

The Role the Dutch Reformed Church Played in the Rise and Fall of Apartheid

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On a personal note, I was born and raised in South Africa under the apartheid regime. I knew then, and I know now, that the abhorrent policies of racial discrimination were strengthened by having a strong religious base. Because of my own detestation of both the political and religious systems under which I lived, I decided to immigrate to the United States in 1989. Adapting to a new country, completing a doctorate, and starting a new teaching position consumed me for the next 10 years. In that period, a miracle occurred in South Africa with the release of Nelson Mandela and the eventual collapse of the apartheid government. While there was a celebration in my heart, I quickly came to realize that racial discrimination in South Africa would not disappear overnight. And then I cast my eyes and thoughts toward the United States. Alas, I found a similar, if perhaps more subtle, discrimination based on religious grounds. This discovery forced me to look back at my country of birth and try to gain a deeper understanding of how religion can become the foundation of an entire political system.

I. THE DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH AND WHITE SOUTH AFRICAN HISTORY

According to a 1996 census, approximately 75 percent of a population of more than 42 million South Africans adheres to the Christian faith. Hindus and Muslims account for approximately 2 percent of the population, and about 0.4 percent is Jewish. More than 15 percent of the population do not belong to any of the major religions, but consider themselves followers of traditional indigenous religions. The largest Christian denomination is the Dutch Reformed Church, which was brought to the Cape of Good Hope in 1652 by the Dutch East Indian Company. The English churches, such as the Methodist and Anglican churches, arrived with the British occupation of the Cape in 1802.

The history of the Dutch settlers (later to become the Afrikaners), bound to their strong Calvinistic beliefs, became the cornerstone of white South African history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Great Trek (the emigration from the Eastern Cape Colony into the interior of Southern Africa by some 12,000 to 14,000 Dutch-speaking farmers between 1834 and the early 1840s) is regarded by Afrikaners as a central event of their history and the origin of their nationhood. It was during The Great Trek that the Afrikaans language and their unique culture developed. It was during this period that the Afrikaners' attitude toward the British hardened and the Afrikaner philosophy of apartheid (separateness) was formulated. It was during The Great Trek that the Afrikaners came to believe that they were a "chosen race" and that it was their "manifest destiny" to populate the areas north of the Orange River.

A few voices have been chosen to convey these teachings:

On Slavery and Racial Equality

"It was not so much their (the slaves') being set free as their being placed on an equal footing with Christians, contrary to the laws of God." Anna Steenkamp

"The Afrikaners argued amongst themselves, but shared one article of faith; to deny political rights to Africans and Colored people of mixed race." Thomas Pakenham

"There were many causes of The Great Trek, but the prime cause was the desire of the Boers to get away from this new ideal of racial equality which to them was abhorrent." Alan Paton

"It should be a recognized principle of government that natives—men, women and children—should only be permitted within municipal areas in so far and for so long as their presence is demanded by the wants of the white population." Stallard Commission

On Afrikaner Culture

"The idea of an Afrikaner people as a cultural entity and religious group with a special language will be retained in South Africa as long as civilization stands." P.W. Botha

"You cannot separate culture from politics." Anita Armond

"Most societies use their culture to control citizens." Pieter Dirk Uys

On Religion

"They had their own language, their own customs and traditions, and a myth to light their way, a mystic Christian mission on the Dark Continent." Rian Malan

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“With the Bible as his only instrument of culture, with his gun to shoot game and protect him against those he regarded as savages, the Boer was perfectly adjusted to his environment.” David Harrison

“So long as we honor God we will survive as a volk (nation).” Constand Viljoen

On Being a “Chosen Race”

“Like the Jews, what we want is a country in which we can survive as a people, in which we can live our lives, maintain our standards and our Christian way of life.” Tienie Groenewald

“As long as there is a commitment among Afrikaners to cherish their language and their culture and their traditions, the Afrikaner nation will continue to exist.” F.W. de Klerk

“Their religion, setting them apart from the unelected pagans about them, bred in them a sense of special destiny as a people.” C.W. de Kiewet

The crux of The Great Trek and the religious foundations for the future Afrikaner government are best summarized in the vow taken prior to the Battle of Blood River on December 16th, 1838.

