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Plurality in the Theological Struggle against Apartheid

George J. (Cobus) van Wyngaard

Department of Philosophy, Practical and Systematic Theology,

University of South Africa

vwynggj@unisa.ac.za

Abstract

The church struggle against apartheid remains a key case study in ecumenical public theology, with particular relevance for the Reformed tradition. The importance of Christian theology in both the justification of and opposition to apartheid is well known. Also, the process of ecumenical discernment for responding to apartheid became a significant marker in global ecumenical reflection on what today we might describe as public theology. However, the idea of a theological struggle against apartheid risks ironing out the different theological positions that oppose apartheid. This article highlights some of the attempts to analyze the theological plurality in responses to apartheid. Then it proceeds to present an alternative way of viewing this plurality by focusing on the way in which different classic theological questions were drawn upon to analyze apartheid theologically. Using as examples the important theologians David Bosch, Simon Maimela, and Albert Nolan, it highlights how apartheid was described as a problem of ecclesiology, theological anthropology, and soteriology. It argues that this plurality of theological analyses allows us to rediscover theological resources that might be of particular significance as race and racism take on new forms in either democratic South Africa or the contemporary world. Simultaneously, it serves as a valuable example in considering a variety of theological questions when theologically reflecting on issues of public concern.

Keywords

apartheid – racism – ecclesiology – anthropology – soteriology

1 Introduction¹

The struggle against apartheid is, and will probably remain, an interesting and important case study of church and theology working for reconciliation, justice, and social transformation, but also for questions of public theology in general.² For Reformed churches and the ecumenical movement aligned with the World Council of Churches, this is partly due to the important place that the struggle against apartheid had in the theological search for appropriate local and global church responses to social and political questions, given the international importance of the struggle against apartheid in the second half of the twentieth century. But theologically, apartheid will also remain an interesting and important case study due to the importance of theology on all sides of the struggle. This is true for Reformed theology³ but also beyond Reformed theology and even beyond the confines of the church.

While keeping church and theology apart is not a simple task—the boundaries of both are fairly vague—we should also remember that these are not synonymous. Of particular importance for this article, the church struggle against apartheid and the theological struggle against apartheid overlaps but are not the same.⁴ This is already implied in Russel Botman's account of the famous

1 This work is based on the research supported in part by the National Research Foundation of South Africa. The author acknowledges that opinions, findings and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication which is generated by the National Research Foundation supported research are that of the author, and the NRF accepts no liability whatsoever in this regard.

2 See Etienne de Villiers, "Public Theology in the South African Context," *International Journal of Public Theology* 5, no. 1 (2011), 16–17; following De Villiers' overview of the notion public in public theology in South Africa, when speaking of public theology I imply a more general understanding of theologies relating to issues of general social concern, or the churches' response to issues of general social concern, as opposed to a normative understanding of public theology that focuses exclusively on those spaces of public opinion formation. This more general approach includes black theology and other liberation theologies, and, as De Villiers pointed out when analyzing different understandings of public theology, it is the preferred understanding of public theology in South Africa. Furthermore, it implies a broader understanding than theologies that explicitly translate "Christian meanings into secular terms"; see "IRTI Conference 2017," International Reformed Theological Institute, https://www.pthu.nl/irti/Recent%20conferences/irti_conference_2017/.

3 Robert R. Vosloo, "Remembering the Role of the Reformed Churches in the Struggle for Justice in South Africa (1960–1990)," in *Reformed Churches in South Africa and the Struggle for Justice: Remembering 1960–1990*, ed. Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel and Robert R. Vosloo (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2013), 23.

