

A Historical Perspective on AA Boesak as Organic Intellectual Par Excellence: On Social-analytical and Hermeneutic Mediation in Theology

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Abstract

Allan Aubrey Boesak has—over the past five years or so—been honoured from diverse perspectives by South Africans in festschrifts and journal articles, and particularly in a thesis. One would, however, look in vain for a study on his prowess as an organic intellectual. The objective of this article is to offer a historical perspective on his legacy of embodying, in an integrated fashion, the connectedness of the life of the mind and the struggles of the poor and the oppressed. His legacy is assessed in terms of the first three steps of the praxis cycle, namely insertion, context analysis, and theological reflection. The article shows that based on his rootedness in the black church, the *Belydende Kring*, the Alliance of Black Reformed Churches in Southern Africa and the United Democratic Front, he emerged as an organic intellectual par excellence. In accentuating his theological legacy, issues like identifying God as the God of the oppressed, human rights, and justice are highlighted. The article concludes with a brief attempt at capturing Boesak's intellectual legacy.

Keywords: Boesak; socio-analytical; hermeneutic; mediation; organic intellectual

Introduction

Two quite brilliant festschrifts in honour of Allan Aubrey Boesak have seen the light in South Africa the past three years. Not to forget that since the establishment of the Allan Boesak Legacy Centre in Bellville in March 2016, two memorial lectures have been presented already. The question could easily be: What more is there to say? Yet, much as different contributions and reflections on his life and work, his activism and intellectual prowess, his connectedness with grassroots people and his ability at articulating what is at play in the lives of poor, oppressed and downtrodden people, no study has emerged in which the remarkable integration between what he says and what he does—theory and practice—has been consistently brought into discourse with one another. Put differently, there seems to be a need



Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae
<https://upjournals.co.za/index.php/SHE/index>
 Volume 44 | Number 2 | 2018 | #3374 | 17 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/3374>
 ISSN 2412-4265 (Online)
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to work this out systematically and methodologically in showing that he is an organic intellectual par excellence. Picking up on anecdotes and stories will not facilitate a proper profiling of Boesak as organic intellectual. Conversely, a mere literature study might also not warrant such. Boesak has published extensively and therefore material to research the thesis of this article, namely that he is an organic intellectual, is not hard to come by. However, this will have to be combined with a careful reconstruction of his involvement in the church and in movements. As far as the latter aspect is concerned some delineation will be necessary. An almost unavoidable issue in tracing Boesak's emergence as a leader is the black church. Further movements, where his strong rise as an organic intellectual could be seen most clearly, are: the *Belydende Kring* (BK); Alliance of Black Reformed Christians in Southern Africa (ABRECSA); and the United Democratic Front (UDF). Commentators might wonder about the omission of the South African Council of Churches and his run with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, which for now are not part of the discussion. The selection of instances to be looked at will hopefully not be construed as arbitrary, but the article might show their greater functionality in working out the thesis of the article.

Organisation

Based on the introductory remarks the article finds the following organisation. Firstly, the question on what or who is an organic intellectual is engaged. For this purpose the concept "organic intellectual", as it originated with Gramsci (1971), is carefully looked at. A further issue in engaging Gramsci's notion of an organic intellectual is to reflect on its appropriateness for a theologian like Boesak. Secondly, taking a cue from Maluleke (2012, 214), an investigation is undertaken on the creative tension between "academic excellence and grassroots connectedness." The exercise is facilitated by the praxis cycle with its four steps or movements of insertion, context analysis, theological reflection, and planning. An important disclaimer may be necessary as far as the use of the praxis cycle is concerned. It will not be suggested that the cycle was constructed as a tool for testing whether someone fits the identification as organic intellectual or not. However, since the real test for being an organic intellectual is exactly the integration between action and reflection, the praxis cycle emerges as a handy tool. Thirdly, an attempt is made to show, albeit in a sketchy manner, what could be viewed as Boesak's real intellectual contribution.

Antonio Gramsci: Organic Intellectual

In the discussion on organic intellectualism three issues are to be dwelt on. Firstly, we will be unpacking carefully the manner in which Gramsci uses the concept "organic intellectual." Secondly, the article explores some examples in theology where the concept of organic intellectual has been called into service in describing the role of someone. One of the examples referred to here is West's (1988) identification of Martin Luther King Jr. as organic intellectual. Thirdly, I will be assessing whether the profile fits a theologian like Boesak, albeit in a preliminary fashion at this stage of the article. In the further evolution of the article a more extensive argument is presented on Boesak as organic intellectual.

