

Two Sides of a Coin: On Whose Side is God?

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Abstract

The phrase “Two Sides of a Coin” in the title should be understood as meaning that there are different ways of looking at a thing or dealing with a situation and that they could be both positive and negative. South African history and reality is without a doubt divided into two halves, namely black and white. This history gave birth to ideologies and theologies arguing that God belonged to—and was loyal to—a particular race. For most whites, specifically most Afrikaners, God was always with them in their struggle against the British Empire and blacks. Likewise, for blacks, God was also with them in their struggle against white oppression. The phrase “Two Sides of a Coin” expresses these two points of view that are based on the same subjects or sources, namely God, Christ, and Christianity, although they end up with two different conclusions and I must declare that I am a black theologian who subscribes to the view that “God is on the side of the poor.” The sub-heading “On Whose Side is God” explains that the article interrogates the claim that God is “a God of sides.” The conclusion shows that God is not necessarily located on a particular side but is a God who is already standing at a particular position which naturally is the side of the oppressed and the side of righteousness. The article is divided into four sections: the first section concentrates on the Afrikaners’ belief that God is on their side. The second section concentrates on the white (non-Afrikaner) response to this belief. The third section looks at the black critique of nationalism and apartheid theology. The fourth section expresses the view that God is for all but stands on the side of righteousness.

Keywords: Afrikaners; apartheid; blacks; identity; liberation; purity

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Introduction

The South African history of division was never only political, economic, and social but also religious. Out of religious divisions, a “new God” was formed, a “God of colour” and “state of affairs.” This “God” divided society into two parts, the white and the black. Furthermore, each group developed a theology and ideology that God was with them in their plight.

The claim that God was on their side was formed out of their understanding of salvation. However, based on observation, this claim was not necessarily of a religious nature only, but was also rooted and motivated in day-to-day life issues such as politics and the economy, and Christianity was used to strengthen and justify the argument.

Salvation thus meant two different things in South Africa, which is why I employ the phrase “two sides of a coin,” because a coin consists of two different sides with different meanings. This understanding of salvation has led each individual group to declare that God is on their side, especially in their struggles.

My intention in this article is to explore Afrikaners’ and blacks’ perceptions of salvation under apartheid and, in some instances, to date. Most Afrikaners understood salvation to mean that in God’s eyes, they were the chosen ones, but of course they were wrong. I will also argue that blacks understood salvation to imply that God would liberate them from the Afrikaners’ oppression and that God’s favour was with the suffering black people. The following headings are a compass to the article’s argument: The Development of Afrikaners’ Identity; The Afrikaners’ Internal Critique of Apartheid; English-Speaking White South Africans’ Critique of Apartheid; The Black Theology Critique of Afrikaner Nationalism and Apartheid; and to close the argument, the question: “Where is God to be Found?”

The Development of Afrikaners’ Identity

It is important to note that Afrikaner identity is closely connected to apartheid. Apartheid dates back to 1948 and it is important to grasp that D. F. Malan and the National Party were the architects of apartheid. Later, H. F. Verwoerd as the father of “grand apartheid” established it as South African law. However, what must be clarified is that the notion of “God’s will and favour” for the Afrikaners developed earlier than the concept of apartheid.

The Afrikaners’ identity was shaped through some of the following: the arrival of the Dutch (1652), British occupation (1806), the Great Trek (1835), the Battle of Blood River (1838), the Anglo-Boer wars (1880–1902), and nationalist ideology (1948).

Between 1652 and 1838, a distinct Afrikaner identity began to develop. By 1836, a growing Afrikaner identity had certainly developed an important sentiment of group difference with Africans and superiority. They also distinguished themselves from the

British and rejected the liberal policies in the Cape Colony. The domination by the English in all facets of life triggered Afrikaner pride, nationalism, sovereignty, and isolation, all of which were aimed at the safeguarding of the Afrikaner people. The Afrikaners started to equate their own state of affairs with that of the Old Testament, specifically the suffering of Israel and its “liberation by God.” For example, the trekkers who left the Cape Colony and founded the Transvaal and Free State identified themselves with the nation of Israel who had left Egypt (the Cape Colony and British oppression) for the promised land (the areas to the north of the Cape Colony), where they were attacked by the heathens (blacks). Although these allegories were figurative in nature they became a reality in the long run. How, then, did a distinct Afrikaner identity develop?

