

The way through - II.

Interview with Allan Boesak

An interview between Rev. Joe Cochrane of the Dept. of Religious Studies, University of Cape Town and Dr Allan Boesak, Chaplain at the University of the Western Cape

Joe Cochrane

Allan, we are concerned in this discussion to try and get at what directions are crucial for Christians in South Africa today — in particular, as a theologian, the question of what direction theology should take if it is going to respond to the exigencies in a way that you feel is effective and true to the nature of theology itself in our context. So perhaps I can begin by asking you freely, what do you think is the most crucial thing to deal with at this point, a direction that the churches need to take?

Allan Boesak

I think that the churches and theology need to focus very particularly on what is generally called the struggle for liberation in South Africa. Now I do want to say that this may become a cliché so easily, but when one thinks of the processes which are going on in our society — if one begins to understand what the school boycotts, the strike of the workers, the whole situation of unrest, generally, economically — what is this all about, you begin to ask yourself the question, if there is a role for the church, what is the role of the church? If there is a role for theology, what is the role of theology? I think that we should begin to understand what the struggle for liberation is all about, who are we, young people, military people, workers — how they find themselves involved, who are we willing to put our lives on the line, willing to put our lives on the line (which means this is not a theoretical discussion at all). It is not a thing that one can write a theology about sitting behind your desk. It is a thing that seems to me becomes meaningful and real only when one becomes part of what is happening out there.

For example, the other day we had a pretty busy meeting in one of the Townships. What they were meeting, the students had a confrontation with the police, there was stone throwing and things like that. The parents knew that the minister, the elders were having a church meeting.

They came and listened on the steps of the church and said, you people made these things come out, where is the church, now we want to see where the church is. They knew where the church was sitting. They knew the church was sleeping. They knew

the church had urgent business to attend in looking at the business of the different congregations in their presbytery. But they called out the church. They said, please come out here and stand alongside these children and their parents as that the police ran see, and we can see, where you are. So you see the chairman had to stop the meeting. They had to say, OK, let's forget about our agenda. And I would like to say, they do cover the real agenda. The real agenda was not talking about what the church should be about inside. The real agenda was in the matter of those people, facing the police with those people, facing the dogs and facing the batons. Needless to say, that presbytery meeting was a different thing which finally they reconvened about 2 - 4 hours later. This is what I am talking about.

✓ If we talk about theology in South Africa today, we are talking about people, the church, theologians being in the midst of those fighting for their rights, being charged by the police, being injured and things like that. And I think that is the beginning of theology for the churches in South Africa.

J.C.

In other words you are saying that with the church engaged itself in the issues that are affecting the lives of the people it is with hope even if it is not going to be doing theology as it should be doing for the kind of situation facing South Africa?

Boesak

I think so. That is the beginning. I think the task of the church is to be very clear about what I would call its Babylonian captivity. It is not possible, really, to be involved with the struggle of the people unless you begin to understand what the struggle is all about. Unless you begin to understand how much the church has become part of that problem, part of that struggle in the negative sense. It is not for nothing that people in the streets are saying, the church is on the other side, or, where is the church? In fact, you see, we begin to defend the church there, saying the church is really with you and will make a statement or the piper will die. What we are defending is not what people are saying against it, what they are saying out there, is that we accept that the people in the street who are fighting and come to church every Sunday, wanting that is the church. The church is not the ministers and the deacons and the elders and the boards — and the church is not the people who stand aside with a bible in their hand and ask the questions, should a Christian be

involved? The church really is those people who are involved, who are being shot at. That is where the church is and that is a Babylonian captivity of the church.

But on the other side the Babylonian captivity of the church means itself in the fact — a sobering thought when you begin to think about it — that, in most of the Western countries of the world and also South Africa if the capitalist structure should collapse, the Church will collapse. It means that (and I don't think anybody can deny it) that we are in part of the capitalist structure in South Africa, we have absorbed so much of the way of life of the capitalist society, of the power structures of the capitalist society that we won't know what to do if all of a sudden we awaken to find that the structure is no longer there. This is the Babylonian Captivity of the Church. We have absorbed the power structures of the world to such an extent that if you analyse the levels on which power is effected and exercised in the world, you will find that in the way we're being done is effected and exercised in the church. And it seems to me that if theology wants to begin anywhere I will have to begin at this point — recognising this and trying to develop ways and means of how we as the church may begin to liberate ourselves from this captivity.