4 See for example the shifts between these concepts when the Foreword in *Reformed Churches in South Africa and the Struggle for Justice* opens with an immediate reference to the "theo-

class by Jaap Durand in which he challenged students to identify the particularly theological problem with apartheid. This implied that Durand's class of theology students could name apartheid as a legal, political, or economic problem without necessarily describing the particularly theological problem.⁵

On the one hand, this distinction overemphasizes the point. Theology can probably never function as a discourse disconnected from discourses on law, politics, and economics, but it can definitely not do so when it consciously responds to issues of general social concern.⁶ On the other hand, the historically important quest for naming what the particularly theological problem with apartheid is reveals the strength in Christian responses to social concerns that name problems in terms of a particular logic of Christianity. This is partly important for the formation of Christians in response to injustice, and also for the mobilization of Christians by connecting the struggle for justice to a particular Christian identity. However, what the argument below seeks to show is that it also provides a particular interpretation of what faces society, revealing particular points while hiding others, and it is in its particular interpretation that a theological description sits in dialogue with various other discourses on society.

On the one hand, this article reflects on a particular example of theological reflection on "economic, social, ethnic, cultural and racial plurality."⁷ But more specifically, the article proposes to highlight the plurality in the theological struggle against apartheid. It explores how different theologians drew from different doctrinal loci⁸ in attempting to name apartheid as a theological problem. In addition, it looks at how this allows for distinct analyses of what was

logical struggle against the injustices of apartheid": Mary-Anne Plaatjies van Huffel & Robert R. Vosloo, "Foreword," in *Reformed Churches in South Africa and the Struggle for Justice: Remembering 1960–1990*, ed. Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel and Robert R. Vosloo (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2013), 9.

- 5 H. Russel Botman, "Barmen to Belhar: A Contemporary Confessing Journey," *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 47, nos. 1 and 2 (2006): 240.
- 6 The reminder that all theology is contextual in the general sense should also remind us that any "pure" theology is a fiction, but the conscious attempt at developing contextual theologies, such as theologies that respond to apartheid, by implication overlaps and cross-pollinates with other perspectives on society. See Nico Botha, "If Everything Is Contextual, Nothing Is Contextualisation: Historical Methodological and Epistemological Perspectives," *Missionalia* 38, no. 2 (2010): 181–196.
- 7 Pieter Vos et al., "Call for papers," *IRTI*, https://www.pthu.nl/irti/Recent%20conferences/irti_conference_2017.
- 8 Here I work with an understanding of the loci as places "about which a variety of theological proposals can and have been made and around which theological disagreements cluster," David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 28. These

wrong but also of what an appropriate Christian response should have been. Such an approach does not detract from multiple other factors that informed different analyses of apartheid. However, it seeks to show how asking different theological questions in the face of issues of social concern can lead us to a more nuanced theological description of an issue of public concern.

In the article, I will first describe some attempts at mapping different theological responses to apartheid. Second, I will provide an overview of the theological analyses of apartheid in the work of David Bosch, Simon Maimela, and Albert Nolan to illustrate how different classic theological questions are drawn upon to analyze apartheid in different ways. Last, I will briefly illustrate how this model might assist in responding to contemporary questions of race, racism, and different aspects of antiracism.

2 Describing Theological Responses to Apartheid

The idea of ‘the theological struggle against apartheid’ is, on the one hand, a good description, while at the same time it risks ironing out the theological *struggles* (plural) against apartheid and in critical internal dialogue with, at times in opposition to, other voices of theological struggle against apartheid. The theological critique against apartheid was not a monolithic voice. While by late apartheid there was indeed wide agreement that apartheid is a theological problem, there was, at the same time, disagreement on what exactly the problem was that faces South Africa,⁹ and, in dialogue with this, various arguments on exactly *why* apartheid is a theological problem, and what an appropriate response would be. I briefly highlight a few attempts at mapping the theological differences between voices opposing apartheid, in order better to explain my own attempt at highlighting different arguments on why apartheid is a particularly theological problem. Each example moves a bit closer to what I will propose in the middle section of this article.

The best-known such analysis is probably found in the Kairos Document, with its distinction between state, church, and prophetic theology. The Kairos Document knew that it was busy with an analysis of “the different theologies in

inform some of the ‘classic theological questions’ that different voices brought to bear on the question of apartheid.

