

# Review Article

## Resistance and Hope

C. Villa-Vicencio & J.W. de Gruchy (eds),  
*Resistance and Hope. South African essays in honour of Beyers Naudé.*  
(David Philip: Cape Town and Johannesburg, Wm. B Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1985.)

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With the publication of *Resistance and Hope. South African essays in honour of Beyers Naudé*, the editors, Charles Villa-Vicencio and John de Gruchy, have made one of the most important contributions to the ever-increasing stream of theological literature dealing with the church and political struggle in South Africa. Although dedicated to Dr Naudé on the occasion of his seventieth birthday on 10 May 1985, it is not meant to praise a single individual, but to further the cause for which he has dedicated himself over so many years. It is, therefore, not "a nostalgic journey backwards", but an attempt "to describe what it means to resist oppression, evil, fate and despair, and live in hope because of faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ today" (xii). In order to achieve this, the editors have succeeded in including contributions from some of the most influential theological and church figures in South Africa today, most of them well-known to readers of the *Journal*. Although it is obvious that the authors share "the same perspective" (xi), it is equally clear that they represent different traditions and situations and at times use divergent analyses and ideologies and therefore also differ on important aspects. The net result is a truly remarkable book with lots of important information, gripping accounts, intriguing analyses and almost prophetic challenges.

### THE LIFE AND WORK OF BEYERS NAUDÉ

The book is divided into *four parts*. *Part one* is of a historical nature, dealing with the life and work of Dr Naudé, and includes a bibliography of addresses, papers and writings that are still available. The bibliography concludes at the time of his banning in 1977.

Villa-Vicencio and De Gruchy present short histories of respectively the life of Dr Naudé and the Christian Institute. Depending on an in-depth personal interview which he conducted with Dr Naudé during October 1984, Villa-Vicencio tries to identify some of the most formative events and influences in Naudé's life, in order to understand something of the very complex "contours of human identity . . . in a life quite as provocative as that of Beyers Naudé" (4). He disagrees with most of Naudé's biographers and argues against a sharp conversion during his career, e.g. during the Cottesloe years. Instead he argues for "the qualitative consistency of his response" and that the final character formation "was rather the outcome of certain entrenched values and convictions which bore away at his

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character, and gradually by the sheer weight of evidence convinced him that he was wrong and that he needed to change" (4). This raises a question of the utmost importance for ethical thinking, because the point at stake is obviously not to be able to speculate about the life of a specific individual, but to understand what Villa-Vicencio aptly calls "the social maze of character formation". When discussing the role of the church in South Africa today and also reading a book like this, the question almost never leaves one's mind *how it is and will be possible for people to change their minds, their perceptions, their vision and their convictions*. This question becomes one of the recurring themes throughout the book, sometimes implicit but often clearly articulated, until Nolan's final reminder in the last article that the option for the poor must be made by oppressor *and* oppressed alike, that it does not come naturally for anyone and that it necessitates a difficult learning-process for all. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Naudé's life and work is precisely the evidence that such a major shift of thinking and actions is indeed possible and that again raises the important question: how does this happen . . . and can it be repeated?

John de Gruchy's short account of the history of the Christian Institute and of *Pro Veritate*, an independent journal housed within the Institute, poses a *second very crucial question* that surfaces repeatedly in the volume. He recalls the tragedy of Sharpeville and the Cottesloe Consultation that initiated the process that was to result in the establishment of the Christian Institute, an ecumenical institute meant to spearhead a kind of Confessing Church movement and very specifically to witness to the unity of all believers in Christ and the implications thereof "in the present critical state of our country" (17). He clearly shows the "gradual shift in theological orientation" (17) and the eventual "radicalisation" (21) of the Institute which finally resulted in its "demise" when the state declared it illegal on 19 October 1977 and detained, imprisoned and banned many of its staff. The question which became increasingly acute during these years of development, was *how to translate conviction into strategy*, or what exactly to *do* in order to change society.