J.C.

Now if I may press you fairly severely you don't about economy, what would I think, in particular, what would the leadership of the church need to do in order for all to get beyond our own limited spheres. How would they engage with this in a manner of class, with workers, for example, or the students who are becoming?

How would they acquire the sophisticated understanding what they are dealing with without first wanting to do something or a class to emerge and then they demand class fees or class understand the situation, please think more carefully about it. When do they get the message here, how do they change themselves?

Boesak

I think that is one of the most difficult questions. One can begin by saying the church must open itself up. We should become people oriented, and by that I mean we should begin to concentrate on making a point of going to those people, getting the women who are part of the church, inviting them in, asking for their advice, their opinion of the way we run our church.

I think we would begin by getting people who can bring to the church a different

ness of what we are involved in. I say this because in the church, really, the people who are the opinion makers are the money bags. Poor people have very little say in the church. workers have very little say in the church. We will not begin to understand our situation, if in times which can not be called times of crisis, (they're not normal but they are not times of crisis), we are not open, we do not let these people begin to feel that in the church they have something to say — that they can bring awareness to bear on the church, on the way we run the church, on our community in the church, on our worship in the church, on our sermons in the church. It seems to me the preaching — everything — has to be changed. We have to ask again, if in the way that we are doing things now, the church as a church is being included? I think we could begin there. Whether it will work is of course another matter.

I think we need also, and therefore we should create room for what I would call the necessary but creative confrontation of the Church. In the church you have rich guy and you have the worker who works for him. How has it been possible for the guy who owns the factory, the man who owns the labourer to be sitting in that church peacefully side by side, with the people he exploits? I think it should have been impossible for those people, under our circumstances in a capitalist society, to worship side by side without confrontation being a part of the worship. It hasn't been.

J C

What you are saying seems to imply that in effect, there are two sides within the church as well as in the South Africa as a whole. The division runs through both church and state, if you like, and not between them. And yet most people, lets put it this way, most leaders in the church, for a long time, and particularly in this time of increasing war mentality and preparation, believe that reconciliation is the crucial thing and not confrontation. How does one reach these leaders with the kind of message you have?

Boesak

Church leaders are leaders. I think sometimes precisely because we have developed into a fine art the ability not to be confronted with these issues we are talking about. That is why they are leaders.

J C

So its not going to come from that direction?

Boesak

No, not at all. You know, what I believe we should have in the church, what is absolutely necessary, is what I would like to call an ecclesiastical guerilla. A group of people who are aware, concerned, who know what the issues are, are involved in the struggle for liberation, are part of the struggle, part of the community of the poor and the oppressed —

Because they have committed themselves to this liberation.

Many times in Europe, for instance, these people leave the institutional church, they say we have run up against a wall. In Holland you have groups that call themselves Basic Communities. In Latin America you have got Base Communities. There is a difference between them. In Holland the basic communities have withdrawn from the church almost. They have their own liturgy, they meet, have discussion groups, and they challenge the institutional church almost from the outside. Or they tend to ignore the institutional church. In Latin America the base communities are the church, and they are the popular communities. What we need in South Africa is, it seems to me, this kind of group, concerned people who are in the church and who will challenge the institutional structure of the church all the time on these issues. Who will be a presence, a disturbing presence if you wish.

We need groups of people who will commemorate the fact that so many Christians all over the country, all through our history, have died in the struggle, have been exiled while being in the struggle, have been detained while being in the struggle. This has almost never happened in the church in the sense that we say — well they were active Christians, they were the church. Their memory must be brought into the Church, must become part of our life in the church, because they were part of and they still are part of the church.

This is what Johann Baptiste Metz I think called the subversive memoria. It is subversive in the sense that it disturbs the easy wonderful flow of things in the church. It goes against the kind of reconciliation that becomes an ideology because it tends to avoid the confrontation so absolutely necessary, tends to avoid the fact that before you even talk about reconciliation you must recognise that there is alienation. This avoids that reconciliation — in scripture in the life of the church, all through history — is a costly thing involving blood and life and death and resurrection — pain.

