

The Making of Allan Aubrey Boesak

Theologian and Political Activist

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Abstract

Although no conventional biography of Allan Boesak has been published, either by himself or others, as far as we are aware, we have enough data and information in various places to make small beginnings of the long overdue task. Boesak's phenomenal contribution to political theology, black theology and ecumenism both in South Africa and internationally, deserves deliberate acknowledgement. In this essay, we attempt an appraisal of the contribution of Allan Boesak to politics and theology by focusing on key milestones and reflections in his life. We take our cue from Boesak's own self-definition of being a theologian and a political activist and proceed to explore some of the roots and sources of his theology and political activism.

Key words: Allan Boesak. Black Consciousness. Steve Biko. Soweto Uprising. Dutch Reformed Mission Church. World Alliance of Reformed Churches. Beyers Naudé. Alliance of Black Reformed Churches in South Africa (ABRECSA).

1. Understanding Boesak

Among the people marked for elimination, Allan Boesak was one of the people marked for killing by racist gunman Barend Strydom at Strijdom Square in Pretoria on the 15th of November 1988. We know this because Barend Strydom said so himself later when he appeared in court (Moss 1990). When his ideal plan did not work out, he randomly killed eight black people, with seven dying on the spot.²

To this day, the eight people Strydom killed remain virtually nameless, as the media has been more fascinated with the killing rituals of Barend Strydom. Yet it is fair to add that had Strydom succeeded in assassinating Boesak, black South Africa would have experienced a loss akin to that experienced when Steve Biko inexplicably died in police detention. I dare say it would have been a loss similar to that later experienced when Chris Hani was assassinated in 1993.

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² The people killed by Barend Strydom included Piet Mbedzi, David Tlomekane, Samuel Matipa, Catherine Mokoena, Selina Nkuna, Johannes Mnisi, and Sattar Carrim (See the Star 17 November 1988 and 25 November 1988).

Such has been the stature of Allan Boesak in the South African struggle for justice. Having helped found the Alliance of Black Reformed Christians in South Africa (ABRECSA) in 1981, elected to the Presidency of the World Alliance of Reformed Church in 1982, Allan Boesak spearheaded the formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF) in 1983. Few have contributed as impactfully to the shape and form of South African resistance in the crucial period between 1976 and 1990. For four decades now, Allan Boesak has remained an influential voice and actor both as 'theologian and political activist' (Boesak 2009:8).

Several difficulties attend to the task of appraising the life and work of Allan Boesak. The period during which he was in his prime is as rich and diverse as the contribution of Boesak to the struggle in church and society. The 1970s are marked as much by the rise of Black Consciousness as they are about the concomitant rise of the Bantustan System. It was in the 70s that the full weight of the banning of political organizations and individuals was felt, driving the major political organisations underground. During this period, Apartheid repression of Black thought, creativity, leadership, and resistance took some of its most brutal forms. And yet it was also a most creative period too.

Into the political void left by the banned Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) and the outlawed African National Congress (ANC) stepped the Black Consciousness Movement, the South African Student Organization (SASO), the Black People's Conversion (BPC) and others (Welsh 2009: 144). With the likes of Oliver Tambo, Chris Hani, Ruth First and others in exile and the likes of Walter Sisulu, Robert Sobukwe, Aaron Motsoaledi and other in jail, a new crop of leaders emerged, some from the unlikelyst of sections of society. These included Winnie Mandela, Tsietsi Mashinini (high school student leader), Steve Bantu Biko, Emma Mashinini, Barney Pitso, Harry Nengwekhulu, Desmond Tutu and Allan Boesak amongst many others. On top of these developments a new mass movement of resistance, led by the youth, took shape across the nation. Alongside his peers at the time, Allan Boesak was at the heart of the burgeoning and youth-led mass movement - as actor, interpreter, thinker, voice and prominent leader.

