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**The Gospel of Apartheid**

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This is the last of a series of lectures on ‘extreme Christianity’, at which we’ve looked at extreme versions of the Christian religion from the idealistic and utopian to the nihilistic and genocidal. Today’s story is towards the darker end of the spectrum, but I think it is also ultimately an optimistic story – though you will need to be patient to get to that part. Because this is a story of how a particular form of Christianity helped to generate one of the modern world’s most notorious evils: but also of how that same form of Christianity made a crucial contribution to bringing it to an end. It is, if you’ll forgive the comment, a very Christian story: a story of sin and of at least partial redemption. But we need to begin with the sin.

In 1652 the Dutch East India Company established a waystation on their route to the East Indies at the site we call Cape Town. Despite the normal vague pieties about civilizing native peoples, it was plainly intended as a refuge from the sea rather than as a foothold on the land. Yet the land was fertile and the climate temperate. Dutch farmers began to spread beyond the fort to make their own fortunes, and so ran up against the region’s indigenous inhabitants.

The Khoikhoi of Southern Africa, the people who were once called Bushmen, were perhaps more alien to European imperialists of this era than any other that they encountered. They were nomadic pastoralists, a lifestyle incompatible with the newcomers’ weird habit of claiming specific patches of land for their own exclusive use. The Khoikhoi language, in which the most numerous consonants are clicks made with the tongue, sounded to the Dutch more like hiccups, gurgles, or animal noises than speech. That, plus their lack of anything that looked to the Dutch like religion, fed the settlers’ suspicion that the Khoikhoi were more bestial than human. One Dutch Protestant minister who had served all around the Indian Ocean declared that the Khoikhoi were “the most savage, stupid, and filthy heathens I had ever met.” The words *filthy* and *stinking* were very widely used, apparently turning the Khoikhoi custom of rubbing their bodies with animal fat into a symbol of animality. This judgement was only vindicated by the abject failure of the few, half-hearted early attempts to convert the Khoikhoi to the Christianity of the Dutch Reformed Church. By 1678 a Dutch minister in the colony concluded that “this nation is totally opposed to our religion, no matter what means are directed toward them.” A thoroughly comforting message, since if converting the Khoikhoi was impossible, there was no need to try. What the Dutch really wanted from the Khoikhoi was for them to disappear, and before long smallpox ensured that many of them did.

Elsewhere in the burgeoning European empires, missionary despair on the ground was balanced by optimistic newcomers, but at the Cape of Good Hope, European immigration had all but dried up by 1700. The few thousand remaining settlers prospered and multiplied: a tiny, isolated outpost of Protestant Europe on the shores of the Southern Ocean. Dutch officials regarded the frontier lifestyles of these Boers – ‘farmers’ – with increasing contempt. If the cultural gulf with the Khoikhoi had been narrower, the Boers might have intermarried and assimilated. Instead, they jealously asserted their distinct identity, and the identity they settled on was as Christians: what they were confident the “natives” could never be.

What was these settlers’ Christianity? The colony’s official Reformed church, six of whose seven congregations were in Cape Town itself as late as 1795, could not provide more than occasional, itinerant service to a scattered Boer population. It could, however, set cultural norms. The settlers were a people of the Dutch Bible, and learned from the Old Testament how God had led his people on an exodus through deep waters to a new land, fertile and filled with heathens. They read these stories through the prism of the Calvinist doctrines that Christians are God’s chosen, covenanted people and that children born into that covenant belong to it from the moment of their birth. And so they learned that European equals Christian, African equals heathen, and it must always be so.

The Cape colony was eventually taken from the Dutch by the British during the Napoleonic wars, and in 1820 the first of many waves of British settlers arrived. They joined, by now, around forty-three thousand descendants of the seventeenth-century settlers, people who were by now less transplanted colonists than an almost indigenous people. It is only a little anachronistic for us to use the label “Afrikaner” for these people, and “Afrikaans” for their distinctive dialect of Dutch. British conquest was an existential threat to these people’s sense of self, not least because as well as settlers, British rule brought a wave of Protestant missionaries determined to attack the Afrikaners’ core identity, that sharp division between Christian and heathen. As well as founding their own churches, the British even suborned the Afrikaners’ own Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), which the colonial administration now began to staff with British subjects and which in 1829 decreed that the sacraments should be administered equally to all Christians regardless of race.