My brethren and fellow countrymen. At this moment we stand before the Holy God of heaven and earth, to make a promise if He will be with us and protect us, and deliver the enemy into our hands so that we may triumph over him, that we shall observe the day and the date as an anniversary in each year, and a day of thanksgiving like the Sabbath in His honour; and that we shall enjoin our children that they must take part with us in this for a remembrance even for posterity.¹

This vow was repeated every December 16th across the country from 1838 until 1994. The day itself was preserved as a religious and nationalistic day. The centerpiece in the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria highlights this specific event.

After the defeat of the Zulus at the Battle of Blood River, the Afrikaners established the independent (of British rule) Republic of Natal. The next 90-plus years would see the Afrikaners rebelling against British annexations and influence, as well as refining their own culture, religion, and language. During this period, the Afrikaners came to believe that their own survival as a community was threatened. Together with a growing belief in racial separation, social and spiritual survival became intertwined in church philosophy and political ideology.

II. THE NATIONAL PARTY COMES TO POWER

In 1948, the Afrikaner National Party won the all-white general election based on the apartheid platform. Dr. Daniel Malan, the first National Party Prime Minister, expounded on the relationship between apartheid and Christianity in a letter to the Rev. J. Piersma, a minister in Grand Rapids, Michigan:

The Church believes that God in His wisdom so disposed it that the first White men and women who settled at the foot of the Black Continent were profoundly religious people, imbued with a very real zeal to bring the light of the gospel to the heathen nations of Africa. These first South Africans lit a torch which was carried to the farthest corners of the subcontinent in the course of the last three centuries and whose light now shines upon the greater part of all non-White peoples south of the Equator.²

In its early days, the Church used the blessings of civilization as a means to attract the heathen, but today the traditional concept of European guardianship has taken the form of fostering and financing to the full the social, educational, and economic development of the non-white. And while believing that God helps those who help themselves and, therefore, encouraging and assisting non-Europeans also to participate in this general movement of uplift and enlightenment, the Church has at all time vouchsafed the various black groups the right and duty to retain their national identities. Christianity must not rob the non-white of language and culture. Its function is to permeate and penetrate to the depths of black nationalism, while encouraging the retention and refinement of those national customs and traditions that do not clash with Christian tenets.

The Afrikaners' traditional fear of racial equality between white and black derives from an aversion to miscegenation. Afrikaners have always believed that if they are to be true to their primary calling of bringing Christianity to the heathen, they must preserve their racial identity. The church is, therefore, opposed to intermarriage between black and white and is committed to withstand everything that is calculated to facilitate it. At the same time, it does not begrudge the non-white the attainment of a social status commensurate with his highest aspirations. Whereas the church, therefore, opposes the social equalitarianism that ignores racial and color differences between black and white in everyday life, it is prepared to do all in its power to implement a social and cultural segregation that will redound to the benefit of both sides.

The Bible is accepted as being the Word of God, and the Dutch Reformed Church accepts the authority of Holy Writ as normative for all the political, social, cultural, and religious activities in which humans indulge. The church acknowledges the basic rights of the State as a particular divine institution to regulate the lives and actions of its citizens.

III. THE IMPLEMENTATION AND ACCEPTANCE OF APARTHEID

The National Party implemented the policy of apartheid by passing a number of laws between 1948 and 1954. Among these laws were the Classification Act, the Group Areas Act, the Pass Law Act, the Immorality Act, the Mixed Marriages Act, and the Education Act. Doctor Verwoerd, the National Party's government Minister of Native Affairs/Bantu Affairs, continued to introduce the long and complex series of apartheid laws. As he had told the Senate in 1952, "The various Acts, Bills and also public statements I have made all fit into a pattern, and form a single constructive plan."