One of the problems we have in the church is that we want to be more "Christian" than the Bible, and therefore we tend to be nice and kind and lovely, because that is "Christian". We forget that the Bible talks about a Christian community that can only come to the existence through the pain of discovery of yourself, discovering you captivity, seeing how alienated we are from God and one another, how we are part of the problem, how we are part of other people's death (and unless we see that we will not become part of other people's life). It is that kind of thing that we are talking about.

J C

Yes, now Allan, the New Testament certainly contains evidence, in the Pauline letters and the gospels, of very deep seated and open

confrontation. So it is certainly not a model untypical of the New Testament. But when you put it together with what you call the liberation struggle we find many people saying that this is no longer the gospel, but is becoming, for instance in our situation, a revolutionary version of marxism, trying to take over this church. This raises the question of marxism itself, because it has had so much publicity, it seems to be widespread among many Black groups. How does the church relate to this issue in the eighties, particularly given the kind of transformation that has occurred in Zimbabwe?

Boesak

Well, you see you talk about Zimbabwe and this poses a challenge for the church in a number of ways. I think Zimbabwe and the man called Mugabe, has all of a sudden brought into very sharp focus the kind of problems the Christian Church in South Africa has created for itself.

I once asked the question (I will ask it again one of the things we have to deal with in the eighties) why is capitalism a Christian word? I mean, why is it that if any body confesses he is a capitalist that's enough, then he is a Christian — he doesn't have to explain himself. But when somebody says, you know I think I am a socialist and a Christian, he needs to explain himself. There are many number of books written by people who call them socialists and Christians who felt the need to explain to the Christian Church in general why they have made this choice. That is one thing.

The other thing is that we have become so much part of our own South African set-up that we believe everything told us about Robert Mugabe (you mentioned Zimbabwe, I'm taking that up now). But here you find this Marxist who was the equivalent of the Devil and a murderer of children and all the other things we were told he was. And one of the things he does is to make a Christian Minister President of his Country.

Next, he talks about reconciliation, about not letting revenge take over, not even allowing revenge to get a foothold in your heart, he says, and in our national life because once we allow it in that small little place it will eventually take over your whole life and our country. So what he is doing, is telling Black Christians what about you now. Now I must deal with that forgiveness Mugabe is talking about and I'm not sure how well I will fare with that, I must admit. . . . I'm not sure whether I am ready at this stage to talk about that kind of forgiveness vis a vis whites in general that Mugabe talks about. But this is a Marxist. So all of a sudden, here you have a Marxist, who is talking a Christian language, and South Africa and the Christian Church and the Christian community in this country must be able to deal with that. There is another thing.

Also it is no longer possible to write off Latin American Christians, saying, oh well

you know they are not really Christians because they are Marxists. Some of them are at pains to explain to you why they are using Marxist analysis to deal with the economic situation in their countries. And they say — but you know, I'm doing this as a Christian. And of course after the book of Jose Miranda about Marx and the Bible, one would have to think twice about this whole thing.

So I would like to say that, at least the Christian Church in South Africa can no longer run away from that problem, can no longer avoid discussion on this thing, can no longer avoid the truth of the matter that many many young Black Christians are saying that in order to understand the South African economic situation you have to use a Marxist analysis. It seems to me that the churches have to come to terms with the reality of all this, and as the question: How can we as the Christian Church deal with this reality? And how we will come out is anybody's guess.

J C

It seems fairly clear that the authorities in our land are seeing the future — at least in the eighties, in terms of a total onslaught against South Africa. While the government and many leaders of South Africa in business and other areas, attempt to develop what has been called a total, national strategy to counter this supposed total onslaught.

This in itself is already a confrontation situation. It's a war situation we are told, and in the light of what you are saying it has severe implications for the Church. The question I want to ask is: Does the church have to see itself on one particular side? (the government) has already indicated that it regards Theology of Liberation as part of the total onslaught.

