



## On (c)entering Allan Boesak's contribution on African Christian preaching and decolonisation?<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This article critically explores in a threefold manner what Allan Boesak's oeuvre might contribute towards preaching and (the decolonisation of) decolonisation in our context. First, by way of breaking the ice, I shall introduce (my) Boesak's attractive relevance for such an adventure. Hereafter, the underlining and mining of his work will result in a second movement of what seems to be central and centred for our quest. Lastly, as he helps us with movement, so too are we challenged to break further ground and enter (seemingly problematic) areas and ideas in his thought that might stir and spur us onwards. In sum, there will be talk of a selfless revolution, and a whisper, of where (how and why) to enter, centre, and decentre Boesak's contribution towards preaching and (his "decolonisation" of) decolonisation.

### Keywords

*Allan Boesak; decolonisation; black theology of liberation; preaching; South Africa; public theology*

## 1. Introducing (my) "Boesak"?

"I was a preacher before I was a writer, and I still am", says Boesak in the preface of one of his most recent publications, *Selfless Revolutionaries: Biko, Black Consciousness, Black Theology, and a Global Ethic of Solidarity*

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and Resistance.<sup>2</sup> Being a preacher is an important key to understanding Allan Aubrey Boesak, but it is not the only one. For instance, just recall for a moment (some of) the titles in his oeuvre (read: a long and impressive string of published monographs) covering the past five decades:

- *Coming in Out of the Wilderness – A Comparative Study of the Ethics of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr.*<sup>3</sup>
- *Farewell to Innocence – A Socio-Ethical Study of Black Theology and Black Power*<sup>4</sup>
- *The Finger of God – Sermons on Faith and Socio-political Responsibility*<sup>5</sup>
- *Walking on Thorns – The Call to Christian Obedience*<sup>6</sup>

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2 Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Selfless Revolutionaries. Biko, Black Consciousness, Black Theology, and a Global Ethic of Solidarity and Resistance* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2021), x.

3 Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Coming in Out of the Wilderness – A Comparative Study of the Ethics of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Kampen: Kok, 1974). This was his master's thesis he did in preparation for his PhD when he was a student at Kampen, in the Netherlands.

4 Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence – A Socio-ethical study of Black theology and Black power* (New York: Orbis Books, 1977). This was his PhD, which he got the year before in the Netherlands. Thereafter, it was also published in the United Kingdom, the United States, and in South Africa; translated into Dutch and German; and reissued by Wipf and Stock in 2015.

5 Allan Aubrey Boesak, *The Finger of God – Sermons on Faith and Socio-Political Responsibility* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1982). This is a translation of the Afrikaans, *Die Vinger van God – Preke oor Geloof en Politiek* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1979).

6 Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Walking on Thorns – The Call to Christian Obedience* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984). This was also published in 1985 by the World Council of Churches in Geneva, and translated into Dutch, Italian, and Swedish.

- *Black and Reformed – Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition*<sup>7</sup>
- *When Prayer Makes News. Churches and Apartheid – A Call to Prayer*<sup>8</sup>
- *If This is Treason, I am Guilty*<sup>9</sup>
- *Comfort and Protest – The Apocalypse of John from a South African Perspective*<sup>10</sup>
- *Shadows of the Light – Biblical Reflections in a Time of Trial*<sup>11</sup>
- *The Fire Within – Sermons from the Edge of Exile*<sup>12</sup>
- *Die Vlug van Gods Verbeelding – Bybelverhale van die Onderkant*<sup>13</sup>

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7 Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Black and Reformed – Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition* (New York: Orbis Books, 1984). In 2015, it was reissued by Wipf and Stock.

8 Allan Aubrey Boesak & Charles Villa-Vicencio (eds.), *When Prayer Makes News. Churches and Apartheid – A Call to Prayer* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1986). The UK edition had a slightly different title, *Call to Prayer for the Fall of Unjust Rule* (St Andrews Press: Edinburgh, 1987).

9 Allan Aubrey Boesak, *If This is Treason, I am Guilty* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987). It was also translated into Dutch as *Als dit Verraad Is Ben Ik Schuldig* (Kampen: Kok, 1987).

10 Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Comfort and Protest – The Apocalypse of John from a South African Perspective* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1987). This was also reissued by Wipf and Stock in 2015.

11 Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Shadows of the Light – Biblical Reflections in a Time of Trial* (Pretoria: JL van Schaik, 1996). This was also published in Afrikaans in the same year by the same publisher as *Naby Jou Is Die Woord. Bybelse Oorwegings in 'n Tyd van Aanslag*.

12 Allan Aubrey Boesak, *The Fire Within. Sermons from the Edge of Exile* (Cape Town: New World Foundation, 2004).

13 Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Die Vlug van Gods Verbeelding – Bybelverhale van die Onderkant* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2005). An English translation of the title would be “The Flight of God’s Imagination – Biblical Narratives from

- *The Tenderness of Conscience – African Renaissance and the Spirituality of Politics*<sup>14</sup>
- *Running with Horses – Reflections of an Accidental Politician*<sup>15</sup>
- *Globalisation: The Politics of Empire, Justice and the Life of the Earth*<sup>16</sup>
- *Globalisation II: Global Challenge, Global Faith, Global Justice*<sup>17</sup>
- *Dreaming a Different World: Globalisation and Justice for Humanity and the Earth – The Challenge of the Accra Confession for the Churches*<sup>18</sup>
- *Radical Reconciliation: Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism*<sup>19</sup>

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the Underside”. It was awarded in 2006 with the prestigious Andrew Murray Prize.

14 Allan Aubrey Boesak, *The Tenderness of Conscience – African Renaissance and the Spirituality of Politics* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2005).

15 Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Running with Horses. Reflections of an Accidental Politician* (Cape Town: Joho Publishers, 2009).

16 Allan Aubrey Boesak & Len Hansen (eds.), *Globalisation: The Politics of Empire, Justice and the Life of the Earth* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2009).