Afrikaners’ Political Thought

Many Afrikaners perceived that they were superior to blacks and that they were born leaders, therefore blacks were relegated to being followers. For example, at Pearson in September 1938, Dirk Mostert declared the following about Afrikaners: “We are a chosen nation. We did not choose ourselves. God chose us. We were given a commission” (Mostert cited in Van Jaarsveld 1979, 72). Several biblical texts, such as Genesis 1:28; 9:24–27; 11:1–9; Acts 17:27; and Revelations 21:24 were used to justify “God’s blessing on them and dominion over the earth and others,” that blacks needed to be converted to a new faith, and that the being of others was questionable. These biblical texts and many others were used to support the Afrikaners’ views on leadership and separation (see below). According to Mostert’s declaration, God had chosen the Afrikaners and supported them in their struggles. Therefore, how could anyone question God?

Afrikaner leadership in politics was largely driven by a religious understanding that influenced their political interpretation. In 1838, on the eve of the “Oath of the Battle of Blood River,” the Afrikaners through their leader (Sarel Cilliers) promised God that “if He [God] will be with us and protect us and deliver the enemy [Zulus] into our hands so that we may triumph over him, that we shall observe the day and the date of anniversary in each year and a day of thanksgiving like the Sabbath” (Cilliers cited in Bird 1888, 243). The Afrikaners invited God to be with them in their battle and their victory confirmed God’s approval of and support for them. The victory at Blood River was also a symbol and confirmation of the victory of Christianity over heathenism because Afrikaners compared themselves with the Israelites and Christianity and concluded that God would always be with them. However, they had an understanding that even though God was always with them, suffering was inevitable as in the cases of Israel and Christ.

Certain Afrikaner leaders equated the Afrikaners’ suffering with that of the Israelites as God’s mission. *De Fakkkel* of February 1900 quoted a sermon by a certain Dutch Reformed Minister who said: “God led us into war; it is to chastise us, but he has His sacred goal. ... He will not let us perish, but will confirm us through his baptism of fire.

The Lord Himself planted us in South Africa and let us flourish ... [like Israel] we are going through the Red Sea, but it will make us into a separate people” (Du Toit 1994, 136). This statement was a response to the second Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902). Even though the Afrikaners were defeated in the war, God had not abandoned them. In addition, it symbolised that suffering could bring essential results.

The suffering of Afrikaners would lead to God’s will being accomplished but perseverance was expected from them. For the Afrikaners, perseverance was a symbol of commitment to their commission and a confirmation of their faith in God and Christ. This was expressed by Hexman (1981, 41) when he commented on the poem “Besembos”:

Like Israel, and following the example of Christ Himself, the Afrikaner people achieve salvation through suffering. Totius’ poem is therefore a psalm to national deliverance, an interpretation of history that makes the past bearable. The irrational pattern of the past events fits into a divine scheme, which removes their arbitrary appearance and eternally legitimates them.

The general understanding was that there was a bigger achievement for suffering, and that end was salvation. There was generally an understanding and recognition that it was only through perseverance that one could attain salvation.

Suffering or “the going through the Red Sea” was to bear fruit in the creation of a “separate people.” However, an expectation and precondition of being a separate people was that it would have to be uncontaminated and maintain its differentness.

Afrikaners and Purification

The Afrikaners identified themselves with Israel and identified blacks with the Canaanite heathens. This idea promoted the idea of purification, which was also emphasised by the Israelites. The Afrikaners’ attempt to purify themselves was only possible through separation and the means to achieve this was to legalise and structure separation through politics. The legal process would assure a movement from perceptions and attitudes to a practical fulfilment of history and God’s will. In other words, the legalisation of separation was essential for Afrikaner’s salvation.

The political expression of religious purity that followed on from 1948 can be traced from within the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). In 1857 the church answered the question on whether communion should be served simultaneously to whites and blacks in this fashion:

Synod regards it as desirable and in accordance with Scripture that converted heathen members (i.e. blacks) should be incorporated in existing congregations (i.e. predominantly white congregations) wherever it is possible; but where, as a result of the weakness of some, this should be an obstacle to the progress of the Kingdom of Christ among the heathen, the existing heathen congregations, or those heathen congregations

still to be established, should exercise their Christian privileges in a separate place of worship. (Saayman 1979, 108–109)

Prof. E. P. Groenewald, a New Testament scholar of the DRC wrote in 1947: “[Purity of blood] is as necessary for a nation to do the will of God as is holiness for the individual if he wants to serve God wholeheartedly. ... if a nation guards its separateness, it will enjoy the blessings of God” (Groenewald in Cronje 1947, 48, 57). According to Groenewald, the separation of Afrikaners was God’s intention and if it were fulfilled it would bring about God’s blessings. This clearly communicated a message to Afrikaners as expressed by Groen van Pristerer that “in isolation lies [Afrikaners’] strength” (Van Pristerer cited in Bosch 1982, 15–17).

