the public sphere as a black theologian.[53]

By 1984, South Africa experienced large-scale riots due to the government's attempts to neutralize the black movement in the Transvaal townships. These riots later spread throughout the country and lasted until mid-1986.[54] According to Boesak, this response to the government's power was inevitable, but not unexpected. Security forces have been released. Police attacked peaceful demonstrations, even church services were banned, and churchgoers sprayed with tear gas, shot with rubber bullets, and hunted down like animals. Thousands of people nationwide were detained are without trial. Streets, school grounds, and townships became battlefields as scuffles ensued daily. Boesak states that they tried to keep the marches as peaceful as possible, but it worsened over time as the government began to become more desperate. It became common practice for members of the police to tease some members of the crowd.

These events led to our contention's third significant event, viz the Call for a Day of Prayer to End Unjust Rule. The Day of Prayer was sparked by Boesak's speech at the 1984 SACC National Conference.[55] In response to

---

53 Martin, "Faithful Treason."

54 *Running with Horses*.

55 A. A. Boesak & C. Villa-Vicencio, *When Prayer Makes News* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986).

Boesak's speech, the conference adopted a resolution in which all churches were called to pray to remove all apartheid structures. The SACC changed it afterwards to a day of prayer "for the end to unjust rule." This resolution resulted in an ecumenical group's appointment to make a theological statement in defence of such a day of prayer. This was the birth of the "Theological Rationale."

The document was compiled over four months and sought to be as ecumenical as possible. Even Christians at the grassroots level were also consulted. The day of prayer was scheduled to place on the tenth anniversary of the Soweto massacre, June 16, 1985. During a press conference on May 24, 1985, held at the offices of the Western Cape Council of Churches (hereafter WCCC), Rev. Lionel Louw (chairperson of the WCCC executive committee), Allan Boesak (as president of WCC), and Prof. Charles Villa-Vicencio presented the document "A Theological Rationale and a Call to Prayer for the End to Unjust Rule." In the following days, a storm erupted in the media about this document.[56]

Alan Brews writes in his chapter, "When Journalists Do Theology," in *When Prayer Makes News*, that the media's response to the call for prayer was to discredit it with a "character assassination" of Boesak. Headlines like "Boesak now virtually isolated" in *Die Burger* of June 5, 1985, and "Boesak stands alone on the day of prayer" appeared in some major newspapers like *Die Beeld*. According to Brews, the attack on Boesak culminated in the *Sunday Times* of June 9, 1985, in which an article appeared with the headline, "Let us pray for Dr Boesak too." The author of the article mentions that Boesak's political vision has completely derailed him from his Christian calling and that he is merely seeking fame for the sake of his own Nobel Prize. Newspapers such as *The Citizen* of May 28, 1985; *The Sunday Times* of June 2, 1985, and *Die Volksblad* of June 5, 1985, went to excavate "old skeletons" to further violate Boesak's image. According to Brews, the media spared no effort to drive a wedge between Boesak and his fellow church leaders.

Arguments arose among the members of the moderamen of the Mission Church, of which Boesak was one. The other three members, Revs Sakkie

56 For above and what follows, see *When Prayer Makes News*.

Mentor, N.A. Appolis, and A.J.C. Erwee released a press release in which they distance themselves from the call of the WCCC. Their reasons were twofold: (1) a prayer for the removal of the government is not biblical, and members are instead encouraged to pray for the government according to 1 Timothy 2: 1–3; (2) only the moderamen of the DRMC can call the church to prayer and that they have no knowledge of this call. Boesak responded that his fellow members of the moderamen did not represent the members at the grassroots level and only sought to please the white DRC and the government. It is then no surprise that the DRC sided with the opinion of the DRMC and so disassociated herself with the call.

On the actual day of prayer, Boesak preached to a congregation of 2,000 members at the African Methodist Episcopal Church at Hazendal.[57] Boesak again reiterated that "we do not believe in the power of violence but the power of prayer."[58] Martin mentions that he finds it rather odd that a theological document and a call for prayers "to Christians and all people of goodwill" would make the front page of a newspaper. Reasons have already been asserted in Boesak's decision to contest the very symbols underpinning apartheid. Boesak was on a mission, driven to expose the lies of apartheid, both in politics and theology. He did this while staking a claim to the same theological and ecclesial territory as the Reformed people who created apartheid, and he did this as a predikant (reverend) in the very DRMC that exemplified apartheid.[59]

Conclusion

This study demonstrates the enormous contribution of the theology of prophetic resistance Allan Boesak made to South Africa. It focused on critical junctures in the struggle for liberation and how Boesak reacted in opposing effects of apartheid in both the church and politics. Boesak remained steadfast to the heart of the Reformed tradition even when that tradition has been distorted for centuries to subjugate blacks.