17 Allan Aubrey Boesak & Len Hansen (eds.), *Globalisation II: Global Challenge, Global Faith, Global Justice: Ongoing Response to the Accra Confession* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2010).

18 Allan Aubrey Boesak, Charles Amjad-Ali, and Johann Weusmann (eds.), *Dreaming a Different World: Globalisation and Justice for Humanity and the Earth, The Challenge of the Accra Confession for the Churches* (Stellenbosch: Evangelisch-Reformierte Kirche, 2010). This was a final report and collection of essays on the previous two-volume Globalisation Project.

19 Allan Aubrey Boesak & Curtiss Paul DeYoung, *Radical Reconciliation. Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism* (New York: Orbis Books, 2012).

- *Dare We Speak of Hope? Searching for a Language of Life in Faith and Politics*<sup>20</sup>
- *Kairos, Crisis, and Global Apartheid: The Challenge to Prophetic Resistance*<sup>21</sup>
- *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*<sup>22</sup>
- *Children of the Waters of Meribah: Black Liberation Theology, the Miriamic Tradition and the Challenges of 21st Century Empire*<sup>23</sup>
- *Selfless Revolutionaries: Biko, Black Consciousness, Black Theology and an Ethic of Global Solidarity and Resistance*<sup>24</sup>
- *Parables, Politics, and Prophetic Faith – Hope and Perseverance in Times of Peril*<sup>25</sup>

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20 Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Dare We Speak of Hope? Search for a Language of Life in Faith and Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014).

21 Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Kairos, Crisis, and Global Apartheid: The Challenge to Prophetic Resistance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

22 Allan Aubrey Boesak, *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* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2017).

23 Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Children of the Waters of Meribah: Black Liberation Theology, the Miriamic Tradition and the Challenges of 21st Century Empire* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2019). This was based on the prestigious annual Beecher Lectures he delivered in 2017 at Yale Divinity School – the first and thus far only South African to do so.

24 Boesak, *Selfless Revolutionaries*.

25 Allan Aubrey Boesak & Wendell L Griffen, *Parables, Politics, and Prophetic Faith – Hope and Perseverance in Times of Peril* (Macon: Nurturing Faith, 2023).

- *The Fire, the River, and the Scorched Earth Between – Fifty Years of Black Liberation Theology through the Lens of Allan Boesak*<sup>26</sup>

Why do I start by naming this long list of publications? First, just to get a sense of the magnitude and flow of the oeuvre of Boesak's legacy, which I think has so much to offer in terms of the (re)narration of the South African story. The list is impressive in length, showcasing his creative output over many years (five decades) under often very difficult circumstances, but it is perhaps its profound impact and significant relevance throughout the years in South Africa and beyond that underlines its impressive and lasting qualities. We are here "introduced" to a prolific writer who has produced a lot to ponder. But impressive as it is, this is still not the full story, because much of this is also closely connected to a particular life story and biography within the public domain of embodying this faith and "practising what you preach" (and vice versa). Just to give you two recent examples: Nicholas Wolterstorff, the North American philosopher who has a keen interest in theology (amongst others, especially the intersections between liturgy, justice and public witness), says in his memoirs, "I found in him a soulmate."<sup>27</sup> Demaine Solomons, in his response to one of the eight Cathedral Lectures, says: "Without a doubt, he has had the most significant impact on my development as an emerging scholar of Black

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26 Allan Aubrey Boesak, *The Fire, the River, and the Scorched Earth Between – Fifty Years of Black Liberation Theology through the Lens of Allan Boesak* (Stellenbosch: Sunlit, 2024). This is a four-volume work based on a series of eight public lectures delivered in 2021 (including introductory words and responses by others) from St George's Cathedral in Cape Town, called "The Camissa Project". The Four Volumes are: Volume One: Cathedral Lectures 1-4; Volume Two: Cathedral Lectures 5-8; Volume Three: I Turn My Face to the Rising Sun – Political and Spiritual Meditations; and Volume Four: The Only Thing Between Us and Despair – Preaching Faith, Resistance, and Hope in Times of Trouble.

27 Nicholas Wolterstorff, *In This World of Wonders: Memoir of a Life in Learning* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 169.

Liberation Theology.”<sup>28</sup> Boesak is, in the words of the title of the festschrift of a decade ago, in a broad and comprehensive sense, *Prophet from the South*.<sup>29</sup> In short, an intriguing and fascinating legacy of Boesak in terms of texts (primary and secondary works), biography in its context, and its reception and portrayal by others in the media and the world of (church) politics. This prolific writer is also a profound public figure who, in many ways, “practised what he preached ... and preached what he practised.” He wrote and lived a life to ponder for some time.

Secondly, is the issue or question of how to relate the dots between his preaching/sermons, theology, life/witness, and our context. It is not as if one can neatly categorise his homiletical work and sermons in a separate folder, and the other “more scholarly” or “theoretical” or “theological”, or even the “black theology of liberation” works, in another folder. For Boesak, they are in essence inseparable. It was precisely this kind of “preachy” theology that got me so interested in Boesak’s work years ago. Some people, however, see this strength as an apparent weakness in his work. For instance, Tinyiko Maluleke, one of South Africa’s and the continent’s foremost theologians, and close friend of Boesak, says in his review of Boesak’s *Children of the Waters of Meribah* (Beecher Lectures 2017), “while I loved the book, I sometimes diminish its scholarly nature by becoming ‘too preachy.’”<sup>30</sup> Boesak’s response to this was precisely the same as when I first pitched the idea to him over a cup of coffee regarding the need for an intellectual/homiletical biography of his preaching life. Those

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28 Demaine Solomons, “A Response,” in *Fire, the River, and the Scorched Earth Between* (Volume 1) by Allan Boesak (Stellenbosch: Sunlit, 2024), 102.