To begin with, we ask the question: What was—according to Gramsci (1971)—the central task and political role of the organic intellectual? Gramsci locates the question squarely in the context of a society which is not functioning according to democracy, where the elite leadership is inauthentic and deceitfully governing the country, enriching themselves and their cronies illicitly. It is in the framework of attempting to answer this question that a very famous statement by Gramsci (1971, 323) arises from his *Quaderni* or *Prison Letters*: “All men/women are intellectuals ... but not all men/women have in society the function of intellectuals.” In his understanding it is up to the organic intellectuals to play a meaningful role in the transformation of society as they are connected to the masses and their situation. What is emerging already in Gramsci’s interpretation of the organic intellectual, are the following three elements: resistance against the undemocratic behaviour of the elite leadership; playing a role in the transformation of society; and being connected to the masses.

Whatever the “learned” intellectuals might be or say it is only their influence, authority and criticism in practice connected to the masses that make them useful towards change. It is this function of intellectuals that defines them as organic intellectuals: “Traditional intellectuals are distinguished not by their intellectual activity *per se*, but because of how such activity functions *within society*, the effect it has on presenting a *specific worldview*” (Ives 2004, 74) [own emphasis]. To be able to be an organic intellectual requires sound reasoning and the difficult work to think, to study and to analyse in relation to society. Gramsci (1971) places great emphasis on the arduous work and training that scholarship and effective intellectual ability require. His point, however, is that being intellectuals are positions within the masses of a society; it has to do with the way they organise and disseminate ideas and the impact that they have on the worldview of the people—whether they are aware of it or not—that “choice has to do with their position in society, especially their class position, whether they identify with the poor, uneducated and the underprivileged or not, and whether their lifestyle is accordingly” (cf. Ives 2004, 75).

Too many “intellectuals” who claim to be “leaders” in politics drop out as they do not understand and live out the calling of a rooted and implanted “organic intellectual” leader. Paulo Freire (2005), in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, said that “we have to be reborn and be completely renewed on the side of the poor, underprivileged and suffering to be able to serve them.”

This is the root of Gramsci’s distinction between traditional intellectual leaders and “organic” intellectuals:

- A “traditional intellectual” is one who puts himself/herself forward as “autonomous and independent of the dominant social group,” but who tries to function as an intellectual of the dominant social group
- The linguistic term “organic intellectual,” however, means to be related to the root of the people rather than being secondary, incidental, fortuitous or opportunistic, trying to take control over thought systems *from outside*. This superficial, secondary

role of intellectuals in society, however, is free floating and totally individual, but not embedded within society.

The positive approach of Gramsci, however, is encouraging and constructive for every person, as all people are able to make a contribution towards liberation. Gramsci (1971) explains in his *Prison Notebooks*, when one distinguishes between intellectuals and non-intellectuals, one is referring in reality only to the immediate social function amongst the people: "... *homo faber* cannot be separated from *homo sapiens* (Gramsci 1971, 323) [The active person cannot be separated from the thinking person—own translation].

It is the practical lifestyle function of intellectuals that defines them, and not any privileged access to "truth" or "reason"—it does not matter how much they know or how well they can talk or write. This is how Gramsci (1971) re-defines the very idea of intellectuality in "intellectual leaders," where their practice in the community determines their leadership:

The most widespread error of method seems to me that of having looked for this criterion of distinction in the *intrinsic nature of intellectual activities*, rather than in the ensemble of the system of relations in which these activities [and therefore the intellectual groups who personify them] have *their place within the general complex of social relations* (Ives 2004, 74, 75) [own italics].

One's ideas are never free floating and totally individual, but rather rooted in one's position within society. Gramsci's message is clear: in the last instance it is not what you say, but how your lifestyle portrays what you believe and proclaim that matters—we always make a practical choice between the various conceptions and philosophies of the world and we always choose how to live. In politics, we can add, it is not about ourselves and our enhancement, but about society and the needs of the people.

Then the urgent questions cannot be avoided: What is our worldview and what are our moral values, and especially, does our life style portray these values?

Leaders' worldviews, moral values and priorities determine whether they become embedded in society, for example, industrial technicians and managers are "organically" bound to be capitalist entrepreneurs, with riches and fame as lifestyles. "Professional" intellectuals, whether they pursue personal fame and enrichment, or service to the needy, always organise ideas and present ways of understanding the world; and these are adopted by others in society.

The "organic" character of intellectuals comes from the degree to which they are bound to a specific social group. This binding is not solely a question of class origins or where they live and work—it is a question of the relationship between the ideas they put forward, the understanding of the world that they propagate, and their position within society. In other words, the "organic" quality of intellectual activity is related to how people justify the way a given society is organised and their role in that society.

What is the difference between Gramsci's argument and approach and the traditional liberation theories that can change the situation? Gramsci (1971) takes the whole world of the people and their society together with their worldview and moral values into account in a holistic manner, and not only the political, economic and societal approaches determining the lives of the people. To understand the thinking and perception of the people regarding societal life and its meaning is vitally important to influence them organically. A leader's influence has to be non-mechanical and non-artificial, and these are organically embedded from within the lives and thinking of the people—not dominated by way of objective regulations and forced laws without proper consultation and service of the people.