When and if God’s will of purification was to be followed, the blessing of peace was a benefit. Purification was thus equated with peace because it (peace) could “only be obtained in the country by following the course adopted by nations, to be separated and then to be good neighbours” (Verwoerd in Landman 1968, 138).

Afrikaner leaders emphasised that separation did not mean inferiority but rather differentness. The distinction to them was very important to avoid confusion and misinterpretation. To allow the differentness of the other in the political and legal sphere or sense was justified in the *Counter-Memorial* filed by the Government of the Republic of South Africa, which sought to defend apartheid, by saying, “To judge the morality of a policy it must be remembered that in all ethics a balance must be struck between different values, different rights. Absolute right for the one may mean tremendous injustice to the other” (Landman 1968, 78).

Differentness was to be recognised and glorified by allowing separation, and the result of separation was a “lesser evil” than the “greater evil” in integration. Dr Max Lamberty, a professor at the Hogger Instituut voor Overzeese Gobieden at Antwerp, emphasised this point (in Landman 1968, 130):

“Integration” can be a greater evil than “segregation” when it is not accepted by all the parties concerned, when it is achieved not by free choice but by force. A policy of separation, which leads to the establishment of separate institutions which grant to each of the groups differing racially, culturally or religiously its own possibilities, can, on the other hand, be a benefit when it gives all the groups concerned the possibility of completely developing and realising their own way of life.

Integration was seen as a greater evil as it could have opposed segregation and inequality in favour of equality. Thus, it was problematic to think of equality because, according to the DRC, equality was far from God’s word: “it is an established scriptural principle that in every community ordination, there is a fixed relationship between authorities. ... Those who are culturally and spiritually advanced have a mission to leadership and protection of the less advanced” (Wilkins and Strydom in Huddleston 1956, 61).

The intention of this section was to show that the Afrikaner was “a religious person” who believed in “God” and in “Jesus Christ.” Moreover, Afrikaners saw and understood themselves as a nation from a biblical perspective. This belief made sense in their daily lives and the struggles that they had to overcome in South Africa. Of course, the belief and ideology were questionable and has remained a problem in South Africa to date. In the next section I provide a view of the Afrikaners’ internal critique of the justification of apartheid.

Afrikaners’ Internal Critique of Apartheid

The previous section gives the impression that Afrikaners were a united front and that every Afrikaner was comfortable with apartheid. However, this was not the case. Du Pre (1992, 154) belies the impression by labelling it an unreal situation; he pointed out that “the myth of Afrikaner unity has also been laid bare. The Afrikaners have never been a united people.” Du Pre’s testimony nullifies the perception of Afrikaner’s “thinking alike.” I should, however, mention that Afrikaner theology and ideology has dominated the Afrikaner community and was supported by the majority. It was only a small minority that believed that the theology and ideology of apartheid was a sin, wrong, and contrary to the word of God.

In order to illustrate Du Pre’s argument below, I discuss the views of Beyers Naudé to outline what he had to say to his fellow Afrikaners on the issue of apartheid.

Beyers Naudé’s Declaration on Apartheid

Beyers Naudé was born in Roodepoort in the then Transvaal on 10 May 1915. He graduated from the Stellenbosch School of Theology in 1939. In 1940 he was appointed assistant-minister at the DRC in Wellington, in the Cape province. He was one of the few Afrikaners who campaigned against apartheid. In February 1980 Naudé broke away from the DRC and was admitted to the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA).

In a newspaper article in 1970, Naudé begins by declaring that apartheid was theologically and morally unacceptable. Naudé stated that the fact that the Afrikaners compared themselves to Israel was nothing new because

many other nations have, at some stage of their history done the same (e.g. the British, the Americans, the Germans). Joseph Chamberlain, for example declared once: “The Anglo-Saxon race is infallibly destined to be the predominant force in the history and civilization of the world” while an American, Herman Melville, wrote: “We Americans are peculiar, chosen people, the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of our times; we bear the ark of the world.” (Naudé 1967, 3)

Based on this statement, it is very clear that Naudé did not believe that the Afrikaner claim, nor these other claims, were legitimate.