29 Prince Dibeela, Puleng Lenka-Bula, and Vuyani Vellem (eds.), *Prophet from the South: Essays in honour of Allan Aubrey Boesak* (Stellenbosch: Sun Media, 2014). In 2016, when he turned 70 in February that year, there was also another festschrift, namely: Charles Daniel Flaendorp, Nathan Carolus Philander, and Mary-Anne Plaatjies van Huffel, *Festschrift in honour of Allan Boesak – A Life in Black Liberation Theology* (Stellenbosch: Sun Media, 2016).

30 Boesak, *Fire, the River, and the Scorched Earth Between* (Volume 2) (Stellenbosch: Sunlit, 2024), 131.

who read and appreciate this feature (“leitmotif”) of his work get what he is trying to do deliberately.

“Not only methodologically, but teleologically, my approach to scholarship is different. From the very beginning, I have tried to write in a way that would make my theology not only accessible to preachers but also relatable to the ways they should be preaching. Essential to my theology, therefore, is always an extensive and persistent struggle with biblical texts: how we should read, understand and interpret them. If I were to write or my peers, engaged only in philosophical, high-theological, and esoteric debate, what is my theology good for? If my theology cannot make the Gospel come alive for the pulpit, make the preacher want to reach for the Bible and long to say it from the pulpit, how would the people learn, how would they be touched by prophetic fire, and take their worship of God out of the sanctuary to the streets of protest and resistance? For the same reason, my work is deliberately intersectional.”<sup>31</sup>

In short, it is again the ringing of that opening line: “I was a preacher before I was a writer, and I still am.”<sup>32</sup> Any attempt at an intellectual biography of Boesak should center on Boesak being a preacher at heart.

Thirdly, one might wonder at this stage, what does this necessarily have to do with the theme of our conference, “African Christian preaching and decolonisation”? I think his relevance in terms of the first three (key) words in the conference theme – African Christian preaching – is clear, but what about our last word: “decolonisation”? Yes, Boesak is an important theological figure who might unlock and reveal a lot regarding the South African story, and stimulate certain impulses regarding preaching and homiletics, but does he also deal explicitly with “decolonisation”? He is stern, consistent, and outspoken about being a Black Theologian of Liberation, and the question is thus whether this (obviously and self-evidently) (dis)

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31 Boesak, *Fire, the River, and the Scorched Earth Between* (Volume 2) (Stellenbosch: Sunlit, 2024), 131.

32 Boesak, *Selfless revolutionaries*, x.

*qualifies* him for our interest. It is precisely here, on this point and issue, where it becomes so fascinating (but also tricky and dangerous) in how this story (of many stories) is told.

For Boesak, it is with all due respect, a no-brainer. For him, it seems to be so self-evident that the word “decolonial” or “postcolonial” does not even feature in the rubric of index at the back of the *Selfless Revolutionaries* text, and yet there are many, at least twenty occurrences of the word(s) in his text. For instance, the seamless (absolute given) way in which he speaks of and describes the “decolonial task of Black liberation theology;”<sup>33</sup> or “Hence the necessity of decolonial studies and engagements with Eurocentrism for this generation;”<sup>34</sup> or “Meek acceptance of those rules, oppressive, exploitative, and dehumanizing as they are, is what the decolonized mind rejects, as it rejects definitions of ‘respectability’ and ‘decency’ as set by the hegemonic narratives of the dominant culture;”<sup>35</sup> or, again just a few pages on: “This is how the decolonized mind deals with the colonial presence and colonial power.”<sup>36</sup> It is indeed a recurring word and theme in his work, and perhaps best expressed in the following formulation:

“In the current struggles for authentic Africanity, the decolonisation of our minds, academic studies, and of the Africanchurch - intellectuals especially must be well-girded.” Their role is crucial. It is a role that calls for the courage to be rebels – in the pulpit and at the lectern – against old and new tyrannies, from imperialist domination and post-colonial treachery to political backwardness such as heteronormativity and patriarchy. And the goal is still to make our people the authors of their own liberation. And as I pleaded fifteen years ago, ...”<sup>37</sup>

The end of the quote in the above is quite telling. It is clear, because the drift is that for him it was always there, right from the start. Although

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33 Boesak, *Selfless revolutionaries*, 26.

34 Boesak, *Selfless revolutionaries*, 40.

35 Boesak, *Selfless revolutionaries*, 44.

36 Boesak, *Selfless revolutionaries*, 46.

37 Boesak, *Selfless revolutionaries*, 88-89.

the above might seem to refer to *The Tenderness of Consciousness* (2005), he could have easily taken us back to his PhD manuscript, *Farewell to Innocence* (1976), which already revealed this kind of start. Thereafter, it continues to echo throughout his texts – for instance, in *Black and Reformed – Apartheid, Liberation, and the Calvinist Tradition* (1984), in an essay entitled, “The courage to be Black,” Boesak writes: “Frantz Fanon’s words: ‘Europe, literally, is the creation of the Third World;’<sup>38</sup> and “Black consciousness cannot be suppressed. The struggle for the liberation and ‘decolonisation’ of our humanity goes on unabatedly ...”<sup>39</sup> and:

“South African Blacks are now searching for their true humanity: a ‘decolonised’ humanity free from the infection of white scorn and contempt. ... White values shall no longer be thought of as ‘the highest good’. Blacks shall no longer hate themselves and wish that they were white. No longer shall Black define themselves in terms of others ...”<sup>40</sup>

In short, it is clear and often surfaces seamlessly in the same breath and sentence. So, what is the matter then? The case seems to be settled, and it is time to move on. However, before I do so, it is important to remember – and not be fooled – that the appearances and use of such words in our work do not necessarily guarantee that it is indeed the case. Writing about prophetic preaching and claiming to be prophetic – or, for that matter, “decolonised” – does not safeguard nor illustrate or guarantee that we cannot contradict ourselves. Don’t be fooled by what appears to be there or not; in fact, often it might be our cue – the crack in the system – that something is not right. This is, for instance, a recurring theme and insight in Stellenbosch homiletician, Johan Cilliers’ work I came to appreciate over the years. Not only is Cilliers fond of playing with the ideas of absence and presence in his work,<sup>41</sup> but he also implements it by seldom using the

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38 Boesak, *Black and Reformed*, 5.