The heart of politics, and especially democracy, is that the chosen leaders are in service of the people and their needs and cannot go against their will and requirements.

The real problem with traditional intellectuals, posing as “leaders” but not identifying with the people, is that they are totally “idiosyncratic,” weird and bizarre, as they do not fit in; they lack influence and are ineffective, except for a small uncanny crony group supporting them.

Traditional intellectuals act to the same degree as “functionaries,” as if they are presenting a modernistic “objective worldview” functioning as a benchmark. This occurs almost always because such intellectuals function to help legitimate the status quo and thus the dominant political authority, with minor or peripheral changes.

Here is one of Gramsci's (1971) most important contributions to the analysis of domination, ideology and consciousness. Domination and “subalternity” (subordinate or inferior people) do not mean only physical domination, power and control over the use of resources, on behalf of the people. The dominated people are constituted furthermore by the inability to develop a conscious coherent postmodern worldview; a “spontaneous” worldview instead of an objective one, that actually relates to your own life and place in society in freedom. It is also a key factor that prevents subaltern groups from being able to effectively resist political domination and the exercise of ideological and constitutional power against them.

Gramsci (1971) uses the concept “alienation” for dominated people and focuses on the gap between thought and action: the two conceptions of the world, one affirmed in words or language and the other displayed in effective action.

Because these groups often do not have effective organic intellectuals of their own, they are subordinated and adopt concepts which are not their own, but borrowed from the dominating authority—such concepts and worldviews are necessarily “passive.” The people cannot actively participate in creating or critically assessing the worldviews that determine and guide their lives. They simply accept them, but suffer the consequences of continuous incoherence and contradiction between their thoughts and action, and no liberation or transformation can ensue.

Theology, Church and the Organic Intellectual

Apart from its direct political application in contexts where people were or are still waging struggles for emancipation, Gramsci's concept of organic intellectual is called into service and appropriated to the fields of education (Fischman and McLaren 2005, 425–447), theology and ecclesiology. As far as theology and the church are concerned two examples are shown here. Firstly, there is the example of how Gramsci's idea of organic intellectual is appropriated by some to the role of pastors in the church.

In a piece titled *The Pastor as "Organic Intellectual"* Van Hoozer (2015) describes pastors as "public theologians." He goes on by enriching the statement as follows:

But pastor-theologians, in order to minister truth, must also be "intellectuals." An intellectual is one who speaks meaningfully and truthfully about broad topics of ultimate social concern. The truth of God's plan for the world is clearly such an issue! Indeed, even to speak of "God" is to address a topic of potentially universal concern. Surely we would not want those who speak of God's plan for the world to be anti-intellectual?

He clarifies the meaning of "intellectual" by posing the question: "What do I mean by intellectual?"

He states:

There are intellectuals in the academy as well as society, but they are few and far between. Most academics are specialists: they know a lot about a little, but they are often tongue-tied when forced to address the big questions. Yet on a regular basis pastors address the big questions—questions of life and death, meaning and meaninglessness, heaven and hell, the physical and spiritual. To be sure, no church wants a pastor to be an intellectual if this means being so cerebral and preoccupied with ideas that one cannot relate to other people. This kind of intellectual is so theoretical as to be practically good for nothing. However, the kind of intellectual I have in mind is a particular kind of generalist who knows how to relate big truths to real people.

Van Hoozer (2015) borrows from Oden in his assumption that the "shepherding analogy" still works for the post-industrial society, because the "shepherd characteristically is 'out ahead' of the flock not only guiding them, but looking out, by way of anticipation, for their welfare."

In introducing the very concept "organic intellectual" that is under discussion in the article, Van Hoozer (2015) writes:

An organic intellectual is neither a genius—an individual thinker alone with his or her own brilliant thoughts, detached from everyone else—or a member of an elite intelligentsia. Rather, the organic intellectual articulates the needs, convictions, and aspirations of the social group to which they belong. The organic intellectual brings to the level of speech the doctrines and desires of the community. The organic intellectual is not a product of the Ivy League but homegrown, as it were, on the farm. Most important, the organic intellectual does not speak down to people.

Again, Antonio Gramsci (1971) is helpful:

The mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence, which is an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions, but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, “permanent persuader,” and not just a simple orator.

Van Hoozer (2015) further clarifies his understanding of the organic intellectual in asserting:

The organic intellectual is one who serves the interest of a minority or oppressed social group by giving it prophetic and poetic voice—speech designed to clarify the situation, express the aims and objectives of the community, and rouse it to act in ways consistent with its vision. The organic intellectual knows that ideas matter: they have the power to give shape to certain forms of life. The organic intellectual is therefore no abstract theorist, but rather a social activist and political organizer.