Even though he disputes the claim of the chosen nation as nothing unique, he took pains to argue against this. He pointed out that the justification of Afrikaners as a chosen nation was a biblical misinterpretation and therefore “this misleading interpretation is also to be found in the distorted exposition of passages, like the curse of Ham (Gen. 9:10), the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1–9), the use of the word ‘bastard’ (Deutr. 23: 2), God’s purpose with the creation of man and the birth of nations (Acts. 17: 26), and the ignorance regarding the true meaning of the Incarnation and the nature of the Church” (Naudé 1967, 4). The quotation responded directly to the Afrikaners’ justification that the Bible supported their cause.

Naudé viewed apartheid as morally unacceptable and a biblical misinterpretation, and asked: “How do we reconcile this policy with our pious confession as to the holiness of marriage and the biblical demand for the building up and maintenance of healthy family life?” (Naudé 1970, 4). The question was aimed at challenging the view that mixed marriages were illegal according to apartheid laws and reminding the self-proclaimed “Christian” Afrikaners that they were preventing the plan and act of God from being fulfilled.

The policy of separation for Naudé was not only a theological and ideological problem and concern. The policy of separation was after all also “threatening the future and continued existence of the White man (and particularly the Afrikaner)” (Naudé 1970, 2). Naudé’s prophecy was based on the view that Afrikaners would isolate themselves from the community and thus find it difficult to function within an inclusive community in the future, and that has proven to be the case today. For example, Naudé warned:

Think only of the tremendously deleterious effect of job reservation on our white (and particularly our youth): because there is no healthy, normal competition, as a result of the artificial protection by law, our labour achievement is so much lower, our pride in our work so undermined and our hankering after a lot of money and becoming-rich-quickly-with-as-little-effort-as-possible is busy making many of our rising generation a group of weaklings and layabouts. (Naudé 1970, 5)

Through a history of self-isolation, the Afrikaner has naturally attracted policies that are aimed at rectifying the injustice and anomalies of the past. South Africa’s Constitution, laws, and policies are now designed to protect the black majority because of a history that favoured the white minority. The affirmative action, BBBEE, and land redistribution and restitution laws and policies in South African under a democracy are examples of what the apartheid exclusion has created in the long run and they are suffering the consequences to date and this was created by them (whites). Of course, the consequences are mild compared with what should have been the case or what may be the case in future should a radical black government take over.

We know that white South Africans have been divided into Afrikaners and English-speaking South Africans. I shall share the view of some of the latter. Of course, there

were those English-speaking South Africans who subscribed to whiteness, but for this exercise I wish to argue the critique of those who were against apartheid.

English-Speaking White South Africans' Critique of Apartheid

South African history records that not every white person was an Afrikaner or supported apartheid. Furthermore, there are those whites who came to South Africa before and after the development of the Afrikaner nation. In this section, my intention is to analyse Douglas Bax's views on apartheid. Bax, a white South African who was not an Afrikaner, was from the Presbyterian Church, thus a Reformed Church.

The views of Bax are chosen as an example of an English-speaking critique of apartheid. The fact that he also writes from within the Reformed tradition (Presbyterian) is also significant.

Douglas Bax on the Dutch Reformed Church's Interpretation of Scripture

For the DRC, religion and scripture had given them direction and confirmation that they were chosen by God, that God was on their side, that God's favour was with them, and that they were destined for salvation. In a 1974 report titled *Ras, Volk en Nasie en Volkerevehoudinge in die Lig van die Skrif*, certain leaders in the DRC argued that "Abraham is called away from Ur and Israel is isolated as a people so that God's plan of salvation for the nations may be realised" (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk. Algemene Sinode 1976, 22).

The calling of Abraham by God was followed by God's blessing that he and his family would be a blessing to the entire world:

In the case of Israel the multinational demand for isolation was motivated primarily by religious and not by racial or ethnic considerations. Even if we were to admit that Israel's existence had ethnic significance as well, this aspect cannot be isolated from Israel's unique position as the chosen people of God and it would therefore be inadvisable for the church to draw unwarranted conclusions from it to be applied to relations between the peoples of our times. (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk. Algemene Sinode 1976, 22)

By implication, God's covenant with Abraham should be limited to that particular purpose and context whereby a specific action had to be taken.