As well as the complexity of the epoch another difficulty faced by anyone who takes on the task of assessing the work of Boesak is that the Boesak character, life and work are complex and multi-faceted. Taking a cue from his own self-definition, Boesak is at once a theologian and a political activist. But he is much more. He is a wordsmith and an orator, a preacher and debater, a scholar and a researcher, a man, a husband, and a father. Above all he is human, all too human.

2. The Making of Allan Boesak

In his unconventional biography (Boesak 2009) Boesak appears to regard the speech he made 'standing on a table on the lawn in front of the cafeteria on the campus of the

University of Western Cape' (UWC) (Boesak 2009:21) in July 1976 as the moment that launched him into the life of 'an accidental politician' as the subtitle of his book says.

I recall the moment as crossing an important divide: from now on, I would not just confine myself to 'church matters'; I would put my theology to the test in the field of politics. I would seek earnest answers to the challenges posed to the church and theology, as well as politics, by Aunt Meraai Arendse, Steve Biko and the children of Soweto Boesak (2009:8)

There is more to the significance of UWC in the life of Allan Boesak, though. It is after all the place where, at the age of 17, he enrolled for his undergraduate studies in theology. And yet, as a young Pastor in the besieged communities of Somerset Paarl, Boesak was sharply critical of the theological education diet he received at UWC (Coetzee, Müller & Hansen 2015:120).

...I was to find nothing in my theological training over five years, nothing at all, had prepared me for this. The theology taught me by white Dutch Reformed missionaries was totally inadequate to deal with the crises of faith that grew out of poverty, socio-economic injustices, and political oppression. (Boesak 2009:34)

Even though he does not rate the education he received at UWC very highly, suggesting that by the time he completed his studies there, he was 'a coloured who, like most of us, were at best pulling on the leash' (Boesak 2009:32), there is no denying that his first sojourn at UWC was an important milestone.

Enrolled into the Dutch Reformed Mission Church Theological Seminary at the University of Western Cape as a teenager, ordained as the youngest minister in Paarl, at the age of twenty-two, Boesak was, by all accounts an early achiever – a young man of great promise and one of the best recruits into the DRC Mission Church in those days.

After spending six years in the tranquil and scholarly surroundings of Kampen in the Netherlands, now armed with a doctorate in theology, the then thirty-year old Allan Boesak returned in 1976 to a South Africa, different South Africa from the one he left behind. In this too, is a remarkable fact that should not be glossed over. For an under 30 black South African to obtain a doctorate before would be a remarkable feat at any time, including today. But this kind of achievement was rare in the seventies.

The late Johan Heyns, theology professor at Stellenbosch, already spotted the immense intellectual ability of the young Boesak, supporting him in his desire for postgraduate studies. When Boesak went to bid farewell to Heyns before departing for the Netherlands, Heyns had said of the young Boesak: 'Take a good look at this man, for as you see him now, you will never see him again' (Boesak 2009:33).

Later, he was to meet and interact intensely with Beyers Naudé, clearly someone who had a great impact on him.

Just when I was so angry at the cruelty of Apartheid, so disgusted with the hypocrisy of it all, so disillusioned by the deliberate of both people and the Bible, so absolutely justified in my readiness to hate and write off all white people, Beyers Naudé came into my life. And *all* of a sudden, I had to face the fact that not all white people were the same (Boesak 2009:95)

Our generation has been blessed to witness the blossoming and the fulfillment of the promise that the young Boesak was. In the years since 1976, when he returned from the Netherlands, Boesak has bequeathed more than twenty monographs, hundreds of moving speeches delivered in rallies, several Bible studies town halls chapels at home and abroad as well as a tangible legacy of political activism³. That legacy includes his leadership of the world's largest association of Reformed Churches, the WARC, as well as his role in the establishment of the UDF and ABRECSA.

3. (Theological) Education

Boesak's theological education, both by commission and by omission, had a deep influence on him. If his undergraduate studies, taught to the young Boesak at UWC, felt utterly inadequate and inapplicable, it nevertheless also provided him with his initial and crucial theological foundations in reformed theology. Clearly Boesak rated education, especially higher education, very highly. As student chaplain, the students of UWC were some of the first audiences to listen to his fiery preaching.