He goes on to show the creative fruitfulness of the concept for pastors in the following manner:

The term “organic intellectual” gives concrete content to the analogy of the pastor as shepherd. The pastor-theologian is an advocate for the community of God’s people. The pastor-theologian takes every false thought captive to sound doctrine (2 Cor. 10:5)—Christological “ideas” (i.e., truths) that are both indicative of life and life-giving.

In his article titled “The Organic Intellectual: Why the Pastor-Contextual-Theologian is the Future of Church Leadership in N. America,” Fitch (2012) equally finds Gramsci’s concept of organic intellectual an appropriate category for pastors and theologians. For him, these intellectuals arise “on the ground, in the daily struggles of life ... who are forced to think through issues as they directly arise from their struggles. Living in the trenches, they will be forced to address new questions and formulate new ideas from the place of struggle. It is from here that we can move afresh into the new challenges” (Fitch 2012). Feeding into Gramsci’s interpretation of an organic intellectual, Fitch (2012) understands the intellectual as “less a contemplative thinker than an organiser, permanent persuader, who actively participates in social life and helps bring to theoretical articulation the moves needed to go forward.” According to Fitch (2012), in the words of Gramsci “they enable the emerging social classes to form some homogenous self-consciousness from which to move forward” (Gramsci 1971 quoted in Fitch 2012).

Fitch (2012) draws attention to the two extremes in defining the position and role of the pastor-contextual theologian that are to be avoided. Firstly, there is the “overly pragmatic and devoid of theological reflection” approach. The problem with this approach, according to Fitch (2012), is that ideas developed are put into practice without “theological testing.” Secondly, there is the “ivory tower centric—deep in theological reflection” approach. Quite often this approach is captive to convention and existing structures. These theologians, according to Fitch (2012), become part of “the academic bubble” and are not involved in the daily struggles of ministry and congregational formation working on “abstractions far removed from the life of the church.” Fitch (2012) argues for “pastoral theologians who have their feet in both worlds and take the best of 1) and 2) and produce theology that can move practice towards the challenges of the social situation emerging.”

A rather creative appropriation of the notion of organic intellectual is found in West (1988, 3) in terms of identifying Martin Luther King Jr. as such. Based on Gramsci, West (1988) advances his own constructs by calling Luther King an “organic” intellectual, because he “linked the life of the mind to social change” or “the life of the mind [got] involved in public affairs.” He traces the sources informing this to the prophetic black church tradition, prophetic liberal Christianity, a prophetic Ghanaian method of nonviolent social change and prophetic American civil religion (West 1988). Taking a cue from this, the sources informing the life and work of Boesak are to be shown in this article.

In appropriating Gramsci’s thoughts on the organic intellectual to Martin Luther King Jr., West (1988, 271) helps us to make the connections between then and now. If he is understood correctly, these intellectuals in our day and age are organically linked to prophetic movements, taking the life of the mind seriously enough to relate ideas to the everyday life of ordinary folk. He defines a Christian intellectual as “neither a detached seminary professor teaching potential elites of the church nor an engaged layperson in solidarity with the downtrodden, but rather the dedicated and devoted Christian member of a group—informed by the best available systemic social analysis and guided by the most insightful interpretation of the Scriptures and tradition” (West 1988, 271).

Preliminary assessment

Is Boesak such a Christian intellectual? Is he an organic intellectual? Or is this a mere rhetorical question? Boesak’s (2009, 345–350) own lament, scathing analysis and criticism of Lodge, for example, for unrecognising and consequently “unremembering” the role of faith and of the church in the struggle against apartheid, suggest implicitly that the question posed in this paper is not rhetorical, but requires corroboration. Acknowledging and not conveniently discarding or expunging the “spiritual quality” or “spiritual dimension” of politics has always been a great concern for him (Boesak 2009, 58, 70). It will emerge, however, as a disservice if not an insult to Boesak if proof of his location as an organic intellectual is offered polemically or apologetically. The rest of the task in this paper is to show academically that Boesak is indeed an organic intellectual par excellence. The brief assessment here, based on an interpretation of Gramsci (1971) and a few examples of the appropriation of the concept organic intellectual to the position of the pastor-contextual theologian, is that the profile of grassroots connectedness and intellectual prowess fits Boesak. The task now is to investigate whether in terms of his praxis of struggle he is indeed linking the life of the mind to social change or whether he integrates activism and reflection. The praxis cycle is called into service to argue that based on his agency, context analysis, theological reflection and indeed his action, a description of Boesak as organic intellectual is more than fitting.

Agency, identification and insertion

Worldwide Boesak emerged as one of the profoundest proponents of modes of liberation theology. For him the starting point has always been a faith commitment to very particular

categories of people in society, very particular forms of suffering and oppression, very particular forms of struggle and, of course, very particular forms of joy and of hope.