The last straw was the abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire in 1833. One Afrikaner later recalled her outrage at “the shameful and unjust proceedings with reference to the freedom of the slaves . . . their being placed on an equal footing with Christians, contrary to the laws of God and the natural distinction of race and religion.” “Christian” was a tribal identity, “race-and-religion” a single word. For this Afrikaner, there was only one solution: “We withdrew in order to preserve our doctrines in purity.” A pilgrimage: the so-called Great Trek of the late 1830s, which saw around twelve thousand Afrikaners leave the Cape Colony and move north and east. The DRC’s synod denounced the trek and banned its ministers from joining, but the “Voortrekkers,” undaunted, knew that they were leading their covenanted people from British captivity into the promised land.

This myth was powerfully reinforced on December 16, 1838, when a trekker group of some 470 was attacked by a Zulu army of at least 12,000 at the Ncome River. The trekkers had firearms and an excellent defensive position, but they were still vastly outnumbered, and the Zulus had a formidable reputation. The story goes that the besieged trekkers vowed to commemorate God’s mercy in the event that they survived. We can certainly believe that they saw God’s hand in their victory. The Afrikaners suffered no deaths and only three minor injuries, while the Zulu eventually retreated, leaving three thousand dead. The carnage gave the battle its name: Blood River. Who now could doubt that the Afrikaners were God’s people? The commemoration of the vow every 16 December would become Afrikanerdom’s holiest ritual. It proved that, as the Dutch Reformed minister and poet J. D. du Toit put it in 1909, the “handful of trekkers . . . the freedom seekers, creators of a People,” were “another Israel,” beset by “stark naked black hordes, following tyrants,” but delivered by God’s hand to the paradise providentially set aside for them.

And so the Voortrekkers carved out independent Afrikaner republics north and east of the Cape Colony and, with them, independent Reformed churches. The whole point of the Trek, one leader explained, was not to be forced “to sit at table in Church with Bushmen” or to accept “that baptism and confession destroys the eternal and thus necessary difference between white and black.” The DRC establishment back at the Cape, desperate to reunite with these separated brethren, was now badly split. The ruling in 1829 that nonwhite converts should have equal church membership had, in practice, bolstered the Afrikaner assumption that it was better not to convert nonwhites at all. The solution was proposed in 1857 by Scottish minister in the DRC who was deeply committed to mission. The resolution he sponsored declared that that racially integrated congregations were “desirable . . . wherever possible.” But recognising that this has become an obstacle to mission, it gave permission for segregated congregations. This had two results. One was, indeed, a surge in Dutch Reformed missionary work, and the foundation of new ‘sister’ DRCs for mixed-race and African converts. The second was that the ‘mother’ church, the white DRC, had returned to its original sin.

Meanwhile, the independent Afrikaner republics flourished and the Afrikaner population exploded, an amazing increase from 43,000 in 1820 to some 700,000 in 1900. But by then, British rule was catching up with them. Fatally, the Afrikaner republics turned out to be sitting on vast deposits of diamonds and gold, which was the fundamental cause of the Boer War or South African War of 1899–1902. It is not to defend the republics’ own racial tyranny to point out that this was one of the ugliest episodes in the history of British imperialism. It was a war fought against the entire Afrikaner population, using what Britain’s leader of the Opposition called “methods of barbarism.” Huge tracts of land were emptied of people, who were interned in concentration camps: a new invention, Britain’s gift to the twentieth century. Twenty-seven thousand imprisoned Afrikaners and unknown numbers of nonwhite people died.

The British imperial war machine ground out its victory in the end. But the Afrikaners did not learn to love their conquerors. Instead, in Calvinist mode, they interpreted their defeat as martyrdom, calling them to further defiant faithfulness. Hence the formation in 1914 of the National Party (NP), a political vehicle for asserting Afrikaner identity. This was very close to being the Dutch Reformed Church under another guise: it became routine to joke that the only difference between the NP and the DRC was the day of the week. The NP’s most important leader, Daniel F. Malan, who was also an ordained Dutch Reformed minister, argued that preserving the Afrikaner nation was not mere self-defense but a religious duty:

“We hold this nationhood as our due for it was given to us by the Architect of the universe. . . . The history of the Afrikaner reveals a will and determination which makes one feel that Afrikanerdom is not the work of men but the creation of God”.