If UWC was an important milestone in his life, Kampen had a phenomenal impact. When, in 1976, the returned Boesak stood in front of the students, he felt that in Kampen and through his education, 'he had been remade, [and], he had seen not only something of the world; he had seen the coming of the Black Messiah' (Boesak 2009:32).

The sojourn in Kampen consolidated his scholarly habits, namely, the love for writing and reading. It also sharpened his sense not only of ethical justice but of his primary identity as a theologian.

Even as he realized that he was a beneficiary of education in a manner that few were, Boesak took careful note of the intended effects and consequences the bifurcated nature of South African higher education.

... the university created and meant for coloureds, a proper 'bush college, as we called all those apartheid black universities, a place where the Apartheid govern-

³ See his recent Curriculum Vitae, accessed in December 2015, in http://www.cts.edu/library/documents/Staff-Assets/Vitae/Vita_ABoesak-_2013.pdf

ment hoped 'good coloureds' would be produced. Domesticated, manageable. . . . educated to the limited extent of their coloured capabilities, . . .readied to play their role in the upliftment of 'their people', ready to fit into the separate, coloured political, social and economic slot the government reserved for them.

For all the benefits of education, Boesak was not unaware of the 'curious logic of the Apartheid mind: the idea that a black person, when educated in the 'right' ideological environment, could first be moulded to accept her or his condition of oppression and second indoctrinate others' (Boesak 2009:23). Kampen provided the young Boesak with a dynamic educational space, not contaminated by Apartheid ideology, allowing his intellect to roam and to soar. Speaking metaphorically, Boesak suggests that before he went to Kampen, he 'could see the door, but [I] did not yet own the key to open it'.

That is what the Dutch gave me. . . . But they did another thing that would have a life-long impact on my theological thinking that would have life-long impact on my theological thinking and political activities: they introduced me to the reformer Calvin. In the Netherlands, I met not the insipid, doctrinaire anaemic Calvin of South African Dutch Reformed pre-ordained election theology, the Calvin who blessed racism and guaranteed the rightness of the theology of Apartheid. The Calvin I met was the radical Calvin, the constructive revolutionary whose fiery sermons about poverty and wealth, and whose deeply moving sermons about Holy Communion and Baptism, forever captured my mind and heart (Boesak 2009: 35).

In Kampen, Boesak also 'met' Abraham Kuyper, not the sanitized and racist ideas of neo-Kuyperism 'articulated so well by Andries Treunicht'. There, he met also, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the theologian who resisted Hitler and his ideology.

Freed from the constraints of Apartheid book bannings and related, Boesak also started re-reading Steve Biko in Kampen, especially Biko's critique of the black church. Boesak's stay in Kampen included a brief visit to the USA, in 1973, where he met the likes of James Cone, Gyraud Wilmore and Albert Cleage, whose Shrine of the Black Madonna' he visited in Detroit. There, Boesak met the Black Messiah and bid farewell to 'the Jesus of Constantinian Christianity, without thorns but with a crown of laurels . . .' (Boesak 2009: 39).

An important influence on Boesak while he was in the Netherlands were theologians Paul Lehmann and Nicholas Wolterstorff. He considered, Lehmann's study, *The Transfiguration of Politics*, one of 'the most formative theological studies I have ever read' (in Smit 2014: 24). Wolterstorff may have introduced Boesak to the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Reflecting on his overall experience in the Netherlands, Boesak declared: 'Now I had the key. All I had to do was to find the courage to open the door' (2009:41).

4. The Impact of Boesak's Parents

Since *Running with Horses* was deliberately not meant as a regular autobiography, it does not afford us much insight into the young Boesak's family. Given his stature, the basics of Boesak's life are well known. Born on the 23rd of February 1946, in a small Northern Cape farming town of Kakamas, on the banks of the Orange River, Allan was one of the eight children of Willem Andreas Boesak and his wife.

In a brief if also backhanded sort of way, Boesak traces his deepest theological insights to the 'tenacity and purity' of his mother's faith, who after the death of his father when he was six years old, brought them all up as a single parent.