In calling into service the praxis cycle as it originated with the two Jesuits, Holland and Henriot (1983), two brief remarks are necessary from the onset. First, the context that the cycle speaks to is not just any context, but the world of the poor. Second, the cycle is aimed not only at thoroughgoing, rigorous social analysis, but at change. Indeed, it is one thing to attempt at understanding a situation or a context philosophically and yet another to change that situation.

In the understanding of the cycle, agency or insertion as Holland and Henriot (1983) will have it, is about the choices we make, the options we exercise and the values we espouse. Once again, these are not just any kind of choice or any type of value, but they are fundamentally informed by the world of the poor. And much as it is an approximation, such options and values translate into an option for the poor. Or if we stay with the categories identified in the Confession of Belhar (1986): the needy, the poor, the downtrodden, the orphan, the widow and the stranger.

Without fear of contradiction I submit that the life and work of Boesak have always been characterised by these. Not in a free floating, ad-hoc fashion, but his agency in the struggle for justice reveals a strong organisational and programmatic involvement as the following examples of the *Belydende Kring*, Alliance of Black Reformed Churches of Southern Africa, and the United Democratic Front might show.

The *Belydende Kring*

Space does not allow for an elaborate treatment of the *Belydende Kring* (hereinafter BK). Not only is Boesak the main mover for the coming into being of the BK in Bloemfontein in 1974 and one of its first chairpersons, he is also one of the main authors of the theological declaration of the movement (Fortuin 2013, 308). Perhaps for a proper historical perspective it is necessary to take one step back to November 1973 when Meyer, editor of *Pro Veritate*, the journal of the Christian Institute, wrote an editorial article with the very simple title “A Christian breakthrough in the *NG Kerk* in Africa” (hereinafter NGKA). The title obscures the fact that the breakthrough referred to has indeed been historical for two reasons. In a gathering predating the article about one hundred ministers from the NGKA declared apartheid unchristian and vowed to work for reconciliation, justice and unity. More than that, the creation of a movement to embody this was hinted at quite strongly (Van Rooi 2011).

On the anecdotal side perhaps, I remember Boesak being back in the country from the Netherlands, pitching at the last Worcester Synod of the *NG Sendingkerk* (hereinafter NGSK) in 1974. I was then studying at the University of the Western Cape and was back home in Worcester for the brief spring holidays. That must have been our very first personal encounter at a meeting in the Calvynse Kerk where he addressed a group of ministers from the NGSK on issues relating to the newly established BK.

The theological declaration on which the movement was based reveals in a real sense the attempt at inculcating a praxis where the organic integration of action and reflection was paramount. In summary, the six tenets or statements could be stated as follows: proclaiming the kingship of Jesus Christ over all areas; achieving organic unity; taking seriously the prophetic and priestly task of the church vis-à-vis oppressive structures in the land; letting the kingly rule triumph over the ideology of apartheid; promoting the evangelical liberation from unrighteousness; and supporting ecumenical movements that promote the kingship of Christ on all levels of life.

Retrospectively it would be fair to point out that the statement was drafted at a time that the movement was still known as the *Broederkring*, partly explaining the recurring exclusivist metaphor of “kingship” or “kingly.” The change in name from *Broederkring* to *Belydende Kring* (BK) in 1983, shows an interesting evolvement of consciousness.

This last point brings us to an important question around trying to understand the BK. Consciousness in the BK operated on at least four levels. First, coming into being in the golden era of black consciousness in South Africa, the BK as a progressive movement was almost bound to be affected. As an organic intellectual, Boesak was at the forefront of assisting us to understand the political philosophy of black consciousness and its connectedness to black theology (Boesak 1976). A second level of consciousness was non-racialism. Much as the BK embraced strong proponents of black consciousness, it was home also to proponents of non-racialism for the simple reason that in contradistinction to apartheid, both black and white were welcome. A third level of consciousness has been due to the grace of our sisters in the BK with the formation of the BK Women. Slowly but surely we began to cut our teeth on non-sexism; confronting patriarchy as painful as it might have been. Perhaps the fourth level of consciousness was more implicit, albeit strongly so, than explicit. From the onset there has been a fairly clear understanding in the BK that the issue was not only about unity, but also justice. It would, therefore, be fair to suggest that a measure of class consciousness was emerging. And indeed not class consciousness in the vulgar, dogmatic sense of the word, but as then—so now, revealed by South African life itself.