The DRC leaders of the 1974 General Synod, who promoted the view that apartheid was biblically based, used Genesis 10 and 11 as some of the biblical texts as the basis of the argument for claiming to be God's chosen and for enforcing separation. In contrast, Bax judged this interpretation of Scripture as misinterpretation. He boldly stated that (in Genesis 1 and 11)

Whereas before God blessed men so that they would gradually fill the earth (1:28), now (and now only) by confusing their language He divides them into separate, alienated and potentially conflicting groups, and thereby now (and now only) scatters them abroad over the face of all the earth (11:8f). Thus they lose their unity (and their common language and culture) not because God originally willed this at all, but because they have misused this unity and their cultural progress, and have sought their security in their own group identity, culture and power of achievement, instead of in God alone. (Bax 1979, 15)

Bax argued that God's original intent was for human beings to be united; however, human beings misused God's unity to achieve a sinful goal.

Bax challenged the report on "God's Will of Separation" by saying:

The Report confuses two quite different things: providence and ethics. The fact that God, in His providence, has punished [people] by confusing their languages, so that they divide into groups that misunderstand and are alienated from each other does not seek to exacerbate this. There is no commandment whatsoever to this effect in Gen. 11. A theology that does not confuse providence and commandment in this way, however, would, if it were consistent, end up by allowing such absurdities as, for instance the logically similar inference that because God punished man with death (Gen. 3:19, Rom. 6:23), He must want men to kill each other. (Bax 1979, 17)

Bax challenged the report on its justification that separation was God's will. He argued on the basis that God favours unity and justice instead of separation and injustice. The divine preparation cannot and can never contradict the divine direction or vice versa.

Bax argues that both divine preparation and direction are for one another and with each other. This argument is clarified when he quotes Ephesians 2:11–22 to emphasise

that, whereas before Christ came the Gentile nations were separated from the nation of Israel, now they are no longer "excluded from citizenship in Israel"; no longer "foreigners to the covenants" made with the nation of Israel, no longer "far away". Now they have been brought near through the blood of Christ. The text does not explicitly refer to black and white, but the significance is that it includes even those who are not Jews. (Bax 1979, 23)

By quoting Ephesians 2, Bax wanted to remind us of that God's word and will are not arrested in the Old Testament alone but moves beyond it to the New Testament, because it is through and in Jesus Christ that reconciliation was achieved and is possible.

I wish to conclude this section by saying that after every revolution, there comes a new order. Afrikaner and white theology and ideology created a new world order. This new world order has created what Beyers Naudé labelled "an unreal society." Even some whites have observed this, and that is why J. N. J. Kritzinger, also an Afrikaner, proposed a new white Christianity, because "a liberating and positive white Christianity

will entail an attempt at re-socialising the entire white community through the creation of new symbols of white identity. This includes the turning away from racist colonialist assumptions of superiority, and a turning towards a definite ‘white African’ identity” (Kritzinger 1988, 315). Kritzinger realised that the new world order had to include even whites but that this world is possible only if they are willing to confess their sins, convert, and correct. Conversion should not be viewed and measured by the possibility and ability to integrate but should be viewed by confession and acceptance of one’s guilt and by dismantling the structures of colonialism and apartheid. After all, sins unconfessed are sins reproduced and unforgiven. Kretzschmar (1986, 65) has argued that

white Christians should also consider what integration in the church would mean. Certainly, it would mean one and not four Dutch Reformed Churches, and in all the churches, black and white ministers with equal standing, training and salaries; mixed congregations and, therefore, a willingness to adapt and co-operate in terms of language, structure and the content of the worship services.

These approaches differ significantly from that of Afrikaner nationalism and apartheid. This leads us to the black theology critique of Afrikaner nationalism and apartheid.

The Black Theology Critique of Afrikaner Nationalism and Apartheid

In South Africa, since 1652 Christianity and theology have been interpreted by whites. To use an analogy, the driver of Christianity and theology was, therefore, the whites, and blacks were the passengers. The passengers were very observant and thus learnt the directions and later realised that there were different directions that could be travelled. But to take a different route which the driver did not use and see as fitting, the passengers had to learn to drive.

