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Learning From Mistakes of the Past: Christianity, Apartheid, and Social Movement Framing

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During an interview in 2010, South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu was asked how it can be that Christianity was used both to support and reject apartheid. He responded, “It is people. Because as you were saying, some people are able to use the Bible as a means of opposing injustice, whereas others are able to find justification. You can find justification for slavery in the Bible. Some say this is what the Bible says and that closes the argument. You will find that the Bible, if you want it to, will justify many things.”¹ Tutu asserted that it is the people who interpreted the Bible to support injustices which explains the discrepancies within Christianity during apartheid. The decades long pro-apartheid regime in South Africa was heavily supported by Christian denominations, specifically the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), while other denominations and prominent Christian leaders, such as Archbishop Tutu, strongly opposed this oppressive establishment. In an article about his ministry during apartheid, Tutu wrote, “What bothered them [black South Africans] ... was why they had been picked out for so much suffering at the hands not of pagans, but of those who claimed to believe in the same God whom they worshipped and who read the same bible.”² The black Christians of South Africa could not comprehend how their own religion was being used to oppress them.

During the beginning of apartheid, 47% of white South Africans belonged to the DRC, which openly supported racial segregation.³ As evidence of this the DRC implemented racial segregation within its congregations for many years before the official apartheid regime began, and further the leaders of the DRC publically supported the implementation of this unjust system. The DRC first came to South Africa in the mid-1600s, and the first minister arrived at the Cape Colony in 1665. The church began to grow and expand beyond the Cape Colony, and the first DRC seminary opened in South Africa in the late 1800s, allowing the denomination to no longer be reliant on pastoral leadership from outside of South Africa. It was around this time that the DRC established separate churches for whites and blacks, and this marks the beginning of their theological justification of apartheid.⁴

With the history of the DRC and the words of Bishop Tutu in mind, this causes one to ask how the leaders of the DRC managed to convince their members to support apartheid. In this paper, I argue that the leaders of the DRC used social movement framing to interpret the Bible to theologically justify apartheid and thereby mobilize their congregation members to support the apartheid regime. The DRC was convinced that apartheid was a good and helpful solution for everyone, and were in favor of the practice of racial separation being widely implemented. Even when it became clear that the DRC had been misinterpreting the Bible, they refused to adjust their position until after the apartheid

¹ Amina Chaudary, "Interview with Desmond Tutu, Archbishop of Cape Town," *The Muslim World* 100, no. 1 (01, 2010): 117-123.

² Desmond Tutu, "DARK DAYS: EPISCOPAL MINISTRY IN TIMES OF REPRESSION, 1976 - 1996." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* no. 118 (03, 2004): 27-39.

³ D. P. M. Beukes, *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture: Official Translation of the Report Ras, Volk En Nasie En Volkereverhoudinge in Die Lig Van Die Skrif: Approved and Accepted by the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church, October 1974*, (Cape Town: Dutch Reformed Church Publishers, 1976), 2.

⁴ Richard Elphick, and T. R. H. Davenport, *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social, and Cultural History*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 16-20.

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regime was over. While there is much literature regarding the biblical concepts used to support apartheid, it has yet to be made evident how these biblical ideas were framed in order to rally support for apartheid. Based on the primary documents I have examined during my research, I argue that the DRC, in its theological policy in support of apartheid, utilized four types of social movement frames; frame bridging, frame amplification, frame extension, and frame transformation to influence and mobilize DRC members to accept and enforce apartheid.

Methodology

The method of examination which I will utilize when examining the policies and theological concepts of the DRC justifying support of apartheid is Social Movement Framing, developed by Snow et al. (1986) Snow et al. introduced the concept of frame alignment as a means to rectify shortcomings in existing Social Movement Organization theories. They define a “frame” as “the schemata of interpretation” that enables individuals to find and categorize happenings within their life. Once these events have been acknowledged as meaningful, frames are used to organize and guide these experiences. Frames align, connecting individuals to Social Movement Organizations’ (SMO), such that the interests, values, or beliefs of an individual are somehow connected to the ideology of a particular SMO. This frame alignment is a process by which individuals are brought together and united behind a particular cause through an SMO, such as the DRC. In particular, Snow et al. introduced the four categories of the Frame Alignment Processes; bridging, amplification, extension, and transformation.⁵ I argue that these four types of social movement frames played a large role in the DRC’s mobilization of their congregation members in support of apartheid, particularly in regards to the texts examined in this paper.