### **AFRIKANER, REFORMED AND BIBLICAL ROOTS**

The *second part* of the book comprises of five contributions structured around the *Afrikaner, Reformed* and *Biblical* roots present in Naudé's life. Jaap Durand, Vice-Rector of the University of the Western Cape, explicitly focuses on the first question already referred to and asks how it was possible for a few dissident theological voices, like those of Naudé and to a minor degree some of his contemporaries, to evolve from "the seemingly monolithic structure" of Afrikaner civil religion in the late 1940s and 1950s. He quite correctly makes the very important observation that the phenomenon that needs explanation is not so much the development of Afrikaner civil religion, because the interplay of the main spiritual forces at work with Afrikanerdom's political and socio-economic history made the end result almost inevitable, "an unsurprising and foregone conclusion" (39). What does need explanation is the presence of the dissident voices, but no research has been done on this perplexing problem. In a convincing analysis he then shows why the influential Kuyperian so-called neo-Calvinism of the time "was not able to, and in fact did not, produce critical and dissident voices in a period when the historical circumstances and the general spiritual climate were not conducive to this kind of

thinking" (40), amongst other reasons because of its "very biblicistic approach to the Bible in which little respect for context or historical situation is shown" (42). The result of such a lack of insight in the hermeneutical process is clear: "Once certain principles have been established as biblical, opposition to those principles can easily be seen as opposition to the Bible itself" (42). The subtle, but pervading danger present in a relevant theology, cut to supply existing aspirations and strategies with absolute sanctions, is almost unnerving.

These remarks give a sharp edge to the theological question implicitly raised by Villa-Vicencio. Will the theological debate inevitably only be a reflection of the interest and power struggles, so that a meaningful theological discussion aimed at a process of convincing and change is completely impossible in a conflict-ridden society like South Africa?

Durand explains the enigmatic presence of at least a few "rebel theologians", leaving the mainstream of Afrikaner Civil religion, by seeking their theological roots in "the theologically much maligned pietism and the equally maligned idea of the Afrikaner's missionary calling" (45). Pietistic pragmatism combined with a missionary vision of "commitment to the welfare of other people", had "in the long run to break the fetters of an ideology" (49). This opened a window in the wall of determinism by illustrating that a *vision, when informed by facts and experiences*, in this case the suffering of black people in the South African apartheid society, *can indeed bring about change*.

Willem Saayman, Associate Professor in the Faculty of Theology at UNISA, pursues more or less the same question, but with regard to the present situation within Afrikanerdom. His underlying theme is to test the conviction expressed by Beyers Naudé in 1977 that he was still quite hopeful then that "Afrikaner opposition could bring about decisive change in South Africa" and that it could come about "if sufficient numbers of Afrikaners themselves were willing openly to oppose the suffocating policies and to expose the false ideology of racial supremacy". Although difficult, Naudé did not consider this only "an idle dream" (54). In an illuminating attempt to evaluate the origins, character and significance of the prevailing division in Afrikaner ranks, Saayman distinguishes three present-day schools of thought among Afrikaners. They are the various right-wing groups, still imbued with the pure apartheid vision, the largest group, comprised of *verligte* (enlightened) Afrikaners and the small but "prophetic" group opposed to "the central pillar of the apartheid system: the goal of the maintenance (for pseudo-theological or economic reasons) of Afrikaner political power" (54-55). This analysis forces him to deal with "an intriguing question, one that has not been studied adequately yet" which boils down to exactly the same question already raised in the previous contributions:

What is it that brought these Afrikaner prophets to such open opposition against their own system?

He then discusses several stimuli that can be helpful in changing *verligte* and even right-wing Afrikaners into people truly opposed to the system and committed to a new kind of society. Important amongst these are again *the evangelical pietism* combined with "missionary" convictions, a *real encounter with the black world* (made "virtually non-existent" in the "devilishly successful establishing of two different worlds in South Africa . . . continents apart"), so that the very human

aspirations of black South Africans may be experienced together with the fact that “the most radical resistance to apartheid is often fired by an idealism based on the central tenets of the Christian tradition” and also a *rediscovery of the oikoumene*, which again has become very problematical, because “the theological climate in the Afrikaner churches is extremely isolationist and introverted” (56-58).

