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### Allan Aubrey Boesak, With Foreword by Nicholas Wolterstorff, Dare We Speak of Hope? Searching For A Language of Life in Faith and Politics. Reviewed by Travis Pickell

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**Allan Aubrey Boesak, with foreword by Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Dare We Speak of Hope? Searching for a Language of Life in Faith and Politics***

(Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014). xiv + 202 pp. £11.99/US\$18.00 ISBN 978-0-8028-7081-0 (pbk)

**Reviewed by:** Travis Ryan Pickell, University of Virginia, USA

‘Hope’ has become something of a catchword in contemporary civic and political discourse. In 2006, then-Senator Barack Obama published *The Audacity of Hope*, his visionary manifesto, which was followed two years later by now-iconic presidential election campaign posters, boldly and simply proclaiming ‘HOPE’ to masses of American voters. Over the past decade, we have witnessed the powerful enthusiasm the promise of hope can bring to a civil society desperately longing for a hope-filled politics.

Even so, there are those who would warn against an easy alliance between hope and politics. Some, we might call them ‘realists’, believe that political hope must be severely chastened. The realm of politics aims merely at forestalling the ‘worst-imaginable’ possibilities by attending to the ‘art of the possible’. Better not to raise your hopes too high. Others, rather cynically, claim that politics is an essentially hopeless endeavour, where deceit reigns in the acquisition of power, and where power, once possessed, corrupts its holder. Then there are political activists who fear that hope—especially religious hope—tends to distract believers from the hard work of politics, resulting in a disengaged and otherworldly quietism. For the realist, hope is dangerous. For the cynic, hope is naïve. For the activist, hope is an opiate.

Allan Aubrey Boesak, one of South Africa’s most prominent anti-apartheid activists in the 1980s, stands against each of these views. His book offers a unique and valuable perspective for debates about the relationship between hope, specifically Christian hope, and politics. His enquiry is framed by two recent political events of historic significance: Nelson Mandela’s election as the first post-apartheid president of South Africa and the election of Barack Obama, the United States’ first African-American president. The reader gets the sense that, for Boesak, these events were marked by a sense of hope bordering on euphoria, which was followed by a sense of disappointment. Did these men promise too much or were the expectations placed upon them too high? *Dare We Speak of Hope?* asks ‘what it means to believe in hope’ in the midst of ‘these political realities’ (p. 13, emphasis added).

Boesak's book is separated into six chapter-length essays, followed by a concluding epilogue. By their very titles, each chapter indicates both the challenges and the necessity of attending to hope in the political realm. So, for example, chapter 1 is entitled 'Dare We Speak of Hope? Only if We Speak of Woundedness'. Here Boesak answers the common critiques of hope's purported naïveté, otherworldly escapism, Pollyannaish optimism or dangerous triumphalism with a reflection on the way that *true* hope can only be found on the far side of vulnerable engagement with and against the concrete injustices in the world. This short chapter exemplifies the theologically eclectic and ad hoc method adopted throughout the book. Boesak moves effortlessly from an account of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's vulnerable solidarity with the oppressed, to a biblical exegesis of 'glory' in Romans 5, to a reflection on a congregational letter of encouragement sent by a seventeenth-century English slave-woman, to the traditional beliefs of the Khoi-Khoi people of South Africa, to the concerns of contemporary feminist theologians, all interspersed with personal experiences of resisting political oppression in apartheid South Africa.