Deep down, instinctively, almost, black Christians always knew. Just as my mother knew not how to think politically and somehow always knew about God as God of the poor, the fatherless and the widow. She knew because the Bible told her so and because that was her daily experience. That was her mantra to her eight children after the death of my father, and her won explanation of the tenacity and purity of her faith when others would have long given up (Boesak 2009:34).

From this passage it becomes clear that part of Boesak's biblical faith came as much from reformed theology as it did from the teachings and the conduct of his own mother. Long before he went to seminary and to Kampen University for theological training, the young Boesak had observed the deep, resilient and counter-hegemonic faith of his lay mother.

In her biography on Trevor Manuel, Pippa Green recounts that the Boesak family was so poor there were no birthday presents. Instead, Mrs Boesak Snr, would read a Bible text to each of the children on their birthday, pointing out that the word of the Bible was greater than any present. Clearly, for Allan Boesak, his mother was the example of steadfast faith in the face of great odds. One can almost feel the signature and power of his mother's approach to the Bible when Boesak (2009:35) writes: 'The truth of the Bible, no matter how hard it is being suppressed or misread or abused, has a way of revealing and asserting itself'.

He described his mother, Sarah Helene Boesak, nee Mannel as 'a heroine of the faith, a marvelous woman whose footprints in the lives of her children will remain large and her memory for all of us unsullied' (Boesak 2009:88). In an email exchange with me on 24 January 2017, he described his mother as 'an extraordinary woman who did a great job in raising her children'. He goes on to describe her innings thus:

Not having had the privilege of much schooling herself, (she did not finish Primary School) she more than nothing wanted that for her children, and she would go to extraordinary lengths to make that possible. She herself worked day and night – by day as a seamstress in a women’s clothing store, by night she would do people’s washing and as a celebrated cook would sometimes cook special dishes people would order. We would deliver those during the day and over the weekends. She would for instance take one of the older children out of school for a year, to work and augment our meagre income, and to give the child next in line an opportunity to have a year at school. She did this with all her children except me and my youngest brother. We were the privileged ones. It took my older siblings longer to finish school, but it did mean that all of us got schooling – all my older siblings became teachers. My oldest brother returned to school and like my youngest brother and me entered the ministry.

But Boesak also knew that his mother was no ‘political animal’ and was therefore unable to answer the political questions her teenage son was asking of her. What struck him most about his mother is captured well elsewhere in his 24 January email:

“...it was as a person of faith that she made the deepest impression. Her faith was strong, she shared it with her children, and taught us that it was the foundation of life. What I remember most was our daily devotions after supper: a Bible reading and prayers. Somehow, despite the lifelong indoctrination by white missionaries and their apartheid theology preaching and teaching, she found in the Bible a different God. She always spoke of, and prayed to the God who was the Father of Jesus, the Father of the fatherless, the Defender of the widow, the weak and the helpless, the protector of the stranger. This was a God who was “an ever present help in times of trouble”. It is this image of God and of Jesus which stayed with me even when I, as a seminarian, was taught an other-worldly, apartheid theology by my white DRC professors in Bellville. And when I was confronted with the challenges of my ministry under apartheid and the challenges posed by Aunt Meraai, and discovered the inadequateness of my training, I was saved by what I heard my mother say about God. In a sense, one could say, her theology was my first exposure to what I would later recognize as liberation theology. I guess she had a critical intuition about the Bible which resisted apartheid thinking without her being overtly “political”, but which also had what I now call an intuitive ingenuity for the deepest, most consistent message of the Bible: a book of a God who seeks justice and liberation, who takes the sides of the poor and the defenseless”.

But Boesak missed his father deeply. He noted painfully that ‘the personal wrestling with life’s demands, which came too early to ‘a boy whose boyhood was lost too soon, needed the guiding hand of a father’ (2009:88).