39 Boesak, *Black and Reformed*, 6.

40 Boesak, *Black and Reformed*, 18.

41 Johan Cilliers, *The Beautiful Chaos of Being. Reflections on Life, Aesthetics, and Practical Theology* (Stellenbosch: Red Mouse Design, 2024), 101–129.

popular jargon and keywords of dominant discourses in our time.<sup>42</sup> In his critiques on nationalism and moralism in South African preaching, he remarked that cladding your sermon with “Jesus,” many other passages of Scripture, and other (typical) rhetorical religious questions often reveals that the preacher is merely trying to plaster and whitewash the cracks in their sermons.<sup>43</sup> Or many South African homiletics and theologians will write about prophetic preaching by joining the choir who ask: “Where have all the prophets gone?” Instead of asking the same question (with the same repetitive answer), he interrupts the discussion by challenging us to break with clichés and other predictable language patterns and speak a new, creative word.<sup>44</sup> Stated differently, instead of also dropping fashionable words like “decolonial” and “postcolonial,” he rather zooms in by asking about the timing and spacious opening and movement of our theological speech.<sup>45</sup> In short, there seems to be an awareness of the temptation of not to get stuck with what we want to engage with. An obvious presence might be superficial and hollow – casting its shadow of absence being present – and thus the need to not only follow the lines but also read between the ways they are timed.

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42 Johan Cilliers, *Timing Grace. Reflections on the Temporality of Preaching* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2019), 23.

43 Johan Cilliers, *God for Us. An Analysis and Assessment of Dutch Reformed Preaching during the Apartheid Years* (Stellenbosch: Sun Media, 2006), 58–61.

44 Johan Cilliers & Charles Campbell, *Preaching Fools. The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012), 156.

45 One of the few places (read: articles) where he does engage explicitly with these terms are in Cilliers, *The Beautiful Chaos of Being*, 166–180, and 216–230. Not only is it clear from these chapters/articles that he does this on his own terms and conditions, but also why he deliberately chooses to deal with these concepts between the lines and times in works like *Space for Grace – Towards an Aesthetics of Preaching* (Stellenbosch: Sun Media, 2016) and 2019’s *Timing Grace*. Again, see the footnote on “prophetic preaching” in *Timing Grace*, 23.

Someone who is also well-aware and outspoken on the above is one of our younger South African colleagues, Wessel Wessels.<sup>46</sup> Wessels is right in seeing the need to differentiate more carefully between Black Theology of Liberation (BTL) in South Africa and what is called for in the quest for a postcolonial theology/homiletics in our context.<sup>47</sup> According to Wessels, there might have been a time when their genealogies shared some common grounds and roots, but be careful to see and use them today as if they are still resembling synonymous branches which are supposed to bear the exact same fruits. Wessels is onto something, because this might just be a way for BTL to move and time itself anew. For instance, in an extremely valuable collection of essays by a younger generation and followers of Boesak and BTL in South Africa, titled *Liberating Black Theology – Emerging South African Voices*, it strikes me that they do so without really pondering whether “liberating black theology” too should be *liberated*. I, too, sense the need for BTL in our context, but then the window for how we see and frame the world should also be a mirror to trace our own moving identities. The title also creates a possible play in self-critical reflection, and yet it is seemingly not in this sense or tone that these voices speak or envision their (“liberating”) emergence.<sup>48</sup>

An interesting feature in Wessels’ work is that he opines in the end that Boesak is perhaps more colonial than he and many others interested in his work might realise. In fact, according to Wessels, Boesak is so outspoken that he ends up being stuck in an anti-colonial mindset that is mirroring

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46 Wessel Wessels, *Postcolonial Homiletics? Exploring Consciousness, Centres, and Identity for Preaching* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications), 2024.

47 Wessels, *Postcolonial Homiletics?* 15–67.

48 Demaine Solomons & Eugene Baron (eds.), *Liberating Black Theology – Emerging South African Voices* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2023). Examples of sources within the South African context who did in the past embrace this play of words (read: critical double movement) in their titles, are: John W de Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology – A South African Contribution to an Ecumenical Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); and Rian Venter & Francois Tolmie (eds.), *Transforming Theological Knowledge – Essays on Theology and the University after Apartheid* (Bloemfontein: Sun Media, 2012).

(the flipside of) a de facto colonial mindset.<sup>49</sup> Now, whether this is indeed the case, I am not so sure. I think this is something we need to question. Or let me rephrase: the lines might be more entangled and blurred than is often realised. If we need to differentiate more carefully between the two, then these distinctions should not end up in neatly separated categories.

Raising such critique – on any of the sources named thus far or coming – is supposed to be heard as “talk of a selfless revolution and a whisper.”<sup>50</sup> It is critical to ask questions in the form of soft and probing whispers to open it up and see what new insights might emerge. Or let me try yet again by saying for me it is often about going “after” Boesak (or any other theologian or source) in a (distinctive and contrasting) threefold manner.<sup>51</sup> This time

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49 Wessels, *Postcolonial Homiletics*? 40, and 83–84.

50 This is to indicate a slightly varied take on Boesak’s *Selfless Revolutionaries*, with which we have started at the beginning by now also bringing the famous lyrics of Tracy Chapman’s song, “Talkin’ Bout a Revolution,” into the mix to create a different sound and tone on a global ethic of solidarity and resistance. The first three lines of Chapman’s song read as follows: “Don’t you know / They’re talking about a revolution? / It sounds like a whisper.”

