

The South Africa Collection

No.4: Response to 'Black and Reformed' by Allan Boesak

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Boesak's brilliant exposition of liberation theology in the reformed tradition is sharply interfaced with a dynamic analysis of the psychotic elements implicit in the very ground of religion itself. The suggestion is made that the Christian religion and the inter-group strife in South Africa are mirror codifications of the same primitive processes of psychotic human defences..

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Response to 'Black and Reformed'

by Allan Boesak

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In a review of Allan Boesak's book "Farewell to Innocence" on one of the fly leaves of this particular volume the reviewer notes that Boesak

"urges a reversal of much 20th century materialism 'to recapture what was sacred in the African community long before white people came - solidarity, respect for life, humanity, community' ."

The reviewer seems to indicate that Boesak is offering a regressive reversal to idealised dream-time as some kind of pseudo way forward into the future. If we read the construct as itself a psycho-dynamic symbol, psychotically dissociated from its ground, then it makes more sense. If we wish to move towards a position of higher level integration we need to regress to pre-trauma levels of unification and then rework the impingement which leads to the defensive splitting in the human psyche, so egressing into the here and now with a higher level of consciousness than heretofore. The process of centration, of primal integration is precisely not carried through by a quasi-historical return to the time of innocence as a species. It is as if a Freudian preacher suggested that what was required was a return to the primal horde before the death of the first father, followed by a living as if our history had not happened.

"... white anxiety increases. Whites think they can consolidate their own safety by neutralizing and oppressing the symbol of their anxiety: blacks. This oppression, however, creates hate and bitterness that become visible in society. These, in turn generate increased anxiety and confusion among whites. But this is not a vicious circle. It is, rather, a plunging spiral." [p 5f.]

If colonisation represents the imposition on other populations of the defence structures inherent in the psychosis of the dominant race, then de-colonisation demands, follows, and necessitates the deconstruction of the defence system of the dominant. In so far as that progresses just so far is the dominant group subjected to the irruption of psychotic anxiety from the roots of its repressed psychic core. Initially as that psychotic anxiety rises so the old projection mechanisms are reinforced and the carriers of the anxiety defence victimisation become even more deeply victimised, alienated, repressed, oppressed, cut off, denied, exported across the boundary in some scapegoating carrier-ship. The reinforcement of the defence structure is a sign of the weakening of the construct. So increased defences actually belie decreased effectiveness of the construct and actually increase the anxiety unleashed within the social system. Fascinating that Boesak takes the symbol of the plunging spiral, the vortex, the whirlpool, that terrifying whirlpool of blackness sucking down into the abyss, to fall into which is to risk chaos and annihilation, in withdrawal from which stands the direction of the religious community, in plunging through which lies the hope of our birth.

"... the struggle in South Africa is not merely political; it is also moral. The struggle is not merely against an oppressive political and exploitative economic system; it is also a struggle for the authenticity of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The struggle is as much against a political philosophy and practice as it is against a pseudo-religious ideology." [p.23]

There are always two participants in a struggle and a struggle is never seen as a one-sided event. They struggle together and in that sense the struggling going on between black and white, the struggling of the system is precisely a struggle for the authenticity of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The battle is about the preservation, or otherwise, of the defence structures embedded within the religious gospel. The defences of splitting into black and white, life and death, good and bad. The structures of the gospel which involve the alienation of an out-group and their condemnation to hell, the elevation of the in-group and their certainty of heaven. The structure of the gospel which implies the psychotic projection of hurt parts of humanity onto some scapegoat carrier on the boundary, so that the actual sufferer never has to deal with those parts from which they are now distanced in the ritual. I suggest that the whole system in struggle is precisely wrestling with the issue of the preservation or breakdown of the psychosis of the gospel.

"'That all may be whole' - these are very beautiful words, not only because they echo so much of what the gospel of Jesus Christ is all about, but also because they echo so much of the African understanding of life. This is indeed a very fitting and gripping theme. We know from the gospel that wholeness of life is with Jesus Christ; without him, life is somehow just not worth living. Life is somehow empty. Without him, human fulfilment cannot be achieved."
[p.42]

Boesak rightly endorses wholeness as the goal of the struggle. The problem lies in the origin of wholeness and the paradigm of wholeness which are themselves the holders of brokenness. First the paradox. The concept of wholeness as an echo of so much of the African understanding of life, which has echoes with the comments about that which was sacred in the African community long before the white people came, solidarity, respect for life, humanity and community. There are certain facets of pre-white African ideology which are quite different culturally from the post-white construct but to hold that culture up in itself as an epitome of wholeness is a deluded dream. I was certainly not aware that the Bushmen were afforded any better deal in the face of the invading Zulu and Xhosa than were the latter when faced by the white invasion. Perhaps the Kalahari desert was the appropriate homeland for the Bushmen in the apartheid system that was already in place in the Cape before the whites discovered it. Inter-tribal conflict was as acute in those days as it is today. We do not have a time in human history in which innocence, solidarity, wholeness, community ruled. The myth of unfallen humanity, living in some Garden of Eden in a state of innocence affords a psychotic delusion when it is held up as a goal or objective towards which man in his brokenness is somehow urged to progress. If only the Dutch Reformed Church repudiated apartheid, if only the whites hadn't come, if only, if only, if only we could return to the womb then everything would be all right. Religion as the reified ritual of the 'if only' diverts all our energy from the problems of solving the situation as it is. Hypothetical constructs are a flight from reality.