His final evaluation of the importance of the present division within Afrikaner society is fairly sceptical. He calls for “the need to be realistic when thinking about political change in South Africa” (59). For decades now, Afrikaners have been made to believe that apartheid can be justified from Scripture, so that “whoever wants to bring about change in the social, economic and political structures of South Africa will have to deal with racism at this fundamental, ideological level” (59). The implications are clear: as far as the Afrikaner society is concerned, *before there can be talk of how to proceed from conviction to effective strategy, the more basic question must still be dealt with namely how to change from* (deep rooted, religiously legitimated) *conviction to conviction*. This is difficult and his own expectations sound rather sombre.

A third well-known Afrikaner theologian, David Bosch, Dean of UNISA’s Faculty of Theology, delves even more deeply into the problematic aspects involved in the first question concerning the processes involved in forming and changing convictions. He focuses on the causes for the “fragmentation” within Afrikanerdom and the Afrikaner churches, and demonstrates how the socio-political and economic *interests*, i.e. the position of the churches in society vis-à-vis the centres of power, *shaped their convictions and actions*.

The Dutch Reformed Church has been, at times, the church of the establishment, and, at other times, the church of the people in opposition to the political establishment. And frequently this circumstance . . . rather than doctrinal or other ecclesiastical considerations, determined the church’s attitude on a particular issue (61).

He shows that religion often exercises one of two divergent functions in society. Where the religious community occupies a privileged position in society it will tend to render stability to the wider social structure. Where, however, the religious community does not occupy such a privileged position, the opposite will normally be the case. Such a community will then tend to reject the accepted patterns of behaviour in society at large and the relevance and legitimacy of the religion itself will be tested in respect to the contribution it can make in order to achieve change. “Its orientation is therefore to the future rather than the past. It supplies the basis for social change” (62). Bosch’s thesis, which he demonstrates convincingly with lots of astonishing quotations, is that not only does the South African society today harbour two very different communities in which religion tends to play diametrically opposed roles, but that the white Afrikaner community and its churches have, in the course of history, played both these roles, depending on their position in society. In view of this he then evaluates the current fragmented scene within Afrikanerdom and regards opposition from within as “at the same time, more difficult and more significant” than is generally assumed. His closing remarks are a bit less morbid than those of Saayman when he weighs the possibility that the Dutch Reformed Church may return to its Calvinistic and evangelical roots and relate these to the present context.

The final contribution in the second part consists of two Bible studies by Allan

Boesak, the NG Sendingkerk chaplain at the University of the Western Cape and President of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and Wolfram Kistner, the Director of the Commission on Justice and Reconciliation of the SACC. Boesak deals with Luke 15:11-32 and Kistner with Hebrews 13:13. Both discussions form examples of a very consciously contextual exposition with a view to the South African scene, which leads to the next part.

### **THEOLOGY IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT**

The *third part* includes five contributions, one each from the two editors and the rest from Frank Chikane, the Director of the Institute for Contextual Theology, Itumeleng Mosala, Lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies of the University of Cape Town and Buti Tlhagale, Catholic priest at the Regina Mundi Pro-Cathedral in Soweto. While De Gruchy, Chikane and Tlhagale deal more generally with the methodology of contextual theology, Mosala and Villa-Vicencio address two specific issues.

In an excellent analysis, that really deserves to be read and reread by participants in the South Africa theological debate, De Gruchy looks at the "theologies in conflict" in an attempt to ascertain whether it is possible at all to hope and work for a common theology that will be able to transcend the present conflict. He takes the different causes for the conflict, including the all important role of the divergent social contexts and of human interests as seriously as they most certainly deserve to be taken and sides with Nicholas Lash in asking whether the notion of a common Christian tradition is really meaningful at all. De Gruchy himself refuses to abandon all hope:

... a genuinely Christian theology should struggle to transcend selfish interest and ideological captivity, in the service of those interests consonant with and demanded by the kingdom of God . . . The critical task of theology is to evaluate all truth and interest claims, including its own, whether in word or deed, in the light of the gospel of the reign of God in Jesus Christ. In this way theology should act as a hermeneutics of suspicion, testing all theologies and ideologies to see whether or not they are really in the service of the truth or in the service of some other interest which contradicts the gospel (87).