51 Once, twice, thrice “after” Boesak (or any other source) would mean that we first try to articulate as good as we can what is stated. In other words, before we give our response (whether it is merely to underline, question, or move on), do we hear and get what is communicated, and can we formulate it in such a way that it reflects his words? On the one hand, this is an attempt to listen anew – also for the whispers – and articulate a truthful account of what is heard in this process. And yet, on the other hand, it is also often easier said than done, because one is deeply aware and conscious of being introduced to “my ‘Boesak.’” My fingerprints are inevitably visible (and “all over him”) on how he is perceived (by me). Therefore, when one goes (as a “follower”) “after” one, there should also be the necessary checks and balances in place to be “after” someone in at least two other very distinctive ways. Whilst one starts with a commitment to listen and articulate only/mostly what was heard during this round of “following” (“after1”), we may thereafter also go after one in the form of speaking back, interrogating and questioning (“after2”), and see how the conversation can move along and beyond with a whisper of one’s

around, such a threefold going “after” Boesak implies that the introduction of (my) “Boesak” will now be followed by a typical postcolonial (double) move of “c/entering” his “preachy” contribution.<sup>52</sup> In short, there is a need to centre and enter Boesak’s preaching theology if we truly want to decolonise (the decolonisation of) Christian preaching in Africa. Therefore, a few brief, but I believe important indicators to articulate in listening to Boesak (centring him) – followed up by what can be raised as questions (entering him) on our way forward.

## 2. On “centring” some key characteristics of Boesak’s preaching theology?

What I appreciate about Boesak’s preaching theology and reckon to make an important contribution towards decolonisation of Christian preaching in Africa and beyond, are at least the following (and let me be daring and not only make three but) four points.

First, a recurring theme in his work, throughout the years, is the significant weight that the names of vulnerable people play in his work. For instance, 2009’s *Running with horses*, is (like many of his other works) filled with a repetitive chorus of names and stories of people like “Aunt Meraai Arendse,”<sup>53</sup> “Steve Biko and the children of Soweto,”<sup>54</sup> “Thabo Sibeko of Sebokeng,”<sup>55</sup>

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own (“after3”). Stated differently: If we follow Claudio Carvalhaes’ lead on the so-called “hermeneutics of the knees,” then what is proposed here, is nothing other than an attempt to bow, acknowledge, affirm, and respect what is right and necessary; but also, where to stand up, question, protest, and resist; as well as, where and when it is time to dance, move, even walk away, celebrate, and take a knee beyond all of this; see Claudio Carvalhaes, “Gimme de Kneebone Bent,” in *What’s Worship Got to Do with It? Interpreting Life Liturgically* (Eugene: Cascade, 2018), 142–160.

52 Simone Drichel, “The Time of Hybridity,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 34 (2008): 605.

53 Boesak, *Running with Horses*, 33.

54 Boesak, *Running with Horses*, 8.

55 Boesak, *Running with Horses*, 167.

“Bernard Fortuin of Elsie Rivier,”<sup>56</sup> or “like little twelve year old Johannes Pochter from Steytlerville,”<sup>57</sup> who are all integral in (re)forming our memories. For Boesak, “Soweto” is “a symbol,” “a consciousness,”<sup>58</sup> where we come to terms with the “Black Messiah”<sup>59</sup> whose “blackness” is more than a colour – “it is a condition” – in which they “bear the marks of Christ.”<sup>60</sup> This characteristic rhetorical move in Boesak’s oeuvre – to name their names and tell their stories – drills deeper into a profound theological insight, namely that “we hear the voice of God most clearly in the voice of the victims;”<sup>61</sup> or “We say it once more: justice denied to one is justice denied to all;”<sup>62</sup> or “you are not free [referring to whites] when they [blacks] are not free.”<sup>63</sup> In short, it is about this God who is in complete solidarity with people who suffer.

We can and need to differentiate between the history of suffering and the history of salvation, but they cannot be separated. There is “heilsgeskiedenis” (a history of salvation) for “huilsgeskiedenis” (a history of suffering). They are spelt differently and thus mean completely different things, and yet they sound so similar because you cannot come to terms with one without also hearing and knowing the other. In short, to summarise this point, Boesak sees how life in the sanctuary connects with life upon the streets where people are struggling to make a living. With one ear close to the mouth of God, and another to those who think they are forgotten in the gutters of society, Boesak can exegete and connect Word and world. Again, these names – like “Auntie Meraai Arendse,” or “Bernard Fortuin of Elsie River” – reveal what it is all about, namely how safe and content are the most vulnerable (exposed and marginalised) people in our midst. Let me state it

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56 Boesak, *Running with Horses*, 167.

57 Boesak, *Running with Horses*, 209.

58 Boesak, *Running with Horses*, 22.

59 Boesak, *Running with Horses*, 32–41.

60 Boesak, *Running with Horses*, 50–51.

61 Boesak, *Running with Horses*, 111.

62 Boesak, *Running with Horses*, 125.

63 Boesak, *Running with Horses*, 146.

in this way: when we assess and evaluate “being born free in the R.S.A.,” let us hear *their* names, listen to *them*, and be guided and judged by *them*. Or in Boesak’s own words: “We must not measure our progress by the comfort of the rich, but by the contentment of the poor ... those the Bible calls ‘the least of these.’”<sup>64</sup> The struggle is not primarily about issues and problems and policies per se, but about *people* – crying people in whom God hears His own Son’s cry – who, as the least among these, bear and resemble the image of God. This is nothing other than a (preaching) theology that is simultaneously at “the edge” of society, and therefore also with an/the edge in society. It represents the edges and seems so edgy – and yet it claims to have the edge (in more than one way) in society.<sup>65</sup>

Secondly, there is the agency to completely turn things around, and read and reclaim tradition against tradition. It is not about mere protest (where others – like the so-called “white liberals” or “enlightened Afrikaners” – speak and fight for us), but a call to refuse by taking control of the narrative and having pride in who we are.<sup>66</sup> We hear this, for instance, when he says,

“Instead of striving toward whiteness and all the symbolic political, economic and social ramifications of ‘being better,’ ‘moving upward,’ becoming ‘more acceptable,’ we celebrate our blackness, affecting that all-important reversal to all oppressed people. ... we took off the white masks and took pride in our black faces. ... from now on, our minds would be our own.”<sup>67</sup>

The flipside of this is not to be tempted and default into falling back on white liberal theology, but rather for a black church to stay conscious in taking responsibility for its own struggle, and be the architects of its own destiny.<sup>68</sup> It is not one’s words or even hearts that count, but your

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64 Boesak, *Running with Horses*, 242.