This demonstrates the difficulty in classifying a work like the present one. It is filled with personal narrative and examples from Boesak's well-known political activism, but it is not an autobiographical memoir. It is closer to what Nicholas Wolterstorff labels (in the Preface) a 'theology *in concreto*' (p. xi). Boesak draws consistently upon Christian scriptures, at times delving into detailed biblical exegesis and word studies of the original Greek and Hebrew text, but this is not properly a work of biblical studies. Boesak draws upon historical and contemporary theology, but he typically does so less in the manner of an historian of doctrine (seeking a *de dicto* interpretation which is absolutely faithful to the author's intention) and more in the manner of, perhaps, a political theologian (thinking with and beyond the original author, on the level of a *de re* interpretation). In terms of genre, the essays in the volume might be best characterised as 'prophetic sermons'. While they aim to shed light on the nature of Christian hope as it relates to political life, they do not intend merely to convey *information* to the reader, but rather to aid in *transformation* of the reader. In Boesak's own words, 'I have tried to avoid discussing hope as if it were a systematic theological or esoteric philosophical category' (p. 19). 'Hope is not an intellectual concept, something we comprehend after careful study, observed through the permutations of scientific analysis, created in esoteric academic debate. Hope is not a religious construct, disconnected from the lives and struggles of God's little people. No, Hope makes herself known *in encounter* with suffering and struggle' (p. 70, emphasis original). It is *this* encounter towards which Boesak consistently and powerfully points the reader.

As sometimes happens, the weaknesses of this volume are but the inverse of its greatest strengths. In his emphasis on hope as a *lived* phenomenon and his eschewal of 'systematic' and 'esoteric' philosophical analysis, Boesak tends towards ambiguity and lack of precision. In the end, the reader knows that Boesak desires a hope-filled engagement with politics, but it is not always clear what Boesak means by 'politics', and upon what object or objects one's hopes should be based. The lack of precision makes it seem, at times, as if hope is made to do too much, to stand in for other important concepts. At one point Boesak states that hope's 'birthplace' is the cross. By this he means that genuine hope is to be found in a 'struggle' against injustice. This has a ring of plausibility. A few sentences later, however, Boesak goes further to say that the cry of dereliction on the

cross is hope's 'form and shape' (p. 72). But is this not to go too far? Is this not to make hope so capacious a concept as to be utterly meaningless? If the cry of dereliction is the 'form and shape' of hope, is there anything that cannot be counted as hope? Perhaps I am reading too much into this phrase, and it was merely intended to be a restatement of the metaphor of the cross as the 'birthplace' out of which hope is born. I suspect that Boesak, if pressed, would agree that this is so. But it simply underscores a broader tendency towards imprecision in his prose that the reader would do well to expect. Another result of Boesak's unsystematic treatment of hope is the difficulty of determining what exactly differentiates one chapter from another materially. For Boesak's reader, hope in the face of woundedness (chapter 1) feels much like hope in midst of struggle (chapter 3), hope characterised by fragile faith (chapter 5) and hope marked by anger at the way things are and courage to see them changed (chapter 2).

That said, there are many valuable insights in this short volume. In the most complimentary way possible, I would say that the cumulative effect of this book is less than the sum of its parts. I mean that each of the chapters is a valuable and rhetorically powerful reflection on the politics of hope, even if they do not build up to a particularly clear or overwhelming 'argument' or conclusion. Those interested in issues of just war and pacifism will find chapter 4 ('Only if We Speak of Seeking Peace') especially of interest. Boesak evaluates the just war tradition in light of modern warfare and nationalistic 'megaterrorism', joining Martin Luther King and others in declaring just war criteria effectively obsolete. In its place he puts forth a vision of pacifism. True to form, however, Boesak's pacifism is not a 'theory of resistance and strategy' (p. 120), but the hard-won product of years of struggle against political violence and personal exposure to the dehumanising effects of violence and vengeance. Those who are interested in the politics of South Africa, and what hope looks like in apartheid and post-apartheid contexts, will want to read chapter 3 ('Only if We Speak of Struggle'), which traces the struggle for liberation and political justice as it is represented by the figures of Sol Plaatje and Albert Luthuli, respectively the first Secretary General of the African National Congress (ANC) and its last president before it was banned by the apartheid regime.