For now, this defiance was contained. After their bruising victory in 1902, the British created a new Union of South Africa in 1910, in which their own baby steps towards a nonracial state were ended and the Afrikaners’ rigid racial hierarchy was accepted. The governing United Party described this as the “Christian Trusteeship of the European Race” over the “Natives.” The rights of non-whites to vote, already severely limited, were progressively curtailed. In 1913 a sweeping Natives Land Act reserved the vast bulk of the country’s best farmland and of its cities exclusively for white ownership. South Africa’s British establishment claimed that this was a society evolving toward equality under the law, but for those on the law’s receiving end most progress was in the other direction. Even the English-speaking churches, which unlike the DRC remained formally committed to racial inclusion, were in practice segregated by language as a proxy for race, and remained firmly under white missionary control.

You did not need to be a visionary, however, to suspect in the early twentieth century that this racial tyranny was not wholly stable. But how were white South Africans to defend it, especially against the rising bogeyman of Communism? For Anglophone whites, the answer tended to be imperial liberalism, which aspired to a nonracial capitalist democracy under the rule of law, knew that good order and gradual change were the ways to get there, and was happy to justify today’s injustice on the basis of aspiration to better tomorrow, or perhaps the day after. For Afrikaners, there was an obvious alternative to this milk-and-water ideology. The age’s other rising ideology, Fascism, was one of racism, nationalism, violence, and manly, peasant virtues; an ideological fit with Afrikanerdom which only became closer once Nazi Germany began confronting the Afrikaners’ hated British conquerors. A series of fascistic Afrikaner movements culminated in the emergence in 1938 of the Ossewabrandwag (OB), the “Ox-Wagon Sentinel”: a folk reenactment society with paramilitary ambitions, whose stated aims were to protect “the religious, cultural and material concerns of the Afrikaner.” When Afrikaners were dragged unwillingly into Britain’s war in 1939, they flocked to join the OB, which by mid-1940 numbered 200,000. Its manifesto of that year demanded an Afrikaans-speaking republic in which various racial ‘questions’ would be settled and openly supported a German victory. It also began an active campaign of sabotage.

But this is where the story becomes interesting. For the OB’s bid for Afrikanerdom’s soul failed. It was blocked by the NP, the Afrikaner National Party. The NP’s leadership was committed to creating a white-supremacist Afrikaner republic, but they were not Nazis. This lugubrious distinction between two kinds of racism matters profoundly, because at its heart was the NP’s commitment to its Christian identity.

The OB defined its nationalism by race and blood. This caused an immediate problem, because talk of the “white race” lumped Afrikaners in with their British oppressors. Worse, emphasizing blood rather than covenant changed Afrikanerdom’s meaning. In OB hands, Afrikaner history was not a sacred narrative of divine protection and redemptive suffering but a story of triumphalist violence. Instead of celebrating defeats as martyrdoms, they looked for triumphant victories. To the NP, it all looked pagan, and as foreign as British rule. Fascism and Nazism used a vague Christian identity as a cultural dog-whistle. Afrikaner Nationalism looked for a state founded, as the Afrikaner Brotherhood put it in 1941, on ‘the eternal legal principles of the Word of God’ and committed to freedom of conscience. It also wanted white-only citizenship. So this was not liberal democracy, but nor was it fascist totalitarianism. And so as fascism crumbled worldwide in the wake of the Second World War, the OB collapsed too, and classic Afrikaner nationalism took its place. It was now something without parallels worldwide: an ideology which openly and defiantly defended racism in principle as well as in practice. Apartheid was often compared rather loosely to fascism, but this was not true, except in the sense that different boots feel the same to the person being kicked. Apartheid was a form not of fascism but of Calvinism. That fact is central both to its creation and to its dissolution.

Apartheid was of course far more about money, power, and fear than it was about religion. Almost all of South Africa’s power and wealth were controlled by its white minority, a status quo which suited that minority rather well. But human societies do not act on bald calculations of self-interest. Generally, we need to believe that what we are doing is right, or natural, or serves some higher purpose. Ideologies can be bent and stretched, but they are not infinitely malleable, and if they eventually snap, the cause they are holding together can fall apart. So it was in the case of apartheid and the Dutch Reformed Church’s Calvinism.