65 Allan Aubrey Boesak, “A hope unprepared to accept things as they are”: Engaging John de Gruchy’s challenges for “Theology at the edge,” *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif / NGTT* 55/1 (2014): 1055–1074.

66 Boesak, *Running with Horses*, 55.

67 Boesak, *Running with Horses*, 11.

68 Boesak, *Running with Horses*, 46.

active participation (“your body” in “the streets”) in the struggle for justice.<sup>69</sup> Therefore, “don’t mourn, mobilise;” and “while we mourn, let us commit ourselves to the struggle ... there are things we can do.”<sup>70</sup> In short, this is precisely what Boesak does in his life and work, namely, to unmask the injustice within a tradition and reclaim it for liberation. For instance, the same Bible that is used to oppress is now used to set us free. Or, if Apartheid’s theologians use Calvin and Kuyper to seek theological justification for their policies, then Calvin and Kuyper will be rediscovered and read anew to set them (as “great” theologians) and all of us (oppressor and oppressed) free.<sup>71</sup> Or, if you (and the likes of FW De Klerk, the TRC, or even Desmond Tutu) want to speak about Truth and Reconciliation, then let us remember reconciliation is “real, radical, revolutionary,” and subvert our piety towards the reradicalisation of what Desmond Tutu is all about – beyond political pietism and Christian quietism.<sup>72</sup> Or, if Barack Obama “preaches” “hope” during his USA presidential campaign in 2008 – “Yes, we can!” – then Boesak questions it by daringly asking, “Dare we speak of Hope?”, to which he immediately responds with the chorus that qualifies “*Only if* (we speak of woundedness) ... *Only if* (we speak of her children) ... *Only if* (we speak of struggle) [and-and-and].”<sup>73</sup> Or, to those who are so fond of Ubuntu, do they know that Ubuntu desperately needs more Ubuntu?<sup>74</sup> In short, this agency (“courage”) to reclaim and use the master’s tools to overthrow (expose and unmask – mimic) the master, is remarkably creative and powerful.

Thirdly, what about the issue of not being self-critical of your own movement and insights on various subject matters? Is he really like some kind of broken record, stuck on repeat or even in reverse (not moving

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69 Boesak, *Running with Horses*, 54; 211.

70 Boesak, *Running with Horses*, 170; 211.

71 Cf. Boesak, *Black and Reformed*, and especially 90–107.

72 Cf. Boesak & DeYoung, *Radical Reconciliation*, and especially 9–23, and 131–158.

73 Cf. Boesak, *Dare We Speak of Hope?* vii–viii.

74 Boesak, *Pharaohs on Both Sides of the Blood-Red Waters*, 117–146.

forward with the times), and like a broken watch at least (very briefly) right twice a day? Also, on this matter, I think there is more to Boesak than is often acknowledged. I highlight this not to idealise and romanticise what is seemingly there to be imitated and copied, but rather to give credit where credit is due and learn from what is the deeper drive and leitmotif in all of this. Several examples come to mind: For instance, 2024's *Cathedral Lectures* is a deliberate and conscious attempt to reflect and evaluate BTL after fifty years. So too is 2021's *Selfless Revolutionaries* a rereading and revision of earlier readings and insights into Biko, Black Consciousness, and Black Theology for our times. 2019's *Children of the Waters of Meribah* interrogates BTL's affinity for patriarchy and sexism. Returning to Scripture and the Exodus narrative, Boesak revises and recalibrates the complete nervous system and sensors of BTL's orientation and propelling movement into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. So too with 2017's *Pharaoh's on Both Sides of the Blood-Red Waters*, which latches onto Takatsho Mofokeng's concerning disillusionment of realising the Pharaohs are still there, even though they look like us (meaning: black). 2015's *Kairos, Crises, and Global Apartheid* is taking the struggle against Apartheid "beyond Apartheid" to the so-called "next level". Furthermore, as I referred to in the above, the same applies to the Obama's so-called reign of "hope" (with its optimism and opportunism) in which he tries to cast it in a completely different light with 2014's *Dare we speak of Hope* (which is, come to think of it, very much like 2012's critical response in *Radical Reconciliation* on the TRC and Tutu's [highjacked] "Rainbow Nation" that is partly chased, partly sold, for its [empty] promise of a pot of gold). Lastly, there is obviously more, but let me name one more telling example, namely what he did with the Belhar Confession (mostly in vain – and at his own expense and reputation) to claim some space for LGBTQ+ people within URCSA and other Reformed Churches who profess to embody the Confession of Belhar.<sup>75</sup>

Lastly, our fourth point of centring appreciation for Boesak's work, highlights another strong chorus which rings throughout reading a text

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75 Allan Aubrey Boesak, "To Stand Where God Stands. Reflections on the Confession of Belhar After 25 Years," in *Belhar Confession. The Embracing Confession of Faith for Church and Society*, edited by May-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel and Leepo Modise (Stellenbosch: African Sun Media, 2017), 421–439.