9 Was it apartheid itself, colonialism of which apartheid was a special kind, global capitalism of which apartheid was a particular racial form, or white racism? Obviously these overlap, but both history and contemporary debates make it clear that different perspectives bring us to vastly different proposals for policies and concrete action.

our Churches.”¹⁰ One of the most important aspects of the Kairos Document is the distinction between church and prophetic theology. While it admits that church theology is in some way critical of apartheid, it is rejected as inadequate at best, but even more, from a prophetic theology point of view, in actual fact unbiblical. The main distinction between church and prophetic theology is seen, however, as being on the level of social analysis. The problem with church theology is its attempt at applying theological principles from the tradition in a universal manner without adequately analyzing the situation. Prophetic theology would also call for reconciliation, peace, and justice, as church theology would, but it is rooted in a rigorous social analysis.¹¹

It is this last point which is of concern for the argument below. There is undoubtedly truth to the fact that differences in social analysis, or social location, would lead to vast theological differences even when working from similar theological principles. But what I want to propose is that we also need to note the different theological questions themselves that are raised in the struggle against apartheid.

Similarly, Klippiess Kritzinger draws on the late 1980s work of the Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT), in which different responses to apartheid were placed within a linear model from prophetic, through center, to conservative. Kritzinger, however, tries to name these according to the “dominant religious symbol characterising each,”¹² thus presenting the following model:

Standing for justice (working for transformation)	Being God’s church (working for reconciliation)	Preserving the status quo (preventing transformation)
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In the ICT project, the general approach suggested was that those in a prophetic tradition should work to convince those in the center, and oppose those seeking to preserve an unjust status quo.¹³ Kritzinger’s model distinguishes between a

10 Kairos Theologians, *The Kairos Document Challenge to the Church: A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa* (World Council of Churches, 1985), 12.

11 Kairos Theologians, “The Kairos Document,” 17–22.

12 Johannes N.J. (Klippiess) Kritzinger, “The Struggle for Justice in South Africa (1986–1990): The Participation of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa,” in *Reformed Churches in South Africa and the Struggle for Justice: Remembering 1960–1990*, ed. Mary-Anne Platjies-Van Huffel and Robert R. Vosloo (Stellenbosch: SUN PRESS, 2013), 99.

13 George J. (Cobus) Van Wyngaard, “Responding to the Challenge of Black Theology: Liberating Ministry to the White Community, 1988–1990,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72, no. 1 (2016): 5.

primary emphasis on justice and a primary emphasis on reconciliation to highlight different responses to apartheid—reading justice and reconciliation as specifically religious symbols. In brief, he attempts to read these differences in terms of differences in religious symbolism.

To use a third example, Steve de Gruchy¹⁴ raises the question of church theology by highlighting that in theologies of struggle against apartheid, there were different ecclesiologies at work, resulting in quite distinct witnesses. He uses Kairos and Belhar as symbolic of two different streams of theologies that both opposed apartheid but that were theologically distinct and continued to speak past each other beyond the end of apartheid. Of importance is that similarities in social analysis¹⁵ can still bring about very different responses to questions of social concern, given different theological positions—in this case, different ecclesiologies.

This illustrates some of the ways in which social and theological analysis have been drawn upon to describe different responses in criticizing and opposing apartheid (ignoring for a moment those who worked to preserve apartheid, which is outside the focus of this paper). What I will do in the argument below is slightly different from these examples: I propose to trace the theological particularity of different answers to the question, “Why is apartheid a theological problem?”¹⁶ While not disconnected from differences in sociopolitical analysis and working from different social locations,¹⁷ I focus quite specifically on differ-

14 Steve de Gruchy, “On Not Abandoning Church Theology: Dirk Smit on Church and Politics,” *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 48, nos. 1 and 2 (2007), 356–365.