The theology of apartheid was based on the apparently innocuous principle that human diversity is God’s will. The Old Testament implies the primary unit of that diversity is the nation, and the Jewish nation’s history implies that nationhood is defined by descent and way of life, not territory or political independence. It is easy to conclude that nations are created by God, and must be preserved inviolate to his glory. And so the Afrikaner “nation,” a conquered minority in a very diverse country, came to have a horror of mixing, blending their God-given distinctiveness into a soulless, cosmopolitan, modernist soup. This principle even stymied the achievement of a great Afrikaner hope, the full reunion of the sundered branches of the DRC after the Boer War. The Cape DRC’s notorious 1857 ruling, remember, did not actually require racial segregation. It retained a handful of “colored” members and two “colored” congregations. A fully united DRC would be governed by a synod including an elder from each of those congregations. For the other, exclusively white branches of the DRC, this was intolerable. One Transvaal delegate insisted that “if there were even one Coloured among 1000 delegates, he would vote against unification”, and the scheme fell.

That Transvaaler’s comment certainly arose from profound racial loathing and fear, but it had a rationale. The argument was that “colored” and black Christians should belong to their own national churches, not the Afrikaners’ church. They were another nation, with their own divinely created way of life. Mixing them into the DRC would contaminate both nations with each other. And so instead, during the 1920s and 1930s, the DRC poured its efforts into building up its sister churches, the segregated, non-white DRCs, in the belief that each nation could that way, in parallel, attain the fullness of its own distinctive divine calling. From around 1929, DRC writers on this subject began to apply a new word to this project: “apartheid.”

This early, church-led vision of apartheid was idealistic. In 1931, the Orange Free State’s DRC called for black churches to be established “on their own terrain, separated and apart,” as part of a community that would live “apart from yet, where possible, in cooperation with the white community.” Neither blacks living amongst whites, nor whites living amongst blacks, could expect to be treated as equals, but they could expect justice. The federal DRC’s mission policy of 1935 insisted that “each nation has a right to be itself and to try to develop and uplift itself,” and it supported “social differentiation and spiritual and cultural segregation, to the benefit of both sections.” It was a policy, DRC theologians argued, which would suit everyone apart from the Anglophone capitalist elites, with their project to mash South Africa’s God-given diversity of nations into bland, mongrel homogeneity. They argued that this separation was morally superior to the status quo of simple discrimination and exploitation. One theorist cited the Afrikaners’ own suffering at the hands of the British to argue that

“the Boer nation can therefore understand the sufferings of the Bantu [black South Africans]. It is the same imperialism and capitalism, having them believe that the foreign is better than what is their own, which seeks to destroy their tribal life”.

How this might be done in practice was sketched out by a group of theologians at Stellenbosch University, led by Professor Gustav Gerdener. Gerdener emphasized that separation should not mean inferiority, and was particularly keen on equality in education, in order to foster what he called ‘a healthy Christian-National life-view’ among all races. This was entirely consistent with his other priority: a ban on interracial marriage, which would preserve all of South Africa’s many nations in their individual purities. It was possible to say, with a straight face, that none of this was about racism.

The test came in 1948. The National Party ran on the emerging policy of apartheid in that year’s election, facing of course an overwhelmingly white electorate. It lost the popular vote, taking 38 percent against 49 percent for the governing United Party, figures virtually unchanged from the previous election. But constituency boundaries had been redrawn, and the NP’s success in thinly populated rural seats delivered it and a small allied party a slender parliamentary majority. It would remain in power without a break until 1994.

The theologians were nervous. Would apartheid actually be constructed so as to permit what Gerdener called “really equivalent and autonomous development”? One of his associates warned in 1947 that apartheid could only be justified if inspired by “Christian love and not by racial egotism or a feeling of racial superiority.” In 1950, Gerdener chaired a DRC conference on “the native question” which insisted that nonwhites be permitted to own substantial amounts of land. He also argued against the use of black labor in the white-run economy, and that in the meantime black labourers ought to be treated with the respect due to an equal, separate people. These views were reflected in the 1956 report of the Tomlinson Commission, a review of racial policy set up by the NP government, which recommended that South Africa be partitioned. The white-ruled state ought to relinquish enough land to form a series of viable independent states, with most blacks becoming citizens of these new states. Decolonization was gathering pace across the continent, and the Tomlinson report suggested a kind of internal decolonization, to leave a rump white South Africa alongside its black neighbors.

