

The Reception of Bonhoeffer by Boesak in South Africa

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What difference, if any, does it make when Bonhoeffer is examined, not through analyses from the rich, global North, but, as Bonhoeffer himself sought to do, ‘from below’, from the viewpoints and experiences of oppressed communities?¹

ABSTRACT

In this article I ask about the reception of Bonhoeffer in South Africa, more particularly by Allan Aubrey Boesak. I argue that Bonhoeffer plays a key role in Boesak’s life and thought. In fact, the *leitmotifs* of Boesak’s life and thought – *Jesus is Lord* – to *stand – with God* – in the hour – are linked to the life and thought of Bonhoeffer. Boesak, I argue, deliberately deals with fragments of Bonhoeffer’s life and thought and has brought these fragments into dialogue with Black Liberation Theology. Asking about Boesak’s reception of Bonhoeffer in this light might allow those of us who want to *do* theology from below, from below, to go with Bonhoeffer beyond Bonhoeffer – that is, to stay true to Bonhoeffer’s reception, to stay true to *receiving* his life and thought. This also allows for the asking of questions related to European theology in Africa.

Introduction

There are many ways to ask about the reception of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in South Africa.² This question has often been asked, particularly by academics. In an article

- 1 Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Kairos, Crisis, and Global Apartheid. The Challenge to Prophetic Resistance* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 5.
- 2 Cf. also Russel Botman, “Is Bonhoeffer Still of Any Use in South Africa?”, in *Bonhoeffer for a New Day: Theology in a Time of Transition*, J.W. De Gruchy ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1997), 366-372, and Robert Vosloo, “Interpreting Bonhoeffer in South Africa? The Search for a Historical and Methodological Responsible Hermeneutic” in *Bonhoeffer and Interpretive Theory: Essays on Methods and Understanding*, Peter Frick ed. (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2013), 119-142. Cf. also John W. de Gruchy, “Bonhoeffer in South Africa, an Exploratory Essay by John W. de Gruchy” in *Bonhoeffer: Exile and Martyr*, John W. de Gruchy ed. (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), 26-42; *Bonhoeffer and South Africa: Theology in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1984); “The reception of Bonhoeffer’s theology”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, John W. De Gruchy ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 93-112; “Bonhoeffer, Apartheid, and Beyond: The Reception of Bonhoeffer in South Africa” in *Bonhoeffer for a New Day. Theology in a Time of Transition*, John W. de Gruchy ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1997), 353-365; “With Bonhoeffer, beyond Bonhoeffer. Transmitting Bonhoeffer’s Legacy” in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s*

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