The first of the four Frame Alignment Processes, frame bridging, is the linkage of two or more ideologically consistent yet structurally separate frames regarding a particular issue or problem. Essentially, this connects an SMO to people who share common grievances, yet lack the organizational base to act upon their discontents. Frame amplification hones in on a person’s values or beliefs and makes the connection between those values/beliefs and the cause for which the SMO is striving, thereby giving people a reason to join their cause. Frame extension is similar to frame amplification, but is used when there is not an obvious connection between the individual’s values and the SMO’s cause. Frame extension is a hooking process in which SMOs extend the boundaries of their framework such that their work seems to align with the values and beliefs of potential adherents. Frame extension is seen as an initial step, which leads to frame transformation. Frame transformation is utilized when the work of an SMO does not initially resonate with individuals’ lifestyles and value systems. In these cases, the SMO works to reinterpret things that are already important to an individual through a new lens, such that they are

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now connected to the work of the SMO. These four types of frame alignments create the method utilized in this paper, called Social Movement Framing. In the sections that follow, I provide quotes which demonstrate how the DRC used each particular frame. This process will be repeated for each of the four frames, until it is clear that the DRC, in its theological policy in support of apartheid, utilized all four types of social movement frames in order to influence and mobilize the people of South Africa to accept and enforce apartheid.

Data

The data that will be examined in this paper consists of a primary text published by the DRC which details their theological justification of apartheid and the church policy which reflects this belief. In 1974, the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church approved and accepted a document entitled, *Ras, Volk en Naise en Volkereverhoudinge in die lig van die Skrif*. The official English translation is entitled *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture* (1976). This document will be referred to as the RVN. The RVN provided a thorough explanation for the DRC's theology and scriptural interpretation involving the rise in racial conflicts in South Africa. The document lays out the DRC's biblical basis of apartheid, including the DRC's own past success with racial separation, biblical passages to support their argument, and why the practice of racial segregation is God's will. According to the DRC, once this document was published it became the primary document which articulated their policy on apartheid, and was known both within and outside of the church.⁶ Data from this document will be examined to identify the framing techniques that the DRC used in support of apartheid.

Framing Techniques

The RVN contains all four types of social movement framing, suggesting that the DRC used each of these frames in its efforts to mobilize people to support apartheid. The following analysis is by no means meant to be exhaustive, but instead clearly shows that all four methods of social movement framing were utilized by the DRC in their efforts to mobilize Christians to support the apartheid regime.

Frame Bridging

The Dutch Reformed Church exercised frame bridging as a way of connecting congregation members to those people outside of the church who supported secular racial segregation. Frame bridging proved useful to the church because frame bridging is employed when frames that are consistent ideologically have not been connected to a specific cause. While the two groups of people (in this case the DRC members and non-members who supported apartheid) may be fighting for the same cause, they have yet to realize that their values are similar enough that they can unite in that cause. The RVN

⁶ *The Story of the Dutch Reformed Church's Journey with Apartheid: A Testimony and Confession*. (Cape Town: Dutch Reformed Church Publishers, 1997), 14.

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exhibits frame bridging by emphasizing that there is biblical support behind apartheid. This allowed their congregation members to freely support the secular apartheid regime without concern that it went against their faith. Suddenly, the want for racial segregation wasn't simply an opinion, or xenophobia – it was ordained by God.