Squint hard, and it is almost possible to imagine that this could have been just. There were other contemporary examples, from Austria-Hungary to India, where partition had seemed like the least bad way of dealing with irreparably riven societies. It was possible for apartheid’s theorists honestly to believe that this was the only way for all of South Africa’s nations truly to be themselves.

There were only two problems with this fantasy. First, partition could only have been just if it was mutually agreed by all the peoples concerned, which was tricky, because the underlying purpose of the entire project was to deny nonwhites any real power. As Manas Buthelezi, a Lutheran bishop in Soweto, patiently explained in 1977,

“If we came together, and then agreed that the solution is that we should separate, then separate development would have a moral basis. But now only one section says we must separate and dictates how we should separate”.

Second, neither the NP government nor the white population as a whole was ever willing to contemplate the sacrifices that the Tomlinson Commission called for: not renouncing the use of cheap black labour, certainly not sacrificing vast amounts of land and resource to set up viable new states. The NP’s chief political ideologue, Hendrik Verwoerd, roundly rejected the commission and did his best to purge Gerdener’s idealists from Stellenbosch. Any talk of separate development, he warned, had to take into account the “innate hereditary factors” which ensured that blacks’ development would inevitably lag behind whites’.

So apartheid as actually implemented was a kind of parody of idealistic “separate development”. Interracial marriages were banned in 1949, and all other interracial sexual contact the following year. Nonwhites were banned from owning land in most of South Africa. Houses owned freehold by black families for generations were bulldozed and entire communities forcibly relocated to new, purpose-built “townships” such as Johannesburg’s South-West Townships (SoWeTo), deliberately kept a safe distance from the cities. All schools for nonwhites were nationalised and redesigned in order to train unambitious, politically quiescent manual laborers for the white economy. Even in 1959, when Verwoerd, now prime minister, invoked the language of separation to propose the creation of so-called Bantustans, or “homelands,” carved out of South Africa for the black population, it was a mockery of the notion of partition. The “homelands” as eventually erected constituted some 13 percent of South Africa’s land area and did not include any of the best farmland or any of the cities. Almost all blacks, a large and growing majority of South Africa’s population, were now supposed to be residents of these reservations. The millions who worked in the white-run economy were reclassified as migrant workers, stripped of many of their remaining rights, and made liable to arbitrary “deportation.” The homelands were puppet states funded and controlled by the apartheid regime.

The point is not that Verwoerd betrayed some ideal vision of what apartheid could have been. That vision was both contradictory in its conception and utterly impossible to put into practice. Apartheid’s theologians were less the NP’s dupes than its enablers, providing a vital idealistic veil to a policy of naked racial self-interest. The DRC had, for the time being at least, legitimized apartheid.

South Africa’s English-speaking Protestant churches never signed up to apartheid, and regularly denounced it, but generally preferred issuing resolutions to, for example, choosing to pay their black and white employees equally for equal work. The few who spoke out more clearly, such as the English missionary Trevor Huddleston, were usually removed from the country fairly quickly. This mood of quiescent opposition hardened considerably in 1960, after the Sharpeville massacre, when police opened fire on a mostly female crowd of demonstrators, killing sixty-nine people, most of them shot in the back. The regime, instead of investigating the atrocity, imposed a nationwide state of emergency and arrested thousands of opposition activists.

This was enough to awaken the sleepiest of consciences. Joost de Blank, the Anglican archbishop of Cape Town, called for the DRC to be thrown out of the World Council of Churches. Instead, the WCC organized a formal consultation at Cottesloe, in Johannesburg, in December 1960. It was a remarkable event. The representatives of one of the smaller DRC offshoots kept themselves clearly separate from all the others throughout and were rumored to be feeding news to Prime Minister Verwoerd. The main DRC’s delegates, however, mingled freely with those of the other churches, including eighteen nonwhite participants (and one woman). Over a week, they discovered sufficient mutual understanding that on the last day Archbishop de Blank made an uncharacteristically gracious apology for misjudging his DRC colleagues. The consultation’s final communiqué, agreed to by all present except that DRC offshoot, denounced the ban on mixed marriage and the system of migrant labor and even insisted that every adult regardless of race had “the right to own land wherever he is domiciled, and to participate in the government of his country.” Not exactly a rainbow nation, but a huge shift.