The main part of the essay is an analysis of the most important forms in which the Christian faith has been contextualised in South Africa, including the African Independent or indigenous church movement, the Dutch Reformed theology in the struggles of the Afrikaner and black theology. Generally speaking he is very critical of the "bedeviling" influence of the "conflicts inherited from the theological battlegrounds of Europe" which created "false divisions" locally and he regards these developments to contextualise the Christian faith in the South African situation favourably. This becomes evident e.g. in his important comments on the significance of black theology.

The important point, perhaps, is that for De Gruchy the final context is the *single context* of the Christian faith within South Africa at this particular point in time. Precisely because of that the different theologies must be in dialogue with one another, albeit a dialogue characterised by tension and even conflict. Simply to resign oneself to the existence of a pluralism of (contextual) theologies where "everything goes" is to his (ecumenical) mind obviously unacceptable. That is the reason why he is continuously in search of "the normative witness" (87), the

“common Christian tradition” (85), the “common basis, upon which we can deal with the issues (87), the “common Christian heritage” (96).

If the present theological conflict has done nothing else it has forced upon us the need to face these issues and the need to question the usefulness and the validity of imported, undigested and regurgitated theologies, and to work more consciously towards a *genuine contextual theology for South Africa* . . . But it will have to be a common, biblical tradition beyond the divide of the apartheid heresy, a truly non-racial South African theology (97).

In a short but informative contribution Chikane reports on “the theological methodology” that has emerged in the work of the Institute for Contextual Theology during the past three years. In the true manner of liberation theology he contrasts “the traditional method of theology” (“learning” or “studying” theology) with “a newly emerging methodology” (“doing” theology). Theology is no longer being done in an ahistorical, deductive and essentialist way with answers or solutions determining the problems. “The imperialistic claim made by Western theology of universality must be rejected” (99). Theological reflection arises from praxis, it is “not detached, cool, objective and neutral, but passionately involved”, it “begins with the experiences of actual struggles, suffering and joys of particular communities” (99, quoting Allan Boesak). Social analytical tools replace philosophy and rational psychology in their supportive roles (98,102). The motive of this theology is liberation, which means “it is subversive by nature”, because it is “committed to social change, and to approximating on earth the kingdom of God” (102). For Chikane this is no idle talk:

The involvement methodology means *taking sides* with the victims of society against the victimisers . . . Taking sides must ultimately be to the benefit of both victim and victimiser, by liberating both from the sinful structures of oppression. There is no question of neutrality. *Being neutral in a conflict situation means taking sides with the victimiser* (102).

For Chikane, as for the ICT, this rejection of “theological neutrality” (101) through active involvement in the struggle is of crucial importance.

This essay again addresses both questions already referred to. The *first* is most certainly present as at least an implicit theme, i.e. how to change even the oppressed people themselves to get involved in a new vision of a “preferential option for the poor and oppressed” and to prevent “theologians who are part of the oppressed majority” not to succumb to the “temptations of co-option” (102). More explicitly, however, it raises the *second question* as sharply as possible, i.e. *how to find strategies to live out the implications of such a vision*. On this point the article serves indeed as the very serious challenge which Chikane has obviously intended it to be.

If possible, Tlhagale articulates the options even more clearly. He rejects the term “contextual theology” because it “remains an evasive expression in so far as it accommodates the self-justification of the oppressing group” (126), and prefers the expression “black theology”, for several reasons. This term itself, however, needs to be qualified as “a black theology of labour”. The need is not so much to be suspicious of and to reject the Western Christian tradition, but much more fundamentally to make the Christian faith possible again for black and oppressed people in a situation where “because of the apartheid system, the credibility of Christianity is becoming increasingly questionable”, where “the mighty hand of God in human history . . . is hardly felt”, where “personal testimonies of the bountiful-

ness of God were found wanting among those without food, housing, education, and work" (126). In short:

Black theology can therefore no longer assume the presence of faith amongst the people . . . A more radical grounding of faith is imperative . . . There is a need for black theology to validate the legitimacy of faith (126-127).

How is this possible?

The approach that is gradually gaining the upper hand is the historical-materialist approach — not because this method is simply fashionable, but because this approach rests on the theory that beliefs and ideas are conditioned by the relations of production (127).