In the first chapter of the RVN, the DRC spends a large amount of time using biblical examples of God's plan for apartheid, otherwise referred to as autogeneous development or parallel development. One of the primary biblical stories utilized by the DRC is Genesis 11:1–9: The Tower of Babel. In this infamous story, humans attempt to build a tower that reaches to the heavens, but are stopped by God, who confuses their language and scatters the people across the earth. In regards to this passage, the DRC wrote,

For the purpose of our report the question arises as to whether Genesis 11:1-9 can serve as a Scriptural basis for a policy of autogeneous development? Our answer is a qualified yes. The diversity of races and peoples to which the confusion of tongues contributed, is an aspect of reality which God obviously intended for this dispensation. To deny this fact is to side with the tower builders. Therefore a policy which in broad terms (as distinct from its concrete implementation) bears this reality in mind, is Biblically realistic in the good sense of the word.⁷

In this interpretation of The Tower of Babel, the DRC emphasizes that while diversity is created by God and therefore good, the separation of races was also intended by God and is good. Racial segregation should therefore not be altered. In turn, the policy of apartheid emerged as a way for humans to abide more fully by God's will. In this case, the DRC used a well-known biblical story to show that parallel development was the intent and will of God. By having this story to base their apartheid theology off of, members of the DRC were free to join the secular apartheid movement, now that they truly believed it was in line with their faith.

Frame Amplification

The DRC employed frame amplification to draw more support from church members whose ideology was in line with apartheid, but for some reason were not vocal about it. The method of frame amplification is similar to that of frame bridging, but focuses on a slightly different audience. Rather than connecting two groups with well-developed values and ideologies who are supporting the same cause, this method seeks to hone-in on and magnify an individual's values or beliefs, in an effort to show that those values and beliefs are in line with the cause for which the SMO is striving. Frame amplification allows an SMO to take a person's beliefs and easily connect them to the work the SMO has done. The quotes examined in this section show that racial separation had been successful within the DRC, and therefore it is the DRC's duty to spread this method of peace to society as a whole. These passages demonstrated to the members of the DRC who were more cautious

⁷ Beukes, RVN, 18.

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about vocalizing their support for apartheid that racial separation is a successful peace-keeping method, which is meant to be implemented more broadly.

In the beginning of the RVN, the DRC attempted to explain why they believed racial separation was a practical and successful model for society. Apartheid was not simply a policy created overnight – it had been in the works for decades both within and outside of the church. The DRC wrote, “As a result of a natural process of growth, separate churches were established amongst the various population groups. The progress of these churches was so blessed, and the results so positive, that this method has had a considerable influence on later political thinking and developments.”⁸ According to the standards of the leaders of the DRC, racially separate churches succeeded in allowing these different races to flourish and grow more in their faith by worshiping separately. They interpreted this success as a blessing of God and reasoned that the blessing should extend beyond the walls of the church into wider society. More importantly, the church leadership viewed apartheid as a method of success that evolved naturally within the church to encourage its own flourishing. By displaying how successful apartheid was within the church, the DRC amplified the values of those members who already agreed with apartheid so that they would be more willing to implement it more broadly. Since apartheid succeeded within the church, the DRC determined God gave the church a duty to spread this system outside of the church as well.

Another example of the DRC utilizing frame amplification appears in the DRC’s examination of the New Testament, the commandment to “love thy neighbor as thyself” (Mark 12:31). This commandment establishes an ethical mandate for Christians to treat others at least as well as they would treat themselves, if not better. Since this is what God commanded Christians to do, the DRC leadership reasoned that society would function better if everyone followed this commandment. However, this ethical imperative seems to conflict with the policy of apartheid, which clearly favors white South Africans and plays to their self-interest. The DRC, however, framed this commandment in relation to other texts from the New Testament to justify racial separation. The leaders wrote,

The life and viability of man and of a people is a gift of God which should be protected and treated with a sense of responsibility (cf. e.g. Paul who consistently states his case in front of the authorities concerned). It is therefore perfectly permissible within the context of the second commandment for a person or his people to protect or safeguard their own life or existence, provided the interests of others are not sacrificed to self-interest.⁹

By emphasizing the virtues of self-preservation, the DRC managed to uphold the commandment to love thy neighbor as thyself (Mark 12:31) while at the same time

⁸ Beukes, RVN, 5.