As an example of a specific law, Dr. Verwoerd introduced a bill in 1953 to remove black education from missionary control to that of the Native Affairs Department. He stated: "I will reform black education so that Natives will be taught from childhood to realize that equality with Europeans is not for them." Verwoerd attacked the liberalism of missionary education which gave black children ideas of growing up to live in a world of equal rights between black and white. He later explained to the Senate that there was "no place" for blacks outside the reserves "above the level of certain forms of labor." So, "What is the use of teaching a Bantu child mathematics when he cannot use it in practice?" He added: "Education must train and teach people in accordance with their opportunities in life."

The Bantu Education Act was put into operation in April 1955. Only two major churches continued to run state-assisted missionary schools, the Dutch Reformed Church and the Swedish Lutheran mission. The other major churches refused to accept government conditions, including new Bantu Education syllabi and other controls on teaching, in return for continued state financial aid. Black schools no longer studied the same syllabi as non-black schools but followed new Bantu Education syllabi. The Bantu Affairs Department had to approve teachers and also controlled the local school boards consisting of parents and officials—which managed the everyday running of schools.

As Prime Minister, Dr. Verwoerd recognized that expanding industries in white areas needed an expanding black labor force. But he predicted that the black urban population would begin to fall in the late 1970s, by which time apartheid would have succeeded in developing the black rural reserves as alternative areas of employment. Verwoerd saw total separation between white and black societies as the final aim of apartheid. Black labor in white society was like "donkeys, oxen and tractors," which could someday be replaced by other machinery.

So, where did the churches in South Africa stand with all this? The Dutch Reformed Church gave its support to the system of apartheid. As apartheid was called into question throughout the country in the 1970s and the 1980s, church leaders were, in general, more committed to apartheid than many of their followers, and the church became an impediment to political reform. A few Dutch

Reformed clergy opposed apartheid. The best known of these, Rev. Beyers Naude, left his whites-only church in the late 1970s and joined a black parish within the Dutch Reformed church. The efforts of other church leaders who worked to reduce the church's racist image were often constrained by the fact that the church's highest authorities, who supported apartheid, controlled parish finances.

IV. RELIGIOUS OPPOSITION TO APARTHEID

In the 1990s, black South Africans formed a majority in all large Christian churches in South Africa except the Dutch Reformed churches, as had been true throughout the apartheid era. In these churches, many people became involved in efforts to reverse the effects of apartheid policies, but with varying degrees of militancy. Again, there were often significant differences between church leaders and their followers concerning race and politics. For example, senior officials within the Roman Catholic Church in South Africa opposed apartheid, but a group of Catholics formed the South African Catholic Defence League to condemn the church's political involvement and, in particular, to denounce school integration.

Leaders of the Anglican Church spoke out in opposition to apartheid, but church members disagreed about tactics for expressing their views. Some white Anglicans vigorously opposed their church's involvement in politics, while many black Anglicans became leaders in the antiapartheid movement. The Methodist Church, which was overwhelmingly black, adopted openly antiapartheid stands on many public issues, but its leaders' activism cost it support among those who feared public scrutiny on this politically sensitive issue.

Religious alliances provided a means of coordinating church opposition to apartheid while minimizing the public exposure of church leaders and parishioners. The South African Council of Churches (SACC) was the most active antiapartheid umbrella organization. The SACC not only opposed apartheid, but also offered encouragement to those who contravened race laws. Under the leadership of Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu in the 1980s, the SACC also attempted to withhold cooperation with the state, as much as possible, in protest against apartheid. SACC leaders were outspoken in their political views, lodging frequent complaints with government officials and organizing numerous peaceful protests.