The Afrikaners were driving Christianity and theology into apartheid and the blacks were not happy with the direction the bus was taking as it was going to cause a fatal accident that was ultimately going to affect everybody and distort God’s intentions for humanity. Blacks were not comfortable with and did not accept apartheid theology and its implication that Afrikaners were chosen by God to oppress and exploit them. The end product of apartheid was oppression and exploitation, although it was claimed that the intention of apartheid was separation.

The question is why the passengers did not jump out of the bus rather than wanting to drive it and change its direction. To answer this question, and looking at black theology’s critique of apartheid theology, I will put forth the views of the black theologians on God and oppression.

The Black Theological Rejection of Black Oppression

South African black theology arose in the mid-1970s as a reaction to apartheid and was given birth by the ideals of the Black Consciousness Movement and in dialogue with the Latin American theologies of liberation. Black theology, a version of contextual theology, is a theology of struggle and aims to achieve liberation from oppression. The ultimate goal of black theology was for black people to be liberated and freed within their own country and continent, also from the internalisation of oppression.

Black theologians were in search of the truth about the black plight and asking whether the oppression and exploitation of blacks was God's deliberate intention. They discovered that no genuine religion could justify oppression, exploitation, racism, separation, etc. To them, this was a heresy and a moral evil. They objected to the fact that blackness was associated with "bad housing, being underpaid, pass laws, influx control, migrant labours, group areas, white bosses and black informers, condescension and paternalism, in a word black powerlessness" (Boesak 1977, 57). This response and objection were rooted in the understanding that God sides with the oppressed, the exploited, and the poor. Simon Maimela (1987, 69) argued that black theology draws "its inspiration from the biblical witness to a God who freed slaves from the clutches of an oppressive Pharaoh, is responsive to white theology which sanctifies racist social institutions." Maimela's confession contradicted and disputed the claim of the Afrikaners and opposed any claim that God was in any way associated with slavery and racism; God was the opposite of such and was in fact a God of freeing the slaves.

Allan Boesak advanced a similar argument that the Afrikaner government was not with God or representing God, stating that

the South African government is neither just nor legitimate. In its ongoing oppression and exploitation of the people, in its wanton violence in order to maintain the system, in its persistent disobedience of the word of God, this government can no longer claim to be the "servant of God for your good". It has become, quite simply, the beast from the sea of Revelation 13, the biblical opposite of the servant of God of Romans 13. (Boesak and Villa-Vicencio 1986, 151)

Black theology critiqued any form of oppression and exploitation that was perpetuated and promoted in the name of God and Jesus Christ that made a mockery of others based on their skin colour by Afrikaners and whites in general. Since God was not on the side of slavery and oppression, then whose side was God on according to black theology?

God As Being on the Side of the Blacks

The morality of Afrikaners and the DRC supported separate development based on race as God's intention by comparing themselves with the Israelites. Maimela (1987, 25) did not dispute the appropriation of the symbol of Israel; to him "the appropriation of the story of Israel, if this story means anything at all, should enable us to talk about God from the level of personal faith and to affirm in faith that, as God was for Israel, God is

even today for us and therefore also for me.” Maimela did not have a problem with the idea of being chosen. However, he did not support the idea of separate development and separation.

Black theology did not agree with the policy and theology of separation. Separation was unthinkable and impractical as to them African life was whole. Manas Buthelezi (1997, 96) explained the notion of life in Africa as wholeness, saying that “it is impossible to grasp this concept of the wholeness of life if one does not take seriously the fact that God is the creator of all things.” By implication, this included both blacks and whites; therefore, the search for the black self and black humanity could not be satisfied when it was separated from the rest of creation and God’s good plan for creation.

To be an authentic self means to have an opportunity to live this life as God has given it, that is, to live as a free being and to live alongside others. Thus, “to live means to be at a point in the realm of the created things wherein one receives and shares with others the life sustaining gifts of God” (Buthelezi 1997). Takatso Mofokeng shared this view, saying, “God is the God of a community of equal people who participate vigorously in creating justice, socially, politically and economically” (Mofokeng 1983, 237).

To black theologians, the emphasis on blackness and black power did not mean separation with whites or the entire creation but rather that blacks had to be given the opportunity to live as human beings, develop, benefit, lead, etc., in the country of their birth. But of course, Afrikaner theology and ideology brought with it a dangerous theology of separation, which leads to the question: Why did blacks remain Christians?

Why did Blacks Remain Christians?

The question of why blacks remained Christians cannot be avoided since what they were affirming (Christianity) was used to oppress and exploit them for a long time. Several answers to this question are found in declarations (like that of the Belhar Confession) and the theology of blacks.