Those interested in the contemporary American political situation will perhaps be most interested in chapter 6 ('Only if We Speak of Dreaming'), which I found Boesak's most interesting and provocative chapter. It consists of an extended exegetical reflection on the biblical narrative of Joseph, 'the dreamer'. In Boesak's hands the story of Joseph becomes a cautionary tale about the dangers of becoming 'a son of the empire' (p. 158). When Joseph was young, he received dreams from God, which should have been used for the flourishing of his people. As Joseph grows older 'the dream' is repeatedly threatened until, finally, Joseph rises to power in Pharaoh's government. This is the point in the story that is typically interpreted as a sign of God's faithfulness to Joseph and God's approval of Joseph's righteousness. According to Boesak, however, 'the dream is now threatened by Joseph himself, and his commitment to the empire' (p. 158). With 'stunning ... ruthlessness' (p. 162), Joseph uses his foreknowledge to extort grain and land from the impoverished masses, to the point where they desperately sell themselves into slavery. It is no small irony, Boesak notes, that Joseph is here instituting the very economic order that would leave his own people, the Israelites, enslaved by a future Pharaoh (p. 160). According to Boesak, we see here a prophetic strain in the Bible criticising the

imperial logic of Egypt. Joseph is finally saved from the vitiating allure of the ‘politics of power’ when he reidentifies with his people, and, more importantly, when he eschews the divine pretensions of power: ‘Do not be afraid! *Am I in the place of God?*’ (Gen. 45:19). ‘The dreamer really returns only after Joseph lets go of the empire and its seduction of power and embraces instead the power of the dream’ (p. 166).

Boesak then returns to the framing figures of the book, Mandela and Obama. In old age, according to Boesak, Mandela reclaimed the dream of ‘a new South Africa’ (p. 169) characterised not by power, violence and injustice, but by *Ubuntu*—fellow humanity. While avoiding hagiography, Boesak nevertheless paints a picture of an aging Mandela who managed to find a hope forged in pain and struggle. Pointedly, the narrative of Joseph’s struggle to maintain ‘the dream’, and of Mandela’s recapturing of the dream, are offered as a call and a challenge to President Obama: ‘If President Obama can return to the people and call on them for help in his struggle against Republicans to stop short of a “fiscal cliff” ... why doesn’t he call on them for help on the greater, more fundamental issues of ending the wars, eradicating poverty, and creating systemic justice?’ (p. 172). The point is crystal clear: will Obama remain a ‘son of the Empire’? Or will he give up the politics of power and reclaim the hopeful vision that he once promised to the world?

This book is about what it means to maintain hope in the midst of politics. The reader who is interested in a careful philosophical analysis of hope and politics would be advised to look elsewhere. This book is for the reader who desires to see a more just, equitable and peaceful civic order—and who is struggling to maintain even a shred of hope in its pursuit. Such a reader will find encouragement to hope, not *in* politics itself, but to maintain hope *in the midst* of politics. What Boesak offers is a thoroughly theological, and ultimately Christological, account of hope that promises to shape and sustain political engagement in the pursuit of ‘justice, peace, and equity’ (p. 21).

**Guido De Graaff, *Politics in Friendship: A Theological Account***

(London: Bloomsbury: T & T Clark, 2014). vii + 231 pp. £59.99. ISBN 978-0-567-02936-2 (hbk)

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*Politics in Friendship* offers a probing, resourceful account of a pertinent set of themes for Christian ethics. The title of the study is unfolded in at least three senses: first, friendship runs *parallel* to political communities, a distinct but analogous form of life; second, it provides a context for the requisite candour and commonality to *support* political processes; third, friendship might be called a *beginning* to political dynamics and so be indispensable to them. De Graaff draws these strands together with the term ‘parapolitical’, which he adopts from Hans Ulrich (pp. 21–22). As he specifies the term theologically, particularly through the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Bishop George Bell’s shared acts of political judgement during the Second World War, De Graaff observes the additional sense in which friendship might exist *beyond* political processes. This is to say that even as these two friends deliberated over how to prepare their nations for peace,