One could say that he is also asking the question of how to arrive at a Christian vision or a set of Christian convictions, and that he answers that by saying that a vision is determined by socio-economic conditions and contradictions so that the solution can only be to get involved in praxis, in strategy, in the material life-conditions of "the labouring black people", which he then makes his "starting-point" (127).

The option for "a class struggle against exploitation", for "the revolutionary activity of the struggling classes" originates according to Thagale, from the basic *convictions* of the Christian tradition:

. . . black theology, like the white Christian tradition, takes nature as a given, as a gift of God to be transformed and regulated for the benefit of all . . . All have a claim to it. Capital . . . is a communal possession. *From this premise flows the conviction nurtured by black theology that black workers have to restore the just order of things* (131).

Once the option for such a strategy has been made, the Christian consciousness and perspective becomes "clearer and more convincing" (133). For black theology "praxis authenticates Christian claims" (134), when praxis is understood as this very specific kind of praxis, namely active involvement in the revolutionary class struggle of the workers.

In much the same vein Mosala also severely criticises the concept of "contextual theology", pointing to its "theological harmlessness" (103), the "social class origins of the term itself" (104) and the fact that it is tautological and therefore "theoretically bankrupt" (104).

He pleads for a black theology of liberation that rejects the idealist methodology of "the dominant theological status quo" (105), takes its starting-point in "the actual, concrete existence and activity of black people within the South African social formation" (108), uses "a historical-materialist sociological approach" (107) and makes a "clear ideological choice" (109) for "prolonged, concrete engagement in the struggles of the black working class" (109). With the exception of a few recent formulations, he is of the opinion that black theology has never really made this ideological break with bourgeois theological and biblical hermeneutics (109). He suggests that a socio-historical analysis of the African Independent churches as black working-class churches may prove an instructive and liberating exercise.

In a very interesting case-study, Villa-Vicencio compares the quite different "theologies in the service of the state" present in the reports of the Eloff Commission of Inquiry into the SACC and the Steyn Commission of Inquiry into the Mass Media. This analysis alone provides worthwhile reading, but he goes even further

than that to reject four unacceptable relations between church and state and to develop "three cardinal theological axioms" to which a viable doctrine of church and state must do justice. The end result is a very informative contribution to this important debate within South Africa, drawing some bottom lines for churches and Christians to keep in mind when getting involved in actual political strategies.

### ECUMENICAL VISION AND ACTION

In the six essays of the *final part* the scope is broadened to include the ecumenical perspective, although several of these studies might also have been included in part three.

Gabriel Setiloane, also Associate Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the UCT, looks at the development of the ecumenical movement in Africa from the "mission church" to the moratorium and tries to ascertain why the ideal of "organic church unity" has never "burnt in the African bosom with the intensity as it does among some whites" (146). Again the reader is provided with valuable information, clear and persuasive arguments and above all with a very important contribution to the theological issues at stake in South African church circles and the way in which priorities should be decided in the local ecumenical movement.

The same holds good for the serious attempt by Margaret Nash, well-known figure in ecumenical circles, to relate the burning and inspiring "ecumenical vision" to the "mundane realities" of church life, political conflict and human suffering in South Africa. She is very much aware of the need to find the right priorities and reminds of a word of Allan Boesak warning against "using the gospel to escape the demands of the gospel" (154). The question on how to move from conviction/vision to strategy/reality is here addressed in full detail and to sobering effect. Vividly describing the basic struggle for survival of so many people she says: "*Those who seek to be in solidarity with the poor and the oppressed have no right to arrive with high-flown analyses and theological treatises . . .*" (154).

The essay is to the point, moving and inspiring, as are the concluding remarks: On Sundays we break bread in church and in so doing affirm the vision . . . What we do with bread the rest of the week tests the reality of our affirmation . . . (158).

The world renowned Anglican Bishop of Johannesburg, Desmond Tutu, draws a short comparison between Christian spirituality, especially Old Testament, and African spirituality and points at "a remarkable affinity" between the two (159). He also addresses the problem of universal versus particular or contextual theologies and concludes:

Theology should glory in a particularity that gives it relevance. The price for contextuality, particularity and relevance is, however, that it cannot lay claim prematurely to universality. There is a plurality of theologies, jostling and competing with, complementing and challenging one another (160).