Although *Running with Horses* is dedicated to his father, Boesak affords little space and time to reflecting on the influence Boesak Snr had on him. And yet there is no denying that, on the evidence he provides in this work, the early exit of his father, left a void in the life of Allan Boesak. In his teenage years, Boesak often expressed to his mother how much he missed and needed to talk to his father. For her part, his mother often spoke to the children about their father.

'I wish your father was here'. She did not at all feel herself inadequate, I think, or unequal to the task of bringing up her children – all eight of them, all on her own. But her inborn wisdom withheld her from denying that a child needs both parents and that sometimes, just sometimes, she found it hard to be both. (Boesak 2009:88)

In 1980, during a long meeting with the late Oliver Tambo in Lusaka, inside the home of Kenneth Kaunda, as Tambo sat listening intently and sympathetically to the younger man, Boesak had something akin to an apparition of his own biological father. 'But here's the strange thing: all of a sudden I missed my father with a pain that was almost physical. He had died when I was only six', writes Boesak (2009:87).

My father was as dark as Oliver Tambo, as gentle, as wise, I could not guess where, had he lived, his politics would have taken him. But I hoped fervently that he would have understood mine. How many times had I wondered what he would have thought of the choices I have made? ... for the first time since becoming a man, [I was] speaking to another man who could have been my father, *as if he were*. Everything about him told me: trust him. It was a most amazing feeling, almost devastating in its unexpectedness. So I spoke to him of things my mother did not know, and would not know for years. (Boesak 2009:88-89)

The void born by Boesak as a result of his father's death is not unique to him. The presence and accompaniment of parents is an important feature in the growth of any child. This is how Nelson Mandela, described the impact of the loss of his own father, who died in his presence, when he was nine years old:

I do not remember experiencing great grief so much as feeling cut adrift. Although my mother was the centre of my existence, I defined myself through my father. My father's passing changed my whole life in a way that I did not suspect at the time (Mandela 1994:17)

And yet Nelson Mandela could not conceal the depth of love and reverence which he had for his father. As a matter of fact, the very first sentence in his autobiography is a backhanded but beautiful tribute to his father, which reads thus: 'Apart from life, a strong

constitution and an abiding connection to the Thembu royal house, the only thing my father bestowed upon me at birth was a name, Rolihlahla' (Mandela 1994:3). A little further in the same first chapter Mandela fondly describes his father as,

... a tall dark-skinned man with a straight and stately posture, which I like to think I inherited. He had a tuft of white hair just above his forehead and, as a boy, I would take white ash and rub it into my hair in imitation of him. ... He could be exceedingly stubborn, another trait that may unfortunately have been passed down from father to son (Mandela 1994:5)

The absence of a functional relationship between children and their fathers can be troubling but much more troubling seems to be the absence of a father from an early age. Both Boesak and Mandela seem to have had healthy if also very brief relationships with their fathers, this side of the grave. It is possible that

In an article titled, "The divine favour of the unworthy: When the fatherless son meets the Black Messiah" (Boesak 2011), it seems that Boesak is being biographical, at least in part. The condition of fatherlessness seemed particularly pertinent to Boesak's theology (Coetzee, Müller, & Hansen 2015:130). In some of his writings, he regarded Jesus as one who knew the pain of fatherlessness.

Mandela marks out the traits inherited from his father and notes that his father embedded him deeply into the traditions of his clan and gave him a prophetic name, namely Rolihlahla (troublemaker). Well-known writer, Chinua Achebe (2009:36ff) fondly and beautifully describes his father as: 'an orphan child born into adversity, heir to commotions, barbarities, rampant upheavals of a continent in dissaray'. Achebe is thankful to his father for his appreciation of education and his inculcation of a sense of purpose in the life of the young Achebe.

Boesak sees in the demeanor of Oliver Tambo an image of his father who, like Tambo was dark, wise, and gentle. Although Boesak does not write at length about his father, the few remarks he makes, reveal a deep longing for and a connection to his father.

Clearly, the influence of both parents, each in their unique ways, one through her powerful presence, the other through his haunting absence, was immense in Boesak's life of faith, scholarship and calling.