---

57 Martin, "Faithful Treason."

58 *When Prayer Makes News.*

59 Martin, "Faithful Treason."

The article attempted to indicate the hypothesis of how Allan Boesak, with his theology of prophetic resistance, had a tremendous influence in the former Dutch Reformed Mission Church (hereafter DRMC) and the broader theological landscape in South Africa. This was done by investigating Boesak's theology from a historical-theological perspective and positioning him against the backdrop of crucial black resistance events during the 1960s and 1970s. This was to indicate that Boesak was part of a larger movement at the time. Secondly, the focus shifted to Boesak's involvement within the DRMC and broader ecumenical circles and how his theology of prophetic resistance influenced both the theological and political landscape during the latter part of the 1970s and the turbulent 1980s.

Bibliography

Acta Synodi, NG Sendingkerk 1950

Acta Synodi, NG Sendingkerk 1978

Acta Synodi, NG Sendingkerk 1982

Acta Synodi, NG Sendingkerk 1986

Adonis, J. C. 2002. "Bevryding tot Eenwording en Getuienis: Die Geskiedenis van die Verenigende Gereformeerde Kerk in Suider-Afrika 1950-2001." *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif*, vol 43, no. 3-4 (Sep 2002): 327 – 341.

Boesak, A. A. 1974. *Coming out of the Wilderness: A Comparative Interpretation of the Ethics of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X*. Kampen: Uitgeversmaatschapij J. H. Kok.

— 1975. *Om het zwart te zeggen*. Kampen: Uitgeversmaatschapij J. H. Kok.

— 1977. *Farewell to Innocence. A Social-Ethical Study on Black Theology and Black Power*. Kampen: Uitgeversmaatschapij J. H. Kok.

— 1979. *Die Vinger van God*. Kaapstad: ABC-pers (Edms) BPK.

— 1984. *Black and Reformed. Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition*. New York: Orbis Books.

— 2005. *The Tenderness of Conscience. African Rennaisance and the Spirituality of Politics*. Stellenbosch: SUN Press.

— 2009. *Running With Horses. Reflections of an accidental politician*. Cape Town: Joho Publishers.

— 2010. "At the heart of it all – perspectives on the struggle for the relevance of the Reformed tradition in South Africa." *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif*, 51: 289 – 301.

— 2015. *Kairos, Crisis, and Global Apartheid. The Challenge to Prophetic Resistance*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Boesak, AA & Villa-Vicencio, C. 1986. *When Prayer Makes News.* Philadelphia: The Westminster Press.

Cloete, G. D. & Smit, D. J. 1984. *'n Oomblik van Waarheid*. Kaapstad: Tafelberg-Uitgewers Beperk.

Coetzee, M. 2015. "An interview with Allan Boesak on Beyers Naudé," in Coetzee M, Muller R, Hansen L (eds.), *Cultivating Seeds of Hope. Conversations on the Life of Beyers Naudé*. Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 119 – 131.

Dubow, S. 2011. Macmillan, Verwoerd, and the 1960 "Wind of Change" Speech. *The Historical Journal*, 54(4):1087-1114.

Die Beeld, 1985. "Boesak stands alone on the day of prayer"

Die Burger, 1985. "Boesak Now Virtually Isolated"

De Gruchy, J. W. 2004. *The Church Struggle in South Africa*. London: SCM Press.

De Gruchy, J. W & Villa-Vicencio, C. (eds.) 1983. *Apartheid is a Heresy.* Cape Town: David Philip Publisher (Pty) Ltd.

Fortein, E. A. 2008. *Allan Boesak en die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sendingkerk: 'n Teologies-historiese ondersoek*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation: Universiteit van Stellenbosch.

Kritzinger, J. N. J. 2015. "Standing together for Unity and Justice," in: Koschorke K & Meier J (eds.), *Studies in the History of Christianity in the non-Western World*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.

Martin, S. W. 2004. "Faithful Treason: The Theology and Politics of Allan A. Boesak." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* (2004): 80 – 99.

Mokgoebo, Z. E. 1984. "Broederkring: From 1974 to …," in: S. P. Govender (Ed.), *Unity and Justice, The witness of the Belydende Kring.* Braamfontein, South Africa, 13 – 17.

Moore, B (ed.) 1973. *Black Theology. The South African Voice*. London: C. Hurst & Company.

Moore, B. "Black Theology Revisited." *Bulletin for Contextual Theology in South Africa and Africa*, September 1994. [Online]. Available: <http://www.hs.unp.ac.za/theology/moore.htm> [Accessed: 8 October 8 2020].

Pauw, J. C. 2007. *Anti-Apartheid Theology in the Dutch Reformed Family of Churches*. Published doctoral dissertation. The Free University of Amsterdam.

Stubbs, A (Ed.) 2004. *Steve Biko: I write what I like – A selection of his Writings*. Johannesburg: Picador, Africa.

Sunday Times, 1985, "Let us pray for Dr Boesak too."