Indeed, for those Afrikaners who were not with them that week, it was a betrayal. Verwoerd himself denounced the communiqué. The DRC’s Transvaal synod, which had sent most of its officeholders to Cottesloe, rejected their conclusions, withdrew from the WCC and threw all those involved out of office, including the synod’s acting moderator, Beyers Naudé. The DRC, once a proud outpost of the Protestant world, now felt both besieged and betrayed. No one shows this more spectacularly than Naudé, for whom Cottesloe triggered nothing less than a conversion. Liberated from office, he agitated against apartheid and the DRC’s role in it. In 1963, he founded a Christian Institute to foment antiapartheid views, building links with the English-speaking churches and then with black South African Christians, a constituency who had generally been ignored up to this point.

The threat was profound. In 1968, Prime Minister John Vorster warned the Christian Institute that anyone aiming to “do the kind of thing here in South Africa that Martin Luther King did in America” should “cut it out, cut it out immediately for the cloak you carry will not protect you.” It was no idle warning. Naudé was closely watched; in 1975, he was briefly imprisoned, and after his outspoken support of the 1976 Soweto uprising, in 1977 he was placed under strict, incommunicado house arrest. In retrospect, the regime should have silenced him far sooner. He had galvanized the English-speaking churches from nominal to earnest antiapartheid activism and turned their struggle into a genuinely multiracial one. He had also shown where the DRC’s own Calvinist conscience might lead it. His work led directly to the foundation of the South African Council of Churches in 1968, and to that body’s decision in 1976 to elect its first black president: a forty-five-year-old rising star in the Anglican church named Desmond Tutu, who argued that the antiapartheid cause was a struggle for white as well as for black liberation, and who helped lead the campaigns of mass civil disobedience that challenged the apartheid state in the 1980s. From 1986 to 1990, South Africa remained under a continuous state of emergency. Tens of thousands were arrested and thousands killed. President P. W. Botha talked of South Africa’s facing a “total onslaught.” It was clear that the apartheid state was no longer even faintly stable. Most of the world assumed it would eventually fall, that it would go down fighting, and that it would take the country into chaos with it.

Instead, between 1989 and 1994, a new president, F. W. de Klerk, gambled that there was another way. His success was fundamentally down to the remarkable vision and astuteness of his counterparts in the African National Congress (ANC), but it is only fair to point out that this was the apartheid state’s initiative. The National Party was not forced to the negotiating table. Its military advisers were clear that they still had the situation in hand and could hold out for a long struggle. If anything, the regime had won the bloody confrontations in the townships through the later 1980s. It could have fought on for many more years, and holding on to the bitter end would have made a certain cold-blooded sense. Fear of retribution or even extermination in the event that the white minority lost its grip on power was very real. The rider of a tiger may not have a viable long-term strategy but still clings on.

Instead, the apartheid state guessed that a deal could be made. The collapse of the Soviet empire and the defeat of Cuban-backed guerrillas in Angola made the old bogeyman of Communism behind the ANC seem less frightening. The moment was, de Klerk said, a “God-sent opportunity”—not a throwaway phrase from an earnest Calvinist. And if the ANC’s liberal-capitalist wing was in the ascendant, so too was the NP’s, its old autarchic nationalism in retreat in the face of neoliberal economics.

But these secular themes miss a crucial part of the story. One survey of Afrikaner business leaders found that between 1968 and 1988, almost half ceased believing that humanity’s division into nations was an expression of God’s will. This was not because they were secularized. As late as 2001, 90 percent of Afrikaners (compared with a mere 40 percent of Anglophone South African whites) told pollsters that they considered religion more important than politics or money. Afrikanerdom was losing not its faith but its moral self-confidence. A senior intelligence officer who would later hold secret talks with Nelson Mandela recalled that in the mid-1980s “nowhere was the situation out of hand, but it was clear that politically and morally we were losing our grip.” In 1979, an Irish visitor to the Afrikaner university of Potchefstroom described his hosts as ‘good men who had inherited certainties, which no longer seemed certain, and who were now groping their way, in considerable intellectual, and some moral, discomfort.’