Alliance of Black Reformed Churches in Southern Africa

Part of Boesak’s “mission in life” was the battle of who were the true inheritors of Calvinism and of Reformed theology (Boesak 2015, 124). In the church and particularly in the Alliance of Black Reformed Churches in Southern Africa (hereinafter ABRECSA) he would be afforded space to rescue Calvinism and the Reformed tradition not in a dogmatic sense, but in terms of a consistent, ongoing praxis of liberation. The issue at stake then was so serious that De Gruchy (2013, 26) speaks of it as “The Contest for Reformed Identity in South Africa.” De Gruchy finds that “Boesak had the gift of giving expression to this Reformed legacy in a way that struck a decisive cord within the *NG Sendingkerk* ... Now all of a sudden, to be black and Reformed was not an oxymoron but a badge of honour” (De Gruchy 2013, 33).

Boesak, being the initiator of ABRECSA, delivered the inaugural address at the movement's first conference in 1981, the very year of the centenary of the NGSK. The title of his lecture was "Black and Reformed: Burden or Challenge?" and when it found publication in 1984, together with other as yet unpublished lectures from the time between 1976 and 1984, the subtitle was *Apartheid, Liberation and the Reformed Tradition* (Boesak 1984). In his lecture at the ABRECSA conference he "explored the contradictions of the Reformed tradition as experienced in South Africa and the promise and challenge of the tradition in the struggle against apartheid" (De Gruchy 2013, 33). In challenging the members of the movement he said that the future of the Reformed tradition in South Africa could only be secured if black Reformed Christians were willing to take it up and make it their own. Once more, Boesak's intent was not the systematic theological rescue of the Reformed tradition, but a restoration of the tradition to once again become what it was:

A champion of the poor and the oppressed, clinging to the confession of the Lordship of Christ and to the supremacy of the Word of God ... able to search with others for the attainment of the goals of the Kingdom of God in South Africa. (Boesak in De Gruchy and Villa Vicencio 1983, 26)

Let me make just one remark here and that is: only retrospectively one realises that the restoration of the Reformed tradition has been a liberation within the liberation struggle. And indeed, this is what hope is made of—that amidst the struggle, liberation breaks free.

The United Democratic Front

Arguably the clearest evidence of Boesak's connectedness to the grassroots has been his agency in the United Democratic Front (hereinafter UDF). As a mass-based, mass-democratic, non-racial and non-sexist movement the UDF became fertile ground for his organic intellectualism. As a broad church the UDF was home to all manner of formation, organisations, clubs and faith-based communities. It is in the UDF that he rubbed shoulders with school kids, students from tertiary institutions, workers, fiery political activists and ideologues and in particular also the clergy, imams, pundits, rabbis and so forth. There are wonderful images of agency portrayed in photographic material showing Boesak with clenched fists in the "Don't vote" campaign, at funerals of victims of apartheid who paid the supreme price in the struggle for justice, shown where he is greeted by UDF supporters after a church service, a moving photograph of him, this time not with clenched fists, but open outstretched arms to save an accused informer at Lawaaikamp in George.

This is what has always informed Boesak's (2009, 143–153) speaking. He articulates eloquently the suffering, oppression, exploitation, frustrations, dreams hopes and joys of those on the ground and by so doing emerges as one of South Africa's best organic intellectuals. A prime example of his speaking prowess is his "Three Little Words" speech at the launch of the UDF on 20 August 1983 in Rocklands, Mitchel's Plain. Later on we shall return to a particular aspect of his address.

Context analysis

In looking at how Boesak does his social analysis, it is important to keep in mind his radically inductive manner of theologising. Put differently, in investigating his analysis, it is crucial to remain aware of the fact that his analysis evolves as he writes. His insistence on “doing theology” rather than merely “thinking or reflecting theology” means that most of the time there is a radical integration of theory and practice.

In his writing there have been instances of distinct social analysis. One example is the creative manner in which the concept of “innocence” is called into service as a serious analytical category. He differentiates between “white innocence” and “black innocence.” He describes white innocence as maintaining power by preserving the status quo, grounding such tendency on the assumption that they just happened to have the superior position and should because of that have guardianship over black people. If Boesak’s (1976, 1–7) category of innocence is to be prolonged way into our democracy, the very pertinent, but uncomfortable question needs to be posed: Is socio-economic and cultural guardianship not more devastating than any other form of guardianship? And: Is the situation not aggravated by the petit bourgeoisie and the black elite “innocently” accepting such guardianship? Innocence for black people was to allow their minds to be a potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor, suffering from a slave mentality and being paralysed by a lack of self-affirmation. In this country we have not even begun to engage the manner in which “innocence” amongst black people plays itself out in equally devastating forms of internalised racism and oppression. To prolong Boesak’s analysis of black innocence: Are we not projecting ever new forms of childishness by consciously distorting our reality and closing our eyes to matters we find too horrendous to contemplate?

Boesak’s (2009, 65) category of innocence finds further appropriation in his engagement with empire. He alludes to the reality that in relation to empire the impact of the categories of innocence and pseudo-innocence is much broader than the black/white context. He uses the example of America to reveal what constitutes the innocence of empire: “... we are serving in freedom’s cause, a cause that is the cause of all (hu)mankind.”