5. Accidental Political Activist

As noted above, Boesak defined himself as theologian and political activist. He nevertheless insists, as per the subtitle of his *Running with Horses*, that he is 'an accidental politician'. He is convinced that, although he has been active in party politics, '... the party-politician's mantle rests uneasily on my shoulders. It is an

ambivalence I shall have to live with ... (Boesak 2009:17). Given that Boesak had already been active in both national and provincial ANC politics, not to mention his key role in the formation of the UDE, it is a little surprising that, in the preface to his book, he seems to single out his joining of COPE as the main illustration of his involvement in party politics.

But his political awareness dates back to his teenage years when he started bombarding his mother with political questions. His very consciousness of the injustice of the political realities of his birthplace, Kakamus 'with its Dutch reformed Mission school and its feudal relationships, and where the days of slavery, it seemed to me, were touchable, a mere heartbeat away, just beyond the black-burnt stone koppies ...' (Boesak 2009:88), is proof of his early political awakening.

As a youngster Boesak had experienced the devastation of poverty born of unjust political arrangements, first hand. Later on, as a young priest, Boesak was confronted by a context in which his congregants were faced with 'removals forced upon the communities by the Group Areas Act' (Boesak 2009:33). One congregant, aunt Meraai Arendse, an old woman whose house was about to be appropriated and destroyed, reacted angrily to Boesak's sermon:

'You don't have to talk to me about Jesus' she said without smiling as she spoke with biblical indignation. 'I have known and loved him before you were born. What I want to know is this: What is God saying about this injustice? Why is God allowing this to happen?' (Boesak 2009:33)

Although Boesak regarded his speech on the lawns of the UWC in July as his moment of initiation into political activism; and although he considered his education in the Netherlands and the USA as having provided him with 'the key', it is clear that he was a 'political animal' long before he left for the Netherlands. Boesak did not rate his undergraduate education that highly. Yet, there is no doubt that the education he received at seminary launched him into the world of academic theology, laying the seeds for the formation of one of the most important reformed theologians of the late 20th Century. His six-year sojourn in the Netherlands, which included a shorter visit to the USA, afforded the young theologian space to read, write and think without having to look over his shoulder, free of the fear and the restrictions that infested the South African church and academy of the time.⁴

⁴ Farewell to innocence: A socio-ethical study on black theology and black power, (1976), followed by Coming in Out of the Wilderness (1976), The Finger of God (1982) (a collection of sermons dealing with such matters as the ministry in a Black situation, the death of Steve Biko and the Information Scandal), and Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation, and Calvinist Tradition, (1984).

Though debatable, there is a sense in which Boesak may, in principle be correct in asserting the accidental nature of his political involvement. Nurtured in the simple faith of his mother, having observed her relationship with God as well as his reliance on the Bible, Allan is first and foremost, a man of faith. Active in the church from a young age, Boesak enrolled for the ministry at 17 and before he was 25 years old, he was ordained as a minister. Most of the first ten years of his ministry was taken up by theological studies.

Contrast Boesak's with the life paths of the likes of Dikgang Moseneke, who at 17 was incarcerated at Robben Island for his political activities in favour of the PAC. Similarly, Collins Chabane joined the ANC at the age of 17 and served a jail term for his political activities in Robben Island when he was 24. Moseneke and Chabane are typical political animals, who were overtly active in politics in their teens already. By contrast, the teenage Allan Boesak was a church boy through and through. It was through the lens of faith, the faith in which he was nurtured within the Dutch Reformed Sending Kerk and the faith he observed in and through the spiritual practices of his parents that the young Boesak made sense of the world around him.

For Boesak, politics, like life in general, were meditated to him through the prism of faith in God. Notably this was no ordinary faith in God. It was faith in God in spite of poverty and deprivation. It was faith in the face of injustice, even faith in a God against whom Boesak often expressed anger. Though written when Allan Boesak was barely ten years old, an excerpt from Don Materra's⁵ poem of anger at God, seems to capture Boesak's often expressed sentiment of anger.