15 De Gruchy, “On Not Abandoning Church Theology,” 358–359, traces similar trajectories or social analysis for both streams, through the Christian Institute, SPROCAS I & II, and black theology, yet still he argues that differences in ecclesiologies lead to different theological responses to apartheid.

16 An important distinction should be made between attempts to answer why apartheid is a theological problem and attempts to reveal the problems in the theological justification of apartheid. While the political project described as apartheid has a particular history of being theologically developed and justified, and important insights on what the theological problem with apartheid is can be discerned by critically examining this history, attempts to describe why apartheid is a theological problem go beyond this, or in a different direction from this, by questioning the implicit assumptions or implications of apartheid in relation to Christian theology, so that aspects which might not be required for justifying apartheid theologically (or might even be consciously rejected in the process of justifying apartheid) are also revealed in such a theological description.

17 Indeed, as the references to ‘apartheid,’ ‘whiteness,’ and ‘capital’ in the headings below indicate, there are also very different analyses of the sociopolitical problems underlying each of the three theologians’ work. That intersection is, however, bracketed out for the moment in order to highlight the particularity of theological analyses that the article seek to reveal.

ent theological evaluations. And while the different theological traditions illustrated in, for example, De Gruchy's analysis no doubt influenced my examples, what I seek to highlight is specifically how the problem of apartheid was viewed through different classic theological questions. My concern is not primarily evaluation. The problem of colonialism and white racism deeply impacted modern European theology,¹⁸ and it could be expected that the theological problems underlying apartheid, as the logical conclusion of European colonialism and whiteness, can be found throughout the logic of Western Christian theology. A choice therefore need not necessarily be made between the various examples I describe, since each theological question can in some way help to clarify this pervasive problem. On the other hand, the concern is also not with simply adding theological arguments together in order to arrive at a full systematic account of what is theologically problematic about apartheid or why apartheid is a theological problem. Rather, by raising these theological arguments, I hope to indicate how they relate to the contemporary struggles around race and racism in South Africa, as part of a quest to connect the struggle against apartheid to the contemporary situation facing South Africa. I also hope to open possible ways of asking theological questions about other matters of sociopolitical concern, thereby providing a lens on one aspect of the plurality in our public theologies.

3 Apartheid as a Theological Problem

Albert Nolan (as part of the broader movement of liberation theologies) explicitly developed such a system of drawing on theological language to describe what is happening in our contexts. "Reading the signs of the times," a key metaphor for Nolan and those in the Kairos tradition, is something that Nolan claimed to see more among political analysts than among theologians, but the need he expresses is that "God and the traditions about God" should be used to "throw light upon the meaning of public events."¹⁹ This is what Nolan describes as contextualization: "Contextualization means naming our experience and our practice with religious words like sin, salvation, grace, temptation, the work of God, the powers of evil, the practice of Jesus, the power of the spirit and so

18 See Willie J. Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (London: Yale University Press, 2010) and Kameron J. Carter, *Race: A Theological Account*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

19 Albert Nolan, *God in South Africa: The Challenge of the Gospel* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1988), 21.

forth.”²⁰ That different theologians will name different aspects of our experience with the words of sin, salvation, and grace would come as no surprise to anyone vaguely familiar with the theological diversity in the church. However, here I am interested in how our choice of theological questions and religious words determines the clarity that we can provide on sociopolitical and public concerns.

I will use writings from the 1980s (and some from the early 1990s) of three key South African theologians who wrote about the theological problem of apartheid: David Bosch, Simon Maimela, and Albert Nolan. We could make distinctions such as labeling Maimela as representing black theology and Nolan a liberation theology more aligned to Latin American liberation theology, or Bosch as representing an example of reconciliation being proposed as response to apartheid, and Nolan justice. Those would be largely correct. But what I want to show is that at key moments when the three of them try to articulate the theological problem of apartheid, they are asking different *theological questions*. Bosch’s questions are ecclesiological, Maimela’s anthropological, and Nolan’s soteriological.