like *Selfless Revolutionaries*, namely the gift of “a more humane face” which longs to deal with the rest of the world. For instance: “The test is not just the placing of power in different hands, the test is the character of the new society, its humanness and inclusivity, its responsiveness to what one can call its continuing ubuntuification.”<sup>76</sup>

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76 Boesak, *Selfless Revolutionaries*, 6. This call towards a new and different kind of humanity resonates hereafter in phrases like the following: “Why is the historical fact of the creole nature of all South Africans, beginning with our DNA, of no account?” (88); “one of its [Black Consciousness] strongest weapons was its anti-tribalism, the antithesis of the tribalism so essential to apartheid domination and its non-racialism so essential to the creation of an alternative society and to the creation of a meaningful humanity” (112); and what we hope for “is not new forms of racialized consciousness, but the creation and nurturing of a new, open, and de-dichotomized human consciousness. This is not ‘post-racialism,’ but my understanding rather of non-racialism, as genuine, inclusive humanism” (121); “a truly human and humanized consciousness, [is] a way of life in response to each other’s human beingness, the embrace of each other in a common search for reconciled humanity, cherished diversity, and meaningful life” (123); “The point here, again, is to underscore that for Black Consciousness, this was the gateway to non-racial inclusivity. In the end, it was not ‘race’ that was the main determinant of a person’s being and existence, but a person’s humanitarian consciousness, their commitment to the liberation of all humanity” (146); “I will argue that that Biko’s ‘human face’ was never intended to be confined to ‘blackness’ as ‘racial’ category, and that this political understanding of blackness was always an inclusive Africanness” (190); “Why are Afro-centricity and Afro-plurality posited as mutually exclusive? And taking ‘de-colonised’ humanism seriously, why is indigeneity not a better concept for serving these goals?” (198); “In identity politics, blackness, or for that matter femaleness, or queerness, is politics without depth, without commitment, without principles. ... One’s blackness counts for nothing if it is not identification with the suffering of the black poor, the oppressed, and the left-behind. Blackness, without commitment to the struggle for that radically transformed, egalitarian society Black Consciousness envisioned, is what Black Consciousness derisively called ‘non-whiteness’” (206).

In sum: There you have at least four (among many) profound points in Boesak's oeuvre which underline his significance for anyone who is interested in a theme such as African Christian preaching and decolonisation. Centring on Boesak (anew) surely has a strong appeal. However, such a move, along with him, also calls to indicate places where one should perhaps enter with caution as we try to move along with him. Let us continue the talk about a *selfless revolution* "and whisper" which might cause a stir to spur us on ...

### 3. To be continued: Entering Boesak ...?

First, can it *be said* (critiqued), and even more importantly, can anyone raise these or other questions? I think it can (and is welcomed) but let me still rephrase – really trying to be sensitive – and ask about the "fragmentation," "orientation in a movement towards," being "underway" (instead of being arrived or stuck at a certain point) that is currently breathed within Boesak and South African Black Liberation Theology. To what degree does Black Liberation Theology crave liberation for itself? It is one thing to promise and do it for others, but do you not need it yourself? Or, let me phrase it like this: The "Pharaohs on both sides of the Blood-red Waters" are mostly (if not always) portrayed as "the other" (PW Botha or Cyril Ramaphosa), but should it not also serve as a mirror for yourself? When sin is predominantly a project about the other (and thus merely projected upon the other), then the (whitewashed) log in our own eyes leaves us with merely seeing the other as a (fearful black sheep and) scapegoat. Stated differently, what about recognising oneself in another? *Liberating Black Theology – Emerging voices* needs (to play with) the pun (and seek the ambivalence in the word play it provides, meaning also serious self-critique). Just as the Word of God is not a closed and static thing (a done deal), so too does BTL (or any other theology for that matter) need to constantly happen anew. Revelation is not possession, but a gift, and thus an actualism at work with which we cannot make absolute claims and final arrivals. One can obviously do so, but then it is *hubris* (pride; arrogance; you know it all; no need to question, ask, probe for more; or confess any wrongdoing). Such an "arrived," always on top of it, all figured out, with absolute certainty, neatly categorised positions, has as its flipside the seemingly opposite position of *sloth* – also not willing to push and go and probe "all the way." Whereas *hubris* might

think it is “god” who knows it all and has it all figured out (“arrived” but in fact “stuck”), so too with *sloth* that is just lazy and contends with being stuck (and thus arrived in another sense). Neither sloth nor hubris/pride see the need for constant revision, beginning with theology anew and fresh every morning.<sup>77</sup> In short, I might be wrong, completely wrong, but the seeming lack of self-critique of facing Pharoah’s image in the mirror in front of us, is at times concerning.

Second, what about the timing and “timed-ness” of BTL for our current situation? The truth question is seldom whether it is right or wrong, but whether it is the right word and mode of doing theology in this space and time. What might have been right and timely and timed might not be the case today. You might know what is right, but if you get the hour (the Kairos) wrong (the word for now), then it is (sorry to say) false. Stated differently, we need perhaps a greater sensitivity between differentiating the “know” from the “now”, and vice versa, the “now” in terms of what there is to “know”. Is what we “know” also what we *now* need to *know*?<sup>78</sup>

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77 Much of the critique raised here is inspired by Karl Barth’s theology. For Barth’s understanding of “The Word of God” and “Revelation,” see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1–2 (London: T&T Clark, 1956–1975); and for how pride and sloth are related, see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1–2 (London: T&T Clark, 1956–1975). For further commentary on Barth’s thoughts on “The Word of God” and “Revelation,” see Bruce L McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); and for an excellent recent discussion on Barth’s thoughts on sin manifesting as hubris and sloth within doing theology, see Hannah Reichel, *After Method. Queer Grace, Conceptual Design, and the Possibility of Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2023), 80–101. In short, I believe that such self-critique, which allows for more honesty and humility, is integral to rediscover our common humanity whereby we can put on together “a more humane face” within and for the world. For more guidance on such introspective and interdisciplinary talk, see Piet Naudé, *Pathways in Ethics. Justice – Interpretation – Discourse – Economics* (Stellenbosch: African Sun Media, 2016), 123–148.