Precisely because it is contextually relevant, a particular theology may become obsolete when the issues cease to be burning ones, although what is true will be integrated in "the abiding tradition of the entire Christian family" (160). This knowledge not only reminds everyone that no-one possesses a monopoly of truth, but also forces Christians to seek *relevance*, which means to speak the good news to real and not to imagined needs (161). He then proceeds to develop main aspects

of such a relevant spirituality, which deserve to be widely read, because, if some of the issues he mentions are neglected, we shall indeed be guilty of "sleeping through a revolution . . . waiting to find out which way the wind is blowing" (164).

This is followed by two extremely interesting case-studies. Peter Randall, lecturer in the Faculty of Education at the University of the Witwatersrand, immediately addresses the second question often referred to, i.e. how to get from conviction to strategy, when he reminds of Karl Rahner's warning that the church runs risks in attempting to translate ethical norms into concrete proposals, but that this is necessary if the church is not to be seen as living in a world of pure theory, remote from life and making pronouncements that do not touch the stubborn concreteness of real life. He then discusses in great detail as "one example of the church at work in this way" both phases of Spro-cas, already briefly mentioned in De Gruchy's essay. It makes for absorbing reading, especially against the background of the fact that the churches are still faced with exactly the same issues. He calls it "a venture of faith on the part of a small group of Christians who were convinced that such a project was both desirable and necessary in order to help the church *move from mere denunciation of apartheid, no matter how eloquent and even passionate, to a more meaningful and concrete involvement in the hard issues* facing those church members who opposed the policy" (166). The central issue they had to deal with concerned "*social change*". The participants hoped to be "*active collaborators in change*". To read again what was done and how it developed through several stages, just to realise that, in spite of everything, "the fundamental structural problems" (171) still remain, is very much a sobering experience.

In a case-study of grave importance for the churches, James Cochrane, Director of the Careers and Information Centre in Cape Town, gives a clear exposition of the church's relationship to the worker movement, especially the independent non-racial or "black" trade unions, perhaps "the most significant force challenging apartheid's structures of power" (174). He not only illustrates and analyses the problematic nature of the church's intervention strategies in situations of conflict, but also addresses the all important issue of class, before he deals extensively with the question: "What shall the churches do?" (183-188).

The final essay is the one already mentioned by Albert Nolan, well-known author, priest and worker in "contextual theology" from the Dominican Order in Johannesburg. His purpose is to open up the debate about the "option for the poor" in South Africa. He first discusses the term itself and rejects several common misunderstandings and then deals with the biblical grounding, before he moves on to the really important issue, namely "the contextual implications" of such an option in South Africa, which, according to him, have not been systematically worked out at all. His arguments are remarkably clear and authoritative and deserves to be widely read and discussed.

The option for the poor then is an uncompromising and unequivocal taking of sides in a situation of structural conflict . . . It is the assertion that the Christian faith entails, for everyone and as a part of its essence, the taking of sides in the structural conflict between the oppressor and the oppressed . . . *Nothing could be more controversial and challenging for our theology and our practice as Christians* (191).

The short remarks on what this will necessarily imply in South Africa are even more challenging.

**FINAL REMARKS**

It is impossible to do justice to an all important book like this in a review. All the essays are of excellent quality and will make an invaluable contribution. It is even more impossible to offer substantial criticism here without unfairly singling out some contributions. The volume is meant to stimulate critical thought, debate and action. This review will serve its purpose if it succeeds in convincing readers of the necessity to read this major work. It has therefore focused only on two major themes that run through almost all the articles. The first is the question of how to change one vision for another, which is especially important in the Afrikaner community in which Beyers Naudé himself grew up, but also in the black community. It is almost astonishing to note the number of times that the authors of this book explicitly discuss the role of an inspiring *vision*. The second is the question of how to translate a (new) vision into (effective) socio-political and economic strategies and actions, which is a major problem for everyone, but has already been shown to be very difficult in the English-speaking community where traditional anti-apartheid convictions have often broken down on specific measures.



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