⁹ Beukes, RVN, 34-35.

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advocating for self-protection. In doing so, they argue that self-protection is best achieved through apartheid. Although the stipulation at the end of the passage, which states that the interests of others should not be sacrificed, seems to automatically nullify the validity of the apartheid regime, in the minds of the writers of the RVN, it does not. Throughout the RVN, the DRC frames apartheid in such a way that it appears as the best solution for all involved. The leaders did *not* frame apartheid as a structure that benefited whites; rather, they framed apartheid as the best solution for peace. This frame enabled members of the DRC to support apartheid because members believed that they demonstrated love of neighbor; they could overlook that the self-interests of persons of color were subordinated to white self-interests because the DRC framing emphasized that apartheid promoted peace, which benefited everyone in society. Due to the churches' commitment to peace, advanced under the regime of apartheid, the interests of persons of color were not sacrificed. As a result, the way that the DRC leadership framed this issue furthered members' desire for self-protection, which they found through apartheid.

Frame Extension & Frame Transformation

The DRC employed frame extension and frame amplification to extend the boundaries of their congregation members' belief in the will of God such that they now accepted apartheid as the will of God. Frame extension reinterprets an individual's values such that she does not seem to be opposed to the cause of the organization. If an individual believes in one thing, in this case the will of God, then frame extension is used to extend the boundaries of that person's belief in the will of God such that it encompasses the SMO's cause. This process slowly fades into frame transformation, because an individual's values have been transformed such that their values are now completely in line with that of the SMO. Frame extension functions as a hooking process or a gateway that allows the process of frame transformation to begin. By using these two frames, the DRC mobilized its members who were not yet convinced that apartheid was morally sound. Since members of the DRC already believed that it was their duty to abide by the will of God, all that needed to be done was convince them that apartheid was indeed the will of God. Additionally, a main objection congregation members had against apartheid was that it went against the diversity that was clearly promoted within the Bible. The DRC used frame extension to extend the value of diversity being good to include the idea that diversity should be good, but puts people at risk of sin. Therefore, the DRC transformed the value of diversity to become the value of constrained diversity, or parallel development. This constrained diversity allowed members to feel as though they were still upholding the biblical value of being diverse, while the different races were separated.

In addition to convincing members of the DRC that apartheid was the will of God, the DRC also had to convince them that it was their duty to preach this to society as a whole, including the government. In order to do this, the DRC first had to extend the value of being obedient to God to ensure that obedience encompassed all aspects of one's life. They wrote, "The church which preaches Christ, preaches the kingdom. In concrete terms this means a mandate to be obedient to God in all spheres of life and, in reality, this is a recognition of the fact that Christ is King of the whole of existence. And for this reason the

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church is concerned with the whole of human life in all its facets.”¹⁰ In this passage the DRC articulates that since Christians are required to be submissive to God, and the church preaches the word of God, Christians should obey the ordinances of the church in all aspects of their lives. This example of frame extension shows how the church was able to have a pervasive influence on its members’ lives. From there, it wasn’t a far reach to extend this influence to include society as a whole. The DRC wrote, “It is the primary task of the church to preach the Word of God and to equip its adherents for service in all spheres of life, which includes their own society. In fact, wherever the Word of God should demand it, the church should fulfill its prophetic function in spite of popular opinion.”¹¹ Later on, the DRC specified that preaching the Word of God to society included the governmental authorities as well.¹² In these passages, the DRC plainly transformed a value of its congregants, to obey the Word of God, into the obligation to preach and enforce God’s will to society as a whole, including the government. If a congregation member had concerns about applying apartheid theology to areas of life outside of the church, the DRC made it clear that it was their Christian duty to see that all aspects of life were in aligned with the morals and values of the church.