The crucible of that discomfort was the Dutch Reformed Church. During the 1970s, some in one of the DRC’s small offshoots, the puritanical Dopper Church, began to draw attention to apartheid’s brutality, and to criticize the main DRC’s subservience to the state. Reformed churches in Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands were becoming increasingly critical of their South African brethren, and while the DRC could dismiss the World Council of Churches as a gaggle of crypto-Marxist heretics, other Calvinists were harder to ignore.

In 1974, the DRC produced a full-scale report on racial issues, titled Race, People, and Nation*,* which argued once again that it was legitimate for a country to “decide to regulate its inter-people relationships on the basis of separate development.” The tone was moderate. South Africa’s churches had begun an experiment with segregation in 1857, and the churches had been blessed with prosperity ever since. So apartheid was a justifiable policy in principle. Yet the report also deplored some features of apartheid, such as the ways that migrant labor and residential segregation destroyed families. It even lamented the fact that “social contact between the different groups of people is restricted to the minimum”.

The synod that debated the report found itself badly split. A vocal minority tried to push the critique further, but the majority’s instinct was still to circle the wagons. The crux issue was mixed marriage. The report had argued that mixed marriages were “undesirable” because different cultural backgrounds can “impede the happiness and full development of a Christian marriage”. For DRC traditionalists, this missed the point. The synod eventually added a clause stating that mixed marriages were “impermissible,” because they destroy a nation’s ‘God-given diversity and identity’. This was about racial duty, not marriage counseling.

This did not silence sceptical voices, but the decisive challenge came from an unexpected direction: the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, the DRC’s ‘daughter’ church for South Africa’s so-called ‘coloured’ population, which had long been quietly apolitical. Leading the charge was Allan Boesak, a young “coloured” minister recently returned from study abroad. In 1978, in the wake of the Soweto uprising, he persuaded the Mission Church’s synod to declare that apartheid was a sin and to join the South African Council of Churches. Boesak addressed the Council the following year and helped to spur it to adopting a policy of civil disobedience, but his most significant impact was within the Reformed church family itself.

In 1982, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) met in Ottawa. The WARC had criticized apartheid before, but Boesak now forced the pace. He led nine other South African delegates in publicly refusing to take communion at the opening service while DRC representatives were present. The WARC was impressed. It formally declared “that apartheid is a sin, and that the moral and theological justification of it is a travesty of the gospel, and in its persistent disobedience to the Word of God, a theological heresy.” Declaring that a fundamental question of the faith was at stake, it suspended the white DRC and elected Boesak, who was only thirty-six, as its new president. Spurred by this, the Mission Church drew up a new confession of faith – something that is not done lightly in a Reformed Church – that condemned ‘the forced separation of people on the grounds of race and colour’, and asserted unity and reconciliation as fundamental Christian values. It also, in 1986, elected Boesak as its youngest-ever moderator.

For the white body that still thought of itself as the “mother” DRC, this was a genuine crisis. The debacle at the 1982 WARC fostered soul-searching as well as anger. A defiant motion to withdraw from the WARC was defeated. Previously sound men started to doubt. Johan Heyns, one of the church’s most prominent theologians, now denied that apartheid was God’s will and came out in favor of mixed marriage. His colleague Willie Jonker demanded that “we distance ourselves from every form of racism, not because of Ottawa, but because racism is a sin.” Instead, the 1982 synod resolved to set up yet another commission to produce yet another report.

The commission’s work took four years, but it was apparently not long enough. Its 1986 report, Church and Society, was chaotic and full of points on which the authors had not been able to agree. Even so, it denied that forced separation of peoples or a ban on interracial marriage could be justified. It even stated that

“the application of apartheid as a political and social system by which human dignity is adversely affected, and whereby one particular group is detrimentally suppressed by another, cannot be accepted”.

Notice that measured reference to “the application of apartheid”: the report denounced racism as an evil but only called apartheid an error, which could have been intended honorably and done differently. Even so, the change is astonishing. The DRC had crossed a theological Rubicon, hesitantly, ungraciously, but voluntarily. Apartheid’s hard-liners recognized that their cause was lost. In 1987, they formed the breakaway Afrikaans Protestant Church, a refuge for a few tens of thousands of bitter-enders. Afrikanerdom’s conscience had moved on.