*If only we could meet man to man
You; stripped of power
And I; of fear
I would lift my shirt and show you
Scars wide as the moon
Black as the stars*

*If only we could meet
In the ghetto, in the street
You; stripped of the power of death
And I; of its fear
I would walk away from you
And I know that you
Would cry to have me back*

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-bUHprpJ2tA> accessed December 2015.

*Perhaps I would return to wipe your eyes
For who wants a God that cries?*

And yet Boesak searched for a God that cries. The image of an impassive God is one against which Boesak and fellow liberation theologians struggled. This unfeeling God – the God who did not mind the tears of the poor and the oppressed - was the God of Apartheid. It was in the struggle against this seemingly hard-hearted God, a God worthy of being walked away from, that Boesak found not only the God of justice, the protector of widows and orphans but also his vocation as an accidental politician. Church and theology led Boesak to politics and not the other way round. For him, it was not that politics provided answers to which theology could not, rather his straddling of the two spheres was part of both his theological vocation and his continuing search for the God of justice.

Boesak took careful note of how the Apartheid government and the Dutch Reformed Church had used the bible and theology to install and defend the cold-hearted God of Apartheid (Boesak 1985: 787. Together with other prominent clerics such as Beyers Naudé, Takatso Mofokeng, Itumeleng Mosala, Wolfram Kistner and Albert Nolan, to name but a few, Boesak realized that the back of Apartheid could not be broken by military power and political contestation alone.

He was one of the first to diagnose and fluently articulate that Apartheid was not just a racist system and political ideology but that it was in its core a theological heresy and a distortion of Christian doctrines of God and humanity. To break the back of the Apartheid system, this reality had to be exposed systematically, so that Apartheid could be shown to be not merely as unjust and exploitative, but also as a theological heresy (Boesak 1985:787-788). . Few South Africans were better equipped to lead the process of the great unmasking of theological lie at the centre of the Apartheid system than Allan Boesak. Few were better equipped to unmask the coincidence and confluence of the political and the theological in church, state and society than Allan Boesak. Few would have gone, so confidently and so deftly, to the very sources of Apartheid theology – e.g. John Calvin, Abraham Kuyper – to find in there the seeds tools for the systemic destruction of Apartheid theology.

In hindsight, we now realize that; seized with a burning vision, full of potential for a tremendous repertoire of theological and rhetorical skills, Allan Boesak was propelled by the spirit of God from his birthplace of Kakamus to Somerset West where he grew up, from UWC to Kampen where he read theology, from Kampen to Soweto when he returned from the Netherlands in 1976, from Soweto to Mitchells Plain where the UDF was formed and from Mitchells Plain to Ottawa in Canada where he was elected President of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

Boesak's momentum was always faith-based. The ebb and the flow of his deepest convictions were always theological in orientation. As Nico Koopman (2014) observed, the primary parameter and 'central to his theological labour and his personal piety', an organizing principle for Boesak's political activism was the phrase 'Jesus Christ is Lord'. Armed with the conviction, the Lordship of Christ extended to every sphere of life, Boesak confronted one of the most fierce worldly powers, the Apartheid state, without any fear.

In an essay that is arguably the most thoroughgoing appraisal of Allan Boesak's theological *oeuvre*, Dirkie Smit (2014:11) has observed that he,

... has always been fascinated by power: by questions of power, real power, political power, social and economic power; the power of language, the power of the word, the power of rhetoric and persuasion; by the relationship between morality and power, the questions of ethics and power, the relationship between justice and power, peace and power, violence, non-violence and power, human interests and power, the power of the marginalized; the power struggles, the struggle against powers and the powerful, by naming power, unmasking power, challenging power, resisting power; by theological, particularly Christological claims about power; by prayer and power, and by spirituality and power.

But Dirkie Smit fails to forcefully and clearly make the connection between Boesak's 'fascination' with power and his biographical experience of powerlessness in the face of the crushing powerfulness of the 'powers that be'. Boesak's recollection of his birthplace of Kakamas, referred to earlier, is as a place dominated by the presence of the church, but also a place where one 'could almost touch slavery'. That kind of phraseology speaks of one who perhaps observed as a child, a level powerlessness among his people that was akin to the days of slavery.