I focus on this key component of each in order to illustrate how the particular question of race under apartheid is viewed in different ways depending on the kind of theological questions asked. This does not imply that all attempts at naming apartheid in terms of either of these traditional loci resulted in the same conclusions, but I do seek to highlight that the choice still allows a difference in perspective.

I take as my starting point Bosch and Maimela’s chapters in the 1983 publication *Apartheid Is a Heresy* and Nolan’s 1988 publication *God in South Africa*.

3.1 *Bosch and Apartheid as an Ecclesiological Heresy*

David Bosch was a Dutch Reformed Afrikaner theologian and missiologist. In explaining why apartheid is “nothing but a heresy,” the particular mission history of the Dutch Reformed Church forms the lens through which he observes the problem. Bosch’s account is well-known in Reformed circles, tracing the problem of apartheid through the fateful 1857 decision on separate worship for white and black Christians, who, in the formulation of the decision, are distinguished as “us” and the “converts from the pagans” respectively.²¹ Bosch seeks

²⁰ Nolan, *God in South Africa*, 27–28.

²¹ No explicit reference is made to race in the 1857 resolution, even while the implication is clearly racial. The distinction is, however, found in the phrase “our converts from the pagans,” revealing the distinction between subjects and objects of mission so prevalent in

to highlight a Protestant missiological problem in the relation of sociocultural diversity and the unity of the church and, in particular, how what was considered 'effective' in certain missiological circles—ministry to people within culturally homogenous groups—is elevated into a “revelation principle.”²²

Bosch's answer to Durand's question would be ecclesiological. The theological problem of apartheid is, at inception, an ecclesiological problem. While not denying the existence of “racial prejudice” within the white church, which decided on a racial separation of worship, Bosch clearly considers “racial prejudice” to be of lesser importance in comparison to the theological problem he discerns: “The real reason for the creation of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sendingkerk and of several other ethnic Churches in the decades that followed, may indeed not have been racial prejudice but, rather, a weak ecclesiology.”²³

Apartheid is a heresy because it is built on a theological justification for the sociocultural segregation of the church, while Bosch would argue that the heart of the gospel includes being called into a community that breaks down the barriers between people. Bosch views this as intrinsic to the gospel and not just a mere effect of it. Therefore, apartheid is “nothing but a heresy,” and specifically, it is an ecclesiological heresy.²⁴ The result of his ecclesiological critique is also a focus on racial segregation. This is lifted to a brutal extreme under apartheid, this system of strict racial separation that Bosch sees coming out of a weak ecclesiology and a distorted missiology.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s Bosch would argue that the church's witness should be found in being an alternative to apartheid society—and this means being a community that transcends the boundaries of race.²⁵ Thus what he

colonial mission discourse. David J. Bosch, “Nothing but a Heresy,” in *Apartheid Is a Heresy*, ed. John W. de Gruchy & Charles Villa-Vicencio (Claremont: David Philip, 1982), 32.

22 Bosch, “Nothing but a Heresy,” 30.

23 Bosch, “Nothing but a Heresy,” 33. This is although Bosch would be fully aware of explicit racism in the early Cape colony. See, for example, John de Gruchy's description of reasons for joining the Great Trek, which included the placing of “slaves” on “equal footing with Christians, contrary to the laws of God and the natural distinctions of race and religion,” John W. de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa* (London: SPCK, 1979), 19. We should note that this theological lens fails to answer certain questions. Race gets lumped together with an intra-European problem of ethnic and national churches, providing no clear answer as to exactly why this disunity takes a racial form. It also fails to give a theological account for the simple question why it is that a particular racial group can unilaterally decide what the boundaries of the church should be.

24 Bosch, “Nothing but a Heresy,” 35.

25 For a list of examples where this is found in his work, see George J. (Cobus) van Wyngaard, “The Public Role of the Christian Community in the Work of David Bosch,” in *Missionalia* 39, nos. 1 and 2 (2011): 162.

proposes as response to apartheid as an ecclesiological heresy is a church that structures its life so as to oppose this separation. In the church black and white should be united, as a reminder to society that we should be united beyond the confines of the church as well.

