

Pharaohs on Both Sides of the Blood-Red Waters—Prophetic Critique on Empire: Resistance, Justice and the Power of the Hopeful Sizwe—A Transatlantic Conversation

Boesak AA

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I often find myself in the situation where, in discussions on racism, people (who can hardly be designated as participants) demonstrate their unwillingness to become involved, their ignorance of the predicament and ability and/or desire to resolve it, and their conviction/pretence that apartheid is ended; so they play the post-apartheid game: denial—didn't know ... *I never really understood what was going on. I certainly never supported it. I am not a racist* [We are all racists!]. *I never voted for the Nationalists* [then who did and kept them in power for almost 50 years?]. Then the truth of democratic South Africa emerges: *I abhor affirmative action and black economic empowerment* [which seeks to empower blacks] *but supported job reservation* [which benefited whites]. But note also the gnostic sub-text based in secret knowledge: ... *but I did not mind benefiting from it*. It is a bit like President Zuma allegedly receiving a massive salary for which he did not work—and accepting it as if it was his right and anyway, he deserved it!

In this context, here is a timely publication from Allan Boesak which, like his other recent publications, *Tenderness of Conscience* (2005), *Dare we Speak of Hope?* (2014), touches directly on our theology, our spirituality and our Christian praxis. However, in this brilliant analysis, Boesak moves beyond the particularity of the South African context to the global context by discussing inter alia parallel situations in the USA and Palestine.

This is also a work which has a strong Christological basis. Boesak engages at a deep level with the publication titled *Fatherless in Galilee* (2001) by Andries van Aarde—a pioneer in the quest for the historical Jesus. Boesak aligns Jesus' mission in the Roman Empire with the Black Messiah in the imperial circumstances of our time, of the “betrayal to the cause of

Jesus” which “is the thinking that the journey can even continue with integrity without the confrontation with the victims of such imperial thinking and the consequences of it in the communities of the victimized” (p.116).

In chapter after chapter, Boesak exposes us to fresh creative thinking on topics with which we are so familiar that we have become blasé about them. Nowhere is this more evident than in his chapter on *ubuntu*, which is not a state of being, a destination, but something to be strived for and worked at. Boesak relates *ubuntu* to a loss of our humanity when “*ubuntu* takes flight” (p.118) in the form of “a conservative and reactionary tradition that undermines progress and open, democratic discourse” (p.123) as it is co-opted as a tool of cultural and political hegemony. Boesak promotes *ubuntu* as “social inversion” (lifting up the lowly and bringing down the proud and powerful: Luke 1:52) with reconciliation and transformation “as the expression of compassionate justice and love not only possible but durable” (p.136). This is an ongoing dynamic process.

There is a deeply prophetic element in this book; a forthtelling of the consequences of passive acceptance of the status quo allied with an evasion of our personal and communal responsibility. Using the bifurcation between Bonhoeffer’s cheap grace and costly grace, Boesak highlights the difference between cheap reconciliation, which is the outcome of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and costly reconciliation; the price Jesus paid on the cross. He also applies it trenchantly to the examples of Eugene de Kock (costly) and FW de Klerk (cheap). We, the perpetrators, seem to be content with cheap reconciliation, while the victims are denied the fruits of costly reconciliation.

While he never mentions it directly, one gets a clear impression that this book is grounded in Boesak’s personal passion (suffering) as well as that of the South African nation (*sizwe*) in contradistinction to the apartheid era devotion to the *volk*. It is to be commended as a tool for enhancing our contextual theology, a devotional guide for personal and group reflection, and a guide and stimulus for our public theology in practice. This volume will serve as a critical, yet positive, corrective to the thinking that we have crossed the Rubicon. As I read it, the biblical text that constantly came to mind was: “Conform no longer to the pattern of this present world ...” (Rom 12:2). As the title of this book indicates, clearly we are now more than ever living in the midst of *Pharaohs on Both Sides of the Blood-Red Waters*. This is not a destination but a point of departure and challenge to all.