Boesak

Well, the church will once again have to make a very painful choice. Either the church finds itself on the side of the oppressed, or it finds itself on the side of the oppressor. If the oppressor has decided that the gospel of liberation is part of a total onslaught on the existing order in South Africa then it seems the choice for the church is very clear.

It is impossible to deny the liberation that the gospel offers humanity, it is impossible to deny the inevitability with which people inspired by the gospel, will march towards that liberation. And it's impossible not to recognise that the Church cannot be neutral in all this, and yet, then to go and stand on the side of the oppressor, because of — for instance — the advantages that the existing order offers the Christian Church. And it seems to me that this is a painful choice one which the church can not only make once. As the situation develops and as the government discovers new ways to make their total strategy effective, and as one thing fails and another thing is tried out, the Church will be called once again, and again and again, to make this fundamental choice. For instance there was a time when one could

almost say, the choice was very simply a choice against white South Africa, for Black South Africa. The thing has shifted in the meantime. We find the government is trying to bring blacks into economic privilege. Some Blacks, like the so-called coloured group, will become part of the politically privileged group here. So the choice is no longer simple. The more complicated situation, the harder it becomes for the church to make this kind of choice.

And it seems to me it requires a lot of sophistication from the church. I would like to think that the church understands this. I would hope that the church understands it. It seems to me that what we have in South Africa is a clear shift away from the simple Black and White colour politics towards what you see developing a core of privileged people around which you find several layers of protection: the economy, the military, even the legal system in this country. And the choice, the very agonizing choice for the Christian Church in this country is whether or not it will be co-opted to become yet another layer of protection around that small group of privileged people in this country which will no longer be merely white, but will also have a sprinkling of Blacks (just to make it more difficult for the church).

Basically it seems to me people have to look not merely at justice, so called, being done to people in general, but the criterion for the church will have to be that justice which is being done to what the Bible calls, The least of my brethren. The people at the very bottom of the ladder. Now unless basic justice is done to them equivalent to what is being done to everybody else, then it seems clear. But I'm not sure whether the church in this country understand this.

J C

There is a little bit of terminology confusion here. You said the church is where the people are struggling at a very basic level at the same time talking about the church as a layer of protection. So it seems to me we are talking about the present reality of the institutional church on the one hand and what you say needs to be the direction for the future on the other.

Boesak

OK fine

J C

One last comment, or interesting note to make on what you have just said. To date, in this country, we have not had anyone in the churches at any level whose task is quite simply to understand and interpret to the Churches the legislation that goes through parliament. This would seem to me one of the basic ways of becoming sophisticated. But leaving that aside I want to ask you another question.

You are a chaplain to a University, a so-called "Bush College"; you are also teaching in a seminary. What are the implications of all that you have been saying for the formal theological education of the church which produces most of those who teach, speak, preach and who lead at this point?

Boesak

Theology should be informed, to begin with, by what is happening around us. In other words do not start your thinking about theology by taking a text book. Start your thinking about theology by asking: What is happening around you? How do you understand that? and how do you interpret that? Once you have their understanding you should begin to ask: what does this tell you about the Church, God, the Bible? About yourself? About the role that you think you ought to play?

I think that theological training as we have had it up to now is a disaster. It does not equip us for the kind of dilemmas that we are faced with as a church now. You mentioned for instance, the fact that the church is lacking someone to merely look at the kind of legislation that is being passed in parliament. Because you see in the church we think that has nothing to do with our theological training. It seems to me we should begin to be informed not only by what people are doing at the grassroots level, but also by what goes on with those in power, and to take these two things and put them into the perspective of what we understand the gospel to be all about. I think if we can begin there we might begin to do theology differently, even in our formal training.

J C

One last question Alan. Perhaps a very brief answer is all that is necessary. What do you see as the most important direction for yourself in the next 10 years?

Boesak

Not to teach theology! (laughter from both) Really, but to be a minister in the church. The last year or so has made that very clear to me.

Where it is happening it seems to me is amongst people, to be challenged by people when you have had your Sunday sermon, to be challenged by those about whom you talk outside, with whom you are involved, on behalf of whom you say you are speaking. It is impossible for me to write anything theological anymore without that kind of group of people around me, challenging, criticising, informing, asking questions. That is what I would like to do.

J C

Thank you very much.