3.2 *Maimela and Whiteness as an Anthropological Heresy*

When Simon Maimela explains why apartheid is a heresy he takes a very different route from that taken by his then colleague at the University of South Africa, David Bosch. For Maimela, apartheid is an anthropological heresy. This is a theme throughout his academic career,²⁶ but if we again start with *Apartheid Is a Heresy*, then the following considerations emerge.

Maimela is not unconcerned with the divisions in South African society. He notes the disunity and divisions—the apartheid—of South African society as markers of a South Africa with a certain problem; what that problem is, however, is exactly what needs to be discussed. In particular, Maimela takes note of the problems of disunity within the church, and the numerous examples of white people refusing to worship with black Christians.²⁷ But these divisions do not lead him to discern a primarily ecclesiological problem at play, but rather an anthropological problem.

In one of the last places in which Maimela discussed his anthropology, he explicitly points to this anthropological problem as what underlies these divisions: “Indeed, when that pessimistic anthropology became embodied in the apartheid ideology and the social structures, it became the *most greatest single factor* that was to result in the division of our racial groups from another—rather help to reconcile them.”²⁸

On the one hand, Maimela notes what he describes as a typical Western theological influence at work in this anthropology—an understanding of humans as inherently bad, following understandings of sin most often associated with Augustine, but which Maimela briefly mentions as also coming from Paul on the one side and Luther and Calvin on the other.²⁹ But beyond this theologi-

26 For a more detailed analysis of how this theme is repeated and develops throughout his career in the 1980s and early 1990s, see George J. (Cobus) van Wyngaard, “The Theological Anthropology of Simon Maimela: Democratisation of Power and Being Human in Relationship,” in *Verbum et Ecclesia* 38, no. 1 (2017): 1–8.

27 Simon S. Maimela, “An Anthropological Heresy: A Critique of White Theology,” in John W. de Gruchy & Charles Villa-Vicencio, eds., *Apartheid Is a Heresy* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1983), 49–50.

28 Simon S. Maimela, *What Is the Human Being?* (Pretoria: University of Pretoria, 1994), 2, emphasis mine.

29 Maimela, “An Anthropological Heresy,” 53. For a brief overview of original and inherited

cal trajectory, Maimela's argument is even more that what we see among white people is an anthropology that is not biblical or Christian but that has internalized modern assumptions about the human found, for example, in Hobbes and Marx.³⁰

But what is the content of this negative anthropology? Maimela describes it as a white pessimistic view of humans as fundamentally in conflict with other humans, as having "uncontrollable fratricidal drives which even the Gospel and conversion cannot tame."³¹ What underlies the divisions in society is a white anthropology that teaches that other humans are to be feared. Apartheid is a solution to this perceived fundamental danger that other humans pose.³²

But more than a mere reciprocity of animosity is at stake in the anthropological problem Maimela discerns. One of Maimela's key concerns is with a colonial Christian anthropology that rejects the implications of the *imago Dei*: quite specifically, one that through "monopolizing the assignment of human creativity and dominion-having"³³ constructs an anthropology that allows some (white people) to have dominion over others, and to refuse the vocational act of participating in God's creative work in black people.³⁴ Thus, behind apartheid we find a white anthropology that is convinced that humans are fundamentally in conflict, but even more, that dominion belongs to those who are white. It is therefore more accurately whiteness, not apartheid, which is the heresy on which Maimela focuses. The denial of this agency, the monopolizing of power by the European process of colonization, taking away people's right to exercise this dominion, is an anthropological heresy.

Maimela's black theological anthropology paints a different picture. In particular, he reads the Genesis 1 reference to 'dominion' as an insistence on the democratization of power. Being human implies having the agency to participate creatively in God's creation. For Maimela this will form part of a theological argument for Black Consciousness as appropriate response to racism in South Africa.

sin in Western theology, particularly in Augustine but traced into modernity, see F. LeRon Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 189–216.