Finally, there is one passage of the RVN which appears to be the crux of the DRC’s argument in support of apartheid. This passage, found in the section regarding the church and social justice, clearly articulates that it is the duty of the people of the DRC to enforce the separation of races throughout the country, even though it will result in suffering and hardship for some population groups. It states,

In Southern Africa the church is called upon to be the light and salt in a complicated set of population relationships: several highly disparate people which differ substantially from one another, i.e. in level of civilization, have to live together in one country. The inequality among these peoples, particularly as a result of such factors as history and development, places a heavy burden of responsibility on the privileged peoples and societies to let justice be done to all, particularly because certain measures, essential to maintain order in certain situations, may cause suffering and hardship for some. The church is specially called to be the ‘conscience’ of the community and at all times to place such measures in proper perspective in the light of Scripture.¹³

This section of the RVN took a common value held among Christians, that of being the salt and light of the world and to live out God’s will, and transformed it into a mandate for the enforcement of apartheid despite the harmful consequences of the regime. Rather than trying to hide the clearly negative ramifications of apartheid, the DRC instead brought them

¹⁰ Beukes, RVN, 39-40.

¹¹ Beukes, RVN, 63.

¹² Beukes, RVN, 71.

¹³ Beukes, RVN, 64.

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to the front and reinterpreted and transformed them. Instead of suffering and hardship being a crime, they became a “heavy burden of responsibility” for the white people to bear, and it is all a part of the church’s special calling to be the “conscience of the community.” The DRC reframed both the negative ramifications of apartheid and the values of the congregation members such that they were in line with one another. This is one of the most chilling passages of the RVN, as it clearly exhibits how Christians, whose goal in life was to do the Will of God, were manipulated into supporting the apartheid regime.

Learning from Mistakes of the Past

Now that apartheid is over, members of the DRC and Christians as a larger community are left with the daunting task of reclaiming their religion, which was used to cause so much harm and oppression. It is easy for Christians who were not a part of the DRC to ignore this aspect of Christian history and claim that those who used Christianity to support apartheid were not real Christians. However, the fact remains that the DRC was working with some of the same basic texts and ideas that are accepted among the broader Christian community. By using social movement framing, the DRC managed to take values and ideals held by Christians all over the world, and frame them in such a way that provided support for the apartheid regime. Therefore, instead of ignoring this dark part of their past, Christians have to acknowledge the fact that apartheid was strongly supported by members of their own religion so that they can work together to ensure their religion is never manipulated in such a way again. While Christianity has an immense capacity for doing good in this world, it is all too easy for its scripture to be misinterpreted and abused. Since there is no way to completely ensure that Christianity will not be used for malicious purposes again, it is important that Christians are aware of the methods used to interpret their sacred texts such that they appeared to support racial separation. By understanding how social movement framing played a role in this interpretation, Christians can have a better understanding of the importance of interpretation and thereby work to ensure that their scripture is not interpreted in order to support oppression. Theology brings people together because of their belief in the divine, and as such, many people are more likely to place additional weight in an idea or cause if it comes from a theological standpoint.¹⁴ Therefore, the way in which theology is interpreted must be approached cautiously, so as to not fall into dangerous interpretations such as those that led to apartheid.

As has been demonstrated with the DRC and its members during apartheid, the methods of social movement framing have the power to mobilize a large group of people to support a particular cause. Additionally, the fact that the DRC chose to use all four types of frames rather than focusing on one in particular strengthened their interpretation. By interweaving all four types of social movement framing, the DRC was able to craft a powerful and seamless argument that influenced all members of their congregations, despite their values and backgrounds. However, it is not necessarily the method itself that is harmful or

¹⁴ Arthur C. Brooks, "Religious Faith and Charitable Giving," *Policy Review* no. 121 (Oct, 2003): 39-50.

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dangerous, but rather the way in which it is used. Social movement framing can be applied to any type of social movement organization, not only those that support systems of oppression. Therefore, Christians must be mindful of the way in which social movement framing is utilized, since it can be used for malicious purposes just as easily as it can be used for benevolent purposes. The method of social movement framing has an immense power to mobilize groups of people, and Christians must be cautious of their use of it.

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