Countering the efforts of the antiapartheid community, the Christian League of Southern Africa rallied in support of the government's apartheid policies. The Christian League consisted of members of Dutch Reformed and other churches who believed apartheid could be justified on religious grounds.

V. THE END OF APARTHEID AND THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE NEW SOUTH AFRICA

In 1990, Nelson Mandela was released from prison and it was clear that the old order was about to come to an end. The Dutch Reformed Church, led by Johan Heyns, who was later killed by right-wing Afrikaners, gave an official apology for the travesties of apartheid. But there is proof that the church hasn't totally exorcised the specter of apartheid. In 2000, one of the very few female ministers not only resigned but also revoked her affiliation with the Dutch Reformed Church over an article in which she called Afrikaner nationalism the biggest divide in the church and claimed that the church was being abused as the last vestige of Afrikanerdom.

The new South African Constitution (1994) provides for freedom of religion, and the government generally respects this right in practice. The Bill of Rights, included in the Constitution, specifically provides for and protects freedom of religion. The Bill of Rights prohibits the State from unfairly discriminating directly or indirectly against anyone on the grounds of religion, and it states that persons belonging to a religious community may not be denied the right, with other members of that community, to practice their religion and to form, join, and maintain religious associations. Cases of discrimination against a person on the grounds of religious freedom can be taken to the Constitutional Court.

The Constitution states that religious instruction at public schools is permitted so long as it is voluntary and religions are treated equally. However, the Department of Education is still using a syllabus that requires public schools to administer one period of religious instruction a week. The syllabus provides six options for religious instruction: Bible Education, Hindu Studies, Islamic Studies, Religious Education, Right Living, and Scripture. Many public schools have dropped religious instruction in practice. In schools that do administer religious instruction, students have the right to not attend the religious instruction, and school authorities respect this right in practice. A new syllabus has been drafted that, if implemented, would provide for voluntary, not mandatory, religious instruction in public schools. There are some private religious schools in which religious instruction is required.

VI. CONCLUSION

To conclude on another personal note, as a child I well remember feeling "different" because I was English speaking and attended an English school and an English church. My Afrikaans neighbors appeared to have a deeper respect for our country and a more definite belief that they were indeed a chosen "race." I remember attending religious instruction classes at school and sensing that the Calvinistic doctrine was at the heart of those classes. In fact, as the

entire education system was based on Christian National Education, even our history classes were filled with Afrikaner nationalism. I remember as a teacher reading a Dutch Reformed Sunday school textbook. It told young people that the Bible required absolute loyalty to their country and its leaders and that compulsory military service was a privilege for all white male civilians. I remember my father accepting the principles of apartheid even though he was a good man. I remember my delight when my mother joined the Methodist Church and became actively involved with a large group of black women. I remember my heartbreak when she died and those same black women were denied the right to attend the "white" church from which she was buried. My last, and perhaps only, act of defiance was to ask all those black women to come to the same church that had excluded them to honor my mother at a later date. My 5-year-old niece and I were the only white people in an all-white church on that wonderful day.

From a distance, I follow the political and religious development of the New South Africa with interest. I believe that the Christian churches, including the Dutch Reformed Church and the Roman Catholic Church, are working closely with each other as well as with other non-Christian faiths on the socio-political front. The New South Africa appears to "render unto God what is God's and to Caesar what is Caesar's." A strong moral base has been accepted in order to create a strong socio-political future, but unlike the National Party regime, which made the Dutch Reformed religion an official religion, the New South Africa will not impose a national religion on the citizens.

NOTES

1. Sarel Celliers as cited in Bulpin, T.V. *Natal and the Zulu Country* (Capetown: Cape and Transvaal Printers Limited, 1966), 112.

2. Daniel Malan as cited in Jansen, Carolize. "Apartheid and Religion," *Adult Christianity* (May 1998). <<http://www.postfun.com/pfp/features/98/may/cjansen.html>> Accessed December 15th, 2002.

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