In terms of new forms of analysis way into post-apartheid South Africa, an interesting notion introduced is that of the “politics of delusion.” He describes the politics of delusion as cynical, arrogant and as a neglect of dreams and the promises to the poor. He goes on to draw attention to the disappointment, disillusionment, anger and frustration that have taken grip of South Africans. One very pertinent issue which emerges quite strongly in his new analysis of the South African reality is what he calls the “flirting with ethnicity.” He finds that non-racialism has been reneged on, making way for ethnic nationalism. Mangcu (2001: xiii), in reflecting on the new political culture in South Africa, draws a distinction between “racial syncretism” and “racial nativism.” Such flirting with ethnicity or racial nativism feeds into forms of instant gratification and entitlement resulting in the appalling situation of a gross betrayal of the poor. In typical Boesak fashion he alludes to the “still poor, still destitute, still denied.”

Diametrically opposed to the politics of delusion is the politics of hope which is informed by the resilience of hope, a refusal to give up and a steadfast resolve to remain on the narrow path of non-racialism and the mustering of strength to continue dreaming.

Theological Reflection

Once again, in turning now to Boesak's theological reflection, it needs to be accentuated that he simply does not theologise in the fashion of neatly separating agency or identification or insertion, analysis and reflection from each other. For that he is too much of an "inductive" theologian. In his manner of "doing theology" the three dimensions are collapsed.

For purposes of proving the basic thesis of the paper, however, I am required now to show the logical coherence between the different steps of the praxis cycle. The question to be answered here is whether he allows his faith commitment and his reading of the signs of the times to inform his theological reflection. Three issues are selected for discussion: the poor, justice, and human rights.

Still poor, still destitute, still denied

Boesak's theology is characterised by a radical preferential option for the poor. Be that in black theology or his remarkable contribution in restoring the Reformed tradition, he chooses unequivocally for the poor. So much so that from his early beginnings as pastor and later on as academic theologian, the gospel has been the gospel of the poor. In his interpretation of Luke 4, the narrative on the sermon preached by Jesus in the synagogue, (Boesak 1976, 20–26) any depoliticised, individualised, spiritualised and non-relational reading of the text is debunked. Instead he shows that the categories of poor, captives and the blind are political and socio-economic in nature. These are people who are socially oppressed and suffering from the power of injustice. But he does not leave it at that. He goes on to pronounce liberation, first by identifying the God of the Old Testament as a Liberator God and then by arguing that Jesus stood in the same prophetic tradition of liberation. This is the very tradition that the Confession of Belhar (1986) calls us to stand in; and by so doing to stand where God stands on the side of the needy, the poor, the downtrodden, the orphan, the widow and the stranger.

In this context I was reminded of an intriguing controversy between Boesak and Loff (Kritzinger 2010) on whether the metaphor should be "moving" or "standing" with the poor in the BK declaration that was to be drafted. Boesak's own recollection is that he gave in to the argument of Loff that it should be the "standing" metaphor. In a search Kritzinger (2010) has found that the metaphor in reference to where God stands is found only in Psalm 109. The very pertinent question to be asked way into our democracy is whether the church is at all standing, let alone moving with the poor or whether in fact, it is sleeping through a revolution?

Is it really so difficult to see in South Africa the still poor, the still destitute and the still denied? Plaatjies Van-Huffel (2013, 345) draws attention to the fact that—much as the Confession of Belhar (1986) as an historical document speaks to a very particular context—issues like racial inequality, discrimination, oppression, poverty and injustice addressed in Belhar are timeless and universal. Therefore, once again: Is it so difficult in South African society to see the gross inequalities and socio-economic discrepancies, the poor suffering in the dungeon of apartheid? And not only see, but to join the ongoing struggle for fundamental change with justice.

Justice

This article does not allow space to look extensively at the manner in which Boesak (2009) engages critically with the reductionist understanding of transformation by Mbeki, and the legalistic interpretation of justice by De Lange and the purely secular notions of reconciliation of Gerwel, Manuel and Mbeki. One is particularly intrigued by the fact that Boesak is not outright dismissive of their thoughts on issues of justice, reconciliation and transformation. On the contrary, he treats them with respect by indulging in a close reading of their statements, utterances and writings and then proceeds to expose the reductionist and politically expedient nature of their understanding.

Boesak (2009, 271–283) himself makes it abundantly clear that justice in his understanding is not just any justice or justice in the generalised sense of the word, but justice for the poor. This is the kind of justice that appears as a distinct trajectory in most of his sermons, speeches and writings.