Allan Boesak did not believe that God was to be blamed and held responsible for what Afrikaners did in South Africa and for their interpretation of the Bible. He declared, “It was not God who is responsible for the tragic state of affairs in South Africa, it is the voters and the government they have put in power” (Boesak and Villa-Vicencio 1986, 141). He shifted the blame from God onto human beings.

Black theology also rejected a model of a white or Afrikaner God. To black theology, God was rather associated with blackness. Blackness was understood and interpreted as meaning “to glorify God.” Blacks had “to find out whether [their] position is a deliberate creation of God or an artificial fabrication of the truth by power hungry people whose motives are authority, security, wealth, and comfort” (Biko 1978, 87). The position that Biko was referring to was that of blacks being brushed aside as a creation or factory

fault. He wanted to prove that blacks were created as they are and that they did not have to be ashamed of their blackness. They were not non-whites.

Blacks could also not abandon Christianity because of their understanding of the historical Christology that made it possible to know Jesus as a truly human being who suffered alongside blacks in their hardship and daily struggles. It offered new possibilities for blacks to be able to see Jesus as living alongside them in his difficult life of poverty and low economic status. This point is emphasised by the starting point of black theology: Jesus who was born in a manger resonated with blacks born in squatter camps. Black Christology defined and saw Jesus Christ as the Jew who suffered and struggled throughout his life as a human being. And according to Gabriel Setiloane (1976, 128–131), this Jew was like Africans, even if Africans wanted to refuse and reject him:

His words. Ah, they taste so good
As sweet and refreshing as the sap of the palm
Raised and nourished on African soil
The Truths of His words are for all men,
for all time.

And yet for us it is when He is on the cross,
This Jesus of Nazareth, with holed hands.
And an open side, like a beast of sacrifice:
When he is stripped naked like us,
Browned and sweating water and blood
in the heat of the sun,
Yet silent.
That we cannot resist him.

How like us he is, this Jesus of Nazareth,
Beaten, tortured, imprisoned, spat upon,
truncheoned.
Denied by His own, and chased like a
thief in the night.
Despised, and rejected like a dog that has
fleas,
For NO REASON.

It was this shared life experience that fascinated and attracted blacks to the Christian faith; they wanted to know more about this Jesus of Nazareth. For blacks, there were many similarities between their lives and that of Jesus of Nazareth.

Where Is God To Be Found?

The question of whether God is to be found in the Afrikaners' camp or the blacks' camp is a delicate one because taking sides is very dangerous. But where there is injustice,

one cannot be neutral or stand on the side of injustice. Neutrality itself is a position that sustains and maintains the status quo. The question is problematic, especially when everybody wants God to be on their side and the danger of taking sides is that it creates hurt feelings and resentment since God appears to be siding with one group to oppress another group. Therefore, God appears to be or seems to be unjust, but like I said, a neutral God or the God who stands on the side of injustice is not the God who blacks should worship or relate with.

We cannot deny that in any situation of conflict there are usually two sides. It is also expected that when there is a pursuit of justice, taking sides is inevitable and unavoidable. But, even so, it must always be clear that justice should be pursued on behalf of all. Moreover, we cannot deny that those who will find themselves as victims will always think of justice as theirs and for them, although justly speaking, justice is for all but determined by God.

In life (politics, economy, religion, etc.) there are right and wrong positions and views, and God cares about life, and has an opinion and standpoint about it. Unfortunately, or fortunately, God is always on the side of the morally right. It must be clear that God does not move to the correct or just position, but God is already standing there in righteousness. When we choose what is right, God sides with us by virtue of us choosing God's side; in effect, we have decided to move to God's position. This position (where God is) is simply God's perspective or point of view. What we call God taking sides is the position where we find God standing; it is not that we move to that particular position and God follows us, it is the other way around. Therefore, for God to be on our side, we must seek God's side, which is the side of righteousness, liberation, justice, reconciliation, unity, and peace.

It must be clear that this does not imply that God is silent and neutral, but that God has a position and speaks his/her mind. For example, the declaration that God is righteous and just provides us with the answer and assurance that God is standing in righteousness and in justice instead of wickedness and injustice.

God loves all humanity and cannot be an irresponsible God who neglects his/her people; blacks and whites and all other people are God's own creation. Psalm 50 (specifically verses 2–7, NIV) seems to summarise my argument that God has a particular position and is not silent about injustice. It is necessary that we move to God's position:

²From Zion, perfect in beauty,
God shines forth.