78 Cilliers, *Timing Grace*, 10, 23, 41, 58–59, 93, 116, 209–210, and 225.

Obviously, there is more than one possible answer for our South African context, but at least it needs to grapple with and revisit the polarisation between “public theology” (in the plural) and “BTL.”<sup>79</sup> There are various and multiple reasons to question the unnecessary polarisation (even antagonism and suspicion) between these “two” (who is not supposed to be “two,” but actually much closer related and intimate than they think and pretend to be.)<sup>80</sup> Public theology does not (necessarily) share different roots in its genealogy with BTL, and the fruits of public theology have to do with BTL’s roots.<sup>81</sup> In the words of Heinrich Bedford Strohm, “Public Theology is Liberation Theology for a pluralistic liberal democratic society.”<sup>82</sup> Our complexity assumes interdisciplinary work (again, neither stuck in pride nor arrived in sloth), and thus it might be long overdue to acknowledge the mutation within the BTL trajectory of harvesting the fruits of becoming (and being) public theologians as well. In short, it is late in the day and thus time to celebrate how it “moved and continues to move” by constantly also

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79 Allan Aubrey Boesak, “Rebels at the lectern and in the pulpit: Hegemony, harmony, and the critical dimensions of intellectual and theological integrity,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa / JTSA* 162 & 163 (2019): 115–136, and specifically 130. So too the following articles of Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, “The elusive public of public theology: A response to William Storrar,” *International Journal of Public Theology* 5 (2011): 79–89; as well as “Why I am not a public theologian,” *The Ecumenical Review* 73(2) (2021): 297–315. For a further response on the latter article(s), see Dion Foster, “African Public Theology? A conceptual engagement to keep the conversation alive,” *In die Skriflig*, 56(1) (2022):a2849. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v56i1.2849>

80 Martin Laubscher, “The (demanding) history of South African public theology as prophetic theology,” *In die Skriflig* 56(1) (2022):a2856. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v56i1.2856>

81 Nico Norman Koopman, 2007. “Reformed theology in South Africa: Black? Liberating? Public?” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 1(3) (2007):294–306; and “Public theology as prophetic theology: More than utopianism and criticism,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa/JTSA* 134 (2009):117–130.

82 Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, *Liberation theology for a democratic society: Essays in public theology* (Zürich: LIT, 2018).

liberating and reinventing its own legacy for tomorrow. We are not done becoming theologians and preachers.

Third, Boesak is surely unto something beautiful in our fourth and last remark in the previous section (BTL's gift of offering the world a more humane face), but I wonder whether Yasha Mounk, political scientist and philosopher at Columbia, most recent work, *The identity trap – a story of ideas and power in our time*, might not add to this conversation by stepping into this space. According to Mounk, the current crises of identity politics (or as he says, the “identity synthesis”) is partly also due to a particular use of lines within postcolonial theory (Said and Babba), closely combined with a particular stream within postmodern philosophy (Foucault), and Kimberly Crenshaw's Critical Race Theory. All three are in themselves extremely valuable, but combined in a certain way, they seem to take us back to what he calls a very “familiar” strategic essentialism that at some stage enters and eventually stops any form of further conversation. Stated differently, according to Mounk, this “strategic essentialism” erodes and endangers the liberal “universalist” idea that we can indeed belong together.<sup>83</sup>

Let me try to phrase it in this way: We are more than the labels of either “the oppressor” or “the oppressed.” Such binary starting points will eventually (always?) categorise us in a hierarchical “black and white” manner. At first, it might not even be said, but at some point, such a strategic essentialism just kicks into order because of such “flawed” starting points. Strategic essentialism, it seems to me, assumes *Übermensch* and a Scapegoat. We are not only more than these “categories,” but we fit more than one, and even then, there are more fragments and sides to it than we may want to know or acknowledge.

Lastly, by way of conclusion, let me recall yet again the earlier work of Johan Cilliers in which he studied the hermeneutical structure and key characteristics of Apartheid preaching during the 1970s and 1980s in

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83 Yasha Mounk, *The Identity Trap. A Story of Ideas and Power in Our Time* (Dublin: Penguin Books, 2023).

South Africa.<sup>84</sup> After reading these sermons, three things emerged, namely the way in which we deal (or rather not deal) with history and our times – drawing flat lines between yesterday and tomorrow; the (“tamed”) biblical text and our sermons. Stated differently, it is to whitewash the text and history whereby “eternal” truths are not translated into becoming timely, timed and temporal to us. In short, it is nothing other than an escapism from dealing with the complexity of history’s different times, and thus it cannot be “whitewashed.” Secondly, it is to think that we can either only do it ourselves, or we are left to ourselves. In other words, nothing other than religious activism where it starts and end with us. As liberators, we too need to be liberated. We cannot save ourselves, or even better, be the Messiah for others. Again, depending on where you stand and look, it is either hubris (pride) or sloth (numbness) – in short, plain falsehood to think it is all there is – and (evidently or eventually) all up to us. Thirdly, we can only operate if there is some form of enemy or scapegoat to fear or oppose. It does not take much to recognise how this apartheid mindset mutates into whiteness, and it can also easily mutate into other modes of theologising.<sup>85</sup>

We have a lot more in common than we think (pun intended) – even if it is only now the fact that we hear the echo of Boesak’s opening words resonating with us in this space, namely “I was a preacher long before I was a writer and I still am so today.”

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84 Cilliers, *God for us?*

85 Martin Laubscher, *Wit issie ’n colour nie* (it is a “sermon”)! After preaching, faith formation, and whiteness in contemporary South Africa,” Stellenbosch Theological Journal 9(2) (2023): 1–21; and especially 7-12.

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