We turn to Boesak's creative unpacking of justice in terms of three dimensions. In engaging the rather problematic nature of the TRC process, Boesak shows how perpetrators were virtually let off the hook, fabricating remorse, whereas victims of gross human rights violations were coerced into forgiving. He goes on to establish the inextricable link between reconciliation and justice. In this context he then proceeds with his three dimensions of justice, once again, illustrating the fruitfulness of Calvin's theology for struggles of liberation and justice. In drawing from Calvin's sermons on Deuteronomy 24 and Psalm 82, which speaks to the rights of the poor, he constructs the following dimensions: the restoration of integrity, the restoration of human dignity, and the restoration of human contentment. Boesak bemoans the separation of justice from reconciliation. He writes: "It is not when government or big business or the media moguls are satisfied that justice has been done and that reconciliation 'works.' *It is when the poor, the wounded, the vulnerable, are content. To be content is to be fulfilled, in body and spirit*" (Boesak 2012) [own italics].

This is the DNA of compassionate justice. According to Boesak this is the kind of justice that would not hide behind acts of charity, leaving the systemic injustices untouched. It is the kind of justice that is grounded theologically in the confession that God is "the One who brings justice and true peace, and that in a world filled with injustice and enmity God in a special

way is the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged” (Confession of Belhar 1986, Article Four).

Human Rights

In the brief discussion on Boesak’s agency in the UDF, there has been an allusion to his “Three Little Words” speech. In the context of Human Rights Day the focus is on the first little word, namely “all” (i.e. “all of our rights”). Before coming to that and allowing Boesak to speak for himself as only he can, and since this particular day is now euphemistically called Human Rights Day, I would like to draw a sharp correlation or parallel between Sharpeville and Marikana. It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into the heart-rending details of the events that occurred in 1960 and 2012 at the two locations respectively. However, attention needs to be drawn to the fact that both tragic incidents emanated from the most heinous, most virulent systems humanity has seen: apartheid and neo-liberal capitalism. In the Confession of Accra the latter system is exposed for its devastation of human life and the life of mother earth.

“All” of us need to heed Boesak’s (2009, 395) insistence on “all of our rights” which—years into our democracy—he unpacks as follows:

When we spoke of “all our rights” all these years ago, we did not speak of the rights taken from the pages of some liberal document and taken for granted in what is usually called a “liberal democracy.” We spoke of the right to be free and the right to struggle for that freedom and the right to live in that freedom. The right to have a government of our own choice and the right to hold that government accountable; the right to fashion our own destiny and to participate in the shaping of our society. We meant the right not to be poor and destitute, not just the right not to be discriminated against but the right not to be wronged ... [not] that kind of democracy where we have the vote, but are bereft of our voice, where our speech is not the speech of vibrant diversity but controlled uniformity; where we are shown a manifesto, but never a vision; where the dreams of the poor have become the blanket of the rich; where justice for the poor is a line in a slogan but not the song of our hearts.

Conclusion

In summary then, what are the distinct, long-lasting intellectual contributions of Boesak? This article first contends that there is substantial evidence to the effect that he is an organic intellectual par excellence. In this paper a beginning was made to scratch the surface. Second, and despite wariness of turning Boesak into an anonymous post-modernist, his “turn to language” constitutes in itself a major contribution to the paradigm. Smit (2012, 32–33) captures the issue at stake well in writing:

Allan Boesak [has] an extraordinary command of language, of words and meanings, of images and metaphors, and of the emotions and expectations of his hearers. Boesak possesses unsurpassable gifts of rhetoric ... deeply impressed with the rhetorical power at work in his language. It is also correct, poetic, stylish, rich imaginative language.

On a very serious intellectual note, Boesak in his “linguistic turn” in which language is stretched (O’Donnell 2003, 118–119), breaks decisively with the enlightenment paradigm

and its doctrine of satisfaction in terms of which knowledge is produced through watertight definitions placed into neat little boxes. Boesak operates in a constructivist manner, consistently creating knowledge by constructing new ways of discourse. Knowledge is made not by way of preconceived universally valid ideas, but through experience, through struggle, through an ongoing praxis of liberation. This is how we know what we know.

Third, Boesak does not shy away from critical discursive engagement with peers. Be that Mandela, Mbeki, Manuel, De Lange, Gerwel or Tutu. What we need to observe is that he does not deal with them dismissively nor judgmentally, but respectfully. Fourth, Boesak is an example of how you cannot “do theology” without keeping in creative tension to one another the issues of agency, analysis (reading the signs of the times), hermeneutic mediation and action.

Ultimately the eulogy on Boesak from Maluleke (2012, 214) is a more than fitting synopsis of a wonderful legacy:

If North American black theology has James Cone as one of its most scholarly exponents and Martin Luther King, Jr. as its activist inspiration, then in Allan Boesak South Africa has Cone and King combined in one package of explosive dynamism: scholarship fused with rhetorical ability; written eloquence combined with amazing fluency of speech; academic excellence with grassroots connectedness.

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