Johan Heyns, who was elected as the DRC’s moderator in 1986, now took charge of the process. He had the report sent back for further revisions, resulting in a 1989 draft that was less a statement of doctrine and more a confession of past errors. Heyns also helped persuade the government to permit some antiapartheid protests from late 1989 onward, and in 1990 he bluntly declared, on behalf of the DRC, that apartheid as such was a sin. Like many of his colleagues, his conversion was late but in earnest. Unlike most of them, he sealed it with his blood. He was shot and killed by an unknown assassin in 1994 while playing cards at home with his wife and grandchildren: one of apartheid’s last martyrs.

In December 1989, President de Klerk called for a conference of all South Africa’s churches to address the emerging new world. This eventually took place at Rustenburg in November 1990, and included, among others, the long-silenced Beyers Naudé. The show was stolen, however, by Heyns’s ally Willie Jonker. Four pages into his lecture, Jonker pulled out a handwritten scrap of paper and told the startled delegates,

“I confess before you and the Lord, not only my own sin and guilt, and my personal responsibility for the political, social, economical and structural wrongs that have been done to many of you and the results of which you and our whole community are still suffering from but vicariously I dare also to do that in the name of the D. R. Church of which I am a member, and for the Afrikaans people as a whole”.

The DRC’s awkward, crabbed journey to repentance had not prepared anyone for this unscripted moment. Desmond Tutu now interrupted proceedings from the floor and said:

“I believe that I certainly stand under pressure of God’s Holy Spirit to say that . . . when confession is made, then those of us who have been wronged must say “We forgive you.” . . . It [the confession] is not cheaply made and the response is not cheaply made”.

The delegates present applauded. The exchange made headlines around the world, and the DRC’s formal delegates, as surprised as everyone else by Jonker’s sudden intervention, rushed to declare that they endorsed his remarks. And they all lived happily ever after.

Church politics does not work that way, of course. A good many DRC members, including the former president P. W. Botha, objected to being told they were penitent. Some talked of further schism. On the other side, the nonwhite Dutch Reformed churches, who understood the fine gradations of the DRC’s language, felt Jonker’s statement was suspiciously vague and wanted to know exactly what he was confessing. Tutu himself was criticized for offering too quick and blithe an absolution.

Progress since then has been halting. The DRC’s 1994 synod finally abandoned the attempt to produce a theological statement on racial matters, and also invited an outsider to address it, a lifelong Methodist of discreet but fervent faith: the newly elected president, Nelson Mandela. In 1998, the DRC was readmitted to the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. But the DRC has been slow to embrace the view that apartheid was inherently evil, rather than an innocent idea wickedly implemented. The church’s formal submission to the post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) merely claimed that “apartheid was allowed to degenerate” into injustice. This view has long hampered its reconciliation with the non-white DRCs.

Plainly, the DRC’s repentance has been neither perfect nor consistently gracious, but repentance of any kind is not so common in human affairs that it can pass unremarked. The DRC’s sanctification of racial prejudice was intrinsic to apartheid. It did so believing it had good intentions, but that failure of moral insight only deepens its culpability. Yet Reformed Protestantism’s restless tendency to revisit and question its own orthodoxies meant that support for apartheid was not graven in stone. So if this story has a lesson for the wider history of religious extremism, I suggest it is ultimately a hopeful one. Religious traditions can be bigger than the evils they commit; they carry enough resource within themselves to be able to correct and transcend their mistakes, given enough time, enough pressure and a modicum of heroism. Reformed Protestants in particular, perhaps, can dig deep holes for themselves, but they can also dig themselves out. They can even help to save a nation in the process.

And perhaps a soul or two. One participant in the TRC recalled a private conversation with one witness, a member of one of the state’s death squads. During the 1980s, this man had carried out sickening atrocities. “I did all those things because of my Christian faith,” he explained; he believed he was fighting a just war against Communism. “You have to understand, I really believed that I was being a good Christian.” But he had changed his mind. Some of the murders he had seen committed went beyond what he could accept as honorable. So he decided to confess his former crimes, to tell survivors as much as he could, and to denounce his former colleagues. His interviewer asked him why he had changed his mind. “He looked me straight in the eyes and said, ‘You see, I’m a devout Christian. I was changed by my profound Christian faith.’” There are layers of self-deception, self-justification, and wishful thinking in that statement. There may also be truth.

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