- 30 Maimela, "An Anthropological Heresy," 50–51.
 31 Maimela, "An Anthropological Heresy," 52.
 32 Maimela, "An Anthropological Heresy," 54.
 33 Maimela, *What Is The Human Being?*, 23–24.
 34 Maimela, *What Is The Human Being?*, 20–29.

3.3 *Nolan and Capitalism as a Soteriological Heresy*

Nolan's *God in South Africa* was an attempt at explicitly contextual theology. Nolan's previous book, *Jesus before Christianity*,³⁵ was on the historical Jesus, and what he does in *God in South Africa* is to read the South African situation woven theologically into the Jesus story. The theological core that Nolan focus on is sin and salvation. "The gospel is about salvation from sin," he says. "That is one of the few statements that all Christians would agree about,"³⁶ and it is this key statement that Nolan wishes to read in light of the South African context.³⁷ Nolan's theological lens is found by asking what sin and salvation would mean in apartheid South Africa.³⁸ At the heart of Nolan's analysis is reading the system of purity and holiness in the time of Jesus as an analogy for the system of apartheid.³⁹

The problem Nolan discerns in European Christianity is soteriological at heart: "The most serious heresy of European Christianity, especially the last few centuries, has been the reduction of the gospel to little more than the salvation of souls."⁴⁰ Nolan's interpretation of the gospel is an explicit alternative to this, reading sin and salvation thoroughly through the concrete social context of apartheid South Africa. So what, then, is the 'sin and salvation' that Nolan names in his attempt to describe the problem of apartheid?

We can only speak of salvation if we are clear about sin, about what "we need to be saved or liberated from."⁴¹ In brief, in Nolan's reading of Jesus, sin is that which causes suffering, and the severity of the sin is directly connected to the amount of suffering it causes.⁴² However, guilt is not simply correlated to the amount of suffering caused, but is due to the active work of refusal to acknowledge what our actions cause and attempting to justify that which

35 Albert Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity* (New York, Orbis Books, 2006).

36 Nolan, *God in South Africa*, 31.

37 The question that Nolan will ask throughout the book is, "What hope of salvation does the gospel of Jesus Christ have to offer us in South Africa today?" Nolan, *God in South Africa*, 6.

38 In spite of this focus on sin, he seems to critique the language of sin and heresy, which cannot but include the claim that apartheid is a heresy. He says, "Those who say that apartheid is a heresy or that apartheid is a sin are indulging in understatement. The Catholic bishops came close to the mark some years ago when they declared apartheid to be 'intrinsically evil,'" Nolan, *God in South Africa*, 87. Still, it is through the language of sin that Nolan describes the system of apartheid.

39 See, for example, Nolan, *God in South Africa*, 46, 52, 60, 69, 74, 87, 100, 113, 127, 139, 156.

40 Nolan, *God in South Africa*, 108.

41 Nolan, *God in South Africa*, 31.

42 Nolan, *God in South Africa*, 34–38.

causes suffering.⁴³ Salvation, on the other hand, is about the kingdom of God,⁴⁴ and for Nolan ultimately about power: about God's powerful victory over evil, which is seen in power exercised in service to the people.⁴⁵

Why is apartheid a theological problem? For Nolan this is because apartheid⁴⁶ causes excessive suffering. It is a sin because as an offense against people it is an offense against God.⁴⁷ But in Nolan's social analysis, capitalism is really the root cause of the suffering.⁴⁸ Also, those who cause this suffering and support the system⁴⁹ are guilty due to the way this suffering is justified. Yet if this is sin, then salvation is that which brings an end to this suffering. For Nolan this is captured in 'power to the people,' and 'God's power' and 'people's power' are largely equated in his description.⁵⁰ This reading of sin and salvation ultimately pits 'the system' against 'the people' and reads the struggle as the work of God.