Then in the very next sentence Allan Boesak unmasks a paradox. Wholeness was apparently to do with the African understanding of life before the whites came who brought the gospel of Jesus Christ, but we know from the gospel that wholeness of life is life with Jesus Christ, without him there is no wholeness. Strange that African society, which was so whole was obviously not whole, since wholeness came in the gospel of Jesus. So wholeness came to Africa in the construct of the white invader, but the invasion of the white with his construct destroyed the wholeness which was Africa - so Boesak is trying to have his wholeness and eat it. The problem is that by asserting that without Him human fulfilment cannot be

achieved, is to lay down axiomatic assumptions about the way forward into wholeness which do not in fact bear scrutiny, since the unwholeness of the Christ is precisely matched to the psychotic unwholeness of homo sapiens, who in his wisdom generates the brokenness which is apartheid. The Christian religion and the inter-group strife in South Africa are codifications of the same primitive psychotic human defences. One is not the antithesis of the other. Rather they are mirror images. No solution to the problem can possibly be found by moving from one side of the mirror image to the other, from one pole of idealisation and repression to its antithesis. This kind of revolutionary behaviour is simply a rearrangement of the dynamic, a movement in a circle, a redistribution of pain. The resolution of the problem of South Africa, and in parenthesis the problem of the world, does not move and progress through conversion reactions.

Next we have two quotations illustrating some of the unjust dysfunctionality of violence in South Africa.

"... violence that means, for example, that a black man who takes a bride today will be forced tomorrow to leave her behind in some desolate homeland if he finds work in a white city. He will not be able to take her with him without contravening the law, and will see her only for a couple of weeks at the end of the year when he returns for vacation. This systemic violence breaks up black family life." [p.44]

"This systemic violence operates in an educational system that, if it allows black children to go to elementary and high school at all, then permits the government to say, 'These children cannot go to a white university, because they lack the competence'. That is not merely a racist statement, but a statement of fact, because 'Bantu' or black African education is so inferior that it does not prepare one for university education. The basic dictum underlying black education in South Africa, as maintained by Dr. Verwoerd in the 1950s, is still true: black children must not get the kind of education that will give them the idea that they can have the same position as white children in South African society." [p.44]

My sense is that while in South Africa we have these social attitudes elevated into the reified position of legal statutes the same processes are also observable in other cultures, for instance in the class structure. Pressure on someone from one class to marry within the class is quite massive and if they marry outside the class then they are either alienated from their own class or have to cut off the parts of the spouse which are non-culturally coherent. They have to be left behind in some other place. The processes of group matching are universal. They are also epitomised in certain religious structures, not least within the Islamic tradition.

With respect to education again we have the same kind of problem in the working class communities of East London where the state has said quite clearly that we will not educate the working classes above their status lest they think that they can take up a position within the society of the British nation which is above their position in life. At times this has been an intentional and articulate policy, at other times it has simply been a way of working that has gone unnoticed. The effects are devastating. The child, educated and brought up in a working class area, has very little chance of getting a high place at university, whatever their ability, simply because the educational standard of the schools from which they come cannot equip them to compete effectively for places which they by dint of innate ability actually deserve. So the working class ethos and its aspiring leadership are contained by educational deprivation. Now I am not going to say that the situation in East London is anywhere near as severe as it is in South Africa, I am simply saying that the same tendencies are observable. The South African context is one in which the psychoses of the world are writ large, it is not unique.

"African churches all too often still cling to a pietistic, other-worldly religiosity that has no bearing on the present situation in the world. In doing this we not only deny the lordship of Christ, but forget that this is the kind of theology that justified our slavery and oppression right through history to the present. The church in Africa needs liberation in order to become an authentic healing agent of God in the world." [p.75]

Elsewhere Boesak indignantly proclaims that integration is not simply holding hands and saying black and white together. Regression within a pietistic cultus to a condition of psychic unification in which splits and alienation are denied is itself a fundamental defence and flight from the realities of the here and now. The problem is that the lordship of Christ is precisely a construct that facilitates this kind of regression. To re-enter and recover paradise, to go back into the womb of our dream-time may, for those who go back, generate some sense of anxiety release and euphoria and a sense of unity and all being together but it is at the expense of the maintenance of the boundary of persecutory scapegoating, epitomised by the Christ. It is at the expense of the differentiation between the in-group and the out-group and one goes to hell, and provided the in-group knows that it is in heaven it doesn't care a damn. The lordship of Christ leads to the perseveration of splitting in the social process. It blocks the very possibility of integration, liberation and humanity, wholeness and healing, for in the insidious spread of the systemic psychosis from the middle Eastern basin, man's inhumanity to man is reified and perpetuated. I sense that the solution of the problem of South Africa will involve the dissolution, the de-construction of the world religions and their fundamental ideologies, the unpicking of systemic psychosis and the emergence of human wholeness on a totally different level, integrated as world citizens, withdrawing from the psychotic objects of deification their power, their dependency, their responsibility. Daring to be whole persons in a whole world.

I find myself endorsing Boesak's objectives yet standing over against him in ultimate antithesis to his direction, his ideology and his methodology. The re-reformation of the church is a displacement, a distraction, a false trail in the desperate search for the path leading to the re-formation of humanity.

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