³Our God comes and will not be silent;
a fire devours before him,
and around him a tempest rages.

⁴He summons the heavens above,
and the earth, that he may judge his people:

⁵“Gather to me my consecrated ones,

who made a covenant with me by sacrifice.”
6And the heavens proclaim his righteousness,
for God himself is judge. *Selah*
7“Hear, O my people, and I will speak,
O Israel, and I will testify against you:
I am God, your God.”

According to Charles H. Spurgeon, this psalm is said to have been written by Asaph, who was one of David’s chief musicians and possibly a recorder in the days of Hezekiah and a keeper of the royal forests under Artaxerxes. He further argued that the psalm is supposedly divided as follows: “The Lord is represented as summoning the whole earth to hear his declaration, Ps 50:1-6; he then declares the nature of the worship which he accepts, Ps 50:7-15; accuses the ungodly of breaches of the precepts of the second table, Ps 50:16-21; and closes the court with a word of threatening, Ps 50:22, and a direction of grace, Ps 50:23.”¹

In verse 5 God orders that his/her people be brought to him/her. In short, people should be brought to where God is. Therefore, a covenant should be understood in the context of agreeing to move to where God is situated instead of seeking to move God to where one is standing. According to Meredith G. Kline (n.d.), the Hebrew word usually rendered “covenant” in the Old Testament is *bərît*. Frequently we read of a *bərît* being “made.” The *bərît*-making is accomplished in the course of a serious practice of support. Usually, this pact centres on the swearing of a vow, with its sanctioning curse. Without a doubt a *bərît* is a lawful good deal, a recognised disposition of a required nature. At the heart of a *bərît* is an act of obligation and the expected oath-form of this obligation reveals the religious nature of the deal. The *bərît* pact is no mere secular pact but rather belongs to the consecrated area of divine spectator and enforcement. And in the case of divine-human covenants the divine sanctioning is entailed in God’s participation either as the one who him/herself makes the commitment or as the divine witness of the human commitment made in his/her name and presence. The covenant makes us to acknowledge the position of God.

Based on this understanding it will, therefore, be difficult for anyone (blacks and whites) to claim that God should move to their side. God’s position is always a righteous one. God is a God of justice (Isa 45:8), peace (Jer 29:7), freedom (Exod 3:7), unity (Ps 133:1), and liberation (Exod 7:16), and like Ps 50 indicates, “Our God is coming and he will not be quiet. A fire burns up everything that is in front of him.” God’s fire burns up ideologies and false theologies.

Anyone who chooses to practice justice, peace, freedom, unity, love, and liberation moves into the territory of God and, of course, those who are oppressed, exploited, abused, poor etc. will find God standing on that side that is favourable, but anyone who stands against justice, peace, freedom, unity, love, and liberation moves automatically

1 https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/spurgeon_charles/tod/ps050.cfm

from where God is standing to a different position. Therefore, this is not necessarily a taking of sides but a deviation and departure from where God is standing.

We cannot dispute that now and then when we want to discover who we are, we usually try to form our identities in relation to the ultimate. This relation thus gives us some assurance that God agrees with us. This is what drove both Afrikaners and blacks to seek their identities in relation to God. Usually, to pursue that distinct identity in God as a nation will lead anybody to want some form of purification. And purification can only be possible when there is that separation because separation will provide a platform to form purity. The conclusion out of this exercise thus becomes: *God is on our side*, but we move to where God is and has been.

Conclusion

It is very important to repeat that the view that God is on a particular side is determined by circumstances and each or all make a determination based on their motif, agenda, experience, and end. In this regard, the Afrikaners wanted to justify their actions by using theology to claim that God was with them, and that everything they were doing was the will of God and ordained by God. Unfortunately, this justification was nonsensical as it undermined the basic existence of blacks. On the other side, blacks had to counter the Afrikaners' claims and justification by showing that God is on the side of the oppressed. As I have concluded, the side of God is the side of righteousness. It must be clarified that righteousness is an attribute that belongs to God; it is a state of being morally correct and justifiable. We must understand that the side of God is perfect conformity to the morally pure holiness of God and perfection. It is out of this context that we must understand that God is standing on the side of righteousness and justice and those who oppress, abuse, etc. find themselves walking away from the side of God.

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