4 The Theological Problem of Apartheid and Contemporary Responses to Racism

It would be saying too much to claim that the theological questions that were asked on their own led these theologians to their respective analyses of the problem. A strong case could also be made that the reverse is true, that their particular social and political analysis caused them to draw on these particular theological questions to shed light on what is happening. Yet, what I hope to show in this is how a range of theological questions can shed light on issues of public concern, and how questions of race and racism will look different depending on what kind of theological questions we ask.

43 Nolan, *God in South Africa*, 39–41.

44 Nolan, *God in South Africa*, 125–133.

45 Nolan, *God in South Africa*, 111–116.

46 Nolan prefers to speak of "the system" rather than of "apartheid," noting that it concerns more than apartheid, but also the broader capitalist world in which apartheid is embedded.

47 Nolan, *God in South Africa*, 38.

48 Nolan, *God in South Africa*, 84.

49 In Nolan's analysis there is a clear differentiation between "white and black" on the one hand and "those supporting and those opposing the system" on the other hand. These descriptions do not simply tie up so that white implies support for the system and black opposition to the system.

50 Nolan, *God in South Africa*, 191.

These brief overviews obviously do not do justice to the arguments presented in each case. Also, they do not exhaust the chorus of theological arguments made in the struggle against apartheid. What they do is illustrate how very different theological questions could be drawn on in answering the one question: Why is apartheid a theological problem? What I hope to do through this argument is to present a case study that illustrates the value of not only asking theological questions, but asking a full range of theological questions when faced with issues of sociopolitical or public concern. But these examples also clarify contemporary debates around race in South Africa.

Merely reproducing theological arguments from the struggle against apartheid inside the contemporary South African situation, or inside the broader global debate around race and whiteness that is reemerging at this point, can never be sufficient. But there are indeed lessons to be learned in general and looking at the contemporary debates around race in South Africa; these examples clarify what is being silenced at times. Let me conclude with a brief reflection on the contemporary South African context.

1. Large parts of the South African debate over the past twenty-three years, in society but also in a particular way in the church, have highlighted race as a problem of (dis)unity. Forming a country, or uniting the church, is seen as what should be the agenda of a society or church given past and present racism and racial segregation. The problem of race, at least as far as the church is concerned, but with interesting political parallels, is fundamentally an ecclesiological problem, a question of how the diversity of people and the unity of the church are to be reconciled.
2. However, in the contemporary breakdown of the so-called “reconciliation paradigm” in South Africa, seen quite explicitly in the student movements and the debates around decolonization, this insistence on uniting people is at times quite explicitly rejected but is more often mentioned as something that first requires a process of humanization. Rather than bringing people together, the focus is on thinking through what it means to be human and what it means to have agency over our own lives.
3. Finally, in the sharp focus on racialized economic inequalities and extreme poverty in recent politics—although I would in no way pretend that this is a recent phenomenon, just of particular importance in the current political climate—the question of race and racism is to a large extent focused on what is wrong in society, on what we within Christian language can name as sin, on the extreme suffering that people experience, and the search is for salvation, specifically in *this* world.

5 Conclusion

We should not make either too much or too little of these different approaches. Reading this as if these theologians could be disconnected from their social locations, their social analysis of apartheid, and their various theological traditions, would be a definite mistake. However, asking different theological questions, drawing from different places where theology has traditionally clustered questions and disagreements, and requiring that we ask the question of what a particularly theological problem with certain sociopolitical situations is, can bring different answers to this theological quest, and in the process creatively draw out different Christian responses.

The importance of noting this diversity is, in part, to remind how our choice for a specific answer to the questions on apartheid as theological problem might not say all there is to say, and could at times even work to obscure other answers that would call us to different actions. More consciously thinking through the multifaceted nature of apartheid, race, and whiteness as theological problems can potentially assist church and theology in more faithfully responding to this in the present. The same could potentially be said of other issues of public concerns questioned in the same way.