When as a young pastor, Allan Boesak, looked into the eyes of Auntie Meraai Arendse, whose house was about to be destroyed as she and others were being forcibly moved out of an area declared to be a whites-only part of town, he saw powerlessness. Behind her angry words about his ineffectual sermons lay a complete and utter sense of powerlessness in the face of a seemingly all powerful government, which at the stroke of a pen, could decide who moves and who stays.

The young Boesak must have observed the same look of powerlessness daily, in the eyes of his single-parent mother, as she struggled to bring up her eight children, armed with her faith and her bible. Powerlessness was the odour that blew in his household. He saw it all around him: among the adults, in his siblings, friends and peers.

Dirkie Smit is therefore not entirely accurate to regard Boesak as being merely enthralled with power, as if Boesak calmly decided one day that 'amongst all the

great theological, political and philosophical themes in the world, I am going to focus on power, because it fascinates me'. No. Boesak was not fascinated by power. He was victimized by it, far too often. Boesak is not merely captivated by power; he is one who knows what it means to be captured by the powers that be. He had observed how, armed with their bible and faith, the powerless generated alternative forms of power, which enabled them to be agents and not mere victims of the powerful. Consequently, Boesak put himself at the service of those alternative forms of power. Lacking in physical and military power, Boesak sharpened his academic, analytical, theological and rhetorical skills instead.

Michael Battle whose PhD focused on Desmond Tutu's take on Ubuntu philosophy, recalls how his supervisor, renowned American ethicist, Stanley Hauwerwas, once paid a beautiful compliment to the Archbishop Emeritus, when he said: 'Tutu is not a theologian, he is better'. I am afraid such a compliment cannot be paid to Allan Boesak, however metaphorically. If Allan Boesak is anything, he is a theologian - an astute and adept theological all-rounder, deeply rooted in the reformed tradition.

We have noted already, his immense rhetorical and exegetical skills. What is often underestimated is Boesak's community organizational ability, skills he picked up first, as parish priest. At the of height Apartheid, in the repressive late 70s and the violent early 80s, Boesak and his peers were able to forge a mass national movement – comprising dozens of various communities, church and labour organizations – the UDF. The UDF played a major role in making South Africa 'ungovernable' for the Apartheid regime and paved the way for the unbanning of the liberation movements. What often shocks and angers, both Allan Boesak and Desmond Tutu⁶ is the extent to which some politicians in the ANC have tried to play down the role of religious leaders.

6. Conclusion: On being Naked in the Public Square

Those who pursue public theology of the sort that Allan Boesak pursued run the risk of being stripped naked in the public square. This is what happened to Allan Boesak. Whatever the merits of the case against him, and Boesak pleads his innocence to this day, the fact remains that he was convicted and sentenced for fraud. In a chapter titled, 'naked in the public square', Boesak tells the story of the 'most painful period in my life' (Boesak 2009:382), a period that included a stint on jail. Although the subsequent presidential pardon not only cut his prison time short but also expunged the criminal record, the episode will always be part of his history. Sadly, for some, this episode may even be made the starting point in any appraisal of the work of Allan Boesak.

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eAKY-KQqCM0> In this 2011 interview, Tutu alleges that the ANC has in recent year tried to play down the role of the churches in the struggle. [Accessed in December 2015]. This theme recurs in the works of Allan Boesak.

In the period between 1976 and 1994 Allan Boesak stood shoulder to shoulder with the country's most influential and prominent leaders. And yet by the end of the millennium, Boesak was doing time in prison, imprisoned this time by the new Democratic government. Convicted, sentenced, incarcerated, abandoned by some of his most trusted comrades, Boesak was indeed stripped naked in the public square. The newspaper headlines of the time were not flattering. If Boesak knows about resistance and militancy, he is also familiar with humiliation and forsakenness.

There is no doubt that the God of justice will be kind to him. May history also look kindly upon him.

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